

A POLE IN THE COUNTRY OF BOXERS. ON THE DONATION OF COL. JAGNIĄTKOWSKI TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN WARSAW

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On 30 August 1930, Magdalena Jagniątkowska presented the National Museum in Warsaw with a *number of Chinese objects, as well as medals and orders in harmony with the enclosed list*.¹ These heritage pieces had been amassed by her husband Władysław Jagniątkowski who had passed away in January 1930. The above note is one of the few reliable pieces of information related to the donation. However, there exist other sources which could form a potential context for the collection's creation. They are mainly publications authored by Col. Jagniątkowski describing his stormy life, including his experience and views. To what degree can texts aspiring to be belles-lettres be considered credible historical materials in provenance studies?

Władysław Jagniątkowski: life and oeuvre

Born at Michałów in 1856, Władysław Jagniątkowski enrolled in the Russian army, and having graduated from the St Petersburg Engineering Academy, he moved to France,² where he joined the Foreign Legion in 1887. He took part in numerous missions to French colonies, which

he continued as a soldier of the Colonial Troops having obtained French citizenship in 1890. In 1896, he married Magdalena Karpińska (1866–1944), who later accompanied him on the foreign expeditions. Moreover, Jagniątkowski actively contributed to Poland regaining independence, e.g., by co-creating the Polish army. After 1918, he used his extensive experience teaching military engineers, and died in Warsaw in 1930.³

The part of Jagniątkowski's biography of the greatest relevance to the donation is that connected with his stays in Eastern Asia. Still as a legionary, he was transferred on his own request to Tonkin,⁴ the protectorate forming part of the French colony of Indochina as of 1887. Furthermore, he was based in neighbouring Annam, currently the central part of Vietnam. When in Asia, he also worked as a topographer.⁵ The Emperor awarded him with Order of the Dragon for creating the map of Annam.⁶ Following numerous expeditions, e.g., to colonial Africa, together with his wife he returned to Tonkin from where he was sent to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. He was awarded the Legion of Honor for his military struggles.⁷ That, however, was not the

couple's last stay in Eastern Asia: they returned to Annam once again in 1907–1908.

Jagniǎtkowski's biography has been recreated on the grounds of very peculiar sources. Apart from several preserved notes, e.g., authored by Władysław Korabiewicz⁸ and mentions in the French press and literature,⁹ his life story has been recreated mainly based on the texts written by the Colonel himself: the novel *W krainie Bokserów* [In the Country of Boxers], the diary in the form of letters *Kartki z podróży* [Postcards from the Trip], and memoirs *Polak w Legii Cudzoziemskiej* [A Pole in the Foreign Legion]. When analysing these works it seems impossible to discern to what extent they are literary fiction, and to what non-fiction. Although in the *Country of Boxers* and *A Pole in the Foreign Legion* the main characters are fictitious, the comparison of their experiences with Jagniǎtkowski's biography suggests that they contain author's memories which relate to the same events in all the three books. The author occasionally tackles motifs potentially connected with the historic pieces at the National Museum in Warsaw (MNW).

For the considerations on the donation's provenance and possible controversies related to them the most important historical event described there was the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901). It broke out because of the social resistance to the aggressive expansion of Christianity in China and the imperial policy of Western powers and Japan connected with Christianity. Members of the secret Yihequan Society (Righteous and Harmonious Fists) violently attacked missionaries and foreigners, as well as the locals who were baptized. It was because of those attacks, and predominantly to protect the interests of the imperial powers that eight countries, including France, made an alliance, and entered China in June 1900. Despite the Boxers' initial successes the military advantage of the international alliance brought about the defeat of the Uprising.¹⁰ One of the results of the troops entering Beijing was the looting of the city and plundering of numerous artworks.¹¹

Jagniǎtkowski participated in the suppression of the Rebellion as a soldier of the French Army. His attitude to the 1900 developments can be regarded as ambiguous. On the one hand, having stayed in Asia before, and familiar with the realities there, he could perceive the tragedy of the situation and the evil connected with the colonial system. This is how he described the French setting off to attack Beijing: *In a few days they will align in order to murder others, to kill the people they do not know, who have never done any personal harm to them. They are going to fight not to defend their homeland, but as vengeance.... Vengeance for those of their compatriots who, uninvited, having barged into China, perished as martyrs, with a bible in their hand, proclaiming love of your neighbour.*¹² On the other hand, Jagniǎtkowski's descriptions of the plundering of the deserted capital may seem at least ambiguous ethically. His reporting on large-scale looting by the coalition soldiers are frequent in the *Country of the Boxers*. He presents the pillaging of palaces as justified punishment for *their recent audacity towards civilized nations*.¹³ He records stealing of not only precious heritage pieces from the imperial court, but also objects of everyday use from households and shops, with the main character participating.¹⁴ Simultaneously, in the memoirs contained in the *Postcards...* he presents himself

as an individual upholding the rule of law, opposing the omnipresent looting.¹⁵

The donation

The donation presented to the National Museum by the widow in 1930 shows that the interest of Jagniǎtkowski and possibly of his wife in the art of the Orient was not merely a typical vogue for chinoiserie or more broadly for the art of the 'Orient'. Large, but varied and not obvious, their collection may testify to their deeper understanding of Asia where they lived for several years. Let us thus, based on various Colonel's texts and memoirs as well as certain historic pieces amassed at MNW that refer to them, analyse the mutual dependencies in order to consider the credibility of the sources and search for contexts for the donation's creation.

The religious sphere played a major role in Jagniǎtkowski's life. Some of the items can be related to it. He was fascinated by philosophy, geomancy, and religions of Eastern Asia. Frequently mentioning the world of Asian beliefs,¹⁶ he even aspired to create an ideal religion model.¹⁷ Among the heritage pieces related to these interests one can mention e.g. the geomagnetic feng shui compass (Fig. 1) serving to delineate the area favourable to man and the printed *Sutra of the Fundamental Vows of Bodhisattwa Kszitigarbha*.¹⁸

The compass and the snuffbox with solar chronometer¹⁹ (Fig. 2) can also be associated with Colonel's education who was a professional cartographer. Furthermore, among the donated objects there was a map of Beijing and the plan of the river near China's capital,²⁰ however, they were lost during WW II.

In the context of the interests in East Asian beliefs two jade *bi* discs are interesting.²¹ These artefacts constituted an important, though mysterious part of the Chinese tradition beginning in the Neolithic period. Connected with geomancy, they symbolize the sky. Being ritual objects, they are often found in tombs together with cylindrical *cong* vessels associated with the earth.²² They were amulets accompanying the deceased in the afterworld. The discs are dated to different periods. The one decorated with a saurian was created under Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795) (Fig. 3), while the second with a carved cloud motif may have been a tomb artefact from late BC or early AD. It was re-used as a decoration of a luxury container for toiletries (also crafted in the 18th century).

The only weapon in the donation is a ceremonial sabre (*dadao*, 'great sword' in Chinese) (Fig. 4). It is directly associated with Colonel's background as a professional military, however, more importantly, a passage related to the sabre can be found in the *Postcards...* When describing the fights with the insurgents in Beijing, Jagniǎtkowski recalls that during the battle he came across a group of boxers: a commander and three soldiers. He let the privates free, meanwhile *I lead the officer holding him by his braid as a prisoner to the headquarters. The general permits me to keep his beautiful genuine sabre as a souvenir...*²³ The quote makes us suppose that the sword at MNW is war booty of Jagniǎtkowski, or the association is just a coincidence.

A sizeable section of the historic pieces amassed in the Collection of Oriental Art is made up of jewellery and attire elements, e.g., two very elegant shoes for women 'of

lotus feet'.²⁴ The custom to bind women's feet was general in 19th-century China among Han women of a high social status.²⁵ Jagńiatkowski mentioned it twice in the novel *In the Country of Boxers*,²⁶ e.g. when presenting the story of young Tay-Ngan-Ky. He helped the French during their stay in Beijing as a translator and food supplier. When bidding farewell to the main character (possibly Jagńiatkowski's alter ego), his sixteen-year-old sister offered him *a small already worn shoe as a souvenir*.²⁷ This may suggest the little red shoe (Fig. 5) (in the colour symbolizing happiness in China) and found in the collection. The second: blue one (Fig. 6) features the information in the MNW's inventory that *it was worn by the Chinese maid of the lady who presented the shoe*.²⁸ This information is hardly credible, since the shoe is chic, and such shoes were worn by the Han elite. It was practically impossible to walk in them, not to mention doing daily chores. It is likely that the person making the entry in the inventory book misunderstood the widow's explanation.

What strikes among adornments are meticulously decorated guards for long nails (Fig. 7),²⁹ used in China by upper social classes.

Worn most commonly on the little and ring fingers, they were a symbol of a high social status, serving as a testimony to abstaining from any physical work. Among the valuables there are also earrings, rings, hair adornments, and bracelets, as well as fans. The gilded headgear decoration contains, e.g., kingfisher feathers of vivid turquoise colour (Fig. 8).

It is likely that Jagńiatkowski found inspiration to collect luxurious woman's adornments fascinated by Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), famed for her long nails and exquisite attire.³⁰ Her characterization covers as many as five pages of the novel *In the Country of Boxers*, including a detailed description of her appearance, not overlooking the clothes and jewellery: *Always wearing rich imperial robes, adorned with magnificent jewels, with a head encircled with pearls, with nails in long golden frames, she looked like a deity*.³¹

On the other hand, it may have been Jagńiatkowski's wife who collected such treasures. In the *Postcards...* there are mentions of her shopping at a jeweller's, where she e.g., commissioned *a necklace made of silver sapeks*³² (Asian coins with a characteristic square opening). It is likely that one of the adornments: a silver pendant (an amulet), shaped to resemble such a coin and decorated with signs of good omen was hers (Fig. 9).³³

Contrary to many other donations to MNW containing Chinese crafts and dominated by porcelain goods, the Jagńiatkowskis' collection features scarce china items. The majority of them are usable: different bowls and little plates, with tea bowls forming the biggest group. In the texts written by the Colonel there are mentions of the tea drinking and making custom in Asia, extremely popular at social gatherings.³⁴ The fact may suggest that the donated historic items were vessels used in Jagńiatkowski's houses in Annam and Tonkin.

The novel features an almost literal description of one of the collection pieces. It is contained in the words of the main character's wife (Magdalena Jagńiatkowska's alter ego) describing the stay in 'Hoi-Haw', namely Hikou, the capital of Hainan Island: *I bought bracelets and a tea set carved in coconut: they custom-tailor things there. For six piastres I have six cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, a biscuit dish, and a milk jug*.³⁵



1. Feng Shui Luo Pan compass, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2693 MNW



2. Snuffbox with solar chronometer and compass, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2696 MNW



3. Disc with a saurian image, China, 18th c. ACNO. SKAZsz 458 MNW



4. *Dadao* ceremonial sabre (great sword), China, ca 1900, ACNO. SKAZsz 2/a-b MNW

The donation included a cup and saucer carved in coconut. Decorated with the *Shou* longevity symbol and the 'hundred antiques' (*bogu*) emblems, they may constitute a part of the described set (Fig. 10). The vessel forms are not typical of China where bowls are customarily used, therefore they were most likely executed for a foreign customer.

Regrettably, the MNW archives holds no documents related to the circumstances of the collection creation and its presentation to the Museum in 1930, e.g., a donors' letter. The only records available are the entries in the inventory book, receipts confirming receiving the gift, and the list of items. One of the few pieces of information on the 'acquisition' of some of the objects by Jagńiatowski are the notes in the inventory book saying that they come from the *Palace of the Ancestors, in the imperial district in Beijing*³⁶ or from the imperial palace.³⁷ Such notes, however, arouse doubts, since similar objects were widely available in East-Asian markets. They do not seem to have come from the imperial court, although they may have come from an affluent household:

a palace, as defined by Jagńiatowski. On the other hand, however, remarks of the kind may have been meant to boost the collection's prestige. Unfortunately, today the fact remains unverifiable.

Conclusion

Everybody dealing with a museum collection would wish to find out the provenance of its pieces, namely *a full history and ownership of an item from the time of its discovery or creation to the present day, through which authenticity and ownership are determined*.³⁸ However, owing to limited and insufficient sources in many a case it is impossible. Furthermore, in the pre-WWII period the approach to the verification of historic pieces acquired by museums significantly differed from today's restrictive accession standards, the fact challenging the individual conducting provenance studies.

In the case of the Jagńiatkowskis' donation the sources for provenance studies are in their majority quite peculiar,



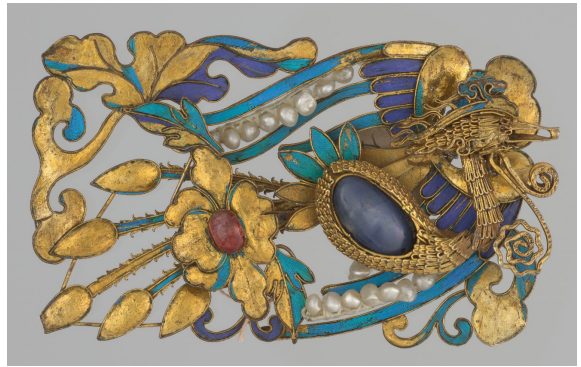
5. Woman's shoe, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2589 MNW



6. Woman's shoe, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2590 MNW



7. Nail guard, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2662 MNW



8. Headgear decoration, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2668 MNW



9. Pendant, good omen talisman, China, 19th c., ACNO. SKAZsz 2664 MNW



10. Cup and saucer, China, 19th c. (?), ACNO. SKAZsz 2702/1-2 MNW

which has already been demonstrated. As the only available ones they permit to formulate conclusions which are, in fact, but hypotheses. Moreover, a shadow is cast on the collection owing to the fact that it was amassed under war circumstances, and its later donor represented a colonial army. It is a fact known from numerous historical sources and studies that during the Boxer Uprising there was looting and plundering performed by representatives of the eight victorious armies. The Colonel is quite inconsistent with respect to this. In the memoirs contained in the *Postcards...* he presents himself as a moral guardian, condemning looting. Meanwhile, in the novel *In the Country of Boxers* not only does the main character mention the robberies, but

also his own participation in them. In one of the fragments he says frankly: *Can you imagine Warsaw where with one spell cast by a magic wand all the residents have either fled or died, leaving their storages and flats wide open? Would there be people who passing by such amassed treasures of the great city resist the temptation to stuff their trunks with a selection of various objects? I doubt it.*³⁹

This very quote was particularly ominous. Not only was Warsaw occupied in WW II, and terribly looted, but this badly affected the Jagńińtkowskis' collection, too. From among the historic pieces featuring on the 1930 donation list, as many as 26 per cent (out of 72 items)⁴⁰ are currently war losses...

Finally, let us point to the fact that the research into the

provenance of the Jagniętkowskis' donation serves as a good example of potential challenges faced by individuals aiming at conducting investigation to present a full provenance of

museum objects. It also forms part of the increasingly more popular research into and verification of Western collections of Chinese art amassed during the Boxer Rebellion.

Abstract: The paper presents the results of provenance studies related to the donation of Władysław Jagniętkowski (1856–1930) and his wife to the National Museum in Warsaw. Presented to the Museum in 1930, the collection of heritage pieces contains objects from China and Vietnam where the donor was based as a soldier of France's colonial troops fighting to suppress the Boxer Rebellion. Based on untypical sources: texts written by Jagniętkowski, the Authors analyse the circumstances under which the collection was amassed. The many-sided contextualization

of the donation grounded in the investigated texts yields the hypotheses on the impact of the donor's personal experiences and colonial conditioning on the provenance of the historic pieces. The research into the provenance of the Jagniętkowskis' donation serves as a good example of potential challenges faced by individuals aiming at conducting investigation to present a full provenance of museum objects. It also forms part of the increasingly more popular research into and verification of Western collections of Chinese art amassed during the Boxer Rebellion.

Keywords: provenance, China, Vietnam, Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), Władysław Jagniętkowski (1856–1930), Magdalena Jagniętkowska (1866–1944), artistic craftsmanship, donations.

Endnotes

- ¹ Archives of the National Museum in Warsaw (below: MNW Archives), Donations II nr 1001-2975, 1922-1930, spis zd.-odb. 320/120, nr 2965.
- ² Central Military Archives, Collection of the War Order of Virtuti Militari 63, call no. I.482.63–528, Kwestjonarjusz 5283, p. 4; 'Życiorys W. Jagniętkowskiego', *Przegląd Wojskowo-Techniczny*, 4, (7, 6, 1930), 741 (273).
- ³ For the fullest biography of Jagniętkowski see J. Załączny, *Władysław Jagniętkowski (1856-1930). Biografia niebanalna*, Warszawa 2016.
- ⁴ *Życiorys W. Jagniętkowskiego...*, p. 742.
- ⁵ J. Załączny, op. cit., pp. 35-36.
- ⁶ ACNO. 74844 MNW, for description of the order awarding see W. Jagniętkowski, *Polak w Legii Cudzoziemskiej*, part 2, Warszawa 1909, p. 169.
- ⁷ ACNO. 74854 MNW.
- ⁸ Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Waclaw Korabiewicz's file, call no. III-410 j.17.
- ⁹ It is mentioned e.g., in: Ch. de Pélacon, *Expédition de Chine de 1900 jusqu'à l'arrivée du général Voyron*, Paris 1903, p. 67; *Le Temps*, 23 September 1901, 14713, unpagged.
- ¹⁰ More on the Uprising see J.W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, Berkeley 1988; P. Buckley Ebrej, *Ilustrowana historia Chin*, trans. by Irena Kałużyńska, Warszawa 2002, p. 255; *The Boxers, China, and the World*, ed. by R. Bickers, R.G. Tiedemann, Lanham 2007.
- ¹¹ *The Boxers, China, and the World...*, pp. 111-132.
- ¹² W. Jagniętkowski, *W krainie Bokserów*, Warszawa 1913, p. 50.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 212-213.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 213-217.
- ¹⁵ W. Jagniętkowski, *Kartki z podróży*, Warszawa 1909, p. 59.
- ¹⁶ The description of *feng shui* see *ibidem*, p. 30.
- ¹⁷ He describes his theory in the book *Religja nowoczesna. Podstawy ogólne* (Warszawa 1927).
- ¹⁸ ACNO. SKAZgr 1809 MNW.
- ¹⁹ ACNO. SKAZsz 2696 MNW.
- ²⁰ ACNO. 74837 and 74824 MNW.
- ²¹ ACNO. SKAZsz 458 i 2666/a-d MNW.
- ²² M. Wilson, *Chinese Jades*, London 2004, p. 10.
- ²³ W. Jagniętkowski, *Kartki z podróży...*, pp. 62-63.
- ²⁴ ACNO. SKAZsz 2589 and 2590 MNW.
- ²⁵ *China's Hidden Century*, ed. by J. Harrison-Hall, J. Lovell, London 2023, p. 217.
- ²⁶ W. Jagniętkowski, *W krainie Bokserów...*, pp. 85, 56-59.
- ²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 230.
- ²⁸ Inventory of the National Museum in Warsaw (below: MNW Inventory), XIII, 72001-78000, s. 282, poz. 74820.
- ²⁹ ACNO. SKAZsz 2662 and 2663 MNW.
- ³⁰ J. Chang, *Cesarzowa wdowa Cixi. Konkubina, która stworzyła współczesne Chiny*, trans. by Anna Gralak, Kraków 2015, pp. 235, 421.
- ³¹ W. Jagniętkowski, *W krainie Bokserów...*, p. 47.
- ³² *Idem*, *Kartki z podróży...*, p. 120.
- ³³ ACNO. SKAZsz 2664 MNW.
- ³⁴ See e.g., W. Jagniętkowski, *Kartki z podróży...*, p. 77, 132.
- ³⁵ *Idem*, *W krainie Bokserów...*, p. 240.

³⁶MNW Inventory, XIII, 72001-78000, p. 278, item 74778.

³⁷Ibidem, p. 279, item 74784.

³⁸Glossary in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums.

³⁹W. Jagińtkowski, *W krainie Bokserów...*, p. 235.

⁴⁰MNW Archives, Correspondence related to donations, donors lit. I-J, 1921-1959, spis zd.-odb. 320/47, p. 20.

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