

First Polish Travel Writings on Japan (1885–1927)

Summary

For Europeans it only became possible to travel to Japan on the wide scale in the 1850s when the policy of sakoku had come to an end. Then, Nippon, forced by western countries, had to open its boundaries. In the 1890s first descriptions of journeys to this faraway country were published in print. Simultaneously, until 1927 Polish literature lacked pieces of writing about Japan created by someone who actually spent there any longer period of time and had a chance to get to know it better. The following essay is an attempt to describe the Polish reports from journeys to the Land of the Rising Sun written in the first years right after the end of the Japanese policy of isolationism.

Similarities between the particular reports can be seen, in the first place, in the travellers' visits to the same places, as well as in the common conclusions arrived at by the authors that the Japanese and western ways of thinking are different from each other. The Polish evaluation of the Japanese civilisation completely depended on people's cultural backgrounds and expectations towards their journeys. The authors' personal interests were exceptionally important as they had crucial impact on the way they (as travellers) perceived the same objects, as well as they created different connotations and afterthoughts in their minds. The evaluation of such elements of the Japanese culture as hospitality, art and the ability to quickly adopt achievements of other civilisations depended on the travellers' personalities. The crucial factor influencing opinions of the Poles was the transformation taking place at that time in Japan both in the country itself and in the mind of the West. Beliefs about the Land of the Rising Sun were gradually changing with time. Extraordinarily fast modernisation amazed visitors. However, travellers' opinions about the changes taking place in Japan were not unanimous. The most arguable issue was Nippon being transformed into a western-like country. Questions appeared whether it was still the same place as before or, perhaps, it became yet another western country. Another important fact for the Polish was the Japanese victory in their war with Russia. Within

several dozen years in the minds of the Europeans the Land of the Rising Sun changed from an undeveloped region with feudal structure into an equal partner.

Both the similarities and the differences in the descriptions between the Polish reports from journeys to Japan provide contemporary readers with valuable information on the evolution of how Polish people perceive the Land of the Rising Sun – not only its art and material culture, but also its role on the international arena.