

Szuk, Géza, „A mi kis Khinánk. A tientsini osztrák-magyar telepítvény” *Vasárnapi Újság, Május 1, 1904, 292-295.*

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Our Little China. The Austro-Hungarian settlement in Tianjin.¹

(A Mi Kis Khinánk. A tientsini osztrák-magyar telepítvény.)

It was circa four years ago, that the so-called Boxer Rebellion broke out in China, and the allied European armies and the Japanese had to establish order.

The embassies in Beijing were at that time already in a separated quarter [Legation Quarter] when they were besieged by the boxers. That they fell into hopeless conditions and went through hard times is proved by the wall that has still remained on the street of the embassies, which is covered all-over by holes of the Chinese bullets. Currently the embassies reside in a well-fortified, walled quarter of the city, and every great power, that has diplomatic representation in China, takes good care of their embassy's defense.

The rebellion - as we know - was suppressed and our monarchy [Austria-Hungary], which also participated in the military campaign, also took his part of the victory, as well as of the indemnity [Boxer Protocol, September 7 1901]. The street in Beijing on whose corner a church stands now for the memory of the fallen, was named after naval captain Thomann [frigate captain Eduard Thomann Edler von Montalmar, died in Beijing, July 8 1900], who was killed during the siege.

After the war's end, many disapproved [in Austria-Hungary] about Austria-Hungary's land-acquisition in Tianjin, China: they believed it is a new burden, an unnecessary thing, since they thought we want to colonize. Now, that I have had the chance to stay for longer at the place, to study the conditions of our little China, I do not believe, that I am doing a useless effort, if I tell a few things about it.

When I have left Europe, I thought I would find rather primitive states in Tianjin, but I was profoundly disappointed. Tianjin is one of the most populous cities of China, with its ca. one million residents, therefore more than Beijing, the capital of the Celestial Empire. Tianjin consists of two parts, one is the actual Chinese city, the other is the European settlement.

The city lies on the Pei-Ho [Bai He 白河, literally: “White River”, now: Hai (lit. “Sea”) River, Haihe 海河] and the Emperor Canal's [Da Yunhe 大运河] side, which is a considerable water transportation rout of the empire. The Baihe River is well navigable from Tianjin to the sea, smaller sea ships with ca. 1200-1400 tons carrying capacity can sail on it, the traffic is bustling. There are villages and fertile fields located on both sides of the river; its strange color is similar to the chocolate, it carries so much of a mud and rubbish that one would not even think it is actually water.

On the right side of the river the Chinese City is accompanied by the Japanese, French, English and German settlements. Our territory is on the left riverbank, at the most advantageous place, next to the Baihe, the Emperor Canal and the Tianjin-Beijing railway [correctly: Beijing-Tianjin railway, Jing Jin Tielu 京津铁路]. Our neighbor to the south are the Italians, further on lie the Russian and Belgian settlements. The area occupied by the foreigners is larger than the Chinese City.

Our settlement is almost entirely built-up by Chinese houses: a real Chinese city. Its area is ca. six-tenth km², just as big as our downtown in Budapest. The part of the Chinese cemetery closer to the railway has still 10.000 graves. Although it is forbidden now to bury the dead there, it is still

¹ Géza Szuk, chief-engineer of the the Ganz factories visited China and Japan between July 1903 and February 1904, to study the economic, financial and technical conditions; this article is published from his pen.

unpleasant when it rains, the area is under flood and the coffins get loosened up. The dislocation of the graves is hard, due to the Chinese belief that they are not allowed to be disturbed. Still, with money one can solve everything in China, so we can redeem the tombs for some trifling sum.

The territories occupied by the other great powers are partly empty lots, or already built-up by European style houses, with good roads and boulevards.

On the first place stand the English and French settlements. In *English* territory there is a nice town hall [Gordon Hall], a park [Victoria Park], barracks and the best hotel in the entire China, the Astor-House, which surpasses our hotels too with their service and convenience.

The *French* part contains mainly schools, hospitals with priests and nuns. The main number of the missionaries comes from the French and I have to note, that they are very good at spreading the faith while managing earthly businesses. Here, the priests collected quite a wealth and the French bishop in Beijing, *Mr. Favier* [Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier-Duperron C.M. (1837-1905), Vicar Apostolic of Northern Chihli] is not only one of the most profound experts of China, but above all also a good businessman.

Closest to the Chinese City lays the Japanese settlement: it also used to be built-up, but after the war, the Japanese simply scorched the Chinese huts and what remained, they have demolished. Now they are building a brand new city, following European patterns.

The *Germans* – also following this example – abolished the Chinese houses from the sight and if one walks along the German-style villa-like row of houses, and sees the German signs, one can believe that he is in some sort of German country town. The Germans have got many soldiers here.

In our direct neighborhood, the *Italians* only gained some Chinese mud huts and pits, but the plans are ready and in short time that is going to be a European, orderly city.

The *Russians* have undertaken with great efforts, divided the lots and at the present time they have built 150 houses altogether. Apart from this they are also planning roads, bridges.

The great powers all are vividly interested about their Tianjin settlements' prospects, since this is the trade center of North-China: each of them are keen to ensure a market and consumers for his own industry and trade. The major part of the banks working in the East have branch here established. Everybody wants to be the first, because even though the volume of commerce is not as high as they hope, with time it is going to be so, considering the fact that in the last year 20 % of the Chinese import went to Tianjin. As for the export, the products coming from Mongolia, Tibet, North-China all are leaving from here to the south and around the world: fur, leather, wool, camel fur, many horses, sheep, swine, etc. Although North-China is not as rich in products as the southern areas, still the above-enumerated goods represent considerable value.

Perhaps Tianjin does not have the significance that Shanghai and Hongkong possesses, but will have, so hopes every merchantman and therefore are trying to get a footing.

Tianjin is important from military aspects; there are many European troops, since the great powers know well, that in times of unrests it is a good spot to keep Beijing in control.

On *our settlement* so far not many things have happened. We are constructing a consular house, that is all. There is a larger barrack planned, that also could be furnished also for defensive purposes. - The area and the Chinese city is connected with a tumble-down pontoon-bridge, that is opened up in every two hours for the passing sailboats. These are the moments when the pulsing life can be seen the most which is typical a characteristic of the Chinese cities. Pack animals, sedan chairs, two-wheeled carts, mass of people are gathering on the shore, waiting for crossing. Approximately 30 000 Chinese live in our district. The streets are narrow, 2-3 meters wide. The kern of the residents are made up apart from some rich Chinese merchants, chandlers and tradesmen. There is everything what the Chinese mouth and eyes wish: theaters, baths, opium dens, pawnshops, even Chinese schools, where the children sit in pairs at their little desks, with books, writing tools and teacups in front of them; the stooped teacher with spectacles welcomes the foreign visitor with great deference.

The streets are clean, as it is forbidden to litter and pasture pigs, and this is a great progress as

the most difficult task is to train the Chinese to cleanliness. The executive power has a big merit in all this achievements, which is represented by Hugo Accurti ship-of-the-line lieutenant, who is commanding the detachment of 40 marine soldiers. There is a ship-of-the-line ensign and a naval doctor assigned to him. The supreme commander is based in Beijing. The officers live in a little Chinese house, next door there is the administrative building with the courthouse, tax office and the police station. The order is maintained by 70 Chinese policemen, the so-called *shimbo*, who are serving with incredibly serious faces and are stationed in four chambers. Every morning they sentence the trespassers caught on the previous day based on expeditious procedure. The punishment is twenty-five bamboo, penalty or stocks, the so-called *cangue* [mujia 木枷], which is tightened on the neck.

The public affairs are conducted by the municipal council constituted by wealthy Chinese, where the military commander and our Tianjin consul always have the majority. The Chinese are very satisfied, as they are treated according to European ways, but the Chinese authorities look at this treatment with jealous eyes as they see the [consular] jurisdiction as a harm on their power. If the Chinese commit a crime outside of the settlement, that falls of course under Chinese jurisdiction.

In front of the municipal building, in a former Buddha-temple lodges our marine detachment. The soldiers live in Chinese houses. On the courtyard there is the temple, within a 7-8 meter high, golden-covered, wooden Buddha sculptor. It is a curious sight, when the sailors are cleaning their horses in front of this saint, or carry the hay in the room. A chapel-like room serves as a storehouse. There is a military hospital too. I have found some Hungarian boys among the sailors.

Although the streets are watered, cleaned, still sometimes the stench is so unspeakable, but this comes with China. The civil service / administration costs money, but the taxes cover the expenses, there is even a good sum remained in every year, so the settlement does not cost a thing, more like it brings profit to us.

It would not harm, if following the other great powers' example we would also make a use of our settlement to promote commercial purposes. Among all the European settlements, ours lays on the best place; we possess almost 1,5 km riverbank along the Baihe River, and this is very important in Tianjin, since the transportation is conducted on the Emperor Canal and on the Baihe River. On the east side it is touched by the railway, so as well as on land also on water it is accessible.

While all the great powers are leasing their settlements from the Chinese, our settlement is the property of Austria-Hungary, we have occupied it; there is an agreement only about the private property. So if there is a need of private buildings or lots, we have to expropriate them and the expropriation sums are set according to the situation of the houses. The public buildings, temples were simply taken by us, these are ours.

The streets are filled with people all day long. On the corners there are large red posters informing the ones who wish to entertain about the pieces performed in the theater. The theater is a real passion of the Chinese people and even in the tiniest village we could find – if not more, then at least one – open stage, where the traveling comedians entertain the audience. After all every Chinese is an actor himself; the main thing is to preserve the tranquility and the appearance, therefore – would anything happen – without ever moving a muscle of his face. In the respect of cold blood he gets ahead of the English.

There are many shops here. Every Chinese main wish is to become a businessman, and in skillfulness the Chinese surpass the Europeans. They have excellent business talent. The shouting and the noise that is conducted by all kinds of vendors shakes one's brain, everybody attempts to shout louder than their neighbor, they beat metal bars, drums, copper plates. Barbers are running along the narrow alleys, because here they shave men not in shops but on the streets. They carry a bar on their shoulder, on one side the little stool hangs where the customer would sit, on the other side a little closet with all the necessary equipment. In the middle of the biggest bustle he has his patient sit down, washes his face with a little water and shaves him, as the soap is not known here.

After the shaving he unties his hair, combs it and braids it, all this for ca. seven penny. The most interesting is that in the meantime the pack men with loaded donkeys pass him while he carries on with the greatest calmness.

The fortunetellers, scribes are pursuing their profession at small desks. Beggars, panhandlers cannot be seen on the streets, while the other cities are filled with them, and Oh, woe to you! If you give something, then the whole street runs after you!

On a square in front of a temple there is a rather numerous mass of people standing, sitting and listening to an old Chinese's tale, who tells all sorts of stories with a peaceful face. The Chinese is a passionate gambler; men sit by the road and play cards. In the autumn the potato- and chestnut vendors dwell on the streets. They roast the potatoes in clay stoves, and the chestnuts on little pebbles.

On the shore of the Baihe rises a one-storied building, this is the public bath; by the entrance a painting attracts the attention: the carp bathing in the waves. If the pigtailed fellow pays the 5 penny, he can enter. In a large room there are small closets around, benches in the middle; the public undresses and goes into a room confined by a door, where there are benches and the water is boiling in a huge cauldron and fills the room with steam where Chinese sweats. Then when coming out, he is poured with water, and as he is in Adam's costume sits or lies down on the bench and the barbers and nail-cutters start their operations while they are drinking tea and smoke pipes.

The houses stand thick next to each other, built of loam, there are no windows facing the streets. On the one hand it is to prevent the neighbors from peeping in, on the other hand for the women be locked up from the outer world. When fire breaks out, which happens frequently in the hot summer, instead of bringing water and start to extinguish the fire, first they would try to scare away the fire's bad spirit with noisy tools, and only when our policemen appear with the fire engines would start the fire fighting, often too late.

When the Chinese is sick, he would heal himself with all kinds of homemade herbs; they are afraid of the European doctors, especially the women, but they already come to be fond of our detachment's doctor, and when there is problem, they would often turn to him. Especially if it is about surgical operation, they would take willingly the aid, since they can see that the European treatment is worth more than the Chinese. Our doctor could tell interesting stories about the insensitivity of the Chinese. In cases, when the European has to be anesthetized, the Chinese bears the pain without a movement of his muscles, by the first cut he hisses one, and that is it.

The public health measures also praise our commander's foresight and vigor. There is no canalization and pipelines, the people are drinking the dirty water of the Baihe, and it is God's miracle, that these people have not died; if Europeans drink from this water, that is certain typhus or dysentery. Despite of all the safety regulations, cholera still occurs, as well as typhus and even the pest, but it is difficult to diagnose these diseases, as they hide these patients and when they die, they are put into coffins and buried immediately.

The life in our little China is like in a hive, starts with sunrise and ends with sunset. In the evening the streets are illuminated, every house-owner bounds to light a little candle in front of his house; but there are public lamps too. The other great powers enlighten their settlements with gas or electricity, even the Chinese city is equipped with electric trams and enlightening. The Chinese shops are open till late night, although there is no life anymore, but there is always a late one, who buys something.

Around midnight only the noises of the policemen's steps could be heard.

When I have seen our navy's flag flying on the bridge and the barrack, it was a strange in this Chinese environment, but one gets use to it quickly and wishes that if only our homeland's trade and industry would take part and opportunity to use this piece of land. Szuk Géza.

List of picture (from left to right, from the top to the bottom): [original photos taken by Géza Szuk]

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1. Chinese street cobbler (“*Khinai utczai foltozó varga*”)
2. The Chinese Police of the Tianjin Austro-Hungarian Settlement (“*A tieintsini Osztrák- Magyar Telepítvény khinai rendőrsége*”)
3. Our Marinedetachment's commander (“*Tientsini Haditengerészeti Különítményünk parancsnoka*”)
4. Potato-roaster Chinese on the streets (“*Utczai burgonyasütő khinaiak*”)

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5. Our embassy in Beijing (“*Nagykövetségünk Pekingben*”)
6. Our Tianjin Marinedetachment's storehouse (“*Tientsini Haditengerszeti Különítmániünl raktára*”)
7. Chinese thief sentenced to *cangue* (“*Kalodára ítélt khinai tolvaj*”)
8. Our Tianjin Marinedetachment (“*Tientsini Haditengerészeti Különítményünk*”)