

ROMANIANS IN CHINA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

IOLANDA ȚIGHILIU

On 8/20 April 1880, the independence of Romania was notified by letters addressed by Prince Carol to heads of states in various countries, China included. In 1880-1881, letters in response were received.

On 26 January 1881, Mihail Kogălniceanu, the plenipotentiary minister of Romania to Paris, was notifying Vasile Boerescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, of the response of the Emperor of China, forwarded to Mihail Kogălniceanu from Sankt Petersburg, on 13 January, by Marquis Zheng, on mission by the government of Russia.

This exchange of letters marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between China and Romania.

Information on Romanians living in China at the beginning of the twentieth century is very scarce. They must have been very few in number. Nonetheless, in a letter sent on 30 January 1907 from Shanghai to the Ministry of External Affairs of Romania, the Austrian citizen Louis Hoffmann was requesting permission to represent the General Consulate of Romania in Shanghai¹.

Hoffmann was noting that he had been the manager of a factory for many years, and that he had business contacts in the area. In the south of China “commercial relations are full of prospects”, especially in the grain and lumber trade. The establishment of a Romanian Consulate in Shanghai would have enabled these economic relations to flourish. The next stage would have been “the setting up of a navigation line linking the Japanese and Chinese ports to Galați”².

Hoffmann’s approach bore no fruits.

The possibilities to develop economic links with China and Japan were also dwelt on by Victor Cădere, the head of the Romanian Mission to Siberia and delegate of the Romanian Government. In his letter addressed on 26 May 1920 from Siberia to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, he was requesting that Romanian legations should be urgently set up in Tokyo and in Beijing, and consulates in Shanghai and in Harbin.³

Victor Cădere believed that “the distribution of wines, fruits and derivatives could be made at high prices; we may even envisage to compete the American oil.” Therefore, the establishment of an efficient Romanian representation in the Far East was deemed imperative. The candidateship of G. Palade, a well-known

¹ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (in following, AMAE), problema 75/1891-1931. Consuli onorifici, vol. 13, f. 205.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem, f. 211-215.

industrialist, was being put forward for the consulate in Shanghai, and of Neculai Neuwirt, of no less high reputation among the Chinese business circles, for the consulate in Harbin.

At a time when the Romanian State was in full process of unification, Victor Cădere's letter failed to elicit the expected response. Romania had other priorities. Ten years later, for fear that the Chinese-Japanese-Russian interests may wield a negative on Romania owing to the fluid political backdrop in the Far East, Aurel Vasiliu, the extraordinary envoy and plenipotentiary minister of Romania to Tokyo, sent from Tokyo, on 18 March 1930, a report to the Ministry of External Affairs, in which he was rating the setting up of a Romanian legation in China untimely. The project was prone to arouse the suspicions of Moscow. Therefore, Vasiliu recommended that the issue should be handled with utmost prudence and discretion, as "for the time being, I take the liberty to stress upon it, Romania should refrain from any act that Moscow, in its well-known ill faith, might interpret as provocation. The legation in Tokyo must continue to act as a vigilant and enduring post of surveillance. [...] Now more than ever, it should be noted that the only policy that can be carried out there is not a policy of initiatives, but rather of vigilance, in anticipation to the opportunities that may arise."⁴

Despite the reserve shown by the Romanian authorities, the Romanian community living in Shanghai took the initiative to organize a Romanian Cultural Circle. Information on this circle can be found in the letter sent on 20 April 1931 by Gheorghe Stoicescu, the attaché d'affaires of Romania to Tokyo, to Constantin Argetoianu, the ad interim Minister of External Affairs.

The first steps were taken as early as 1928 by Marcu Țcovici, born in Brăila and residing in Shanghai, at 319 Avenue Joffre.⁵ On 1 July 1930, Țcovici addressed a new letter to the Romanian Legation in Tokyo, showing that "several Romanians living in Shanghai took the initiative of setting up in that town a Romanian Cultural Circle called 'Eminescu', with the purpose of enabling the Romanians living in China to gather up and read Romanian books and newspapers." On 20 August 1930, Țcovici informed Gheorghe Stoicescu that "some of the members are opposed to the circle being called 'The Eminescu Romanian Cultural Circle', as they do not consider themselves so well-educated, and would rather opt for 'The Romanian Circle' of Shanghai, which would also include a cultural section."⁶ The Circle was set up in November 1930. On 8 November, the president of "The Romanian Circle" of Shanghai, Lahminovici Pincus, was writing to Gheorghe Stoicescu to express his gratitude. He was also enclosing the articles of law of the Circle, for approval.

The Romanian diplomat in Tokyo rated the initiative of the members of "The Romanian Circle" of Shanghai "rather commendable, as although far away

⁴ AMAE, fund 71/China (1920-1944), vol. 3, f. 198-201.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 206.

⁶ Ibidem.

from their country, and without any official representation in China liable to defend the interests of the Romanians, who seem rather numerous, they formed this project to gather up occasionally, and read Romanian books and newspapers, so that they may not forget their mother tongue. To this purpose, the Circle have addressed the Alcalay Bookshop directly, and the bookshop has sent them a book crate through the offices of this legation; the books have already been sent over to them.”⁷

Further on, Gheorghe Stoicescu notes that “the town of Shanghai is the most important center of propaganda, from where the Russian and Chinese communist organizations carry out their activities in countries all over the world, through nationals of every country.” Therefore, the activity of the members of this Circle was to be kept under close surveillance, so as to ascertain whether the project had stemmed from genuine “love of the country”, or the Circle was merely serving as a cover for some subversive action⁸.

The outbreak of military operations between China and Japan also endangered the lives of the Romanians living in the foreign concessions in Shanghai.

In his cable of 20 August 1937, Gheorghe Stoicescu notified the Ministry of External Affairs, that he had requested the British and French consuls in Shanghai to take under their protection the Romanian subjects in the respective concessions, and evacuate them if necessary.⁹

Despite the troubled backdrop of the time, the small community of Romanians living in Shanghai continued to work towards developing new structures liable to foster cohesion.

Therefore, on 4 February 1940, an Extraordinary Assembly of the members of the Association of the Romanians living in China was held.¹⁰ Forty-one members attended the meeting. Gheorghe Paraschivescu, plenipotentiary minister of Romania to Japan, was elected honorific chairman of the Association. The leading committee included Mihai Duca, chairman, Gheorghe Cegan, secretary, and Dumitru Ștefănescu, treasurer. It was decided that a fund of the Romanian-National House should set up, and an initial sum of 203 USD was raised, as indicated by the subscription list opened to this purpose.

On 27 April 1941, the Romanian Chamber of Commerce in the Far East was set up. Its major goal was “to develop commercial relations between the country and the Far East.”¹¹ “The Chamber of Commerce will exclusively discuss issues pertaining to commercial and industrial relations.” The members of the Chamber fell into three categories : active, correspondent, and honorific members. The active members included the Romanian and Chinese trading companies. Foreign traders interested in developing commercial relations with Romania were to be

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem, f. 226.

¹⁰ AMAE, fund Tokyo, vol. 20, f. 121.

¹¹ Ibidem, f. 136.

correspondence members. Persons willing to take initiatives beneficial to the Romanian Commerce Chamber and the purposes it served were to become honorific members. The Chamber had a chairman and a council.

On 6 May 1941, the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Romania in the Far East, Mihail Duca, and Gheorghe Cecan, secretary, sent a congratulation letter to General Gheorghe Băgulescu, on the occasion of his appointment to the office of Minister of Romania to Japan, Manchuria and China.¹²

Eventually, on 8 October 1941, by a decree issued by Mihai Antonescu, vice-president of the Council of Ministers and Minister of External Affairs, an honorific consulate of Romania was set up in Shanghai. Bao Jinguo was appointed honorific consul.¹³

¹² Ibidem, p. 134.

¹³ AMAE, problema 75. Consuli onorifici, vol. 13.