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A. M. Kuryanova

## “Journey Through China” from St. Petersburg to Paris: Illustrations for Pavel Piasetskii’s Travelogue in Russia and France

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1889, Gustave Eiffel gave a tour of the Eiffel Tower to Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich of Russia. The tour included a visit to Monsieur Eiffel’s apartment located at the top of the Tower. There, according to newspaper reports, Eiffel showed the Grand Duke a mirror on which, two days prior, the Russian artist Pavel Piasetskii had drawn a floral frame. The inscription that Piasetskii added to his drawing read as follows: “Flowers from Russia and China salute the great height of the Eiffel Tower.”<sup>8</sup>

By that time, Pavel Iakovlevich Piasetskii (Павел Яковлевич Пясецкий, 1843–1920) — a medical doctor, traveller, writer, and amateur artist — had already made a name for himself among both the Russian and French public. Born in the city of Orel, he moved to Moscow in 1861 to study medicine at the Imperial Moscow University. While a medical student, he also attended classes at the Stroganov School of Technical Drawing. After defending his doctoral thesis in 1871, he moved to Saint Petersburg to work as a military doctor. There, he took courses at the Imperial Academy of Arts until he joined a research and trading expedition heading to China.

The expedition was organised by the Russian government and led by Iulian Adamovich Sosnovskii (Юлиан Адамович Сосновский, 1842–1897), Captain of the General Staff. From 1874 to 1875, the nine-man team travelled from Saint Petersburg to Shanghai, passing through Ulan Bator, Beijing, and Tianjin, before returning to Russia via the Yangtze River route and Lake Zaisan. It was claimed that the expedition was the first not only Russian, but European mission to explore the vast territories of Central and Western China<sup>9</sup>. The expedition aimed to discover new overland trade routes from Western Siberia to the Chinese market and gather information on the ongoing Dungan Revolt (1862–1877).

As a physician, Piasetskii was tasked with collecting data on medicinal herbs, creating taxidermy mounts, studying traditional Chinese and Mongolian medicine, and providing medical

<sup>8</sup> A La Tour Eiffel. *Le Courrier du Tarn*: paraissant le mardi, le jeudi et le dimanche, 1889, no. 3215, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg. (cherez Sibir’, Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai): iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Ia. Piasetskii), vol. 1. St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich Publ., 1880. 560 p. (in Russian), pp. 4–5; Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg. V otvet na zashchitu Sosnovskago po povodu knigi “Puteshestvie po Kitaiu”* (Unsuccessful Expedition to China 1874–1875. In response to Sosnovsky’s defence of the book “Journey to China”). St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich’s Publ., 1881. 298 p. (in Russian), p. 9.

care to local populations<sup>1</sup>. In addition to his medical responsibilities, he pursued his passion for art, producing approximately one thousand drawings and watercolours of China throughout his journey. These artworks captured a variety of scenes, including urban and rural landscapes, interiors of Chinese buildings, daily life, and the diverse types of Chinese people. Drawing from these sketches, Piasetskii crafted a unique watercolour panorama roll that spanned over seventy metres in length, illustrating the mission's progress through China from the city of Hankou via Xinjiang to the town of Zaisan (in modern-day Kazakhstan) on the Sino-Russian border.

In 1880, Piasetskii published a detailed two-volume account of his travels, titled *Путешествие по Куману в 1874–1875 гг.* (Journey Through China in 1874–75), in St. Petersburg<sup>2</sup>. The work featured twenty-four lithographic plates based on his sketches and was republished in Moscow in 1882<sup>3</sup>. Shortly afterwards, the travelogue was translated into French and released in Paris. An abridged version appeared in the French travel journal *Le Tour du Monde* in July 1882<sup>4</sup>, followed in 1883 by a complete translation published by *Librairie Hachette et Cie* — the same publishing house responsible for the journal<sup>5</sup>. The French edition included ninety new engravings derived from Piasetskii's original drawings and watercolours<sup>6</sup>. These same illustrations were later used in the English translation, published in London in 1884<sup>7</sup>.

Piasetskii's book and artwork received international acclaim. *Le Tour du monde* remarked that never before had the French audience “dipped so deeply into the observation of Chinese morals and habits.”<sup>8</sup> The periodical also lauded the doctor's artistic talent, describing him as *très habile et fidèle dessinateur* (an accurate and accomplished draughtsman)<sup>9</sup>. However, while the engravings in the French edition were based on Piasetskii's designs, the engravers took significant artistic liberties, drastically reinterpreting his original drawings and watercolour paintings.

Scholars still tend to overlook Piasetskii's huge oeuvre and focus mainly on his biography, as thoroughly detailed in the works of T. Postrelova [11], G. Printseva [12, 13], and I. Zakharova [18]. This paper seeks to shift attention toward Piasetskii's visual imagery and address several

<sup>1</sup> Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg.*, pp. 33–34; Sosnovskii Iu. *Ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–75 gg.* (*Expedition to China in 1874–75*), vol. 1. Moscow, A. Ivanov's Publ., 1882. 894 p. (in Russian), pp. 9–10.

<sup>2</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.* vol. 1; Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.* (*cherez Sibir', Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai*): *iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (*Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Ia. Piasetskii*), vol. 2. St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich Publ., 1880. 562 p. (in Russian).

<sup>3</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.* (*cherez Sibir', Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai*): *iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (*Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Y. Piasetskii*), in 2 vols. Moscow, M. Katkov's University Publ., 1882 (in Russian).

<sup>4</sup> Voyage en Chine, par le docteur P. Piasetzky. *Le Tour du Monde: nouveau journal des voyages*, 1882, vol. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Piasetzsky P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. Paris, Hachette et Cie Publ., 1883. 563 p.

<sup>6</sup> The abridged version in the journal was even more heavily illustrated and contained two additional engravings.

<sup>7</sup> Piasetzsky P. *Russian travellers in Mongolia and China*, in 2 vols. London, Chapman & Hall Publ., 1884.

<sup>8</sup> Voyage en Chine, par le docteur P. Piasetzky. *Le Tour du Monde: nouveau journal des voyages*, 1882, vol. 44, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

key questions. How did Piasetskii perceive China, and what was his approach to depicting it, as evidenced by his drawings, travelogue, and handwritten autobiography<sup>10</sup>? How did his portrayal of China evolve once his work reached France, and what forces drove this evolution?

In his ground-breaking article “European Vision and the South Pacific,” Bernard Smith argued that European artists travelling to the South Seas were subject to a number of social and cultural preconceptions, including classical and Christian traditions [16]. Their vision was influenced by the convictions of the group to which they belonged or which employed them [16, p. 100]. Smith traced the chronological evolution of these preconceptions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; the present study, however, examines how certain predispositions about China and the Chinese shifted geographically at a particular historical moment. What roles did politics, racist ideologies, technology, fashion, and culture play in shaping the perspectives of both Piasetskii and the French engravers?

Given that the Russian edition contains only twenty-four lithographs — far fewer than the ninety engravings in the French edition — and considering the limited accessibility of Piasetskii’s original drawings and watercolours<sup>11</sup>, this study adopts a dual comparative approach. Where possible, French engravings are directly compared with Russian lithographs and original watercolours. This analysis assesses the extent to which French engravers deviated from the original artworks — examining introduced elements, changes in proportions and scale, spatial organisation of figures, and altered portrayals of Chinese subjects. As these modifications were inconsistent, the study focuses specifically on compositions that exhibit substantial divergence from their references.

The corpus of overlapping images between the Russian and French editions is notably small. Given this limitation, the second analytical strand focuses on French engravings not included in the Russian edition. Rather than analysing individual compositions, this approach investigates broader representational strategies across the two editions and original drawings — scrutinising facial expressions, physiognomic traits, attire, and activities of the Chinese portrayed.

During the journey, Piasetskii was not the only one portraying the distant country — he worked alongside Adolf Boiarskii (Адольф Боярский; birth and death dates unknown), a photographer who accompanied the same research and trading expedition. This likely explains why Piasetskii’s watercolour (now at the State Hermitage Museum; inv. ЭРР-8501) and Boiarskii’s photograph, both depicting a watermill on the Huanghe River in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, appear almost identical. When compared to the photograph, Piasetskii’s watercolour demonstrates remarkable topographical accuracy. In contrast, the engraving by Theodore Weber, which portrays the same watermill in the French translation, diverges in significant ways<sup>12</sup>. Along with a slightly altered urban landscape and perspective, the engraving introduces important new details. The engraver depicted inflated ox skins, which were used to float goods down the Yellow River. While these skins are mentioned in Piasetskii’s text<sup>13</sup>, they are absent from both his watercolour and Boiarskii’s photograph. Furthermore, in the far background

<sup>10</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional’noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian).

<sup>11</sup> Only a selection of these drawings and watercolours are available via the Goskatalog platform.

<sup>12</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 393.

<sup>13</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 2. 1880, p. 754.

along the riverbanks, the engraver included several Chinese-style buildings, such as a pagoda and an arch. These iconic elements align with pre-established perceptions of how the French audience envisioned China.

Piasetskii's approach to portraying China was fundamentally different from that of the French engraver; he viewed the country through the lens of a scientist. In his autobiography, he referred to himself as *ученый врач* (an academic physician)<sup>14</sup>. His primary purpose for travelling to China was to conduct research in natural history. As a result, during his journey, Piasetskii assembled an impressive collection of zoological, botanical, and mineralogical specimens, totalling around six thousand items. He maintained his identity as a scientist while pursuing his artistic endeavors, perceiving his watercolour panorama of China as *художественно-географический труд* (an artistic and geographical work)<sup>15</sup>. Clearly, Piasetskii's travelogue and its illustrations were intended for scientific and educational purposes; the book was first published by the printing house of Mikhail Stasiulevich (1826–1911), a historian and professor at St. Petersburg University, and two years later by the printing house of Moscow University.

Moreover, Piasetskii was not merely a medical doctor; he served as a military physician. The expedition was organised by three Russian ministries, including the Ministry of War. Sosnovskii, Piasetskii, and expedition cartographer Zinovii Lavrovich Matusovskii (*Зиновий Лаврович Матусовский*, 1842–1904) — who was responsible for creating a detailed map of central and northwestern China and documenting plans of Chinese cities and towns<sup>16</sup>—were all in military service. The mission traversed China's Xinjiang Province, a region that, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a significant theater in the so-called Great Game — a political, diplomatic, and commercial rivalry between the Russian and British empires. In 1871, during the Dungan Revolt, Russian troops occupied part of Xinjiang, specifically the Ili area, for the next ten years. This occupation ultimately heightened tensions with the Qing Empire and led to the Ili crisis (1879–1881). During his travels, it seems plausible that Piasetskii engaged in reconnaissance of the terrain that could potentially become a new battleground. His drawings and panorama roll, which depicts the same route from Hankou to the Sino-Russian border that Matusovskii documented, complemented the cartographer's work. Piasetskii's likely involvement in military intelligence may have further enhanced the topographical accuracy of his sketches.

Piasetskii's view of China and his careful recording of the distant land were also most likely influenced by the cultural climate of the time. The mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a surge in ethnographic museums and exhibitions, the rise of positivism emphasising empirical evidence, and the advent of photography — a new medium that allowed for unprecedented accuracy in documenting the world. Additionally, following China's defeat in the Second Opium War, Westerners, including photographers, gained full access to the Chinese interior, subjecting it to increased scrutiny.

<sup>14</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 7(r).

<sup>16</sup> Sosnovskii Iu. *Russkaia ucheno-torgovaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–1875 godakh* (Russian Scientific and Trade Expedition to China in 1874–1875). St. Petersburg, 1876. 121 p. (in Russian).

Interestingly, Piasetskii sometimes reproduced photographs taken by foreign photographers in China in his watercolours [10]. On occasion, he even mimicked photographs by creating black-and-white watercolour paintings. Piasetskii himself was acquainted with the photographic process<sup>17</sup> and would later use a camera while creating his watercolour panorama of the Trans-Siberian Railway — his *magnum opus* [13, p. 64].

Photography served as both a helping hand and a rival for Piasetskii. During the expedition to China, he encountered a heated conflict with Sosnovskii, the head of the mission, who, partly for personal reasons, favoured Boiarskii's photographs over Piasetskii's watercolours [10]. Sosnovskii argued that photography — *серая, безжизненная и немая* (grey, lifeless, and mute as it is) — remains *рабски неотступная копия подлинника* (a slavishly unswerving copy of the original). He suggested that Piasetskii's watercolours could not compete with this new medium, which was better suited for depicting the lesser-known and unusual<sup>18</sup>. This criticism may have additionally influenced Piasetskii, who obviously sought maximum impartiality and accuracy in his work. It is likely that photography “clarified” the doctor-turned-artist's view to some extent.

Due to Piasetskii's meticulous approach, his watercolours depicted China as an ordinary country, starkly contrasting with the fantastical representations typical of *chinoiserie*. Piasetskii had anticipated encountering *чудеса китайской архитектуры* (the marvels of Chinese architecture), such as *волшебные сады с дворцами, балконами, мостами и беседками* (magical gardens with palaces, balconies, bridges, and pavilions), as often imagined by Europeans<sup>19</sup>. He had hoped to find not China but Cathay, of which, as Hugh Honour metaphorically observed, “poets are the only historians and porcelain painters the most reliable topographers” [9, pp. 5–6]. Yet, like many other travellers before him, Piasetskii discovered that the China he had envisioned was far removed from reality; *последняя хуже мечты, созданной воображением на основании описаний да живых рисунков* (the latter is worse than the dream conjured by the imagination based on descriptions and misleading illustrations)<sup>20</sup>. Through his travelogue and drawings, Piasetskii sought to dismantle the myth of China as a land of wonders, presenting instead a more grounded and truthful portrayal.

However, it is important to note that he seems to be more disappointed in the way China was represented in the West than in China itself. A dedicated Sinophile and passionate enthusiast of China, he held a perspective on the Chinese Empire that was quite distinct from the prevailing views of his time. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the admiration for China that had characterised early Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz and Voltaire had largely given way to disdain and sinophobia [1, p. 19]. In sharp contrast, Piasetskii sought to challenge the prevailing stereotypes of the Chinese as hostile and violent, instead portraying them as hospitable, friendly, polite, and good-natured individuals in his writings<sup>21</sup>. For instance, in his travelogue, he recounts an episode during Chinese New Year celebrations when the Chinese congratulated Europeans with a

<sup>17</sup> Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg.*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Sosnovskii Iu. *Ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–75 gg. (Expedition to China in 1874–75)*, vol. 1. Moscow, A. Ivanov's Publ., 1882. 894 p. (in Russian), pp. 9–10.

<sup>19</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 153.

<sup>20</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 403.

<sup>21</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880.

lively procession accompanied by firecrackers. Initially, Piasetskii misinterpreted the event as an attempted attack by an angry mob. He ultimately concludes that the widespread narratives about the malice of the Chinese and the constant danger they supposedly posed to Europeans were starkly at odds with such gentle displays of goodwill<sup>22</sup>.

However, the French translation of Piasetskii's work offers a rather uncharitable depiction of the Chinese. The engravers rendered some figures as half-naked, animalistic savages<sup>23</sup>—a marked contrast to Piasetskii's original drawings and watercolours, as well as the lithographs in the Russian edition. In the latter, Chinese faces are typically vague unless presented as portraits (or perhaps more accurately, as 'types'), with figures depicted in a schematic manner. The French engravers, by comparison, often placed these subjects prominently in the foreground, meticulously accentuating their physiques and facial expressions, at times lending them an air of menace or coarseness.

This dehumanising representation can be understood not merely as a reflection of prevailing prejudices but also as a tool to legitimise France's colonial ambitions during a period of escalating foreign imperialism in China. At the time, France was actively encroaching upon Vietnam, which the Qing Empire regarded as a tributary state. These tensions culminated in the undeclared Sino-French War (1884–85). When the travelogue was published, the French media openly portrayed the Chinese as enemies while framing colonial violence as a noble cause and heroic duty. A review of Piasetskii's travel account in *Le Monde* (22 December 1883) encapsulates this sentiment:

"Whatever the case, let us, as a New Year's wish, make vows so that our brave soldiers and sailors may teach our enemies in the Far East that, even when poorly governed, France — whose missionaries carry the life-giving torch of the Gospel far and wide — is always served with courage and honour by its valiant army, devoted to sacrifice and duty."<sup>24</sup>

In this context, the media discourse surrounding the travelogue functioned as a vehicle for colonial propaganda, closely tied to the politicised patronage of Roman Catholic missionary activities. Beginning in the 1840s, France positioned itself as the champion and protector of Roman Catholic missionaries in China — a role that allowed it to counterbalance the prestige and influence of its British rival [4, p. 552]. As Anthony E. Clark notes, 19<sup>th</sup>-century France saw itself as delivering "both the gospel and the highest vestiges of human culture to China" [7, p. 123] — a civilisational rhetoric that found clear expression in the review of Piasetskii's travel account.

In the 1880s, when the translation was published, France began exhibiting a growing preoccupation with what would later be termed the Yellow Peril — a xenophobic fear of East Asian expansion. While this racist political concept was formally articulated in 1895 by Kaiser Wilhelm II following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) [8], anti-Chinese sentiment had already taken root across the West decades earlier. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, hostility toward Chinese immigrants had fuelled agitation in the goldfields of Australia and California, where objections were framed explicitly in the language of race and colour [14, p. 19]. Chinese labourers, depicted as uncivilised outsiders, faced mounting legal discrimination — partially justified through newly circulating statistics about China's purported 400 million population [14, p. 36].

<sup>22</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 361.

<sup>23</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, pp. 129, 207.

<sup>24</sup> Les Livres D'Étrennes. I. *Le Monde*, 22 décembre 1883.





Fig. 1. Tofani by design of Piasetskii. *Mon escorte habituelle dans les rues* (My Usual Escort in the Street). From: [17]

By the 1880s, these prejudices had intensified into what some portrayed as a looming Chinese tidal wave — a demographic and economic threat poised to “swamp” the “white population” [14, p. 36].

The spectre of a “Chinese wave” was a recurring preoccupation in European racial and political discourse. As Gregory Blue highlights, Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) — the French intellectual often regarded as a founder of modern racism — developed an obsessive fixation late in life on the notion of a “Chinese wave” that would inundate Europe via the new railways of the expanding Russian Empire [3, p. 117]. This anxiety found striking parallels in missionary circles, as evidenced by Piasetskii’s account. He describes an encounter with a French Catholic missionary who, with evident apprehension, asked the members of the mission whether Russia intended to build a railway to China<sup>25</sup>.

Many of the engravings in the French edition of Piasetskii’s book reveal not only a demonising but also a patronising attitude toward the Chinese. One illustration, titled “My Usual Escort in the Streets,” (Fig. 1) portrays Piasetskii as a tall and handsome man in white clothing, standing out distinctly from a crowd of natives, with their attention focused on the outsider. Another print depicts Piasetskii deeply engaged in drawing, surrounded by Chinese individuals who seem captivated by his art<sup>26</sup>. In this context, Piasetskii can be seen as embodying the notion of the “white man’s burden,” as he introduces the locals — who, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, resemble “half devils, half children”<sup>27</sup> — to European art and culture.

Despite being a devoted Sinophile, Piasetskii held certain colonialist views, too. In his travelogue, he occasionally likened the Chinese to children. For instance, he described how the

<sup>25</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1, p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 403.

<sup>27</sup> Kipling R. The White Man’s Burden. *McClure’s Magazine*, 1899, vol. 12, no. 4.

locals were captivated by his binoculars, noting their eager desire to look through them, and remarked that *все они были дети, такие дети, не позабавить которых было бы просто жестокосердно* (they were all children — such children that it would be cruel not to amuse them)<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, he described Mrs. Senki, a Chinese woman he met in Hankou, as “a beautiful savage,” suggesting she would win many hearts if she were to appear in one of Europe’s capitals<sup>29</sup>. While he praised her beauty, he simultaneously exoticized her, reducing her to a figure of curiosity. However, while Piasetskii’s written accounts betray a colonialist lens, his sketches and lithographs in the Russian edition of his travel diary do not display any overt colonial agenda, in contrast to the French engravings.

The engravers in France had dual intentions: to contribute to imperialist propaganda, while catering to the expectations of the French public. Influenced by a long tradition of *chinoiserie*, the French audience craved wonders and exoticism. To satisfy this demand for flowery Cathay, the engravers liberally incorporated picturesque pagodas, junks, ladies with parasols, mandarins, and street vendors with their goods into the illustrations accompanying the translation of Piasetskii’s travelogue. These visual icons of China would have been familiar to the French audience, as they had already been popularised for centuries through Chinese and Chinese-style porcelain, lacquers, screens, cabinets, *chinoiserie* tapestries designed by artists like François Boucher, pavilions in Anglo-Chinese gardens etc.

Although the fantasy of China as a fairyland was increasingly dismantled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this deconstruction “did not prevent its continuation as a dream” [6, p. 175]. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, China once again captured the imagination of European audiences, driven by the rococo revival [9] and “the Romantics’ re-appreciation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century *chinoiserie*” [6, p. 154]. This renewed fascination sparked a trend of collecting Chinese and Chinese-inspired bric-a-brac in France. Prominent figures such as Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers were among those who cultivated admiration for China and Chinese material culture [6, p. 155].

By the 1860s, the fashion for *chinoiserie* had largely waned, giving way to the new vogue of *japonisme* [9, p. 207]. Despite this shift, China retained its allure in Europe. The “opening” of China following the two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) enabled a greater number of bourgeoisie to amass extensive collections of Chinese artifacts through curio shops and trips to China. As Yuet Heng Wong demonstrates, Émile Guimet — founder of the eponymous museum, which first opened in Lyon before relocating to Paris — organised an “unprecedentedly systematic and comprehensive display of Chinese artifacts,” ranging from ceramics and bronzes to books, paintings, and currency [17, p. 76]. Meanwhile, Henri Cernuschi (1821–1896) amassed remarkable Chinese and Japanese bronzes, which he showcased through exhibitions and private viewings [5]; these now form the core of the Musée Cernuschi. China was also prominently featured at the World Fairs, making its official debut in Vienna in 1873. The enchantment with China permeated literature as well. In 1879, Jules Verne published an adventure novel titled *Les Tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine* (Tribulations of a Chinaman in China), set entirely in China and featuring a Chinese protagonist<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 294.

<sup>29</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 358.

<sup>30</sup> Jules V. *Les tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine*. J. Hetzel Publ., 1879. 204 p.



The enduring interest in Chinese culture among French intellectuals and bourgeoisie, coupled with the imperialist appetites of the government, pointed to potential commercial opportunities. The French translation of Piasetskii's travel diaries likely represented a costly venture, given the large team of engravers involved in its production. To justify this significant financial investment, the French engravings adopted a far more manipulative tone than the original drawings. These illustrations were deliberately designed to evoke strong emotions and entertain readers. This is evident in the inclusion of dramatic, sensational, and exotic elements — such as severed heads displayed in cages hanging from trees<sup>31</sup>, garden gates shaped like porcelain teapots<sup>32</sup>, and an abundance of stereotypical pagodas and Chinese vases. Thus, Piasetskii's compositions, initially created for scientific, educational and possibly intelligence purposes, were transformed into biased and sensationalised engravings.

The distortion of Piasetskii's original images through French engravings epitomised France's unique position at the intersection of cultural power, colonial ambition, and representational tradition. Walter Benjamin's characterisation of Paris as “the capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” [2] captures the city's dominance in European cultural production, with French serving as the continent's lingua franca. This cultural preeminence aligned perfectly with France's growing imperial interests in China.

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century China, Britain and France stood as the most influential European powers. Britain dominated economically as China's primary trading partner, while France assumed the role of protector for Roman Catholic missionaries. British depictions of China — notably William Alexander's illustrations — established key visual precedents across Europe [15]. France, in turn, built upon its 18<sup>th</sup>-century chinoiserie tradition while adapting British imagery<sup>33</sup>. Combined with its 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial agenda — intertwined with politicised religious and missionary ambitions—this representational legacy made Parisian workshops the epicentre for crafting Western visions of China, often in deliberately manipulative ways.

It is no surprise that the emotionally charged and engaging illustrations from the French translation of the travelogue continued to be repurposed in French journalism. A slightly modified engraving from the French translation of Piasetskii's travelogue was used as an illustration for the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 in *Le Petit Journal*<sup>34</sup>. The engraver made only minimal changes, adding a few figures of Chinese soldiers while leaving the rest of the composition largely unaltered. This reuse carries a certain irony: the concept of the Yellow Peril emerged in response to the Sino-Japanese War, yet Piasetskii's own sentiment stood in direct opposition to those who feared an invasion from the Far East.

Unlike the French engravings, the doctor's drawings and panorama appear to have served primarily as reports to the state authorities who had commissioned Sosnovskii's mission to China — notably the General Staff and the Ministry of War. This is further indicated by the fact that he exhibited his drawings during the Imperial inspection of cartographic and other works

<sup>31</sup> Piasetsky P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 355.

<sup>32</sup> Piasetsky P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*, p. 427.

<sup>33</sup> In “La Chine. Moeurs, usages, costumes, arts et métiers” by Malpiere (Paris, 1825–27) numerous illustrations were sourced from William Alexander's “The Costume of China” (London, 1805).

<sup>34</sup> La Guerre Sino-Japonaise. *Le Petit Journal*, 1895, no. 216 (in French), p. 1.

of the military and naval departments in the Winter Palace<sup>35</sup>, and presented his panorama to the Emperor on the orders of the Minister of War<sup>36</sup>. Piasetskii's work held importance at a time when Russia sought to extend its political and economic influence over China's northwestern territories, aiming to safeguard the newly annexed Turkestan and secure Russian-Chinese trade. A scientist and a military physician involved in reconnaissance activities, Piasetskii combined these roles to produce drawings and watercolours of China marked by unprecedented accuracy.

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<sup>35</sup> *Russkii invalid*, 1876, no. 72 (in Russian), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 5.

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**Название статьи.** «Путешествие по Китаю» из Петербурга в Париж: иллюстрации к травелогу Павла Пясецкого в России и во Франции

**Сведения об авторе.** Курьянова, Анастасия Максимовна — аспирант. Европейский университет в Санкт-Петербурге, Гагаринская ул., 6/1А, Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация, 191187. akuryanova@eu.spb.ru; SPIN-код: 4658-7795; ORCID: 0000-0003-2211-5952

**Аннотация.** В 1874–75 гг. Павел Пясецкий — русский врач, писатель, художник-любитель — совершил путешествие в Китай в составе учено-торговой экспедиции, организованной российским правительством, из которой привез около тысячи рисунков и акварелей. Позднее некоторые из них были переведены в формат литографий и украсили «Путешествие по Китаю» — двухтомное издание дневников Пясецкого, которые он вел во время экспедиции. В 1883 г. в Париже был опубликован перевод травелога Пясецкого на французский язык, проиллюстрированный девяноста новыми гравюрами, выполненными на основе рисунков врача. В отличие от литографий в русском издании, гравюры сильно отличались от исходных композиций Пясецкого. В статье рассматривается, как политика, культура, технологии и мода — в частности противостояние России и Великобритании в рамках т.н. «Большой игры» в Центральной Азии, распространение идей о «Желтой угрозе» в Европе, развитие фотографии и длинная традиция шинуазри — повлияли на оптику Пясецкого и его образ Китая, а также на те трансформации, которые произошли с его рисунками и акварелями во Франции.

**Ключевые слова:** Павел Пясецкий, экспедиция в Китай, книжная иллюстрация, рисунок, литография, гравюра, Желтая угроза, Большая игра, шинуазри, фотография 19 века

**Title.** “Journey Through China” from St. Petersburg to Paris: Illustrations for Pavel Piasetskii’s Travelogue in Russia and France

**Author.** Kuryanova, Anastasia M. — Postgraduate Student. European University at St. Petersburg, Gagarinskaya ul., 6/1A, 191187, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation. akuryanova@eu.spb.ru; SPIN-code: 4658-7795; ORCID: 0000-0003-2211-5952

**Abstract.** In 1874–75, Pavel Piasetskii — a Russian doctor, writer, and amateur artist — journeyed to China as part of a scientific and trading expedition organised by the Russian government. During his travels, he created approximately one thousand drawings and watercolour paintings. A selection of these works was later reproduced as lithographs to accompany his “Journey through China”, which documented his experience. In 1883, a French translation of Piasetskii’s travelogue was published in Paris, featuring ninety new engravings based on his original drawings. However, these engravings diverged significantly from Piasetskii’s initial compositions. This article explores how politics, culture, technology, and fashion shaped Piasetskii’s portrayal of China and the subsequent transformation of his works in France. Key factors include the rivalry between Russia and Great Britain during the “Great Game” in Central Asia, the spread of “Yellow Peril” ideologies in Europe, the rise of photography, and the enduring tradition of chinoiserie.

**Keywords:** Pavel Piasetskii, expedition to China, book illustration, drawing, lithograph, engraving, Yellow Peril, Great Game, chinoiserie, 19<sup>th</sup>-century photography

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A. M. Kuryanova

## **“Journey Through China” from St. Petersburg to Paris: Illustrations for Pavel Piasetskii’s Travelogue in Russia and France**

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1889, Gustave Eiffel gave a tour of the Eiffel Tower to Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich of Russia. The tour included a visit to Monsieur Eiffel’s apartment located at the top of the Tower. There, according to newspaper reports, Eiffel showed the Grand Duke a mirror on which, two days prior, the Russian artist Pavel Piasetskii had drawn a floral frame. The inscription that Piasetskii added to his drawing read as follows: “Flowers from Russia and China salute the great height of the Eiffel Tower.”<sup>1</sup>

By that time, Pavel Iakovlevich Piasetskii (Павел Яковлевич Пясецкий, 1843–1920) — a medical doctor, traveller, writer, and amateur artist — had already made a name for himself among both the Russian and French public. Born in the city of Orel, he moved to Moscow in 1861 to study medicine at the Imperial Moscow University. While a medical student, he also attended classes at the Stroganov School of Technical Drawing. After defending his doctoral thesis in 1871, he moved to Saint Petersburg to work as a military doctor. There, he took courses at the Imperial Academy of Arts until he joined a research and trading expedition heading to China.

The expedition was organised by the Russian government and led by Iulian Adamovich Sosnovskii (Юлиан Адамович Сосновский, 1842–1897), Captain of the General Staff. From 1874 to 1875, the nine-man team travelled from Saint Petersburg to Shanghai, passing through Ulan Bator, Beijing, and Tianjin, before returning to Russia via the Yangtze River route and Lake Zaisan. It was claimed that the expedition was the first not only Russian, but European mission to explore the vast territories of Central and Western China<sup>2</sup>. The expedition aimed to discover new overland trade routes from Western Siberia to the Chinese market and gather information on the ongoing Dungan Revolt (1862–1877).

As a physician, Piasetskii was tasked with collecting data on medicinal herbs, creating taxidermy mounts, studying traditional Chinese and Mongolian medicine, and providing medical

<sup>1</sup> A La Tour Eiffel. *Le Courrier du Tarn*: paraissant le mardi, le jeudi et le dimanche, 1889, no. 3215, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg. (cherez Sibir’, Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai): iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Ia. Piasetskii), vol. 1. St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich Publ., 1880. 560 p. (in Russian), pp. 4–5; Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg. V otvet na zashchitu Sosnovskago po povodu knigi “Puteshestvie po Kitaiu”* (Unsuccessful Expedition to China 1874–1875. In response to Sosnovsky’s defence of the book “Journey to China”). St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich’s Publ., 1881. 298 p. (in Russian), p. 9.

care to local populations<sup>3</sup>. In addition to his medical responsibilities, he pursued his passion for art, producing approximately one thousand drawings and watercolours of China throughout his journey. These artworks captured a variety of scenes, including urban and rural landscapes, interiors of Chinese buildings, daily life, and the diverse types of Chinese people. Drawing from these sketches, Piasetskii crafted a unique watercolour panorama roll that spanned over seventy metres in length, illustrating the mission's progress through China from the city of Hankou via Xinjiang to the town of Zaisan (in modern-day Kazakhstan) on the Sino-Russian border.

In 1880, Piasetskii published a detailed two-volume account of his travels, titled *Путешествие по Кумая в 1874–1875 гг.* (Journey Through China in 1874–75), in St. Petersburg<sup>4</sup>. The work featured twenty-four lithographic plates based on his sketches and was republished in Moscow in 1882<sup>5</sup>. Shortly afterwards, the travelogue was translated into French and released in Paris. An abridged version appeared in the French travel journal *Le Tour du Monde* in July 1882<sup>6</sup>, followed in 1883 by a complete translation published by *Librairie Hachette et Cie* — the same publishing house responsible for the journal<sup>7</sup>. The French edition included ninety new engravings derived from Piasetskii's original drawings and watercolours<sup>8</sup>. These same illustrations were later used in the English translation, published in London in 1884<sup>9</sup>.

Piasetskii's book and artwork received international acclaim. *Le Tour du monde* remarked that never before had the French audience “dipped so deeply into the observation of Chinese morals and habits.”<sup>10</sup> The periodical also lauded the doctor's artistic talent, describing him as *très habile et fidèle dessinateur* (an accurate and accomplished draughtsman)<sup>11</sup>. However, while the engravings in the French edition were based on Piasetskii's designs, the engravers took significant artistic liberties, drastically reinterpreting his original drawings and watercolour paintings.

Scholars still tend to overlook Piasetskii's huge oeuvre and focus mainly on his biography, as thoroughly detailed in the works of T. Postrelova [11], G. Printseva [12, 13], and I. Zakharova [18]. This paper seeks to shift attention toward Piasetskii's visual imagery and address several

<sup>3</sup> Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg.*, pp. 33–34; Sosnovskii Iu. *Ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–75 gg.* (*Expedition to China in 1874–75*), vol. 1. Moscow, A. Ivanov's Publ., 1882. 894 p. (in Russian), pp. 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.* vol. 1; Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg. (cherez Sibir', Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai): iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (*Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Ia. Piasetskii*), vol. 2. St. Petersburg, M. Stasyulevich Publ., 1880. 562 p. (in Russian).

<sup>5</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg. (cherez Sibir', Mongoliu, Vostochnyi, Srednii i Severo-Zapadnyi Kitai): iz dnevnika chlena ekspeditsii P. Ia. Piasetskago* (*Journey through China in 1874–75 (via Siberia, Mongolia, Eastern, Central and Northwestern China): From the Diary of the Expedition Member P. Y. Piasetskii*), in 2 vols. Moscow, M. Katkov's University Publ., 1882 (in Russian).

<sup>6</sup> Voyage en Chine, par le docteur P. Piasetzky. *Le Tour du Monde: nouveau journal des voyages*, 1882, vol. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Piasetzky P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. Paris, Hachette et Cie Publ., 1883. 563 p.

<sup>8</sup> The abridged version in the journal was even more heavily illustrated and contained two additional engravings.

<sup>9</sup> Piasetzky P. *Russian travellers in Mongolia and China*, in 2 vols. London, Chapman & Hall Publ., 1884.

<sup>10</sup> Voyage en Chine, par le docteur P. Piasetzky. *Le Tour du Monde: nouveau journal des voyages*, 1882, vol. 44, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



key questions. How did Piasetskii perceive China, and what was his approach to depicting it, as evidenced by his drawings, travelogue, and handwritten autobiography<sup>12</sup>? How did his portrayal of China evolve once his work reached France, and what forces drove this evolution?

In his ground-breaking article “European Vision and the South Pacific,” Bernard Smith argued that European artists travelling to the South Seas were subject to a number of social and cultural preconceptions, including classical and Christian traditions [16]. Their vision was influenced by the convictions of the group to which they belonged or which employed them [16, p. 100]. Smith traced the chronological evolution of these preconceptions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; the present study, however, examines how certain predispositions about China and the Chinese shifted geographically at a particular historical moment. What roles did politics, racist ideologies, technology, fashion, and culture play in shaping the perspectives of both Piasetskii and the French engravers?

Given that the Russian edition contains only twenty-four lithographs — far fewer than the ninety engravings in the French edition — and considering the limited accessibility of Piasetskii’s original drawings and watercolours<sup>13</sup>, this study adopts a dual comparative approach. Where possible, French engravings are directly compared with Russian lithographs and original watercolours. This analysis assesses the extent to which French engravers deviated from the original artworks — examining introduced elements, changes in proportions and scale, spatial organisation of figures, and altered portrayals of Chinese subjects. As these modifications were inconsistent, the study focuses specifically on compositions that exhibit substantial divergence from their references.

The corpus of overlapping images between the Russian and French editions is notably small. Given this limitation, the second analytical strand focuses on French engravings not included in the Russian edition. Rather than analysing individual compositions, this approach investigates broader representational strategies across the two editions and original drawings — scrutinising facial expressions, physiognomic traits, attire, and activities of the Chinese portrayed.

During the journey, Piasetskii was not the only one portraying the distant country — he worked alongside Adolf Boiarskii (Адо́льф Боя́рский; birth and death dates unknown), a photographer who accompanied the same research and trading expedition. This likely explains why Piasetskii’s watercolour (now at the State Hermitage Museum; inv. ЭРР-8501) and Boiarskii’s photograph, both depicting a watermill on the Huanghe River in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, appear almost identical. When compared to the photograph, Piasetskii’s watercolour demonstrates remarkable topographical accuracy. In contrast, the engraving by Theodore Weber, which portrays the same watermill in the French translation, diverges in significant ways<sup>14</sup>. Along with a slightly altered urban landscape and perspective, the engraving introduces important new details. The engraver depicted inflated ox skins, which were used to float goods down the Yellow River. While these skins are mentioned in Piasetskii’s text<sup>15</sup>, they are absent from both his watercolour and Boiarskii’s photograph. Furthermore, in the far background

<sup>12</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional’noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian).

<sup>13</sup> Only a selection of these drawings and watercolours are available via the Goskatalog platform.

<sup>14</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 393.

<sup>15</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 2. 1880, p. 754.

along the riverbanks, the engraver included several Chinese-style buildings, such as a pagoda and an arch. These iconic elements align with pre-established perceptions of how the French audience envisioned China.

Piasetskii's approach to portraying China was fundamentally different from that of the French engraver; he viewed the country through the lens of a scientist. In his autobiography, he referred to himself as *ученый врач* (an academic physician)<sup>16</sup>. His primary purpose for travelling to China was to conduct research in natural history. As a result, during his journey, Piasetskii assembled an impressive collection of zoological, botanical, and mineralogical specimens, totalling around six thousand items. He maintained his identity as a scientist while pursuing his artistic endeavors, perceiving his watercolour panorama of China as *художественно-географический труд* (an artistic and geographical work)<sup>17</sup>. Clearly, Piasetskii's travelogue and its illustrations were intended for scientific and educational purposes; the book was first published by the printing house of Mikhail Stasiulevich (1826–1911), a historian and professor at St. Petersburg University, and two years later by the printing house of Moscow University.

Moreover, Piasetskii was not merely a medical doctor; he served as a military physician. The expedition was organised by three Russian ministries, including the Ministry of War. Sosnovskii, Piasetskii, and expedition cartographer Zinovii Lavrovich Matusovskii (*Зиновий Лаврович Матусовский*, 1842–1904) — who was responsible for creating a detailed map of central and northwestern China and documenting plans of Chinese cities and towns<sup>18</sup> — were all in military service. The mission traversed China's Xinjiang Province, a region that, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a significant theater in the so-called Great Game — a political, diplomatic, and commercial rivalry between the Russian and British empires. In 1871, during the Dungan Revolt, Russian troops occupied part of Xinjiang, specifically the Ili area, for the next ten years. This occupation ultimately heightened tensions with the Qing Empire and led to the Ili crisis (1879–1881). During his travels, it seems plausible that Piasetskii engaged in reconnaissance of the terrain that could potentially become a new battleground. His drawings and panorama roll, which depicts the same route from Hankou to the Sino-Russian border that Matusovskii documented, complemented the cartographer's work. Piasetskii's likely involvement in military intelligence may have further enhanced the topographical accuracy of his sketches.

Piasetskii's view of China and his careful recording of the distant land were also most likely influenced by the cultural climate of the time. The mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a surge in ethnographic museums and exhibitions, the rise of positivism emphasising empirical evidence, and the advent of photography — a new medium that allowed for unprecedented accuracy in documenting the world. Additionally, following China's defeat in the Second Opium War, Westerners, including photographers, gained full access to the Chinese interior, subjecting it to increased scrutiny.

<sup>16</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 7(r).

<sup>18</sup> Sosnovskii Iu. *Russkaia ucheno-torgovaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–1875 godakh* (*Russian Scientific and Trade Expedition to China in 1874–1875*). St. Petersburg, 1876. 121 p. (in Russian).

Interestingly, Piasetskii sometimes reproduced photographs taken by foreign photographers in China in his watercolours [10]. On occasion, he even mimicked photographs by creating black-and-white watercolour paintings. Piasetskii himself was acquainted with the photographic process<sup>19</sup> and would later use a camera while creating his watercolour panorama of the Trans-Siberian Railway — his *magnum opus* [13, p. 64].

Photography served as both a helping hand and a rival for Piasetskii. During the expedition to China, he encountered a heated conflict with Sosnovskii, the head of the mission, who, partly for personal reasons, favoured Boiarskii's photographs over Piasetskii's watercolours [10]. Sosnovskii argued that photography — *серая, безжизненная и немая* (grey, lifeless, and mute as it is) — remains *рабски неотступная копия подлинника* (a slavishly unswerving copy of the original). He suggested that Piasetskii's watercolours could not compete with this new medium, which was better suited for depicting the lesser-known and unusual<sup>20</sup>. This criticism may have additionally influenced Piasetskii, who obviously sought maximum impartiality and accuracy in his work. It is likely that photography “clarified” the doctor-turned-artist's view to some extent.

Due to Piasetskii's meticulous approach, his watercolours depicted China as an ordinary country, starkly contrasting with the fantastical representations typical of *chinoiserie*. Piasetskii had anticipated encountering *чудеса китайской архитектуры* (the marvels of Chinese architecture), such as *волшебные сады с дворцами, балконами, мостами и беседками* (magical gardens with palaces, balconies, bridges, and pavilions), as often imagined by Europeans<sup>21</sup>. He had hoped to find not China but Cathay, of which, as Hugh Honour metaphorically observed, “poets are the only historians and porcelain painters the most reliable topographers” [9, pp. 5–6]. Yet, like many other travellers before him, Piasetskii discovered that the China he had envisioned was far removed from reality; *последняя хуже мечты, созданной воображением на основании описаний да лживых рисунков* (the latter is worse than the dream conjured by the imagination based on descriptions and misleading illustrations)<sup>22</sup>. Through his travelogue and drawings, Piasetskii sought to dismantle the myth of China as a land of wonders, presenting instead a more grounded and truthful portrayal.

However, it is important to note that he seems to be more disappointed in the way China was represented in the West than in China itself. A dedicated Sinophile and passionate enthusiast of China, he held a perspective on the Chinese Empire that was quite distinct from the prevailing views of his time. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the admiration for China that had characterised early Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz and Voltaire had largely given way to disdain and sinophobia [1, p. 19]. In sharp contrast, Piasetskii sought to challenge the prevailing stereotypes of the Chinese as hostile and violent, instead portraying them as hospitable, friendly, polite, and good-natured individuals in his writings<sup>23</sup>. For instance, in his travelogue, he recounts an episode during Chinese New Year celebrations when the Chinese congratulated Europeans with a

<sup>19</sup> Piasetskii P. *Neudachnaia ekspeditsiia v Kitai 1874–1875 gg.*, p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Sosnovskii Iu. *Ekspeditsiia v Kitai v 1874–75 gg. (Expedition to China in 1874–75)*, vol. 1. Moscow, A. Ivanov's Publ., 1882. 894 p. (in Russian), pp. 9–10.

<sup>21</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 403.

<sup>23</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880.

lively procession accompanied by firecrackers. Initially, Piasetskii misinterpreted the event as an attempted attack by an angry mob. He ultimately concludes that the widespread narratives about the malice of the Chinese and the constant danger they supposedly posed to Europeans were starkly at odds with such gentle displays of goodwill<sup>24</sup>.

However, the French translation of Piasetskii's work offers a rather uncharitable depiction of the Chinese. The engravers rendered some figures as half-naked, animalistic savages<sup>25</sup> — a marked contrast to Piasetskii's original drawings and watercolours, as well as the lithographs in the Russian edition. In the latter, Chinese faces are typically vague unless presented as portraits (or perhaps more accurately, as 'types'), with figures depicted in a schematic manner. The French engravers, by comparison, often placed these subjects prominently in the foreground, meticulously accentuating their physiques and facial expressions, at times lending them an air of menace or coarseness.

This dehumanising representation can be understood not merely as a reflection of prevailing prejudices but also as a tool to legitimise France's colonial ambitions during a period of escalating foreign imperialism in China. At the time, France was actively encroaching upon Vietnam, which the Qing Empire regarded as a tributary state. These tensions culminated in the undeclared Sino-French War (1884–85). When the travelogue was published, the French media openly portrayed the Chinese as enemies while framing colonial violence as a noble cause and heroic duty. A review of Piasetskii's travel account in *Le Monde* (22 December 1883) encapsulates this sentiment:

"Whatever the case, let us, as a New Year's wish, make vows so that our brave soldiers and sailors may teach our enemies in the Far East that, even when poorly governed, France — whose missionaries carry the life-giving torch of the Gospel far and wide — is always served with courage and honour by its valiant army, devoted to sacrifice and duty."<sup>26</sup>

In this context, the media discourse surrounding the travelogue functioned as a vehicle for colonial propaganda, closely tied to the politicised patronage of Roman Catholic missionary activities. Beginning in the 1840s, France positioned itself as the champion and protector of Roman Catholic missionaries in China — a role that allowed it to counterbalance the prestige and influence of its British rival [4, p. 552]. As Anthony E. Clark notes, 19<sup>th</sup>-century France saw itself as delivering "both the gospel and the highest vestiges of human culture to China" [7, p. 123] — a civilisational rhetoric that found clear expression in the review of Piasetskii's travel account.

In the 1880s, when the translation was published, France began exhibiting a growing preoccupation with what would later be termed the Yellow Peril — a xenophobic fear of East Asian expansion. While this racist political concept was formally articulated in 1895 by Kaiser Wilhelm II following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) [8], anti-Chinese sentiment had already taken root across the West decades earlier. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, hostility toward Chinese immigrants had fuelled agitation in the goldfields of Australia and California, where objections were framed explicitly in the language of race and colour [14, p. 19]. Chinese labourers, depicted as uncivilised outsiders, faced mounting legal discrimination — partially justified through newly circulating statistics about China's purported 400 million population [14, p. 36].

<sup>24</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 361.

<sup>25</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, pp. 129, 207.

<sup>26</sup> Les Livres D'Étrennes. I. *Le Monde*, 22 décembre 1883.



Fig. 1. Tofani by design of Piasetskii. Mon escorte habituelle dans les rues (My Usual Escort in the Street). From: [17]

By the 1880s, these prejudices had intensified into what some portrayed as a looming Chinese tidal wave — a demographic and economic threat poised to “swamp” the “white population” [14, p. 36].

The spectre of a “Chinese wave” was a recurring preoccupation in European racial and political discourse. As Gregory Blue highlights, Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) — the French intellectual often regarded as a founder of modern racism — developed an obsessive fixation late in life on the notion of a “Chinese wave” that would inundate Europe via the new railways of the expanding Russian Empire [3, p. 117]. This anxiety found striking parallels in missionary circles, as evidenced by Piasetskii’s account. He describes an encounter with a French Catholic missionary who, with evident apprehension, asked the members of the mission whether Russia intended to build a railway to China<sup>27</sup>.

Many of the engravings in the French edition of Piasetskii’s book reveal not only a demonising but also a patronising attitude toward the Chinese. One illustration, titled “My Usual Escort in the Streets,” (Fig. 1) portrays Piasetskii as a tall and handsome man in white clothing, standing out distinctly from a crowd of natives, with their attention focused on the outsider. Another print depicts Piasetskii deeply engaged in drawing, surrounded by Chinese individuals who seem captivated by his art<sup>28</sup>. In this context, Piasetskii can be seen as embodying the notion of the “white man’s burden,” as he introduces the locals — who, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, resemble “half devils, half children”<sup>29</sup> — to European art and culture.

Despite being a devoted Sinophile, Piasetskii held certain colonialist views, too. In his travelogue, he occasionally likened the Chinese to children. For instance, he described how the

<sup>27</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 403.

<sup>29</sup> Kipling R. The White Man’s Burden. *McClure’s Magazine*, 1899, vol. 12, no. 4.



locals were captivated by his binoculars, noting their eager desire to look through them, and remarked that *все они были дети, такие дети, не позабавить которых было бы просто жестокосердно* (they were all children — such children that it would be cruel not to amuse them)<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, he described Mrs. Senki, a Chinese woman he met in Hankou, as “a beautiful savage,” suggesting she would win many hearts if she were to appear in one of Europe’s capitals<sup>31</sup>. While he praised her beauty, he simultaneously exoticized her, reducing her to a figure of curiosity. However, while Piasetskii’s written accounts betray a colonialist lens, his sketches and lithographs in the Russian edition of his travel diary do not display any overt colonial agenda, in contrast to the French engravings.

The engravers in France had dual intentions: to contribute to imperialist propaganda, while catering to the expectations of the French public. Influenced by a long tradition of *chinoiserie*, the French audience craved wonders and exoticism. To satisfy this demand for flowery Cathay, the engravers liberally incorporated picturesque pagodas, junks, ladies with parasols, mandarins, and street vendors with their goods into the illustrations accompanying the translation of Piasetskii’s travelogue. These visual icons of China would have been familiar to the French audience, as they had already been popularised for centuries through Chinese and Chinese-style porcelain, lacquers, screens, cabinets, *chinoiserie* tapestries designed by artists like François Boucher, pavilions in Anglo-Chinese gardens etc.

Although the fantasy of China as a fairyland was increasingly dismantled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this deconstruction “did not prevent its continuation as a dream” [6, p. 175]. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, China once again captured the imagination of European audiences, driven by the rococo revival [9] and “the Romantics’ re-appreciation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century *chinoiserie*” [6, p. 154]. This renewed fascination sparked a trend of collecting Chinese and Chinese-inspired bric-a-brac in France. Prominent figures such as Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers were among those who cultivated admiration for China and Chinese material culture [6, p. 155].

By the 1860s, the fashion for *chinoiserie* had largely waned, giving way to the new vogue of *japonisme* [9, p. 207]. Despite this shift, China retained its allure in Europe. The “opening” of China following the two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) enabled a greater number of bourgeoisie to amass extensive collections of Chinese artifacts through curio shops and trips to China. As Yuet Heng Wong demonstrates, Émile Guimet — founder of the eponymous museum, which first opened in Lyon before relocating to Paris — organised an “unprecedentedly systematic and comprehensive display of Chinese artifacts,” ranging from ceramics and bronzes to books, paintings, and currency [17, p. 76]. Meanwhile, Henri Cernuschi (1821–1896) amassed remarkable Chinese and Japanese bronzes, which he showcased through exhibitions and private viewings [5]; these now form the core of the Musée Cernuschi. China was also prominently featured at the World Fairs, making its official debut in Vienna in 1873. The enchantment with China permeated literature as well. In 1879, Jules Verne published an adventure novel titled *Les Tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine* (Tribulations of a Chinaman in China), set entirely in China and featuring a Chinese protagonist<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 294.

<sup>31</sup> Piasetskii P. *Puteshestvie po Kitaiu v 1874–1875 gg.*, vol. 1. 1880, p. 358.

<sup>32</sup> Jules V. *Les tribulations d’un Chinois en Chine*. J. Hetzel Publ., 1879. 204 p.

The enduring interest in Chinese culture among French intellectuals and bourgeoisie, coupled with the imperialist appetites of the government, pointed to potential commercial opportunities. The French translation of Piasetskii's travel diaries likely represented a costly venture, given the large team of engravers involved in its production. To justify this significant financial investment, the French engravings adopted a far more manipulative tone than the original drawings. These illustrations were deliberately designed to evoke strong emotions and entertain readers. This is evident in the inclusion of dramatic, sensational, and exotic elements — such as severed heads displayed in cages hanging from trees<sup>33</sup>, garden gates shaped like porcelain teapots<sup>34</sup>, and an abundance of stereotypical pagodas and Chinese vases. Thus, Piasetskii's compositions, initially created for scientific, educational and possibly intelligence purposes, were transformed into biased and sensationalised engravings.

The distortion of Piasetskii's original images through French engravings epitomised France's unique position at the intersection of cultural power, colonial ambition, and representational tradition. Walter Benjamin's characterisation of Paris as “the capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” [2] captures the city's dominance in European cultural production, with French serving as the continent's lingua franca. This cultural preeminence aligned perfectly with France's growing imperial interests in China.

In 19<sup>th</sup>-century China, Britain and France stood as the most influential European powers. Britain dominated economically as China's primary trading partner, while France assumed the role of protector for Roman Catholic missionaries. British depictions of China — notably William Alexander's illustrations — established key visual precedents across Europe [15]. France, in turn, built upon its 18<sup>th</sup>-century chinoiserie tradition while adapting British imagery<sup>35</sup>. Combined with its 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial agenda — intertwined with politicised religious and missionary ambitions — this representational legacy made Parisian workshops the epicentre for crafting Western visions of China, often in deliberately manipulative ways.

It is no surprise that the emotionally charged and engaging illustrations from the French translation of the travelogue continued to be repurposed in French journalism. A slightly modified engraving from the French translation of Piasetskii's travelogue was used as an illustration for the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 in *Le Petit Journal*<sup>36</sup>. The engraver made only minimal changes, adding a few figures of Chinese soldiers while leaving the rest of the composition largely unaltered. This reuse carries a certain irony: the concept of the Yellow Peril emerged in response to the Sino-Japanese War, yet Piasetskii's own sentiment stood in direct opposition to those who feared an invasion from the Far East.

Unlike the French engravings, the doctor's drawings and panorama appear to have served primarily as reports to the state authorities who had commissioned Sosnovskii's mission to China — notably the General Staff and the Ministry of War. This is further indicated by the fact that he exhibited his drawings during the Imperial inspection of cartographic and other works

<sup>33</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*. 1883, p. 355.

<sup>34</sup> Piasetskii P. *Voyage à travers la Mongolie et la Chine*, p. 427.

<sup>35</sup> In “La Chine. Moeurs, usages, costumes, arts et métiers” by Malpiere (Paris, 1825–27) numerous illustrations were sourced from William Alexander's “The Costume of China” (London, 1805).

<sup>36</sup> La Guerre Sino-Japonaise. *Le Petit Journal*, 1895, no. 216 (in French), p. 1.

of the military and naval departments in the Winter Palace<sup>37</sup>, and presented his panorama to the Emperor on the orders of the Minister of War<sup>38</sup>. Piasetskii's work held importance at a time when Russia sought to extend its political and economic influence over China's northwestern territories, aiming to safeguard the newly annexed Turkestan and secure Russian-Chinese trade. A scientist and a military physician involved in reconnaissance activities, Piasetskii combined these roles to produce drawings and watercolours of China marked by unprecedented accuracy.

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<sup>37</sup> *Russkii invalid*, 1876, no. 72 (in Russian), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Piasetskii P. Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (Department of Manuscripts of the Russian National Library), coll. 601, item 1780 (in Russian). L. 5.

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**Название статьи.** «Путешествие по Китаю» из Петербурга в Париж: иллюстрации к travelogue Павла Пясецкого в России и во Франции

**Сведения об авторе.** Курьянова, Анастасия Максимовна — аспирант. Европейский университет в Санкт-Петербурге, Гагаринская ул., 6/1А, Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация, 191187. akuryanova@eu.spb.ru; SPIN-код: 4658-7795; ORCID: 0000-0003-2211-5952

**Аннотация.** В 1874–75 гг. Павел Пясецкий — русский врач, писатель, художник-любитель — совершил путешествие в Китай в составе учено-торговой экспедиции, организованной российским правительством, из которой привез около тысячи рисунков и акварелей. Позднее некоторые из них были переведены в формат литографий и украсили «Путешествие по Китаю» — двухтомное издание дневников Пясецкого, которые он вел во время экспедиции. В 1883 г. в Париже был опубликован перевод travelogue Пясецкого на французский язык, проиллюстрированный девяноста новыми гравюрами, выполненными на основе рисунков врача. В отличие от литографий в русском издании, гравюры сильно отличались от исходных композиций Пясецкого. В статье рассматривается, как политика, культура, технологии и мода — в частности противостояние России и Великобритании в рамках т.н. «Большой игры» в Центральной Азии, распространение идей о «Желтой угрозе» в Европе, развитие фотографии и длинная традиция шинуазри — повлияли на оптику Пясецкого и его образ Китая, а также на те трансформации, которые произошли с его рисунками и акварелями во Франции.

**Ключевые слова:** Павел Пясецкий, экспедиция в Китай, книжная иллюстрация, рисунок, литография, гравюра, Желтая угроза, Большая игра, шинуазри, фотография 19 века

**Title.** “Journey Through China” from St. Petersburg to Paris: Illustrations for Pavel Piasetskii’s Travelogue in Russia and France

**Author.** Kuryanova, Anastasia M. — postgraduate student. European University at St. Petersburg, Gagarinskaia ul., 6/1A, 191187, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation. akuryanova@eu.spb.ru; SPIN-code: 4658-7795; ORCID: 0000-0003-2211-5952

**Abstract.** In 1874–75, Pavel Piasetskii — a Russian doctor, writer, and amateur artist — journeyed to China as part of a scientific and trading expedition organised by the Russian government. During his travels, he created approximately one thousand drawings and watercolour paintings. A selection of these works was later reproduced as lithographs to accompany his “Journey through China”, which documented his experience. In 1883, a French translation of Piasetskii’s travelogue was published in Paris, featuring ninety new engravings based on his original drawings. However, these engravings diverged significantly from Piasetskii’s initial compositions. This article explores how politics, culture, technology, and fashion shaped Piasetskii’s portrayal of China and the subsequent transformation of his works in France. Key factors include the rivalry between Russia and Great Britain during the “Great Game” in Central Asia, the spread of “Yellow Peril” ideologies in Europe, the rise of photography, and the enduring tradition of chinoiserie.

**Keywords:** Pavel Piasetskii, expedition to China, book illustration, drawing, lithograph, engraving, Yellow Peril, Great Game, chinoiserie, 19<sup>th</sup>-century photography