

The Image of Russia in Japanese Poetry

Alexandre DOLIN

The history of the world culture includes many myths reflecting the ever-lasting dream of an ideal country. However this problem which constitutes an amazing mix of religious, historical and ethno-psychological aspects has never been given an academic comparative analysis.

In general all these myths probably can be divided into two large categories: those describing a supernatural ideal world and those depicting a realm of Truth and Justice on earth. As for the former, we can easily remember numerous legends of paradise: Elisium of the ancient Romans, the Peach-spring land of the taoists in China, Horai mountain of the buddhists, the Walgalla of the German tribes, Muslims' Heaven or Christian Lord's kingdom. Almost every nation, irrespective of its geographic location or level of culture, has a long-cherished myth of paradise which can overlap with some other myths or correspond to similar myths of other nations.

Meanwhile some peoples at various historic stages tried to create an alternate myth supposing the existence of an ideal country somewhere within the boundaries of Eykumena (the human world). In the times preceding the great geographic discoveries "the earthly paradise" would be placed somewhere not too far from home - like "The Happy Arcadia" for the Greeks (Arcadia was just a province in the central Peloponessos peninsula neighbouring other city-states) or the Promised Land of Palestine for the ancient Jews in Egypt.

Much later, in the 13 th c. A.D. a myth of the happy White Water land lost deep in the forests was born in Russia where people was suffering under the cruel Mongol yoke. In the Middle Ages the dream of paradise on earth was enhanced not only in the legends of Eldorado, the Gold kingdom in the jungle of Amazonia, but also in the treatises by Muslim Sufis and the adherents of Jodo(浄土) - The Pure Land teaching in Japan, in the great utopias by Thomas More and Thomas Campanella in Europe. Then came the projects of ideal society suggested by F. Fourier, C. de Saint-Simon, R.Owen and other early socialist thinkers. These ideas paved the way for the revolutionary activists in Russia, Germany, China and some other countries who never hesitated to sacrifice millions of human beings for the cause of building the assumed paradise on earth, the Communist dream. In the meantime the temptation of The New World incarnated in the American Dream called for the exodus of so many people from Europe and then from Asia.

Whatever the image of the Promised Land might be, it could retain the features of an ideal country only on paper or at least apart from the designated place. Nobody of

those who experienced numberless hardships and troubles in search of Eldorado or building Communism or pursuing one's American dream would ever talk of the paradise on earth seriously. So the myth actually never corresponded with reality just because there can be no ideal land, no ideal society and no ideal nation. Those who live in the "ideal" countries like modern America or Israel or Switzerland know it well. Still the myth has survived. It is deeply enrooted in the minds of people all over the world.

The myth of "Japan the Beautiful" articulated by Kawabata Yasunari in his Nobel speech existed for over 100 years in the West. It made the world believe in the "happy Arcadia" of the Orient where every peasant, worker and soldier wakes up with the lines of Basho on the lips and goes to bed after two hours of tea ceremony. The image of the insular people consisting predominantly of rikshas, geishas and samurai busy exclusively with kado, sado, judo and kendo has been imprinted in the minds of the Europeans and Americans for many decades. Numerous Western writers, poets and painters contributed to the proliferation of the "Japanomania". This myth produced a mighty stream of Japonisme in European art at the end of the 19 th c. and provoked a Japanese vogue in Russia which was particularly strengthened by the unexpected results of the Russo-Japanese war. Russians were inclined to see in all their recent adversaries generous knights and in all the Japanese women - mysterious and impeccable perfect beauties. The interest towards Japan before the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia hardly can be overestimated. However this interest was mutual, and both nations kept on watching each other through the looking-glass of a romantic myth irrespective of political and military conflicts between the countries.

Russian influence in Japan by the end of the 19 th century was extremely intensive, and Russia occupied a very special place among the great Western powers in the common conscience of the Japanese. It stood apart from Great Britain, France and Germany - the countries that represented Western civilization with its traditional culture, manners and customs, with its technology, sophisticated weapons and rationalist mind. Russia, remaining also a Western empire and a military superpower located so close to Japan, in the eyes of the Japanese intelligentsia was to be perceived in another dimension, as a boundless land of a mighty and open-hearted people - and that is the kind of apprehension we meet in the works of the best Japanese poets. The Russo-Japanese war that demonstrated to the world many samples of heroic deeds on both sides made Russians respect their newly emerged successful adversary, while the Japanese, filled with pride of the victors, had a very special feeling towards the shattered Eurasian colossus. These events stirred mutual interest in both countries and involved literati in the process of myth-creating.

By the beginning of the 20 th c. great masterpieces of Russian classic literature were already introduced to Japanese readers by the first enthusiastic translators. Major works by Tourgenyev, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Goncharov, Gorky and Chehov

were well known to the young intellectuals. The humanist pathos of Russian classics gained Russians a reputation of a noble-minded nation where peasants were all honest and diligent, landlords were all rich, generous and hospitable, women were all chaste and sympathetic. On the other hand, all Russians seemed to be an easy prey for various temptations. They were sentimental and suffered terrible repentance for minor sins. They were extravert, always ready to reveal the bottom of their hearts to a stranger and in the meantime constantly facing a severe introspective trial. They were fond of drinking, singing, dancing and debauching irrespective of their social status. They lived in an autocratic country but hated authoritarianism and kept on inventing all kinds of teachings, movements and parties to fight for the phantom of freedom. All these features - partially due to the similarity, but mostly due to the radical difference - had an amazing appeal to the hearts of young Japanese men of letters, especially those who pursued liberal and socialist orientation.

Ishikawa Takuboku, later a universally acknowledged author of popular tanka, was one of the first to glorify "the Russian hero" in his early romantic shintaishi poem "Mourning Admiral Makarov" (「マカロフ提督追悼の詩」) dedicated to the memory of a hero of the defence of Port-Arthur fortress:

.....
Oh noble foe! You met your death
Standing fearlessly at your command bridge.
Centuries will pass - and people still will remember him,
Comparing their valiant warriors to immortal Makarov.
So a poet born on the remoted shore of Japan,
In the country of your enemies
Cannot help mourning you on hearing the terrible news.
You, demons of war, bow to him !
You, friends and foes, put down your swords!
Let the battle stop at hearing the name of Makarov...

Since his childhood spent in a poor village Takuboku kept on reading novels and stories by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Tourgenyev, Gorky. The great distant country was for him a stronghold of humanism, a hope of all the progressive mankind. He believed that the world revolution would make a start in Russia, expanding to the neighbour countries of Asia and studied works by Russian anarchists Kropotkin and Bakunin. He wanted to contribute to their cause by organising strikes and propagating the principles of the class struggle. The growth of Marxist thought in Russia and the fights of the First Russian revolution gave a new impetus to Takuboku who was getting more and more infatuated with socialist ideas:

Who will reproach me
if I go to Russia

to fight there together with the rebels
and to die there
in action?!

Of course he was not going to join Russian workers on the barricades but he needed a myth, a romantic "Russian dream" to pass on to the coming generations as a legacy. And very soon Russia became a Promised Land of socialist aspirations for Takuboku and his followers, an object of almost religious veneration and tender intimate love:

Russian name Sonya
gave I to my little daughter.
What a nice feeling
when I call her by name
sometimes!..

Obsession with Russia is often directly outspoken in Takuboku's verse:

I don't know why -
all day long a Russian name Borodin
was on my mind...

Still the background for this obsession presumably was formed by the "spirit of freedom", the revolutionary element that Takuboku was inclined to see in modern Russian history and culture. It is quite obvious from the manifesto-poem "After the Endless Disputes" with its allusions of the Russian revolutionary terrorist Narodnicki party. The poem was published in 1911, soon after the trial and cruel execution of Kotoku Shusui and his comrades that had stirred up the country and brought to life a mighty socialist movement:

We gather for readings, for fervent discussions
And our eyes glitter not less
than the eyes of Russian young men half a century ago.
We lead an endless argument: "What to do?"
But nobody of us would hit the table with a fist
and exclaim: "V narod!"("Go to the people!")..

Takuboku's closest friend and fellow-poet of the "life school" (生活派) Toki Zenmaro (Aika) shared this passion with all the sincerity of youth:

Reading it over and over again,
once more I can't conceal my tears -
oh this book by Tourgeniev in a bleached yellowish cover!..

Some of Aika's poems are full of strange nostalgia - as if the poet felt himself a Russian reborn on the Japanese Islands by a caprice of karma:

I pointed out with a finger far away -
If, overcoming the distance, I could get to that land

Where my Volga flows!..

Writers and poets of the liberal "Shirakaba" ("Birch Tree") group headed by Mushakoji Saneatsu, though not as openly as the enthusiasts of the Life school, also inherited the spiritual legacy of Russian humanism. Thus Tolstoy and Dostoyevky were frequently discussed on the pages of "Shirakaba" magazine. Socialist ideas fed Mushakoji in his attempt to create a utopian "New settlement" (新しき村) in 1918 - which was a direct reaction to the victory of the October socialist revolution in Russia. Senke Motomaro, Ozaki Kihachi, Sato Sonosuke and Fukushi Kojiro known in the history of literature as "the Shirakaba poets" were the first to introduce into new Japanese kindaiishi poetry the motives of labour, hard physical toil that makes a simple modest working man the bearer of the God's will and a hero of the forthcoming age. The most part of these poems were written in the first years after the Russian revolution which influenced to enormous extent the liberal-minded intellectuals all over the world. Here we can mention "Rice" (「米」) and "Carts' sound" (「車の音」) by Senke, "A Night in the Suburb" (「夜更け郊外にて」) and "New Wind" (「新しい風」) by Ozaki, "A Peasant" (「百姓」) by Sato, "To the Workers" (「労働者に与ふ」) by Fukushi.

Though Russia is not present in these poems, its revolutionary energy constitutes a constant background for the authors' imagination. Now, if we check the list of the European maitres especially respected by the "Shirakaba" poets, we'll see the names of R.M.Rilke and R.Rolland - both great admirers of Soviet Russia and Russian culture in general.

In the first years of the Taisho period Russian influence touched the new kindaiishi poetry mostly due to the efforts of Momota Soji, Shiratori Shogo, Fukuda Masao and other poets of the "popular school" (民衆詩派). The group was formed in the first years of the Taisho period under the motto "Poetry - to the people!" and gained momentum after the October Revolution in Russia. Socialist ideas in their most vague incarnation along with the humanist European thought and prose by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gorky constituted the ideological base of the group. "Popular school" didn't accept the Marxist concept of the class struggle seeing the alternative in the "creative activity" of the popular masses. Although their concept of the "people" was very naive and compiled of various incompatible ideas, the passionate sincerity of their aspirations shouldn't be underestimated.

Russian motives are distinctly heard in the verse by Momota Soji glorifying hard labour for the sake of liberty, fraternity and equality. The October Socialist revolution in Russia impressed all the Japanese writers but for Momota it was his major dream come true. In the famous poem "Oh, Russia, You are Flying!" (「ロシアよ汝は飛ぶ」, 1918) Momota created a pathetic hymn to the great Country-of-the-Dream in the image of "the bird-like carriage-and-three" from "The Dead Souls" by N.Gogol.

Oh Russia!

You are flying ahead,
and in your run
you are free.

You are flying over all the countries of the world,
over all the revolts and mutinies.

Oh you, bird-like carriage-and-three!
you are flying!

You are running over the Earth,
over Europe,
over Asia, over Africa,
over all the giant America,
over all the governments and peoples,
over all the temples and confessions,
over all the unequal treaties.

Oh you, bird-like carriage-and-three!

Your coachman today -
it's a peasant, it's a worker,
a man in a sweaty shirt put on a dirty body,
with open naked chest and tanned wind-tempered skin.

.....

So powerfully, "almost not touching the ground"
It runs forward,
the flying carriage-and-three.

Probably this poem should be considered the most colourful and perfect embodiment of the "Russian myth" with socialist orientation where Russia is shown in the best traditions of the "Red propaganda" - as "a hope of all the progressive mankind", a triumphant leader of the World International. This fact looks still more interesting if we remember that Momota Soji has never been a member of any socialist organisation.

Other poetic groups of the late Taisho period, especially those of the modernist trend, also responded to the challenge of the October revolution in their particular way writing down new pages in the history of "Russian myth", though not necessarily from the socialist standpoint. Here we should first of all mention Muroo Saisei, a brilliant master of kindaishi verse and a close friend of Hagiwara Sakutarō, the famous leader of the neosentimentalist school (「感情派」). Saisei whose youth was spent in poverty started his poetic career as a bard of urban slums, endowed with a rare humanist vision of the world. Russia was his religion. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy were for him the apostles of a mysterious God of Justice and Mercy. His first collection "Poems of

Love" (「愛の詩集」, 1918) included many fine poems dedicated to the Russian theme: "The Portrait of Dostoyevsky" (「ドストエフスキーの肖像」), "The Evening after the First Reading of "The Karamazov Brothers" (「カラマゾフ兄弟」を初めて読んだ晩の事), "Forever" (「永久に」). Here we find the "Russian myth" in the most purified and sacralized form:

I thought of the green buds that have finally awakened
on the branches bound by the winter,
I thought of the beautiful capital Moscow!
Pure and bright nature,
divine women
depicted in the novels by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky:
dear Natasha,
kind Sonya...
"Where do such fine people come from?"-
I thought flying there in my dreams.
My thoughts always aspire to this country
that gave birth to so many mutinies and revolutions.
"Contemplations on Russia" (「ロシアを思う」)

Later Saisei published three profound essays on Russian literature: "Women Depicted by Tolstoy" (「トルストイに描かれた女性」), "Women Depicted by Dostoyevsky" (「ドストエフスキーに描かれた女性」) and "People of Tragic Fate" (「侘しき生涯の人々」). His appreciation of Dostoyevsky's works and personality was very close to that of Buddha, Christ or any other spiritual titan - with obvious religious pathos:

Oh this simple face
enlightened with the inner beauty of his soul!
The gloomy times that he lived and worked in
are not easy to understand even for his biographers.
Let's study hard in view of this man.
With all the assiduity we'll study hard
overcoming all the hardships and sufferings - let's swear!
This man belongs to tens of thousands of people.
He is the soil nourishing tens of thousands of souls.
Let's swear to live in real decency
and to study hard, oh yes!

Saisei wanted to see in Russian culture the essence of the Western civilization. He would often go to the concerts given by Russian emigr e musicians and draw in his mind an ideal image of "the Northern paradise". It was in the years when over ten million Russians were being killed in the terrible civil war.

Russian revolution naturally also attracted attention of the leftist poets related both to the democratic moderate "Tanemakuhito" magazine and to numerous anarchist poetic groups like "Aka to kuro", "Kusari", "MAVO" etc. Leftist anarchist poets did not join the Communist party of Japan founded in 1922 under the patronage of Soviet Russia. However Tsuboi Shigeji, Matsumoto Junzo, Ono Tozaburo and many others sympathized with the communist ideas and regarded Russia as a "promised land" of their eternal aspiration for the cultural and social changes. They were fascinated with the merger of these two elements in the first years of the revolution and especially admired the achievements of Russian avant-guard art and poetry.

By the time of the October revolution Japanese intellectuals already knew such works as "Non-realist Trends in European Painting" by Vassily Kandinsky, "Pluses and Minuses of Kandinsky" (「カンヂヌスキ是非」) by Kato Chocho, "Extremists" (「過激派」) by Ishikawa Rokuo and a brilliant collective research "The Futurist Movement in Russia" (「露国に於ける未来派運動」) introducing poems and manifestoes by Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kryuchonih, Bourlyuks. The mighty pathos of negation so typical of the works by Russian futurists reinforced by their challenging bravado and shocking mockery in daily life created a kind of magnetic gravitation for the young Japanese adherents of modernism. And this impact was multiplied by the victory of the revolution which proved the reality of the most abstract fantasies.

David Bourlyuk, one of the renowned leaders of the Russian Futurist movement who had emigrated after the revolution along with the overwhelming majority of Russian intellectuals, arrived in Japan in 1919 and stayed there for two years. He organised a series of exhibitions of Russian Futurist painting accompanied by the lectures and public poetic readings in Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. Bourlyuk gained a broad popularity among the Japanese leftist poets and painters, especially after the publication of his book (in cooperation with Kinoshita Shigeru) "What is Futurism?- the Answer". Among those who experienced the direct influence of this extraordinary talent one might call the names of a painter Kinoshita Shigeru, and especially poets Kambara Tai and Hirato Renkichi. Both Kambara Tai and Hirato Renkichi published in 1921 Futurist manifestoes reminiscent of revolutionary declarations by Filippo Marinetti, Mayakovsky and Bourlyuk put together. Their works visibly affected the poetry of Takahashi Shinkichi and particularly Hagiwara Kyojiro who may be considered the most expressive master of the anarchist poetic movement in Japan.

The movement of Proletarian literature represented by several influential organisations and such magazines as "Literary Front" (「文芸戦線」), "Proletarian Art" (「プロレタリア芸術」), "Battle Banner" (「戦旗」) was completely absorbed by the Marxist ideology and consequently treated the leaders of the Russian revolution as its spiritual leaders. For Nakano Shigeharu, Kobayashi Sonoo, Moriyama Kei,

Makimura Hiroshi, Nuyama Hiroshi as well as for the novelists Kobayashi Takiji and Miyamoto Yuriko Russia kept the status of the Holy Land blessed with the appearance of Messiah. Lenin's works were studied like the gospel, like the Newest Testament. Only the laziest of the proletarian poets never mentioned the Soviet Union in their verse. The spectre of such poetry was rather wide: from the candid pastoral "Poor Katyusha" (「貧しいカチュシャ」) by Hayashi Fumiko to the "classical" odes "To the Anniversary of the Revolution" (「革命記念日に」) by Ito Shinkichi and "Russia under Construction" (「建設のロシア」) by Murata Tatsuo. Hundreds of poems were dedicated to Russia - all of them of course in apologetic tones only.

By the beginning of the 30s when militarist government started a massive attack on the leftist movement many proletarian writers were forced to make "a turn" (転向) and leave their political activity or retort to open servilism. Among those who never stopped singing aloud of freedom and revolution was Oguma Hideo. He belonged to the new generation that came to life during the boom of the proletarian art, and his poetry was a real climax of those glorious years. Oguma inherited the marxist-leninist concepts of his predecessors and greatly enriched them with his pathetic lyricism. He deified Russia and admired Mayakovsky whose mighty personality and outstanding talent influenced the whole bulk of the proletarian poetry in Japan.

The theme of the revolutionary Russia is present in such significant poems by Oguma Hideo as "The Song of the Starting Carriage" (「馬車の出発の歌」), "Oh Volga-river!" (「ヴォルガ川よ」)、"Though I don't Promise you" (「約束しないのに」) and in many others. The Soviet Union has always been for Oguma and his fellow-writers a stronghold of justice and democracy, the only bright star in "the period of darkness". Meanwhile it was the peak of Stalin's totalitarian rule with its bloody terror that demanded hecatombes exceeding a thousand times the losses of the Japanese socialists and communists...

Nobody of the Japanese poets ever could afford a thought that the October Revolution might have been a fatal historic error pregnant with bloodshed, genocide and all possible kinds of atrocities, bringing with it millions and millions of victims. They just couldn't assume that their Holy Land, their Happy Arkadia, "the country of valour, the birthplace of worth" was misled by a bunch of political adventurers and turned for many decades into a hell on earth, a boundless penitentiary for its own people and a terrible military menace for the rest of the world. They couldn't believe that their long-cherished dream was but a beautiful phantom having nothing in common with reality. It was just a fairy tale for the romantic intellectuals and for the oppressed working people of many countries who needed their "paradise on earth" and were ready to see it in the green plains, frozen forests, great rivers and cold seas of Soviet Russia with its multinational population living in a charmed realm of communist propaganda.

For about a century Russia has remained a utopia come true in the eyes of the

Japanese. Here is probably the major reason for the amazing popularity of Russian folk songs in Japan. Along with the real masterpieces of folklore we can find among the lyrics of these songs many samples of phony primitive Soviet poetry which was accepted quite eagerly. Russian ballet, opera, symphonic classic music and classical literature - these symbols of Russian culture inherited from the past hardly managed to survive in the Soviet period, suffering non-renewable losses. However in the conscience of foreign intellectuals they were closely associated with the image of "Mother-Russia", replacing to some extent the genuine political, social and cultural peculiarities of the totalitarian Soviet reality.

We could witness the extension of this myth in the post-Soviet period since the time of the so-called "Gorbachov euphoria" when the world was fascinated with the idea of "the noble Russia" awakening from her slumber like a sleeping beauty. Some disillusionments followed with the development of aggressive and merciless cynical society with a typical autocratic political system. Even now in the era of mass media and intensive exchange of information the glory of the real treasures of national culture and merits of the assumed national character (both mostly belonging to the remote past) are being projected on the present image of the country which is not always worth it.

Probably Russian myth in Japan will live on for another several decades or even longer absolutely regardless of the real condition of Russia with its two million homeless children, starving miners, five million drug addicts and drug traffickers, enormous mafia that have penetrated already all the governmental structures and other endless formidable problems. Well, any nation needs its dream, including the Russians and the Japanese. One might say that in Japan the "Russian dream" is revealed in the most refined and idyllic form free of the extremist complications so typical of the modern Russian nationalist movements creating a novel "Russian myth" for their own purpose. Modern Russians should be honoured by this sentimental veneration hardly deserved by a nation levelled politically, economically and morally with the poorest underdeveloped countries. Who knows, maybe the very existence of this myth abroad will contribute to the resurrection of Russia, and "the Paradise lost" some time will be retrieved.