RECOGNITION THROUGH REINVENTION: THE MYTH OF CHINA IN THE SPIRITUAL QUEST OF RUSSIAN POETS OF THE SILVER AGE

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Abstract || The works of Russian Silver Age poets Nikolai Gumilev and Velimir Khlebnikov display an array of Chinese motifs. These motifs dissolve into the poets' individual creation of myths, indicating their different focuses on the cultural map of China, which correspond to their respective poetic conceptions. Despite their difference in poetics, both Gumilev and Khlebnikov embraced the idea of syncretism and restoration, which encouraged them to resort to China as a mirror that reflects the historical identity of Russia, and motivated their development of China as a trope in Silver Age poetry. Ultimately, their Chinese motifs reflect a common spiritual quest—a quest for reframing Russia's self-identity both as a response to the trend of modernization and as a dialogue with the established European aesthetic rubrics in Russian culture.

Keywords || Russian | Poetry | Silver Age | Nikolai Gumilev | Velimir Khlebnikov | China

0. Introduction

In this paper I will argue that the myth of China in Russian poetry of the Silver Age[1] represents an interpretation of China in the Russian cultural tradition which is radically different from that in the tradition of Western Europe. One may explain this difference by pointing to both the geopolitical situation of Russia and its cultural history. Due to its Eurasian geographical standing, Russia has been the locus of conflicts and intercourse between cultures of various origins on the Eurasian continent throughout its history. As a result, neither the West nor the East holds up as a self-sufficient category with consistent definitions and values when discussing the cultural history of Russia. Neither the notion of "Orientalism" nor that of "Occidentalism" involves a pure dichotomy between the self and the other in Russian cultural discourse. On the contrary, Russia never views either the East or the West as a completely alien political or cultural entity, but identifies itself selectively with both worlds. Hence China, as a metonym of the East, emerged in the works of Russian Silver Age poets not as a result of their search for an entity extrinsic or opposed to the national consciousness of Russia, but as a product of their quest for the truth about Russia's own self-identity.

For the purpose of that argument, I will refer to two poets from different literary schools, poets who held distinct, and often contrasting, poetic and cultural propositions: Nikolai Gumilev (1886-1921) and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). Scholars have addressed the relationship between the two poets and the East, and compared their poetics.[2] However, the discussion on their common relation with China has seldom, if ever, appeared in academic literature. China enters the poetic and philosophical systems of both poets through recurring Chinese motifs, often mythical in semantics and symbolism. These motifs dissolve into the poets' individual myths of China and often reflect a common spiritual quest—a quest for national self-identity both as a response to the trend of modernization and as a dialogue with established European aesthetic rubrics in Russian culture.

Nevertheless, Gumilev and Khlebnikov reconceived China independently and in distinct ways. Chinese motifs in their poetry reflect their different focuses on the semiotic map of China as a cultural concept. Gumilev incorporated images from classical Chinese literature into his poetry, and reassembled them with new connotations and implications, while Khlebnikov delved into Chinese history and philosophy in order to perfect his own reconstruction of his poetic universe. For the Acmeist, the landscape and mood in Chinese classic poetry illustrate the power of a pristine poetic language while for the futurist, the Chinese character provides a possible model for his future language of poetry: *zaum* ("beyonsense").

NOTES

1 | The term "Silver Age" refers to a period of Russian cultural history. It is usually agreed that it lasts from the last decade of the 19th century to the first two decades of the 20th century, when intellectual and aesthetic activities were flourishing with a remarkable diversity, especially in the realm of poetry.

2 | On Gumilev and the East, see FEDOTOV, O. (2003): "Kitaiskie Stikhi Nikolaia Gumileva", *Literatura*, Num. 37; TREGUBOVA, I.: "Kitaiskii Tsikl Nikolaia Gumileva" (electronic resource); ULOKINA, O.: "Tema Vostoka V Tvorchestve Nikolaia Gumileva" (electronic resource). On Gumilev and the East, see TARTAKOVSKII, P. (1992): *Poeziia Khlebnikova i Vostok: 1917-1922*, Tashkent: Fan; WESTSTEIJN, W. (2003): "Trubetskoi I Khlebnikov", in Ivanov, V. (ed.), *Evraziiskoe Prostranstvo: zvuk, slovo, obraz* [Eurasian space: sound, word, image], Moscow: IAzyki slavianskoi kul'tury.. For comparative studies of Gumilev and Khlebnikov, see IATSUTKO, D.: "Nikolai Gumilev i Velimir Khlebnikov: Sravnitel'naia Interpretatsiia Misticheskikh Motivov" (electronic resource); KONTSOVA, E. (2003): "Svoeobzazie poeticheskogo 'Vostoka' V Literature Serebrianogo Veka: K. Bal'mot, N. Gumilev, V. Khlebnikov", PhD Diss., Voronezh National University.

The fascination with the East among Russian Silver Age poets at the beginning of the twentieth century reflects not only the perpetual need for national self-identification of Russia, but also the crisis of humanity in the West which urged this need. China, along with other Eastern countries, opened a new horizon for these writers and stimulated the development of cultural multipolarity which would confront the dominant Euro-centrism in Russian culture and, thus, bring new life to Russian cultural evolution.

The interest of Russian poets in China, especially Chinese poetry, started before Gumilev and Khlebnikov. The translation of Chinese poetry began as early as in the 1860s: Mikhail Mikhailov (1829-1865) translated Friedrich Rückert's (1788-1866) German translation of poems from the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), the oldest existing collection of Chinese poems and songs. Interest in Chinese poetry in Russia expanded at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, Russian philologist and sinologist Vasilii Alekseev (1881-1951) published his translations of Li Bai's (701-762) poems in *Poetry in Prose of the Poet Li Bo: in Praise of Nature*, this time from the original. Under his guidance, his student Julian Shutskii (1897-1938) compiled in 1923 *The Distant Echo: an Anthology of Chinese Lyrics (VII-IX Centuries)*, which contained Shutskii's own translations of Tang Dynasty poets. Russian futurists gained access to Chinese poetry through *The Flute of China*, a collection of classic poetry translated by Viacheslav Egor'ev (1886-1914) and Vladimir Markov (Waldemars Matvejs, 1877-1914), published by the St. Petersburg Group of Union of Youth in January, 1914, six months before the publication of Khlebnikov's *Selection of Poems* (Kovtun, 1987: 58).

Behind the Russian Silver Age poets' growing interest in China, and in the East in general, lies a political stimulus. The aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War exposed the socio-political crisis of Russia, indicated its historical necessity to rethink itself as a state, and compelled the intelligentsia to reconsider the nation's identity and destiny. Among them, the Symbolist poets and philosophers envisioned an opportunity for uncovering Russia's closeness to the East. Indeed, it is in the Symbolist circle where China began to emerge as a reintroduced literary trope.

The Symbolist poet Andrej Bely (1800-1934) imagined the possibility that this cultural and political situation could produce a synthesis between East and West in Russia. In 1909 he started to work on the idea of an epic trilogy, "East or West." *The Silver Dove* and *Petersburg* served as the first and second novels, respectively, in the unfinished trilogy. In *Petersburg*, Chinese images infiltrate the life of the Ableukhov family's father and son. China in *Petersburg* serves as a metonym for the East that played a significant role in forming Bely's view of the Russia's historical identity, as Dmitry Likhachev

(1906-1999) states in his prologue to the novel: «Petersburg in Bely's *Petersburg* is not between East and West, but East and West at once, i.e. the whole world. In this way, Bely poses the problem of Russia for the first time in Russian literature […]" (Bely, 1981; translation mine). In other words, contrary to Rudyard Kipling's (1865-1936) famous statement that "East is East, and West is West", the question of Russia, from Bely's perspective, should be the question of the East and the West as one.

1. Nikolai Gumilev

We also find China as a recurring leitmotif in the works of the Acmeist poet Gumilev. Never having been to China, he learned about the country and its literature primarily through translations, especially through Judith Gautier's (1845-1917) collection of classical Chinese poetry, *The Book of Jade*, which served as the source for his "Chinese poems," published under the title *Chinese Poets* in 1918 and 1922. He classified eleven out of the sixteen poems as belonging to the category "China" (Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962: 303).

The works included in *Chinese Poets* combined translations with original poetry, and blended the elaborate details of *chinoiserie* with an overall impression of a mythical oriental world. They display a kaleidoscope of images from Classical Chinese poetry, infused with a melancholic mood and united with the themes of secret longing and unfulfilled desire. Although all those poems find their equivalents in Gautier's *The Book of Jade*, the two poets have given discrepant names regarding the works' original authors. Gumilev noted the Chinese poet Tze-Tie as the author of the poem "Road", while Gautier claimed the author was unknown. This suggests that Gumilev used other sources for his adaptations, an idea which is supported by his own notion that the works of Judith Gautier, le marquis d'Hervey-Saint-Denis, Huart and Arthur Waley, etc., have been "the foundation of these poems" (Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962: 303).

Chinese Poets is Gumilev's only collection totally dedicated to themes of China and Indochina. The poet revealed his longing for the oriental land, though, in earlier works. In the poem "The Voyage to China" written in 1909, he came up with the following lines:

> Все мы, товарищи, верим в море,
> Можем отплыть в далекий Китай.
> […]
> Только в Китае мы якорь бросим,
> Хоть на пути и встретим смерть!
> (Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962, vol. 1: 118-119)
>
> We all, comrades, believe in the sea,

May sail to the distant China.
[…]
Only in China we shall cast the anchor,
Even on the way we encounter death! [3]

Under these lines lies the critical question: How should we understand Gumilev's China? What did the lyrical hero expect to find there, in the land that fascinated him to such an extent? The critic Michael Basker draws our attention to the last two lines quoted above, in which, he believes, lies the key to Gumilev's symbolic understanding of China: they demonstrate the possibility of reaching China even after death which affirms the non-geographical nature of that conception.

I would argue that it is easier to understand why one encounters death en route to China by associating China with the Russian reference to it: "*podnebesnoe*", a term that refers to the territory under the reign of Chinese emperors, and serves as a metonym of China. In the Russian poetic tradition, the word "*podnebesnoe*" also denotes "heavenly" in opposition to "earthly", as in Alexander Blok's (1880-1921) poem "Life, Like a Riddle, is Vague...":

Вашим умам не дано
Бога найти в поднебесной,
Вечно блуждать суждено
В сфере пустой и безвестной.
(Ius: 2005)

Your minds are not gifted
To find God in the *heavenly*,
They are destined to wander perpetually
In the sphere hollow and unknown.

The proposition that "the voyage" equals "the return" in "The Voyage to China" indicates that China in this poem exists not as an unvisited physical locus, but as a familiar spiritual entity hidden inside the consciousness. The journey to "China" extends nowhere further than the neglected part of the self that "we" in the poem endeavored to retrieve.

The theme of return is associated with China in another poem, "Pilgrim", from the collection "Chinese Poets":

Лишь услыша флейту осени,
Переливчатый звон цикад,
Лишь увидя в небе облако,
Распластавшееся как дракон,

Ты поймёшь всю бесконечную
Скорбь, доставшуюся тебе,
И умчишься мыслью к родине,
Заслоняя рукой глаза.
(Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962, vol. 2: 114)

NOTES

3 | Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

Merely hearing the flute of autumn,
Chatoyant ringing of cicadas,
Merely seeing in the azure the cloud,
Extending like a dragon,

You shall understand all the infinite
Sorrow, befalling you,
And shall dash towards homeland in thoughts,
Covering your eyes with hand.

The image "flute of autumn" frequently suggests nostalgia in classical Chinese poetry. In imagination, the lyrical hero here returns to the homeland ("dash towards homeland in thoughts"), a place attainable through the journey in memory, as in "The Voyage to China".

The motif of "spiritual belonging" appears in one more poem from *Chinese Poets*: in "Home", the lyrical hero, wandering on the water and mourning at his home engulfed by fire, suddenly finds consolation in the reflection of a woman on the boat:

Казалось, все радости детства
Сгорели в погибшем дому.
[...]
Но женщина в лодке скользнула
Вторым отраженьем луны. —

И если она пожелает,
И если позволит луна,
Я дом себе новый построю
В неведомом сердце её.
(Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962, vol. 2: 115)

It seemed that all the merry of childhood
Burned down in the deceased home.
[…]
But the woman in a boat glanced
With the second reflection of moon. —

And if she shall wish,
And if the moon shall allow,
I shall build myself a home new
In her seclude heart.

The prospect of a new spiritual home, which is to be built in "her heart", compensates for the loss of the physical one. Though no home awaits the lyrical hero on the bank, the feeling of retrieved purpose and energy in life has ended the wandering of the heart. Beneath the nostalgic mood of this poem, we feel an impulse towards the rediscovery of spiritual belonging, a drive towards the reinvention of self-identity.

Having associated Gumilev's China with the leitmotif of return,

we could pose the next question: What is it in China that Gumilev identified with and found desirable, that rendered China a destination in introspection? Exploring the Eastern elements in Gumilev's poetry, we find there the reflection of Chinese religion and philosophy that embodies the Eastern way of thinking imbedded in the cultural strata of Russia back to Pre-Petrine times.

The search for Russia's cultural identity found its expression, inter alia, in the Russian religious renaissance. Both Orthodox Christianitism in Russia and Buddhism in the East represented a state of mind and a condition of life in pre-industrial times. Orthodoxy formed the root of Russian national mentality; Buddhism, likewise, played an essential role in the shaping of Indian and Chinese cultural traditions. Gumilev's fascination with Buddhism in his poetry demonstrates his awareness of its significance in the East, paralleling that of Orthodoxy in Russia.

Among different Buddhist doctrines, Olga Ulokina, a Gumilev critic, highlights Gumilev's connection with the Chinese *Chan*, a concept developed from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna* ("meditation"), referring to a set of disciplines in Buddhist practice, with a specific emphasis on the indistinguishability between the self and the world, the subject and the object, the interior and the exterior (Vasmer, 1986: 1630). "One is everything, everything is one", wrote the Third Chinese Patriarch of Chan, Jianzhi Sengcan, in the poem *Xinxin Ming* (6th century). Although the concept "*xin*" in the title of his work could be literally translated as "heart", it occupies a much broader semantic range, combining the subjective "mind" with the objective "spirit." Interestingly, Gumilev in his poem "I believed, I thought" (published in 1912) depicted "heart" as just such a combination of the subjective and the objective:

> И вот мне приснилось, что сердце мое не болит,
> Оно — колокольчик фарфоровый в желтом Китае
> На пагоде пестрой… висит и приветно звенит,
> В эмалевом небе дразня журавлиные стаи.
>
> А тихая девушка в платье из красных шелков,
> Где золотом вышиты осы, цветы и драконы,
> С поджатыми ножками смотрит без мыслей и снов,
> Внимательно слушая легкие, легкие звоны.
> (Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962, vol. 1: 168)
>
> And here I dreamed, that my heart hurts not,
> It – a bell porcelain in the yellow China
> On the pagoda dappled…hangs and affably rings,
> In the enamel empyrean teasing the flock of cranes.
>
> And the silent girl in a dress from beautiful silk,
> Where golden wasps, flowers and dragons are embroidered,
> With crossed legs she watches without thoughts or dreams,
> Carefully harkening to the soft, soft rings.

In the first stanza, the poet presents “heart” as a “porcelain bell” (‘porcelain’ reappears later in his poem “The Porcelain Pavilion” in *Chinese Poets*), which has acquired a new locus: “in the yellow China.” The maiden watching and listening to the music of the bell in the second stanza illustrates that the privacy of “heart” has disappeared, that it has been externalized and now manifests as a perceptible object. However, it has not lost its agency, but still creates music as “the heart of a poet.” That “the heart” exists as an object and a subject at the same time brings the concept close to *xin* in the teachings of the *Chan* school.

Chinese images, exemplified by *xin*, enter Gumilev’s poetic world with intrinsic values carried from the Eastern mentality, and constitute an organic entity that never ceases to represent the Eastern ethos which the poet endeavors to recover in the Russian cultural tradition:

> Восток и нежный и блестящий
> В себе открыла Гончарова,
> Величье жизни настоящей
> У Ларионова сурово.
> [...]
> От Индии до Византии
> Кто дремлет, если не Россия?
> [...]
> Кто дремлет, если не Россия?
> Кто видит сон Христа и Будды?
> [...]
> Везде, в полях и шахтах хмурых
> Восток и нежный, и блестящий.
> (Gumilev, Struve and Filippov, 1962 vol. 2: 167-68)
>
> The tender and splendid East
> Goncharova discovered within herself,
> The grandeur of real life,
> Larionov sternly possesses.
> […]
> From India to Byzantium,
> Who sleeps, if not Russia?
> […]
> Who is sleeping if not Russia?
> Who has a dream of Christ and Buddha?
> […]
> Everywhere, in the fields and the gloomy pits
> The tender and the splendid East.
> (Parton, 1987: 230-231)

Gumilev composed this poem, “Pantum”, during his stay in Paris (when he wrote *Chinese Poets*), when the poet made acquaintance with the avant-garde artists Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) and Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964), who turned his interest toward Eastern culture.

As demonstrated by “Pantum”, Gumilev’s attitude towards the East

concords with that of the Neoprimitivist artists, who eagerly turned their attention towards Eastern arts in which they saw the origin of all arts. Goncharova, in her "Preface to Catalogue of One-Man Exhibition", states: "They [French arts] stimulated my awareness and I realized the great significance and value of the art of my country – and through it the great value of the art of the East […] The West has shown me one thing: everything it has is from the East (Bowlt, 1988: 55-58)." It is in this urge to reopen the cultural values of non-European nations that Neoprimitivism flourished and, finally, gave birth to futurism.

2. Velimir Khlebnikov

Although the futurist poet Khlebnikov incorporated the image of China into his poetics on a different temporal and spatial scale than Gumilev, he started with a similar motive—the mutual illumination of different cultural traditions.

Khlebnikov was not only a revolutionary of poetic language, but also a "mythologizing artist of the word" (Baran, 2002: 30). The myths he created expanded the horizons for Russian poetics in the sense of both time and space. He searched for sources for his myths not only in the archaic period of the Slavs, but also in the much-neglected cultural regions in the world, especially in Asian and African cultural traditions. Such efforts indicate the anti-Eurocentrist and universalist trend in Khlebnikov's ideology and in modernist aesthetics in general.

The universalist ideal finds its expression in the poet's attempt to reveal the parallelism of different national histories and historical epochs. In his book *Teacher and Student* (published in 1912), Khlebnikov hypothesized that through the mirror of "the yellow world" (Asia) we might predict the destiny of "the white world" (Europe):

> Как походы Хиддойесси на материк 1598, так и поход Кибилая в Японию и Яву были великими событиями в желтом мире. Следует ждать, что не менее величественном будет их переломление в белом мире в 1915 и 1927 году, вероятно также, что главная тяжесть их ляжет на 1915 год; этот ряд следующий: 1281 поход Кубилая; 1598 поход Хидойесси; 1915 война времени печатания этих строк. (Baran, 2002: 113)

> Both the campaigns of Hideyoshi to the continent in 1598 and the march of Kublai towards Japan and Java were significant events in the history of the yellow world. One might anticipate that a correspondence of these events in the white world, which should take place in 1915 and 1927, would be of no less importance. It is also likely that the event of 1915 would be the more significant of the two. In this case we have the following timeline: 1281 was the year of Kublai's campaign, 1598 the year of Hideyoshi's march, 1915, then, would be the year of another war

following the pattern of these fixed intervals.

Here Khlebnikov suggests that the interrelationship between China and Japan fluctuated with the same rhythm as that between the European continent and Britain. As Henrik Baran argues, this thought gave rise to the myth of "white China" (cf. Gumilev's "I Believed, I Thought": "It – a bell porcelain in the yellow China"), which denotes Germany in the story "Ka" (published in 1916), where Khlebnikov alluded to the attack by continent (Germany) on the island (Britain) in the First World War with reference to the historical warfare between China and Japan:

> У меня был Ка; в дни Белого Китая Ева, с воздушного шара Андрэ сойдя в снега и слыша голос «иди!», оставив в эскимосских снегах следы босых ног, – надейтесь! – удивилась бы, услышав это слово.
> (Baran, 2002: 107)

> I once had a Ka. Back in the days of White Kathay, Eve, as she stepped into a snowdrift from Andrée's air balloon, and a voice said "Go!" and she left in those Eskimo snows the print of her naked feet (don't you wish!) - Eve would have been astonished to hear that word.
> (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989 vol. 2: 56.)

Beneath such analogy between the West and the East lies Khlebnikov's interest in anticipating the upcoming war and his attitude toward Germany, which further testifies to his anti-Eurocentrism. In "A Friend in the West", an article written for the Slavophile journal *Slav*—partly as a response to the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's (1856-1921) statement that the Slavs constituted a danger to the Western world—he attacked German and Austro-Hungarian militarism as well as the new mechanical technology which rendered it possible, and even suggested an alliance of the Slavs with the Muslims and the Chinese:

> […] Теперь в Германии наука — служанка государства. Расчеты немецкой стратегии Вейротера могут быть опрокинуты умственным расцветом славян.
> На кольцо европейских союзов можно ответить кольцом азиатских союзов - дружбой мусульман, китайцев и русских.
> (Khlebnikov, 2006)

> […] In today's Germany science is the maidservant of the state. The calculations of Weyrother's German strategy may be offset by the intellectual flowering of the Slavs.
> To the circle of European allies we may reply with the circle of Asian allies—a friendly alliance of Muslims, Chinese and Russians.

On the other hand, Asia has been a place of significant interest for Khlebnikov, serving as an entity counteracting European civilization in his political and historical thinking. In the super-saga "Azia Unbound" (published in 1930), his last attempt to "construct 'the pan-Asian consciousness' in poetry" (Baran, 2002: 315), according to

Baran, we encounter a parade of mythical events and characters, often reminiscent of legendary episodes in Asian history, some of which include the name of "*khi*" and "*kho*", which belonged to ancient Chinese astronomers.

Baran proposes that the two lines below from "Azia Unbound" point to a dramatic episode in the history of China:

> Здесь мудрецы живьем закопаны,
> Не изменивши старой книге.
> (Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000, vol. 3: 280)

> Wise men here were buried alive
> but never betrayed their ancient book.
> (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989: 326)

This depiction refers to the tyranny of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, who ordered the burning of books and burial alive of scholars to repress intellectual discourse and political dissent between 213 and 206 BC.

Let's read another episode from the work:

> Там царь и с ним в руках младенец
> Кого войска в песках уснул,
> С утеса в море бросились и оба потонули.
> О, слезы современнец!
> (Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000, vol. 3: 280)

> There a king, a boy in his arms,
> his army sleeping in the sand, leaps
> from a cliff into the sea. They drown.
> O tears of the women who lived through it all!
> (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989: 325)

Baran reminds us of the similarity between these lines and an excerpt from "Otters' Children", another super-saga of Khlebnikov, which offers us a clearer view of the historical context of those lines (Baran, 2002: 318). It turned out that Khlebnikov was alluding to another major event from the history of China: During the Battle of Yamen, the Minister of the South Song Dynasty Lu Xiufu jumped into the sea with the eight-year-old emperor, Zhao Bing, on the brink of his defeat to the Yuan army. Noticeably, this battle signified the collapse of South Song Dynasty, with which the Han people lost its reign of China for the first time (succeeded by the Mongolians).

As demonstrated by "Azia Unbound", Khlebnikov was interested not only in the history, but also the philosophy of China, which he managed to incorporate into a mosaic of cultures of different continents and eras:

Туда, туда, где Изанаги
Читала "Моногатори" Перуну,
А Эрот сел на колена Шангти,
И седой хохол на лысой голове
Бога походит на снег,
Где Амур целует Маа-Эму,
А Тиэн беседует с Индро […]
(Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000, vol. 3: 280)

The land where Izanagi
reads *Monagatori* to Perun,
and Eros sits on Shang-ti's knees,
and the top-knot on the god's
head looks like snow,
the land where Amor embraces Maa Emu
and Ti'en sits talking with Indra […]
(Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989: 326)

"Ti'en", one of the central concepts in the Chinese religious mentality, enters into dialogues with other pagan deities here: Isanagi, Perun, Eros and Indra.

Khlebnikov's attitude towards Asia is rooted not only in his awareness of the Asian part of Russia's self-consciousness, but also in the quest for his own identity. Born in Astrakhan, a place shared by Slavic and Asian ethnicities, Khlebnikov never forgot the Asian influence on his own personality. In his essay "Does a story have to start with childhood?", a Chinese element surfaces in his reference to Astrakhan:

> Там сложилось мое детство, где море Китая затеряло в великих степях несколько своих брызг, и эти капли-станы, затерянные в чужих степях, медленно узнавали общий быт и общую судьбу со всем русским людом.
> (Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000, vol. 5: 202).
>
> It was there my childhood took shape, where the great steppe swallowed up some of the foamy splash of the Chinese sea, and these drops of spray became encampments lost in the distant steppes, where they slowly acquired common habits and a common destiny with all the Russian peoples.
> (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989, vol. 2: 96)

Judging from this, as well as from the discussion around "Ka" and "Azia Unbound", we might regard China as an epitome of Asia for Khlebnikov, of the Asian tradition imbedded in the identity of Russians which would help them to confront Europeanization.

China plays a particular role in Khlebnikov's universalization not only on an ideological level, but also on that of poetics. The aesthetic productivity of the Chinese characters holds great value in his

hypothesis of the creation of a universal language, which he constantly illustrates through his poetic practice. In Khlebnikov's creation of *zaum* language, he bestows particular importance on the written form of the word: "Let us hope that one single written language may henceforth accompany the long-term destinies of mankind and prove to be the new vortex that unites us, the new integrator of the human race" (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989, vol. 1: 364-365), as proposed in "Artists of the World!" (published in 1919).

The visual quality of the word, in Khlebnikov's view, is inherently associated with its sound, as he exemplifies in one of his most well-known poems "Bo-beh-o-bi sang the lips..." (first published in 1913):

> Бобэоби пелись губы,
> Вээоми пелись взоры,
> Пиээо пелись брови,
> Лиэээй — пелся облик,
> Гзи-гзи-гзэо пелась цепь.
> Так на холсте каких-то соответствий
> Вне протяжения жило Лицо.
> (Kutik and Wachtel, 2012)

> Bo-beh-o-bi, sang the lips,
> Veh-eh-o-mi, sang the glances,
> Pi-eh-eh-o, sang the brows,
> Li-eh-eh-ey, sang the visage,
> Gzi-gzi-gzeh-o, sang the chain.
> Thus on a canvas of some correspondences
> Beyond dimension lived the face.
> (Kutik and Wachtel, 2012)

Here, the images of "lips", "glances", "brows", etc., come into view directly through the articulation of different syllables, demonstrating the art of what Khlebnikov calls *zvukopis'* ("soundscript"), in which the sound of the word induces specific images. The "correspondences" (*sootvetstvij*) here appear as an innate bond between the visual and the auditory perception of the word, elucidated in the poet's notes at the beginning of 1922:

> […] Еще Малларме и Бодлер говорили о слуховых соответствиях слова и глаза, слуховых видениях и звуках, у которых есть словарь. […] Б имеет ярко-красный цвет, а потому губы - бобеоби; вээоми - синий, и потому глаза синие; пииэо – черное […]
> (Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000, vol. 1: 476)

> […] still Mallarmé and Baudelaire spoke about the audio correspondences between the word and the eye, about the audio visions and sounds, for which there is a dictionary. […] B has a brightly-red color, hence the lips – Bo-beh-o-bi; Veh-eh-o-mi – dark blue, hence the eyes dark blue; Pi-eh-eh-o – black […]

Khlebnikov considers such "correspondence" between the visual

and audio qualities of the word as a critical step towards the accomplishment of *zaum* language, as he mentions in his notes for the poem "Zvukopis'" in 1921: "This family of art [*zvukopis'*] is a nurturing environment, from which may grow the tree of the world's *zaum*" (Khlebnikov and Duganov, 2000: 477).[4] "Bo-beh-o-bi sang the lips..." suggests a synesthetic perception of the word in which it becomes visible through sound, and audible through shape.

Khlebnikov saw the visual form as a key to the universal language because he perceived its significance in the origin of language, as he explains in "Artists of the World!": "[…] in the beginning the sign for a concept was a simple picture of that concept. And from that seed sprang up the tree of each individual letter's existence" (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989, vol. 1: 364-347). Clearly, he sees the Chinese character as one of the written forms which retains its original "picturesque" face, as he continues: "Painting has always used a language accessible to everyone. And the Chinese and Japanese peoples speak hundreds of different languages, but they read and write in one single written language (ibid.)." In effect, the poet regards Chinese and Japanese characters as possible models for his *zaum* language, as he proceeds: "We stand now on the first landing of the staircase of thinkers, and we find there the artists of China and Japan, who were already ahead of us, and our greetings to them (ibid.)!"

Khlebnikov's attraction to the picturesqueness of Chinese characters is closely connected with his attention to the role of hand-writing in poetry. The instantaneity of practice and uniqueness of each piece of work in calligraphy art testify to the aesthetic potential of writing. One might recall Markov's thesis of "beautiful freedom" in "The Principles of the New Art", when he highlights the beauty of patterns dried by the wind on china and the music of bells with different tones on a pagoda (Bowlt, 1988: 28), both of which result from organic, unrepeatable processes, like that of calligraphy. The idea that writing itself could become an aesthetic practice explains why the futurists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov insisted that "the question of writing… must be posed" (Perloff, 1986: 125) in artistic creation.

The myth of China in Khlebnikov's poetic creation, whether in the geopolitical or cultural sense, ultimately leads us to the myth of Russia. The poet tells the story of China to reflect the tradition and destiny of Russia. He highlights the value of hieroglyphs to illustrate the artistic potential of his own language. From the perspective of Russia, which for Khlebnikov "combines three worlds",[5] China helps to illuminate the less-explored side of Russia's self-identity, as well as Russia's rich cultural potential, which approximates the East and would reveal itself only through the rediscovery of Eastern histories, philosophies, literatures and arts.

NOTES

4 | "Этот род искусства [звукопись] — питательная среда, из которой можно вырастить дерево мирового заумного языка."

5 | From "An Indo-Russian Union": "[...] in Astrakhan, a place that unites three worlds – the Aryan world, the Indian world, the world of the Caspian: the triangle of Christ, Buddha and Mohammed" (Khlebnikov, Schmidt and Vroon, 1989: 341).

3. Conclusion

Gumilev' China and Khlebnikov's China differ in many ways: Gumilev values the semantic richness of simple concepts in Chinese poetry and religion; while Khlebnikov highlights the poetic potential of Chinese characters. Still, their China serves as a rather similar semiotic entity: it is both a mixture of reality and imagination, replete with recreated myths teeming with ancient wisdom and customs.

It was through European literature that the Russian poets of the Silver Age initially gained access to the images of China. Nevertheless, for Gumilev and Khlebnikov, it was the Europeanized mentality that caused a sense of loss and incompleteness in the national consciousness and its aesthetic value system. This prompted them to seek a re-familiarization with China as an approach to retrieve the missing constituent of self-identity, on the one hand, and to expand the potential for their own poetics, on the other. In this way China provided them with a nostalgic dream, an alternative for return and universalization in the turbulence of the modern world.

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