

Japanese Studies in Current Russia : Inheritance and Inheritors

Alexandre N. Mechtcheriakov

*Visiting Associate Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies
(Head, Department of the Culture of the Ancient East,
Russian Academy of Sciences)*

It seems that the life in Japan is designed in such a way that everybody has to apologise every time you have to communicate. So I want to apologise first, too. I am not an expert in the history of Russian Japanology. I didn't have all necessary books at hand. I don't know the situation in political and economic studies. So my report will be sketchy, impressionistic and personal.

The studies of Japan and Japanese language have a good and long tradition in Russia. The first school of Japanese language was established in 1705 in St. Petersburg. And that was the starting point of what may be called Japanology. After that from time to time Japanese sailors came to Russia because they lost their way. Some of them were brought to the capital and taught Japanese (first in capital, then in the city of Irkutsk). First dictionaries were compiled in 1736 and 1782. Some Russian sailors including military vessels came to Japan too. One of them was captain Golovnin who was put by the Japanese officials into prison and spent in Japan several years. After being set free he wrote a very clever and accurate book. Which was one of the best in Europe for his time. In the collection of books of Pushkin who is considered a genius of poetry there is a literary journal with an article on Japan too. So Russia was quite conscious that such country as Japan existed. And that's valid not only for officials and intellectuals. Even many peasants knew the name of Japan. But the quality of their knowledge of it was really poor. I'll give you only one example of that. Russian peasants like peasants everywhere had their kind of Utopia. And some of them thought that the ideal place of justice and happiness was in the "Land of White Water" which they placed on what they called "The Island of Japan." Certainly it says more about their ignorance of

Japan than about knowledge of it. In fact the geographical position of Japan and the politics of isolation were stimulating such ideas : Japan was very distant, she was an island in the ocean, almost nobody had a chance to visit it, she was situated in the East (and Russians at that time were seeking an ideal place not in the West as they do now but in the East). Estimating the whole situation of Russia's knowledge of Japan we must admit that at that time the information on Japan was very scarce as it was in the whole of Europe too.

The next turning point was 1855 when the diplomatic relations between Russia and Japan were established. Russians began travelling to Japan and many of them were writing on Japan. There were diplomats, sailors, those engaged in natural sciences, merchants, missionaries, etc. There were quite accurate reports on the present day customs of the Japanese and of many things that could be verified by seeing them but lack of knowledge of written language prevented most of these people from understanding historical and cultural background of this country. And it was understood quite soon that without academic research the situation in the country could not be grasped. In this period the foundations for academic studies were laid.

The first chair of Japanese philology was established in 1898 in St. Petersburg University. The teaching of Japanese language in Vladivostok began in 1899.

The next turning point was the Russian-Japanese war. As it often happens the war stimulated in Russia interest towards Japan and Japanese studies. After the end of the war Russian Japanology produced many first-rate experts on Japan (such as Nevski, Polivanov, Elisseeff, Konrad, etc.).

You know what happened then. As in other fields of academic (and not only academic) activities Japanology declined in quality. Some of the leading scholars emigrated (say, S. Elisseeff), some of them were put into prison. Others had to compromise. But in the first years after the revolution and even in the '30s some good and accurate books on Japan (especially on Japanese literature) were published but in fact it was a kind of agony. Though a huge plan of translations was compiled in 1937 it was not accomplished as most people capable to do such work were put into

prison. And almost all of the accurate books on Japan were published by scholars who had been educated before the revolution. Almost nobody of them had a chance for teaching and the previous tradition was in fact broken.

In the Soviet period the main focus was made on political and economical studies. Anna-Maria told us last time that it was very difficult in Germany in the '60s to study modern Japan. The situation was just opposite in the SU. I entered Moscow State University (MSU) in 1968. My main interest was in ancient Japan. I was allowed to write my student's report on ancient Japanese Buddhism only once. Then they told me that was enough and I had to study the history of 20th century. It's true that situation in St. Petersburg was different. And that was a reason why Japanologists in StPb kept saying that people in Moscow are dealing only with political studies and in Soviet times it meant that you were dealing with propaganda. And that was true and most of the Soviet studies of modern Japan are of no more value than the paper they were printed on. Now most of these monographs can be used as a primary source for the reconstruction studies of official ideology in the SU and not as a source of information on Japan itself. The situation was really very strange because there were quite a lot of people teaching and working in the universities and research institutes but the quality of research was in most cases poor. As nobody among people who made decisions was interested in defining the real present-day situation, the knowledge of Japan can be considered as not accurate.

But there was another dimension of Japanology, too. It came to surface in the '60s. Strange enough, but in fact Soviet leaders in the bottom of their hearts liked Japan. They liked it because the Japanese political system and culture managed to do what could not be achieved under Soviet regime. I mean impressive economic development, people obeying the orders of the government, social order, young people obeying elders, low rate of crime and divorces and culture so distinctly different from American that was condemned. In a sense Japan was for Soviet top ranking officials a kind of Utopia too. So they allowed people to write on Japan very positively comparing to the US, Western Europe or China. There were some books published on the customs of the Japanese, art history, studies and translations of Japanese literature including classical poetry and

first rate modern prose (Abe Kobo, Oe Kenzaburo, Kawabata Yasunari, Akutagawa Ryunosuke). No Western country had a privilege to be presented in the SU with so many writers which had nothing to do with communist ideology. And all these books were widely read. My book of translations of medieval Buddhist legends (which for censorship reasons was called "Japanese Miraculous Stories" because the word "religion" was a kind of taboo) was published in 70 thousand copies and sold out at once (I know a person who stole a copy from the library because he could not buy it). Some books were even circulated in samizdat (such as translations of Daisetsu Suzuki's writings on Zen Buddhism).

Among these books on the Japanese culture there were good and bad both. But their societal function was the same—they filled the lust for something different, different from cruel and dull world in which Soviet people had to live. That's why so many Soviet intellectuals know Japanese culture quite well, but at the same time there were many people lecturing to whom it was often a terrible torture, because audiences expected from you a kind of spiritual revelation. And if you tried to be more rational they would be really disappointed and think that you didn't understand what's really important. As it was a kind of escapism for many people who were fond of reading on Japan this country was for them a kind of Utopia, too.

And for people who were writing on Japanese culture or literature Japan was not just a field of purely academic activity. Japan presented a possibility to write honestly, to be proud that you are not "with them" (official culture). To study classical Japan was an intellectual privilege, a source of finding self-identity. And no doubt people engaged in these studies were quite different from the usual type of a little boring "scientist." Many of them were gifted in literature, were writing poetry and fiction. But their knowledge of Japan was often not adequate as most of them had never been to Japan and books (mostly foreign and not always competent) were the only source of information. At the same time we should admit that these scholars and books formed an interest to Japan, an interest that is not lost even now.

And what's happening now? As it was clearly shown in the reports of Professors Baxter and Thränhardt the Japanology in the US and Germany depends heavily on what's happening in the society and in the country. This is true for Russia too. Or it is even more true for Russia because

changes in Russia were more rapid and dramatic than in the US or Germany. So one day (to be more precise in December of 1991) the Japanologists in the SU found themselves in a different country, a country called Russia. Now they were free to speak up and to write what they want. But, sure, they were not free from the traditions of Soviet Japanology. The problem was what and how to speak. In another words we can define the problem as intellectual surviving. Besides that the problem of physical surviving was quite sharp too because in most cases academic or university salaries were (and are) not enough for even a modest style of living.

So everybody had to make his choice.

The first one was to emigrate. In most cases that's not an emigration in the strict sense of the word because most scholars are maintaining Russian citizenship. People just got some kind of financial support (mostly from the Japan Foundation) for doing research, then find a job in Japan. In most cases that's not Japanology—they are teaching Russian language and Russian literature. Nobody in Japan will take them to teach Japanese history or literature because of language ability and because our methods of teaching are so different. As these Russian scholars are busy with teaching what they never thought to be their profession (and that's quite frustrating) and people around them are not interested in their Japanese studies their activity in Japanology is declining though some of them are trying their best to be present on the map of Russian Japanology. What's worse for Russian Japanology is that they do not teach in Russia and there is a great demand in Russian universities for qualified people able to teach Japanese history, literature, anthropology etc.

The second possibility is to teach in Russia and get as many classes in different places as possible. I know one person who has between 30 and 40 lecturing hours a week. Needless to say, doing that means you don't have enough energy and time to do your own research.

The third possibility is to do both, i. e. live basically in Russia, from time to time go Japan, earn some money, save it to come back and continue your research project in Russia and teach reasonable hours. That's my case.

I've checked these 2 volumes of *Japanese Studies in Europe* published this year by JF. It is not complete and it says there are 10 Russian institutions engaged in Japanese studies. To this list I can add at least 14 institutions

(Oriental faculty in MSU, some other faculties of MSU, Institute of Far East, St.P. State Univ., Vladivostok University, Khabarovsk University, Yuzno-Sahalisk, Hmelevski private institute in StPb, etc. not considering some smaller places where there are only 2-3 scholars). Japanologists in Russia are concentrated in universities, research institutes of Academy of sciences, museums, libraries and archives. The book cites Germany top in Europe as having 350 specialists, then comes UK (241), France (203) and Russia (175). This book cites 175 specialists in Russia on Japan but the list of members of the Russian Association of Japanologists gives the figure of 500 persons and you should keep in mind that many professional teachers of Japanese language are not members of this Association. So I think the book does not reflect the quantitative side of present day Russian Japanology. But that's not the fault of JF but the fault of Russian scholars and institutions who were too lazy to fill in the forms the JF asked them to do. That reflects the long history of Soviet isolation from the world. And many people still do not feel much commitment to the international community of scholars.

The quantity of books published on Japan is not so small either. Here is the catalogue of recent Russian books on Japan that you can buy. It lists 56 books. The next issue published just a little bit later adds 12 new items. Though these catalogues are quite incomplete they reflect main tendencies in Russian Japanology, tendencies that reflect strategy of survival. The number of monographs is relatively small. That's especially valid for modern Japan studies (I think that's because the elder generation of scholars of political and economical studies, the generation that continue to dominate is not competent enough and has nothing to say). Much effort is put into textbooks and reference materials. What is surprising that translations of classical literature takes such a big share. There are translations of *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki*, *Nihon Ryoiki*, *Kagero Nikki*, *Sarashina Nikki*, Sei Shonagon, Kamo-no Chomei, *Kenko-hoshi*, *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki*, Utaawase, *Hogen Monogatari*, various collections of tanka and haiku poetry, renga, Fujiwara Teika, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, Masaoka Shiki etc. Some important translations are already or almost completed and will be published in near future (*Kogoshui*, *Okagami*, *Shinkokinshu*, *Torikaebaya Monogatari*, *Taiheiki*, Gozan Bungaku Chinese poetry, Basho's diaries, etc). Most of these books were translated into Western languages earlier (though some of

them are outdated now) but some translation projects are unique. I can mention for instance the translation of Chinese version of Lotus Sutra, Prof. Goreglyad's translation of *Kankai Ibun*, or the translation of *Shoku Nihongi* I am working on now. I once was talking with one Japanologist who is famous for his competence and affiliation with Communist party both (and that's unusual as it does not go together very often). He told me that comparing the political and economical situation in the SU and Russia he was desperately dissatisfied with everything what was happening in Russia but must admit that the number of recent translations from classical Japanese literature outnumbered greatly those that had been published in the whole period the SU existed.

There are several reasons for that. First of all the translators being devoted to their subject are working hard quite conscious that you cannot get rich by this sort of activity but their strong conviction is that the best and most fundamental way to understand Japanese culture lies in introducing primary sources (it seems that in the West this conviction is getting weaker now). Second is the quality of reading culture among many Russians who still enjoy "difficult" reading and don't feel puzzled before a book with some words and names you don't recognize at once. Third, is that there is a stable segment of the audience which simply likes Japanese classical literature just because it is so good. Though book-sellers know that these books can't be very profitable at the same time they know they are profitable and they stimulate publishing houses to order new translations. Some of them are published with the help of JF and some of them not.

Though there are some translations of the modern literature there are relatively small in number (by modern literature I mean the literature of the current century of which very soon we shall address as "the previous century") though there were some huge projects such as the collection of Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Abe Kobo (both in 4 volumes). To my mind the major obstacle in better introducing of present day literature is financial. Now there are very many books on the market and to introduce a completely new author needs time and money. Nobody wants to take the risk. Second is that publication of current literature involves copyright problems.

But what is common in these translations of classical and modern literature is that they were done by people who are famous in the field for many

years. We can only be satisfied that the elder generation is so active but at the same time regret that new names are so few. 4 or 5 years ago the situation seemed almost desperate because there were no people who would like to enrol into post graduate studies.

Now I am a little more optimistic. The Institute of Oriental Studies (IOS, Russian Academy of Sciences) held this year the first conference on traditional Japan (including Meiji). Before that Russian Japanologists didn't have a forum of this kind. Even three or four years ago the situation was so that nobody thought that such a conference could ever be held. The main problem was the lack of enthusiasm among the younger generation which tended to choose more "practical" business careers. Now the situation seems more optimistic and more post-graduate studies are in progress. So among the participants all generations were represented.

The major part of the speakers specializes on ancient Japan. That was the main feature of the conference. As is well known, in Europe and US studies on ancient Japan are not very popular now (that reflects the present day tendency to consider important only that time when I am living). And in the fundamental *Cambridge History of Japan* most of the authors were Japanese—just because in the West there are not enough competent experts now.

To give you an idea what kind of research are being done now I shall mention briefly the themes of major reports presented to the conference.

The conference was opened by S.V. Laptev (Moscow State University) who was speaking about recent development in anthropology focusing particularly on craniological and dental studies of Yayoi man. The theme of E.S.Baksheev's report was the practice of temporal burying (*mogari*) with comparison with the same type of burying in Oceania and Asia.

Then came five reports on Nara Japan. E.K.Simonova-Gudzenko (MSU) presented the results of her computer study of place names in "Man'yo:shu." According to her there were six regions which toponyms are mentioned in "Man'yo:shu." most frequently: Kinai itself, the Kanto:valley, Echizen+Echigo, Izumo, Setonakai region, Northern Kyu:shu:. It was very stimulating to compare this to the distribution of place names mentioned in *Shoku Nihongi*. That was a theme of report by E.B.Saharova (IOS). This post-graduate study is not finished yet but it seems that the distribution of place names in both writing sources is more

or less similar. That is the proof that cultural and political borders of Nara Japan coincided.

M.V.Grachov (IOS) told the audience about provincial bureaucracy in Nara period and A.N.Mesheryakov developed a thesis that the reason for initial rising of Fujiwara clan might have been their inclination to Chinese learning which they used as an instrument for political struggling with those who favoured Buddhism mostly (imperial family first of all).

Other prominent studies included A.M.Gorbilev's (MSU) report on Shugendo: (focusing on the concept of sacred space in *Shozan engi*), E.M.D'yakonova's analysis of the literary role of story-tellers in *rekishi-monogatari* and some others (there were 16 reports in all).

Visiting the conference I had a strong feeling that Russian Japanology is recovering from the long period of Soviet isolation and the economic turbulence of recent years.

Let me sum up what I have been talking about. The situation in Russian Japanology depends heavily on the present-day situation in the country and inherits some tendencies of the previous period. The most flourishing area is studies of ancient and medieval Japan, especially publishing primary sources. There are some young and quite promising people in the area and the elder generation is still active. The situation is worse in modern studies and I expect it will take quite a long time to recover.