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REPORT FROM THE PERIPHERY: THE LITERARY HARBIN OF THE RUSSIAN DIASPORA, AND AFTER

The status of "Russian Harbin," of its history, and its literature undoubtedly belongs to the "periphery." It occupies a modest place among works and anthologies devoted to the Russian emigration. Whereas Gleb Struve allocates half a page to the "Far Eastern poets" in his *Russian Literature in Exile*,¹ Marc Raeff's recent *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919–1939*² devotes a little more space to the Harbin emigration, its historical context, its cultural achievements, and the handicaps it suffered in comparison to European centers, such as Berlin, Prague, or Paris. According to Raeff, Harbin's "dynamic cultural elements were overshadowed by the technical and administrative personal of the CER (Chinese Eastern Railway)." Also, Raeff writes, the "highly unstable situation [which] resulted from the vagaries of Chinese, Soviet, and Japanese policies", and, above all, "the distance that separated [Harbin] from the creative cities of the Russian Diaspora in Europe" explain the small impact of the Russian Harbin on émigré culture, an impact which came actually too late: "Only with the renewed emigration of many cultural personalities from Kharbin to the United States (or Australia) was the full value of its contribution appreciated. This, however, occurred on the very eve of the Second World War when Russia Abroad, in our sense, was about to come to an end."³

During the 1980s, a series of anthologies and memoirs were published by Harbin émigrés, specialists, or *liubiteli* (amateurs or lovers), which seems to confirm Raeff's picture. Among them one should mention Elizaveta Rachinskaja's *Pereletnye ptitsy: vospominaniia: posviashchaetsia Kharbinu i kharbintsam* (Birds of Passage: Devoted to Harbin and the Harbinians),⁴ Viktor Petrov's *Gorod na Sungari* (The City on the Sungari River),⁵ *Ostrov Larissy. antologiiia stikhotvorenii poetov-dal'nevostochnikov* (The Island of Larissa: Anthology of Poems by the Far Eastern Poets), published by Emmanuel Stein,⁶ and several collections of Harbin's most "visible" and "international" poet, Valerii Pereleshin, thanks to the efforts of Simon Karlinsky (himself a Harbin émigré) and Jan Paul Hinrichs, a librarian of Leiden University.⁷ Recently, voices from within Russia have surfaced, with a series of articles and at least two book-length studies, published in 1991, the year of the disintegration of the Soviet Union:

Georgii Melikhov's *Man'chzhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia* (Manchuria Far Away and Near By)⁸ and *Kharbin. Vetka russkogo dereva. Proza, stikhi* (Harbin: A Branch of the Russian Tree, Prose, Poems), edited by D.G. Sel'kina and E.P. Taskina, with an introduction of the latter on the "Literary Heritage of the Russian Harbin".⁹ To this kind of publication one should also add the re-emergence of the "Polish Harbin" with Marek Cabanowski's *Tajemnice Mandżurii: Polacy w Harbinie* (The Secrets of Manchuria: The Poles in Harbin), published by the Warsaw Museum of Independence in 1993.¹⁰

Is the "Russian Harbin" entering the museum of lost colonies and extinguished cultures? Not much recent scholarly work has been written on Harbin's "Russian" literature, if one excepts some rather rare articles, such as the discussion, for example, between Denis Mickiewicz and Valerii Pereleshin, published in the *Russian Language Journal* in 1971, concerning the phenomenon of *epigonstvo* (imitation, unoriginal following) in Russian poetry,¹¹ or the intriguing history of Nikolai Fedorov's followers in Harbin, belonging to the movement of "Changing Landmarks" (*smenovekhovstvo*) in the late twenties and early thirties.¹² As to history "per se", if one excepts a series of articles on various historical and cultural issues, only one major work has appeared during the 1980s, namely R.K.I. Quedstedt's *"Matey" Imperialists?: The Tsarist Russians in Manchuria, 1895–1917*, but the geographic location of this interesting and somehow curious book – and location matters – happens to belong, again, to the "periphery": the book was published by the Center of Asian Studies of the University of Hong Kong in the series of its "occasional papers and monographs".¹³ So does, in a sense, John Stephan's 1978 study, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925–1945*: although published in the "center," it represents a mere *episode* of Harbin's history.¹⁴ To complete our picture (which does not pretend to any exhaustivity), we should add two forthcoming books: *Harbin Imprints: Bibliography as History of Its Russian Past, 1898–1960*, by Olga Bakich, author of several articles on the cultural history of Harbin and editor of an annual almanac *Rossianie v Azii* (The Russians in Asia)¹⁵ and David Wolff's *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914*. I will close my inventory by mentioning *The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography of Harbin*,¹⁶ a collection of texts by Chinese (PRC) historians, compiled and introduced by two Danish scholars, Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen. Despite the claim made by these authors to make accessible to the Western reader a "good and representative selection of contemporary Chinese writings on the history of Harbin," and to show some of the "immense amount of work and energy invested in writing and rewriting at the local level in post-Mao China", revealed by their meeting with Harbin's local history community,¹⁷ I suspect that this work has been received by the "Russian *kharbintsy*," or those who feel close to them, as representing a rather narrow and partisan focus, and

perhaps even as the final and international endorsement of the rewriting of history and the purge of Harbin's Russian past by the Chinese. Is the Russian Harbin condemned to oblivion and "history", while recollection and nostalgia will die their natural death? Perhaps not, because even for those, who have not come from there, a strange presence resides in these old books published in Harbin and elsewhere in China during the first half of our century, in these exotic imprints of another time, where sometimes Cyrillic titles coexist with Chinese characters, *ieroglify*, hieroglyphs, as one says in Russian, by some bizarre turn of language, referring to "Egypt," when one means "China."

This leads us to ask the question about China's status within Russian consciousness and to reconsider the history of the Russian Harbin within the "global" context of today's renewed and unavoidable "changing of landmarks." The "Russianness" of Harbin during the first half of the twentieth century poses interesting problems, to the extent that for some time it was part, or an attempted part, of this "accident" of human geography, where one finds "Europe" "holding" the very end of the "East." This is the literal meaning of the name (of the Russian city) *Vladivostok*. But contrary to other cities and settlements of "Russia on the Pacific," Harbin could not be "held" by Russia, and it "returned" to China after having been, for almost half of a century, neither Russian, nor Chinese, nor Japanese, nor "Manchurian," but something else. Today, the question of who "holds" this part of the world is posed again, even if the Russian Far East seems not directly concerned by the overall disintegration of the Soviet Empire. Its "Russianness" is not challenged from the "inside," if one excepts the revival of local "minorities" claiming their ethnic and even "national" identities after the disintegration of the Empire which had nevertheless "imagined" their "national," although Soviet, existence.¹⁸ Together with the Chechens and other nations and ethnies, Dersu Uzala "writes back to the Center." But to what Center? As often in history, crises of identity find their expression in the rejection of an alien "Other." A survey provided in the Fall of 1994 by the Institute of History of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences showed that 62 percent of the population of the Southern part of the Russian Far East were convinced or almost convinced of the reality of a "yellow peril", and concretely, of the imminent danger of Chinese expansion. What is most interesting about this survey is its social composition. Those who felt in the increase in border trade and the "invasion" of "yellow work force" a "threat" belonged to the "maximally informed": 81 percent came from the intelligentsia, and 77 percent attested higher and middle specialized education.¹⁹ For once, xenophobia was not voiced by the "lower" classes. An interview conducted during the same year with Pavel Minakir, head of the Economic Research Institute in Khabarovsk and former vice-governor of the Khabarovsk region in 1991–92, seems to provide a flagrant case of "orientalism" – in Edward Said's sense – on the level of one of the best "infor-

med" representants of the Russian intelligentsia. For Minakir, Russian and Chinese culture are and always have been so radically apart from each other that any further increase of "proximity," such as the handing back of territories, would unavoidably provoke a social explosion. Minakir regretted the good old (Soviet) times, when it was still possible to study and enjoy Chinese culture without having to deal with its physical presence.²⁰

The Harbin experience of "yellow Russia," as it was expressed by its literature, seems to contradict Minakir's pessimistic statement. Let us listen to Valerii Pereleshin's well-known poem, entitled "Nostalgia":

Я сердце на дольки, на ломтики
не разделю.
Россия, Россия, отчизна моя
золотая,
Все страны вселенной я сердцем
широким люблю,
Но только одну тебя, Родина,
больше Китая!
У мачехи ласковой – в желтой я
вырос стране,
И желтые кроткие люди мне
братьями стали.
Здесь неповторимые сказки
мерещились мне,
И летние звезды в ночи для меня
расцветали.²¹

The poem is cited by Grigorii Melikhov, in his *Manchuria Far Away and Near By*, where it functions as an epigraph to a chapter entitled "Sotrudnichestvo kitaiskogo i russkogo naseleniia Man'chzhurii" (The Collaboration of the Chinese and Russian Population of Manchuria). Melikhov paints an idyllic picture of this collaboration, stating that "the main charm of this Russian city on Chinese land consisted primarily in the important cultural and enlightening role, played by Harbin in the mutual enrichment and influence of two great cultures – the Russian and the Chinese." "Here, in Manchuria – writes Melikhov – there existed no artificial barriers between the Russian and the Chinese population." According to him, "the whole history of the railway was in general a beautiful illustration of this very simple fact, that it was built and functioned in the interests of the two neighboring nations, the Russian and the Chinese."²²

Pereleshin's biography appears to be the very embodiment of cultural "neighboring" and "mutual enrichment": born in Siberia during the Civil War, Pereleshin spent his youth as a student of the Harbin-based YMCA, its Juridical Faculty, and its Theological School of St. Vladimir. He became a monk in a Harbin monastery and then joined the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking.

In the 1940s, he worked as a Russian translator for the Shanghai office of TASS, attempted to emigrate to the United States, was interned in San Francisco, deported back to China, and from there, emigrated to Brazil, where he worked in a jeweler's shop, in the office of a furniture factory, as a teacher of English, as a librarian, and finally as a poet when he was rediscovered by the canon of Russian (*émigré*) literature. A few years before his death he was invited to a festival of poetry in Austin, Texas. Pereleshin knew Chinese very well: he translated Chinese classical poetry into Russian and Portuguese. Starting his own poetry in the Acmeist vein and finishing by writing in neoclassicist style, he was considered at the end of his life one of the masters of the Russian sonnet, to which he gave its full canonization, although his contribution to Russian literature was felt, at times, as *epigonstvo*, as we have already seen. His Dutch publisher, the Leiden librarian Paul Hinrichs characterizes Pereleshin as a "reactionary in his opinions on the formal side of poetic language" but "very modern in his treatment of themes which continue to be regarded as taboo by many Russian readers." One of these themes was Pereleshin's homosexuality.

All this calls for recasting the history of the "Russian Harbin," of its literature and culture, and its relation to present-day problems and discourses in new terms, and here, "postcolonial" criticism comes immediately to our mind. Is the historiography on Harbin in need of "deconstruction"? At first sight, the present state of studies on this controversial past, worked over and dominated by various "Others," exists today as a true "aftermath," an "after" that a position of "in-betweenness" and "hybridity" can successfully "reverse," "displace," or at least "negotiate". The problem is that the discourse on "hybridity" and "in-betweenness," as Arif Dirlik reminds us brilliantly in a recent article, "excludes from its scope most of those individuals who inhabit or hail from postcolonial societies," that the "postcolonial, rather than a description of anything, is a discourse that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves (or have come to view themselves) as postcolonial intellectuals," and that "the postcolonialist attitude projects upon the past the same mystification of the relationship between power and culture that is characteristic of the ideology of global capitalism of which it is a product."²³

Contemporary research on Harbin's colonial and postcolonial past might use some of the wonderfully insightful and seductive techniques of postcolonial and postmodern discursive criticism, it might even revive some of the poetry and prose written in Harbin, discover some of the lost imprints, reveal some delightful Sino-Russian "hybridities", but it should never forget to pay attention to the voice of those who *lived*, and still *live there*. And here, we find some important questions that still remain to be answered: why did the literature of the Russian Harbin produce no epic about itself? Why did it emphasize poetry, while prose seems to have remained insignificant? Is it because poetry was the genre

par excellence of the Russian first-wave émigrés? We have to go back to the very publications of "Russia in China", and the list is extensive. I had no access to Olga Bakich's "Bibliography as History" and I am anxious to see it in print. Diao Shaohua, a Chinese professor of comparative literature at the University of Heilongjiang, who has worked many years on the Russian heritage of his city, has recently completed an impressive bibliography of Russian imprints preserved in Chinese collections. This bibliography, containing about 5700 titles, goes well beyond "poetry," including works and periodicals published in Harbin and elsewhere in China on such issues as the Russian colony on the CER, the life of the Russian émigrés in Harbin and Shanghai, the cultural life of Harbin, the Russian press in China, the role of national minorities in Harbin (Jewish, Polish, and others), Russian schools in Harbin, the orthodox church in Manchuria, the role of the YMCA in the life of the Russian population of Harbin, literary organizations (about 40 titles), Harbin collections and almanacs, and literary works as well as criticism, where many names and genres appear for the first time, at least in the (literary) historiography I am aware of. As to the "other Harbin", i.e., the Chinese intellectual production of that time, it is almost completely absent from Diao's bibliography, if one excepts Russian translations of Chinese literature. Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen's *The Making of a Chinese City* does not help us much in this matter either, because their focus is not "culture," but "plain" history. On the other hand, a cultural history of "Russia in China" cannot abstract from its social specificity. Quested writes in her "*Matvey*" *Imperialist?*:

Leaving high-level policy largely aside, the narrative concentrates on the local activities of the Russians, and their attitudes to the Chinese and other nationalities amongst whom they lived. It describes the rise and fall of the only complete multi-class European community which has ever existed in Southern or East Asia, or indeed in any part of Asia since the fall of Byzantium, outside the present bounds of the Soviet State. All other European colonies in Asia from the beginning of modern times consisted almost entirely of planters, seafarers and businessmen, military and officials superimposed on lower classes of the subject nationalities. Such European working class and peasant elements as existed in the British, French, Dutch and German, even Spanish and Portuguese Asian colonies, were minute, fragmented and usually transient. The Russians in Manchuria were the only ones at any time to possess both a working class and peasantry of their own, numbering several tens of thousands. Yet the Russian colony in Manchuria passed, like others before it, from pioneering origins through a phase of power and dominance to ultimate extinction, pointing the road which Hong Kong and Macao, the surviving European toe-holds in Asia, must some day follow.²⁴

Quested gives us a quite detailed picture of social life in Harbin's Russian community until 1917, based on many sources: this picture does not reflect "in-betweenness", except on the higher levels of officialdom, and the interest of Russian intellectuals in Chinese culture. On lower levels of the social ladder – and this increased with time – the Russian and the Chinese Harbin were worlds apart. Quested reports one single marriage between a Russian man and a Chinese woman, and the details she gives about this marriage can give us a feel of what were the preconditions of such a union: the husband "was a municipal physician, who held advanced liberal views on political and racial matters. He became a Buddhist and wore a long Chinese gown, his wife was a businesswoman who owned a steamer plying the upper Sungari."²⁵

With the opening of the Soviet archives and the greater accessibility of Chinese sources, one can anticipate a renewed interest in the study of Harbin and of the whole region. New documents, made accessible last summer by the archives of the Khabarovsk region, concerning the life of the Chinese in the Soviet Far East and related Soviet politics, show that the experience of integrating the Chinese population from 1917 to 1938, from education, the liquidation of low or non-literacy, the organization of theaters and clubs to the creation of a latinized Chinese alphabet, was a painful experiment which ended with fierce repression and expulsion. As to the (possible) "opening" of the "other side", we should not be too optimistic about it. Quested writes that "the general attitude of the Chinese towards the Russian in their midst is a topic on which the non-Chinese must tread carefully. Chinese tradition has attached rather little importance to the recording of social history and daily life: if it were not so the vast controversies over the class basis of Chinese society over millennia of time would not have arisen. So it is not surprising that still less attention has been paid by Chinese writers to the attitudes and life-style of contiguous foreign colonial communities".²⁶ Therefore, the literature of the "Russian Harbin" has still a lot to tell us, if we study it carefully. At the same time, one should keep in mind that the fact that a "complete multi-class European community" could develop during about the same time in Harbin is due to global historical factors that postcolonial sensibilities can illuminate, but not "reverse." And one should not forget the outcome of this development: whatever the degree of cultural hybridity might have been, if there was such a thing, it came to a rapid end when China regained definitive control over the city. Actually, those who lived in "Yellow Russia" had no illusions. Suffice it to quote another of Melikhov's epigraphs: verses by Arsenii Nesmelov, another major poet of the Harbin emigration, who died in a Stalinist prison in 1945:

Милый город, горд и строен,
Будет день такой,
Что не вспомнят, что построен
Русской ты рукой...²⁷

Notes

- 1 G. Struve, *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii*. 2-e izd., ispr. i dop. Paris, 1984. One should also mention an earlier and more detailed essay of V.F. Salatko-Petrishche (Valerii Pereleshin), "Russkie na Dal'nem Vostoke" (The Russians in the Far East), published in P.E. Kovalevskii's *Zarubezhnaia Rossiia. Istoriia i kul'turno-prosvetitel'naia rabota russkogo zarubezh'ia za polveka (1920-1970)*, Paris, 1971, 324-332.
- 2 M. Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919-1939*, New York, Oxford, 1990.
- 3 Ibid., 23.
- 4 E. Rachinskaia, *Pereletnye ptitsy: vospominaniia: posviashchaetsia Kharbinu i kharbintsam*, San Francisco, 1982.
- 5 V. Petrov, *Gorod na Sungari. Ocherki i rasskazy*, Washington, 1984.
- 6 *Ostrov Larissy. Antologiiia stikhotvorenii poetov-dal'nevostochnikov*, Pod red. Emmanuila Shteina, Orange, 1988.
- 7 *Russian poetry and literary life in Harbin and Shanghai, 1930-1950: the memoirs of Valerij Pereleshin* (Pereleshin, V. Dva polustanka). Edited in Russian and with an introduction by Jan Paul Hinrichs, Amsterdam, 1987; V. Pereleshin, *Poema bez predmeta*. Pod redaktsiei Semena Karlinskogo, Holyoke, 1989; V. Pereleshin, *Russkii poet v gostiakh u Kitaia, 1920-1952. Sbornik stikhotvorenii*, Ed., introduction and notes by Jan Paul Hinrichs, Foreword by Simon Karlinsky, The Hague, 1989.
- 8 G. Melikhov, *Man'chzhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia*, Moskva, 1991.
- 9 *Kharbin. Vetka russkogo dereva. Proza, stikhi*, sost. Sel'kina D.G., Taskina E.P., Novosibirsk, 1991. Since then, Elena Taskina has published a new book, *Neizvestnyi Kharbin*, Moscow, 1994.
- 10 M. Cabanowski, *Tajemnice Mandżurii: Polacy w Harbinie*, Warszawa, 1993.
- 11 "Diskussiiia: O preemstvennosti v russkoi lirike. Pis'mo Valerii Pereleshina"; Denis Mickiewicz, "K opredeleniiu epigonstva," *Russian Language Journal* 90, February 1971, 32-41; Denis Mickiewicz, "Diskussia o russkoi poezii," *Russian Language Journal*, 91, 1971, 66-77.
- 12 See M. Hagermeister, *Nikolaj Fedorov: Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, München, 1989, 363-416.

- ¹³ R.K.I. Quedstedt "Matey" Imperialists?: The Tsarist Russians in Manchuria, 1895-1917. *Centre of Asian Studies Occasional Papers and Monographs*, No. 50, Hong Kong, 1982.
- ¹⁴ J.J. Stephan, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945*, New York, 1978. Stephan's book has been translated and published in both China and Russia: *Manzhou hei shoudang: Eguo nacui heimu zhi shi*, Harbin, 1989; *Russkie fashisty: tragediia i fars v emigratsii, 1925-1945*, Moscow, 1992.
- ¹⁵ *Rossiane v Azii* 1, 1994, 2, 1995.
- ¹⁶ S. Clausen and S. Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography of Harbin*, Armonk, NY, 1995.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.
- ¹⁸ Indeed, the "small peoples of the North," or what is left of them, are undergoing some revival during the last years: the first Congress of the Nanai was held on 28-29 October 1995 in Komsomolsk-on-the-Amur. "Nanaitsy gotoviatsia k svoemu s'ezdu" (The Nanai Prepare Their Congress), *Dal'nevostochnyi Komsomol'sk*, 18 August 1995, 2.
- ¹⁹ V. Larin, "Sindrom 'zheltoi opasnosti' v dal'nevostochnoi politike Rossii v nachale i kontse XX v." (The Syndrom of the "Yellow Peril" in Far Eastern Russian Politics at the Beginning and the End of the Twentieth Century), 12-13. Paper given at the conference "Russia on the Pacific: Past and Present", Khabarovsk, August 26-29, 1995.
- ²⁰ Interview conducted in July 1994.
- ²¹ V. Pereleshin (V.F. Salatko-Petrishche), "Nostalgia", Quoted by Melikhov, *Man'chzhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia*, 267.
- ²² Melikhov, *Man'chzhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia*, 268-69.
- ²³ A. Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1994, 337, 339, 347.
- ²⁴ Quedstedt, "Matey" Imperialists?, 3-4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 276
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131
- ²⁷ A. Nesmelov. "Stikhi o Kharbinie", Quoted by Melikhov, *Man'chzhuriia dalekaia i blizkaia*, 188.