

**The Search for an Internationalist Aesthetics:
Soviet Images of China, 1920–1935.**

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines images of China produced in early Soviet culture, focusing in particular on the mid-to-late 1920s, a period of heightened Soviet involvement in Chinese politics. It argues that China became in this period the primary testing ground for the creation of an “internationalist aesthetics”: a mode of representation that might express horizontal solidarity over vertical dominance, and inscribe China into the global map envisioned by Marxist-Leninist theories of revolution. Seeking to produce a new China to replace the exotic Orient, Soviet artists and writers experimented with multiple genres and media—reportage, film, theatre, biography—in their search for the correct mode for internationalist aesthetics. The struggle over how to represent the world for a revolutionary society thus coalesces, in this period, around the question of how to represent China.

Such an aesthetics is inevitably interconnected with politics, and internationalist aesthetics encountered and expressed the same ambiguities as the political project of Soviet internationalism: a liberatory, anti-imperial ideology that simultaneously sought to control political and historical narratives from the world revolution’s proclaimed centre in Moscow. Consequently, these disparate images are united by an insistence on the privileged position and perspective of the Soviet observer, who looks at Chinese reality with a combination of advanced modern knowledge, sympathy with oppression, and revolutionary experience that is purportedly inaccessible to other Europeans, or indeed to the Chinese themselves. This privileged perspective on China undergirds the claims of internationalist aesthetics to present a true image of the world. The search for an authoritative mode for internationalist aesthetics is hampered, however, by recurrent issues of access, mediation and translatability, and by

lingering parallels between this avowedly anti-imperialist discourse and the imperial systems of knowledge production it supposedly replaces.

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Note on Transliterations and Translations

All translations are my own unless otherwise specified. The original language is given alongside the translation at times when attention needs to be drawn to specific elements of the original text. Otherwise, the original is given in a footnote.

For transliteration from Russian, I follow the Library of Congress system. Exceptions are made for proper names that have a widely accepted standard rendering in English: so Leon Trotsky not Lev Trotskii, Vladimir Mayakovsky not Vladimir Maiakovskii, etc.

Transliterations from Chinese are given in pinyin. When Romanizing Chinese proper names, I largely follow standard contemporary pinyin usage, even though this sometimes conflicts with Russian usages of the 1920s. So, for example, I render the current Chinese capital 北京 as “Beijing,” not “Peking,” though the Soviet writers discussed below call it Пекин (Peking). Likewise “Guangzhou,” not “Canton” (КАНТОН), for 广州. An exception to this rule is made for Chinese proper names with established English versions that depart from pinyin: e.g. Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek. When Chinese names are taken from Russian texts where they are given in Cyrillic transliteration, I give the names transliterated from Cyrillic, with the pinyin in brackets if it can be clearly discerned. (For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Chapter Five, on “Den Shi-khua/Deng Shihua.”)

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Introduction

I. China and the Soviet Union in the 1920s: Politics, Aesthetics, Education

Here, in this immense land that has for century upon century been for Asia what Greece and Rome were for Europe, here, in the struggle between two irreconcilable worlds for mastery of an immeasurable human ocean, the fates of our planet are being decided. Will we enter the kingdom of socialism, or will we transition to a new, higher phase of capitalism—the answer to this fateful question will be given by Asia, and above all by China, by China’s evolution over the coming decade. (A. A. Ivin, *China and the Soviet Union*, 1924)¹

In the mid-1920s, after the failure of proletarian revolutions in Europe and the rise of Ataturk in Turkey, China became the focal point of Soviet efforts to foster world revolution. This mission proceeded directly from the Second Conference of the Third Communist International (Comintern), held in July 1920, where Lenin’s “Theses on National and Colonial Questions” had established the principle that the capitalist powers could only be defeated by detaching the colonies that ensured their wealth. Therefore the Comintern, and the indigenous Communist parties under its direction, should form alliances with bourgeois liberation movements to assist nationalist anti-imperial revolutions in colonized and semi-colonized countries. Once imperial rule had been overthrown, the Comintern would work through these local Communists, embedded within the national revolution, to guide developments towards the proletarian (and ultimately global) revolution.²

China had been through its own revolution in 1911, overthrowing centuries of dynastic rule. But the Chinese Republic formed in its place lacked stability: control of the Beijing (Peking) government shifted between the political groups of various powerful generals, while the Nationalist Party (Guomingdang) under Sun Yat-sen formed its own power base in the south, in Guangzhou (Canton). True to the Leninist line in the Comintern, contact between the Bolsheviks and Sun Yat-sen’s Chinese Nationalist Party, the

¹ A. Ivin, *Kitai i Sovetskii Soiuz* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), 29. “Здесь, в необъятной стране,

² Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution, 1919–1927* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), 41–44.

Guomindang (GMD), had been established as early as 1918; by 1922, a formal policy of alliance was in place, its existence made public with a Declaration signed by Sun and Soviet diplomat Adolf Joffe on 26 January, 1923.³ Comintern advisers such as Mikhail Borodin and Vasilii Bliukher arrived in Guangzhou in 1923–4, determined to reorganize the Guomindang into a Leninist party structure with a modern army at its disposal.⁴ Comintern agents also travelled to the northern city of Kalgan in 1925 to assist the Nationalist Army (Guominjun) of General Feng Yuxiang.⁵ The traffic worked both ways, too: Guomindang leaders, including Chiang Kai-shek, travelled to Moscow to meet with Soviet dignitaries, and the Sun Yat-sen University for the Workers of China, headed by Karl Radek, opened in Moscow in November 1925.⁶ Meanwhile the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in collaboration with the Comintern in 1921, was encouraged to form a strategic united front with the Guomindang, and assist the Nationalists in their campaign to reunify the country.⁷

³ Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution*, 45–47, 57–58.

⁴ C. Martin Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, *Missionaries of Revolution: Soviet Advisers and Nationalist China, 1920–1927* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 6–9. In June 1924, there were 25 Comintern advisers in southern China; by April 1926, that number had risen to 58. (Ibid., 7.)

⁵ Ibid., 8, 10–11.

⁶ On Chiang's visit to Moscow in 1923, and the beginnings of his disillusionment with Russian alliance, see *ibid.*, 87–89. For a detailed history of the Sun Yat-sen University for the Workers of China (Universitet trudiashchikhsia Kitaia imeni Sun Iat-sen—UTK, renamed in 1928 Kommunisticheskii universitet trudiashchikhsia Kitaia—KUTK), see L. Yu Min-ling, "Sun Yat-sen University in Moscow, 1925–1930," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1995. Before the founding of Sun Yat-sen University, Chinese students had also studied at the Communist University for the Workers of the East (KUTV). See N. N. Timofeeva, "Kommunisticheskii Universitet Trudiashchikhsia Vostoka (KUTV) 1921–1925," *Narody Azii i Afriki* 2 (1976): 47–57; and Timofeeva, "Kommunisticheskii Universitet Trudiashchikhsia Vostoka (KUTV) 1926–1938," *Narody Azii i Afriki* 5 (1979): 30–42.

⁷ On the Comintern's involvement in the founding of the CCP, see Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 24–30. The two Comintern agents closely involved in the founding of the CCP were Grigorii Voitinskii and Hendrikus Sneevleit (alias Maring), the latter playing a prominent role at the First Congress of the CCP in Shanghai, June 1921.

This plan backfired. By March 1927 the Guomindang army's Northern Expedition, aided by Russian advisers, had marched successfully north from Guangzhou to the Yangzi river, and entered Shanghai. Here General Chiang Kai-shek orchestrated a purge of the labor unions and left-wing organizations in China's most proletarian city, with hundreds killed in mid-April.⁸ That same month, police acting for Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian government raided the Soviet embassy in Beijing, confiscating documents and arresting several Chinese—including Li Dazhao, the co-founder of the CCP, who was later executed.⁹ The alliance in Wuhan between the CCP and the "Left" Guomindang struggled on until July, when Borodin and other Comintern agents set off for Russia, fleeing through the Gobi desert by car.¹⁰ By August 1927, the Comintern mission in China was effectively over. Meanwhile, within the USSR, the argument over China policy and its failure became the focal point of a climactic confrontation between Stalin and the Left Opposition, a struggle for power that resulted in Leon Trotsky and Grigorii Zinoviev's expulsion from the party in November 1927 and Stalin's effective instalment as undisputed leader.¹¹ The violent suppression of the Canton Uprising in December 1927, organized on the Comintern's orders, marked the final defeat of Soviet efforts to shape China's revolution.¹²

Parallel with this political mission to shape China's future, a cultural project was underway to reshape the perception of China among inhabitants of the Soviet Union. A cogent summary of this project and the obstacles it faced can be found in an article entitled "China and Soviet Russia: A Letter from Beijing," which appeared in the prominent Soviet

⁸ Ibid., 405–6.

⁹ Ibid., 1, 403–4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 423.

¹¹ Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution*, 127–160.

¹² Ibid., 15.

journal *Red Virgin Soil* (*Krasnaia nov'*) in March 1924.¹³ Its author, A. Ivin (Chinese *yiwen* 伊文, the pseudonym of Aleksei Alekseevich Ivanov), was a journalist and teacher, fluent in Chinese, who had lived in Beijing since 1917.¹⁴ Ivin's in-depth, insider knowledge of contemporary China made the absence of such knowledge among his compatriots painfully clear. The central point of his article runs thus: if the Soviet reading public wants to grasp the current global moment and its revolutionary prospects, even the most committed socialists among them will have to overcome the Eurocentric bias within Russian culture and education. The enormous populations of colonized and semi-colonized countries in Asia make them an invaluable resource to the imperialist powers of the West, and a vital potential ally in Soviet Russia's struggle to globalize its revolution. And yet, Ivin laments, the public knows almost nothing about Asia: the Eurocentric history taught in schools locates the origins of world history in the Mediterranean, and reduces the rest of the world to a "grey formless mass" subdued by superior European technology.¹⁵

China, Ivin argues, is the focal point of the current world situation. The future wealth of the Euro-American capitalist powers depends on exploiting its workforce and ensuring access to its markets. But China is also going through an unprecedented cultural transformation, a "revaluation of all values" in which imported foreign knowledge challenges traditional forms of understanding. In Ivin's analysis, two forms of modernity, two aspects of what he calls the "Euro-American revolution," compete to replace the "faded face of old China." There is "Americanized China," educated in missionary schools, dressed in a dinner jacket, dancing the foxtrot; and there is the "young, proud face of progressive China, so

¹³ A. Ivin, "Kitai i Sovetskaia Rossiia: Pis'mo iz Pekina," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1924): 183–192. Reprinted as "Kitai i Sovetskaia Rossiia" in Ivin, *Kitai i Sovetskii Soiuz* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), 9–22.

¹⁴ For biographical details on Ivin/Ivanov see V. N. Nikiforov, *Sovetskie istoriki o problemakh Kitaiia* (Moscow: Izd-vo Nauka, 1970), 144–6.

¹⁵ Ivin, "Kitai i Sovetskaia Rossiia," 10.

strikingly reminiscent of the face of revolutionary Russia.”¹⁶ If this third aspect is to win out over its rivals, Russia and China must be drawn closer together on the level of culture: Ivin’s term, *kul’turnoe sblizhenie*, suggests a literal reduction of distance between the two entities.¹⁷ In other words, Ivin claims that, without a greater *cultural* understanding of China, without a greater sense of the history and human experience of the Chinese, any *political* project of solidarity and revolutionary alliance is bound to fail. If the revolution is truly to globalize, the Soviet people must overcome the Eurocentrism in their own culture, and strive to know Asian civilizations as equal and commensurable.

However, this enhanced, revolutionary knowledge will not be easy to achieve, so great is the sense of China as distant and unfamiliar. “For tens of thousands of versts,” Ivin points out, “we share a border with a great and ancient country, an entire separate world comparable only to ancient Rome,” one of the “main branches of human civilization.”¹⁸ Along this vast border, “we are neighbours to a country whose role in the global economy is growing with astonishing speed, neighbours to a people 400-million strong, whose imminent evolution will determine to a significant extent the fate of all of Asia.”¹⁹ And yet, the young Soviet population knows about as much about China “as if China was not our neighbor, but located on another planet.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20. “На протяжении десяти тысяч верст мы граничим с великой древней страной, целым отдельным миром, который можно поставить в параллель лишь с миром древнего Рима, граничим с одной из главных ветвей человеческой цивилизации[.]” A *verst* is a traditional Russian unit of distance, roughly equal to a kilometer.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21. “На протяжении десяти тысяч верст мы являемся соседями страны, роль которой в мировом хозяйстве растет с поразительной быстротой, соседями четырехсотмиллионного народа, ближайшая эволюция которого определит в значительной степени судьбы всей Азии.”

²⁰ Ibid., 20. “Столько же, как если бы Китай был не нашим соседом, а находился на другой планете.”

One solution that Ivin advocates is the widespread teaching of Chinese language in Soviet schools. Following the literary reforms spearheaded by Hu Shi, students could now focus on learning the vernacular language, which, Ivin somewhat dubiously claims, is as easy and quick to master as French or German. But the distance between image and reality remains a serious problem. Even a well-known fact such as the enormity of the Chinese population is too easily experienced as a geographical abstraction, rather than a living reality. Without contact, Ivin suggests—without felt bodily experience—the scale and significance of Chinese reality is hard to comprehend:

In truth, one must wander oneself through the boundless expanses of Asia, observing up close the human beings that dwell there, in order to *feel profoundly* [*глубоко ощутить*] how small the Euro-American world is, and what enormous problems would arise tomorrow before the victorious Euro-American revolution, if it decided to become global.²¹

The mobilization of the entire population for a walking tour of China is hard to envisage, however. How, then, is this movement from cognitive to corporeal understanding to be achieved?

The answer lies in the creation of an internationalist aesthetics, capable of transmitting and disseminating sensory experiences of foreign, distant spaces through the media of print, picture, photograph, film and live performance. This study explores the ways in which early Soviet culture furnished its audience with an aesthetic experience of China, and the reasons why such an experience was considered necessary. Ivin's essay offers a concise summary of those reasons. China, Soviet Russia's neighbour, was considered a vital knot in the contemporary geopolitical situation, understood from a Bolshevik perspective as a global battle for survival between imperial capitalism and revolutionary socialism. And yet, the Soviet public's knowledge of this vast land and potential ally was distorted by distance, a

²¹ Ibid., 11 (my emphasis). “Нужно, действительно, самому побродить по необозримым просторам Азии, ближе присмотреться к населяющему ее человечеству, чтобы глубоко ощутить, как мал евро-американский мир и какие грандиозные проблемы встали бы завтра перед победоносной евро-американской революцией, если бы она решила стать мировой.”

separation enforced by the clichés of mysterious Oriental exotica. A new form of knowledge was needed that would replace this exotic mirage with authentic, contemporary truth. However, Ivin's insistence on bodily experience as a precursor to true understanding seems to suggest that this cognitive transformation needs to be accompanied by some form of sensory immediacy, if the distance separating Soviet Russians from China is truly to be collapsed. Aesthetics is the term I shall use to describe the reproduction or simulation of that immediacy. It is through a combination of sober knowledge and aesthetic agitation, analytical exposition and sympathetic connection, that these images of China seek to work on their audience.

This need for a new cognitive and sensory experience of China was expressed most forcefully and eloquently by the poet, playwright, journalist, and cultural theorist Sergei Tret'iakov. Tret'iakov taught Russian alongside Ivin at Beijing University from 1924–5, and became the most prominent Soviet voice on China in the twenties. Tret'iakov's sojourn in China coincided with his turn away from poetry and towards what he was later to call the "literature of fact" or "factography." As Devin Fore has shown, factography was conceived as a mode of writing that would replace the distanced, contemplative representational systems of bourgeois aesthetics with a productivist "operativity" aimed at reorganizing the consciousness of readers through indexical connections to experienced reality.²² Factography advocated a materialist, productivist conception of literature's social function that effectively rejected any mind-body split; textually transmitted facts were conceived as material objects that worked on the nervous system to organize the reader's "patterns of consciousness," transforming his or her perceptions of the world.²³

²² For an introduction to the literature of fact, see Nikolai Chuzhak, ed., *Literatura fakta: pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov LEFa* (Moscow: Izd-vo Federatsiia, 1929; repr., Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972). On "operativity" and factography's productivism, see Devin Fore, "Introduction," *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 3–10; Fore, "'All the Graphs': Soviet and Weimar Documentary between the Wars," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2005.

This elision of cognitive and corporeal experience is expressed vividly in the declaration that begins *Den Shi-khua*, Tret'iakov's mediated biography of a Chinese student: "Our previous knowledge of China is like a crippled arm. It must first be broken, and then re-set correctly."²⁴ This old knowledge is crippled because it depends on an exotic image, acquired primarily from Western literature, that renders China as a distanced object of contemplation and aesthetic pleasure. Tret'iakov's literature of fact seeks to collapse distance and disrupt this comfortable representational illusion by introducing his reader to vivid, affective facts, culled from Chinese reality and guaranteed by the bodily experience of the writer. This factographic position took shape, indeed was pioneered, in Tret'iakov's writings on China—the need to understand China became, for Tret'iakov, the testing ground for a new form of revolutionary truth-production. Using eyewitness sketches, agitational drama based on historical events, and the life-story of one of his own students, Tret'iakov sought to prove that "fantasy is greyer than reality"; that the factual reality of contemporary China was more thrilling than any exotic novel.²⁵ This is a different kind of aesthetic effect to the exotica against which it is defined: internationalist aesthetics produces its power from a visceral sense of reality.

Tret'iakov will feature throughout this study as a committed mediator of contemporary China, but he was not the only cultural producer drawn to the Chinese theme in the 1920s. Other prominent writers, including Boris Pil'niak, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vsevolod Ivanov, and Isaac Babel', deployed images of China in their works. Pil'niak, like Tret'iakov

²³ Fore, "All the Graphs'," 60.

²⁴ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Neskol'ko slov," introduction to "Den Sy-Khua. (Bio-interv'iu.)," *Novyi Lef* 7 (1927): 14. "Наше прежнее знание Китая похоже на изуродованную руку. Ее надо сперва сломать, а потом снова срастить правильно." This was the first published extract of *Den Shi-khua*; the protagonist's name has not yet acquired the Cyrillic form it was to take in the completed book edition.

²⁵ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo*, 10. "Фантазия серее действительности."

and a host of lesser writers (Galina Serebriakova, Nikolai Kostarev, Sergei Dalin, Oskar Erdberg), travelled to China and published an account of his eyewitness experiences there. In cinema, *The Great Flight* (*Velikii perelet*, 1925), filmed during a major aviation expedition from Moscow through Mongolia to Beijing, and *Shanghai Document* (*Shankhaiskii dokument*, 1928), an account of Shanghai during the Communist defeat of spring 1927, sought to convey China to Soviet spectators as a documentary reality. A trio of films about China to be directed by Sergei Eisenstein, with scripts by Tret'iakov, was planned but never made. The Soviet stage in the mid-1920s saw a host of China-themed productions, including Tret'iakov's agitational drama *Roar, China!* and the revolutionary ballet *The Red Poppy*. All of these prominent cultural productions supplemented the daily presence of China stories and China images in the newspapers: Jeffrey Brooks estimates that China was the most covered country outside the West in the Soviet press of the 1920s.²⁶ During the historical period roughly coinciding with the New Economic Policy (NEP), China was big news.

A general sense of this topicality can be gained by searching in *Pravda's* electronic archive for all articles in a given year that mention the word "Kitai." The numbers rise gradually from 1920, when the word occurs only 47 times, through 1921 (75 times), 1922 (161 times), and 1923 (218 times). The 1924 signing of the Sino-Soviet Agreement, widely trumpeted in the Soviet press as the first "equal" treaty between China and a European power, began the period of most intense interest in China: mentions in *Pravda* for this year rose to 380. In 1925, as the May 30 shooting of Shanghai protestors by British troops sparked strikes and protests around the country, China was mentioned 541 times; the following year, with the successes of the Comintern-assisted Northern Expedition looking likely to reunite the country, 668 times. 1927 was the high point of Soviet interest in China across the media spectrum, as the seizure of Shanghai by workers and their subsequent massacre by

²⁶ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 33.

Guomindang troops marked both the climax and catastrophe of Soviet policy in China. “Kitai” was mentioned 899 times in *Pravda* that year, the highest frequency of any year in the Soviet period. In 1928, with the failure of Stalin’s line apparent after the disastrous Canton Uprising, this figure plummets to 323; by 1931, it had bottomed out at 109, before building again in the late 1930s, in response to the Japanese invasion.²⁷

The activities of Borodin and his Comintern colleagues in Guangzhou were not widely reported in the Soviet press: the official line in this period was that Soviet Russia was a close friend of the Chinese government in Beijing, and it would hardly have done to admit that Soviet agents were simultaneously trying to bring down that government in league with the Guomindang. But the other category of “agents,” writers, film-makers, and dramatists working in the sphere of culture, were far more visible. The images of China they produced accompanied the Comintern’s political project with a cultural project: to transform the attitudes of the Soviet public in line with Ivin’s prescriptions, and to produce internationalism as both a cognitive and an aesthetic experience.

II. Anti-Imperial Aesthetics?

Tret’iakov conceived his new, “factographic” knowledge of China as entering into direct competition with the culture of the West and of pre-revolutionary Russia: in contemporary shorthand, the culture of “imperialism.” The USSR, successor state to a Russian Empire whose imperial legacy it ostensibly rejected, asserted itself on the world stage of the 1920s as the anti-imperial, liberatory alternative to the Euro-American domination of the globe. Nowhere was this reversal more dramatic than in the case of China. Tsarist Russia, after all, had participated enthusiastically in the “carving of the Chinese melon,” the accelerating detachment of territorial concessions from the Chinese Empire that

²⁷ Figures from search conducted through *Pravda* Digital Archive, accessed 24 February, 2014 via Columbia University Library Services: <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/browse/publication/9305>.

had occupied the European powers and Japan through the second half of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century.

In July 1919 and September 1920, on either side of the Second Comintern Congress which set the Comintern's "Eastern" policy, the Soviet government issued the two Karakhan Manifestos, addressed to China. These pledged to restore to China the rights it had lost to Tsarist Russia, ending the indemnities paid since the defeat of the Boxer Rebellion, renouncing the much-disputed right to "extraterritoriality," and conceding Chinese sovereignty, in theory at least, over Manchuria.²⁸ In addition, the Declarations exhorted China to turn towards Soviet Russia, the workers' and peasants' state, to avoid becoming another Korea or India, another nation lost under the yoke of imperialism (亡國 *wang guo*, "lost country," in the Chinese discourse of the time).²⁹ Lev Karakhan, deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs at the time of the Declarations, later became the first Soviet Ambassador to China, concluding a treaty of mutual recognition between the two governments on May 31, 1924, and winning significant popularity in Chinese intellectual circles.³⁰

Nonetheless, the Soviet Union remained a foreign power sending agents to control the political direction of China, which by that time had served as a battleground of rival imperialist powers for almost 100 years. Outside observers were not slow to suggest that this supposedly liberational activity was simply a new, "Red" form of imperialism, and the Comintern a tool for extending Soviet power across the globe. In 1928, the French novelist André Malraux published *The Conquerors* (*Les Conquérants*), a semi-fictionalized account

²⁸ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 20–22. See also Henry Wei, *China and Soviet Russia* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1956), 16.

²⁹ On the term *wang guo* see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 15.

³⁰ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 5–6.

of Comintern agents and their activities in Guangzhou during the general strike of summer 1925. Malraux's title suggests an ambiguity that his novel declines to resolve: are these European men, who bring guns and expertise to Guangzhou and turn them against the imperialist British, in fact simply the latest in a long line of foreign conquerors that have come to China in pursuit of power?³¹

Nor was this paradox entirely absent from Soviet rhetoric. Leon Trotsky, writing in *Pravda* shortly after the shooting of Chinese protestors by British police in Shanghai on May 30, 1925, describes the very blood of the slain and wounded carrying forward the Comintern's mission: "Their blood, evaporating on Shanghai pavements, is infecting the masses with the "spirit of Moscow." This spirit is all-pervading and indomitable. It will subjugate the entire world by setting it free."³² Trotsky is using this language of conquest for rhetorical effect: Soviet political rhetoric at this time was infused with a sense of permanent war and global struggle as its sources of legitimation. Nonetheless, Trotsky's phrase neatly encapsulates the contradictions within Soviet anti-imperialist internationalism. The activities of the Comintern aimed to liberate countries from Western imperial dominance while simultaneously seeking to shape their futures in line with a political and ideological model exported from Moscow.

I believe that this paradox should be taken seriously, not simply reduced to a dismissive summation of the Comintern as a hypocritical continuation of Russian imperial aspirations under a red mask. Soviet policy sought to position the USSR as the globe's revolutionary vanguard, while simultaneously pursuing the national interests of a state obliged to compete within an existing international system of sovereign nation states. The

³¹ André Malraux, *Les conquérants* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928).

³² Leon Trotsky, "Moskovskii dukh," *Pravda*, June 6, 1925. "их кровь, испаряясь на шанхайских мостовых, заражает массы «московским духом». Он, этот дух, всепроникающий и непобедим. Он покорит весь мир, освободив его."

clearest example of this is the status of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Built through Chinese territory under the auspices of the Russian Imperial state at the turn of the century, the CER was taken over by Chinese forces in 1917, operating subsequently under Chinese, French, and White Russian joint administration.³³ Despite the Karakhan Declarations' apparent renunciation of all Tsarist privileges in China, including the CER, the Soviet government made joint Sino-Soviet administration of the railway a central condition of the mutual recognition treaty concluded in 1924.³⁴ Countering claims that the railway remained an "instrument of imperialism," Trotsky argued in 1927 that the CER would be returned "[t]he moment the Chinese people has created its own democratic unified government."³⁵ After 1927, the Soviet government was unlikely to evaluate any Guomindang administration as either democratic or unified. Instead, the railway provoked a Sino-Soviet confrontation: in 1929, the forces of Manchurian warlord General Zhang Xueliang, with the support of Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist government, attempted to seize outright control over the CER, provoking a border conflict and brief invasion by Soviet troops.³⁶

Given these complexities, it seems worthwhile to inquire whether and in what ways the utopian aspirations of Soviet internationalism were compromised by such realities as existing balances of geopolitical power, existing systems of knowledge and identity, and existing technologies of representation and knowledge dissemination. Considerable

³³ R. K. I. Quedsted, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 92.

³⁴ Wei, *China and Soviet Russia*, 25–38. During the negotiations, Karakhan had authorized versions of the Declarations published in Beijing's English-language newspapers. These omitted the clause about unconditionally returning the CER; it seems the Soviet missions attempted to claim that this clause had been inserted by mistake during the original Declaration's translation from Russian into French. Wei, *China and Soviet Russia*, 31. See also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 297.

³⁵ Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution*, 113.

³⁶ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 368–9. The Soviet government eventually ceded control of the CER to the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo government in the mid-1930s.

scholarship in recent decades has been devoted to the exposure and analysis of what might be called “imperial aesthetics”: cultural and artistic products that support and perpetuate imperial forms of power. The foundational text of this trend in Western academic scholarship, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, argues that, while European states were pursuing political domination of non-European groups, European cultural systems (art, scholarship) produced images of these latter groups that present them as inevitably fit for subjugation.³⁷ David Spurr begins his study of *The Rhetoric of Empire* by referencing Jacques Derrida’s equation of anthropology with warfare, enacting a “violence of the letter” imposed by one culture on another, a violence “of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations.”³⁸ Equating Derrida’s “violence of the letter” with Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ideological hegemony, Spurr sees this violence expanding beyond anthropology to include “the entire system by which one culture comes to interpret, to represent, and finally to dominate another.”³⁹

These approaches tend to conceive knowledge production by one culture about another as inevitably a form of domination. Seeking a more positive model of global imagining, Frederic Jameson offers the term “cognitive mapping” to designate an aesthetic that seeks to map the social (ultimately global) totality for its audience, overcoming the separation between subjective phenomenological experience and objective social structure that pertains under imperial capitalism.⁴⁰ The cognitive map, for Jameson, performs spatially the function ascribed by Louis Althusser to ideology, mapping in imaginary form the

³⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

³⁸ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6, 4.

⁴⁰ Frederic Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Gary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 348–50.

subject's relationship to their objective conditions of existence.⁴¹ This connection between the individual and the totality is what makes cognitive mapping, for Jameson, a necessarily *aesthetic* activity: Jameson credits aesthetics with the power to forge connections between individual experience and social totality in a manner denied to the abstract, subject-less discourse of social science.⁴²

An aesthetic of cognitive mapping, Jameson insists, “is an integral part of any socialist political project,” since “without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible.”⁴³ If this is true, then cognitive mapping—the spatial representation of a socialist ideology to replace the destroyed world picture of the vanquished, pre-revolutionary social order—must have been of primary importance for early Soviet culture.⁴⁴ Indeed, Emma Widdis has recently applied Jameson's notion of the cognitive map to the mapping of the new Soviet land through the medium of film.⁴⁵ Widdis focuses on the representation and consolidation of *national* space within the USSR, which might seem to contradict Jameson's aspiration that cognitive mapping could represent a *global* social totality and its inter-relations. In fact, Widdis' study charts a familiar path from the “horizontal” 1920s to the “vertical” 1930s, a movement away from internationalism and towards the Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one country.⁴⁶ The 1920s remain, however, a moment when an alternative

⁴¹ Ibid., 353.

⁴² Response to Nancy Fraser, *ibid.*, 358.

⁴³ Ibid., 355.

⁴⁴ As Clifford Geertz argues, conscious, explicit articulations of ideology become more necessary in periods when traditional modes of understanding and behavior are interrupted. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 218.

⁴⁵ Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2, 197n1.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Papernyi proposes the model of a “horizontal” 1920s, “Culture One,” under which “the values of the periphery become more important than those of the center[.]” and its replacement in the

global map seemed possible: when “[b]orders were not protective divides that demarcated self from other, but rather represented the exciting spaces of transition into the workers' International, the global socialist space.”⁴⁷

Perhaps the key border of this period was the one that separated and connected Russia and China: neighbouring countries from very different cultural traditions brought together by the course of modern history. The images considered below are constantly crossing or reducing this border, by land and by air. The most dramatic border crossing was enacted by the Great Flight of 1925, a pioneering aviation expedition from Moscow through Mongolia to Beijing that became a multi-media event relayed through newspapers, books, and a documentary film (see Chapter Three). But the physical border between the states also offers a metaphor for the cultural distance that Ivin identified and Tret'iakov sought to transcend.

Indeed, Jameson's notion of the cognitive map coincides on several key points with Tret'iakov's statements about how the Soviet image of China needs to be transformed. Jameson's choice of terminology presents an apparent contradiction—does not a “map” constitute a distanced symbol, a representation that appeals to the cognitive faculties but remains detached from the immediacy of individual, corporeal experience? This contradiction also faced the early Soviet producers of China images: how, as Ivin asked, can abstract knowledge of China (such as a map) be communicated to a distanced audience as visceral, sensory experience? The collapsing of this distance between representations of knowledge and corporeal experience, between the map and the body, is precisely the function that Jameson ascribes to aesthetics. The aesthetic appeal to the body, Jameson hopes, can render the abstract concrete, and render the non-present present. This is the function that the early

1930s by a “vertical” Culture Two, “characterized by a transfer of values to the center.” Though Papernyi's book focuses on architecture, he proposes Cultures One and Two as cyclical processes that alternate through Russian history. Vladimir Papernyi, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxii–xxiv.

⁴⁷ Widdis, *Visions*, 10.

Soviet imaginers of China called on aesthetics to perform: to collapse the distance between China and the Soviet audience by an aesthetic appeal to the senses that would complement and make concrete the superior knowledge produced by Marxist tools of analysis.

Tret'iakov makes this project clear in an article entitled “To Love China” (“Liubit' Kitai”). First published in 1925, this short text was reprinted as a programmatic introduction to the collected volume of Tret'iakov's China sketches, *Chzhungo* (1927, republished 1930—the title is a Cyrillic rendering of *Zhongguo*, “Middle Country,” one of the names for “China” in Chinese).⁴⁸ Tret'iakov begins by summarizing the false, inherited image of China that predominates among the general public:

A mysterious country. An inscrutable people.
Chinese porcelain. Chinese shadows. Chinese silk. Chinese tea. The Chinese wall.
Chinese writing. Chinese umbrellas.
“Ah, those refined Chinese tortures! The Chinese princess Turandot, porcelain nodding dolls, Chinese fans, Chinese gowns, ah, opium dens!” groans in addition one of our “sensitive” laywomen, attracted to the theatre and exotic books.⁴⁹

This China is known first of all through its commodities: the famous exports such as porcelain, silk, and tea that became so desirable and so profitable in the European world. Under the Marxist logic of commodity fetishism, the commodity is an appearance that becomes an illusion: the social nature of labour is embodied in and then concealed behind the

⁴⁸ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Liubit' Kitai,” *Shkval* 25 (1925): 14-15. Reprinted in Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo*, 7–10.

⁴⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Liubit' Kitai,” *Shkval*, 1925, 5. Reprinted in Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 7. “Таинственная страна. Загадочный народ. Китайский фарфор. Китайские тени. Китайский шелк. Китайский чай. Китайская стена. Китайская грамота. Китайский зонтик. — Ах, китайские утонченные пытки! Китайская принцесса Турандот, фарфоровые болванчики, китайские веера, китайские халаты, ах, опикурильные притоны! — простонет в добавление обывательница из «чутких натур», интересующихся театром и библиотечной экзотики.” The reference to Turandot, repeated two pages later, hints at the topicality of Tret'iakov's concerns: the Vakhtangov Theatre's production of *Printsessia Turandot* was one of the most popular and influential theatre productions of the early 1920s, while Puccini's opera debuted in Moscow in 1927. (See Chapter Four.)

abundance of commodities and their inter-relation through exchange value.⁵⁰ The commodity logic of global capitalism, Tret'iakov implies, reduces relations with China to possession of or desire for objects.

This illusory logic extends into the sphere of representations, “the theatre and exotic books,” which also constitute, in a commodity economy, commodities for consumption. Hence Tret'iakov's list of fetishized exotica incorporates stereotypical images that circulate through popular culture, depicting vices and tempers both disturbing and alluring: torture, opium dens, Turandot. These images of China are produced for consumption by the literature of the colonial exotic: in a later essay, Tret'iakov lambasts Western writers such as Pierre Loti, Claude Farrère, and Gustave Mirbeau for presenting China as a “land of mysterious wonders, opium narcoses, the refined sensuality of torture, knife-wielding conspirators behind every corner[.]”⁵¹ The cumulative effect of commodification is that Chinese people themselves are effaced; dubbed “mysterious” at the head of Tret'iakov's list, they then vanish behind a catalogue of their products and stereotypical appearances in illusory representational systems. Their true position in the global system is concealed.

Tret'iakov's sketches will seek to provide factual, eyewitness information in order to reveal this true position, to “map” China's real relation to the global system as understood by Marxist-Leninist analysis. But the aesthetic dimension of the task, in “To Love China,” remains fundamental, since the enemy chooses to do battle on aesthetic territory. The illusions of exotic stereotype, Tret'iakov claims, are defended by their supporters on the grounds that “reality is greyer than the fantastic and exotic.”⁵² This is the assertion that Tret'iakov and his literature of fact must disprove. His eyewitness accounts will show a China

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 163–5.

⁵¹ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 199. “удивляли людей былью и небылью об этой стране таинственных чудес, опиумных наркозов, утонченного сладострастия пыток, заговорщиков с ножом из-за угла[.]”

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8. “Действительность серее фантастической экзотики.”

that is not statically, irreducibly different, but transforming in a manner that brings it closer to Russian experience. Scholars hunched over their calligraphy give way to university sportsmen working in laboratories with Bunsen burners; palanquins are pushed off the street by bicycles; Chinese workers and students are organizing unions and protests. “Before this new, explosive China,” Tret’iakov proclaims, “the nodding Chinese dolls of fantasy will crumble into dust. Fantasy is greyer than reality.”⁵³

This overcoming of fantasy by vivid reality cannot simply be achieved, however, by abstract, dispassionate analysis. Instead, only sensory and emotional engagement, relayed through the bodily presence of the reporter, can dispel these illusions: “This formula will be evident to us,” Tret’iakov insists, “when we manage not simply to understand China schematically, but to feel our way around it with our own hands, to fix it with a steady gaze, when we come to know and love China as our own kith and kin.”⁵⁴ Tret’iakov wants his readers to see and feel China as if they themselves were present. Only this aesthetic experience can produce the feelings of closeness and kinship that enable internationalist solidarity: “kith and kin” here translates *rodnoi i blizkii*, literally “kindred and close.” The infinitive in “To Love China” becomes an imperative: consistent with Fore’s definition of factography as “a mode of writing that both manipulates and produces at the same time that it denotes and refers,” Tret’iakov’s China writings seek to *produce* this feeling of closeness and love for China in the reader.⁵⁵

Is “aesthetics” the correct word for this process? Tret’iakov himself often uses the term and its cognates to suggest something distanced from reality, confined to a zone of

⁵³ Ibid., 10. “Перед этим новым, взрывчатым, на дыбы встающим Китаем в пыль рассыпаются болванчики фантазии. Фантазия серее действительности.”

⁵⁴ Ibid. “Эта формула будет для нас очевидна, когда мы не только схематически поймем Китай, но когда возьмем его наощупь, на пристальный взгляд, когда мы его, родного и близкого, узнаем и полюбим.”

⁵⁵ Fore, “All the Graphs’,” 87.

pleasure and distraction set apart from the realities of social life. There is more than one way to understand aesthetics, however. In outlining his notion of the cognitive map, Jameson argues that Marxist conceptions of aesthetics typically reject the notion of the work of art as an object of disinterested contemplation and pleasure, insisting instead that aesthetic experience should perform a cognitive, educational function. “To teach, to move, to delight”:

Jameson turns to Cicero, unattributed, for this summary of the functions of the work of art, adding that the first task is often set aside in modern, non-Marxist perspectives.⁵⁶ Cicero’s original quote, however, is in fact a description of rhetoric: “The supreme orator,” he insists, “is one whose speech instructs, delights and moves the minds of its audience.”⁵⁷ While “delight” seems closer to the form of exotic aesthetics Tret’iakov seeks to overthrow, a combination of educating and “moving the minds” of his audience summarizes well the intent of his China project—especially if we translate Cicero’s “permovet” into something closer to 1920s Soviet language, as “agitate.” These images of China, in other words, are explicitly and consciously rhetorical, asserting a particular interpretation of reality on their audience through a combination of reason and emotion. I retain the term “aesthetics,” however, to reflect the fact that these images took shape across a whole spectrum of genres and media, and to emphasise the various appeals they make to the senses, to sight and sound in particular.

Although not all of the cultural producers who feature in this study ascribed to Tret’iakov’s literature of fact movement, the desire to produce China as both a cognitive and emotional experience runs through these texts. The Soviet perspective on China claims epistemological validity on the grounds of possessing a “scientific” tool, Marxist class

⁵⁶ Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” 347–48.

⁵⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, “De Optimo Genere Oratorum,” in *De Inventione, De Optimo Genere Oratorum, Topica*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 356–57. “Optimus est enim orator qui dicendo animos audientium et docet et delectat et permovet.”

analysis, through which to explain what is really happening in this distant foreign place. At the same time, these cultural producers seek to generate an emotional connection to China that overcomes distance and enables solidarity through a sensory experience of Chinese “reality.”

An objection arises, flagged by scare quotes: how do we, as readers, distinguish fantasy from reality? How do we differentiate between enlightening and deceptive aesthetic experiences? What if Soviet culture simply produces a new false or concealing image of China, removed from the colonial exotic yet shaped to fit the aspiring hegemonic discourse of Soviet-led Leninist internationalism? At their crudest, many of these new images of China can be relegated to what Michael Smith, writing on early Soviet films about the East, has dubbed the aesthetic of “national realism”: national identity is reduced to a tradition-mired backwardness that socialist modernity has come to redeem.⁵⁸ Taken as a whole, these texts sometimes give the impression that China, ostensibly de-exoticized, is in fact re-reified, and always basically the same: a turbulent storm of oppressed coolies, devious missionaries, battered rickshaw drivers, arrogant Englishmen, treacherous white Russians, and imprisoned women. Beyond the convenience of shocking, titillating or otherwise energising clichés, what reification really means here is that “China”—a vast and complex human world of social multiplicities, historical complexities, and competing agencies—is ascribed a stable set of meanings within the aspiring hegemonic discourse of Soviet internationalism.

Any representation of a complex social reality will be partial; these images, furthermore, are generally open about their political agenda. Rather than interrogate the correspondence of these texts to some externally affirmative “reality” of 1920s China, it may be more profitable to explore the strategies through which they claim the authority to represent that reality. These images assert the power and validity of a specifically Soviet

⁵⁸ Michael G. Smith, “Cinema for the ‘Soviet East’: National Fact and Revolutionary Fiction in Early Azerbaijani Film,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (Winter, 1997): 677.

perspective on the world, a travelling subjectivity that combined anti-imperialist, egalitarian sentiment with a strong sense of the global entitlement of Marxist-Leninist scientific discourse. This is why we repeatedly meet the claim, throughout this study, that the Soviet eyewitness observer is uniquely empowered to understand and penetrate contemporary China.

III. The Authority of the Soviet Perspective: Analysis and Sympathy, Observation and Translation

How does an observing outsider produce an authoritative description of a foreign culture? James Clifford ask precisely this question in his examination of ethnography's transformation of "unruly experience" into a stable and authoritative written account of a discreet "other world":

In analyzing this complex transformation one must bear in mind the fact that ethnography is from beginning to end enmeshed in writing. This writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text.⁵⁹

What strategy of authority does the Soviet observer enact, in translating experience of China into textual form? Put simply, these images conceive China as a contested territory split between two opposing parties: "the Chinese," meaning the oppressed and powerless segments of the population; and "imperialism," an alliance of foreign capital, the native bourgeoisie, and Chinese militarism. The Soviet perspective introduces a third position that can perceive the true nature of the Chinese social situation because it incorporates elements of the other two, combining the technological achievements and political innovations of Western modernity with a deep sense of solidarity, born of common experience, towards the oppressed Chinese. Time and again, we are told that it is this unique combination of

⁵⁹ James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 120.

knowledge and sympathy that enables the representatives of Soviet subjectivity to “map” China more correctly than anyone else, and to connect that map to the personal experiences of the Soviet public.

Take for example this quote from Nikolai Karintsev’s *Around the World in an Aeroplane* (*Vokrug sveta na aeroplanе*), an adventure serial for young readers published in 1926. The serial’s plot neatly expresses the aforementioned combination of Western technology and anti-imperial sympathy. Fleeing the First World War, a young Russian Communist named Nikolai Kurdin winds up in New York City, where he admires the achievements of American technology but laments that they are subordinated to the rule of the dollar. Seeking to reach Soviet Russia, Kurdin and his friends take part in an aeroplane race around the world, in competition with a cheating capitalist. Their plane touches down in China, where they befriend Chinese revolutionaries and have a private audience with Sun Yat-sen.

They also meet Elena Larionova, a White-turned-Red Russian who gives them a detailed run-down of recent Chinese history and the role of peasant uprisings. Elena claims that her understanding of China comes simply from the fact that she lives there and is interested in what surrounds her. Kurdin, however, disputes this explanation of her authority:

“Comrade Elena is being modest,” said Kurdin. “The point is not that she has talked and read a lot, but that she has been able to get close to the essence of the China problem and absorb the horror and grief of an oppressed people. She looked at China, not with the rapacious eyes of the lovers of dollars and their ilk, but with the friendly gaze of a Communist. The workers of the whole world look at China with such a gaze.”⁶⁰

The quality of Elena’s gaze, as a Red Russian, is fundamentally different to the perspectives of other foreigners, motivated by sympathy not domination. To paraphrase Mary-Louise

⁶⁰ Nikolai Karintsev, *Vokrug sveta na aeroplanе* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1926) vypusk 4, 49. “— Товарищ Елена скромничает, — сказал Кудрин. — Дело не в том только, что она беседовала и читала, а в том, что она сумела близко подойти к существу китайского вопроса и воспринять ужас и горе забитого народа. Она смотрела на Китай не хищными глазами любителей долларов и иже с ними, а дружеским взглядом коммуниста. И таким же взглядом на Китай смотрят трудящиеся всего мира.”

Pratt's study of travel writing and imperial culture, we might say that Soviet Russians claim to look at China with "anti-imperial eyes."⁶¹ Tret'iakov, introducing the serialization of his travel sketches in *Rabochaia Moskva*, also describes a form of vision that departs fundamentally from the imperialist gaze: "We, the people from this Soviet land, have the honourable role of truly seeing China for the first time, not in the shape of a rapacious and dangerous beast, behind the bars of a cage, but in the form of a human being: vast, backward, tormented, and begging for a comradely hand-shake."⁶² The Soviet gaze humanizes China for the first time.

This sympathy purportedly derived from experience. In a speech to a meeting of the "Hands off China!" society, held at the Bolshoi Theatre on 22 September 1924, Karl Radek, rector of the Sun Yat-sen University for the Workers of China and a prominent public voice on China, explains how this sympathy can be produced among Soviet workers when they know so little about China:

The events taking place in China have aroused profound interest among the working masses in our country. Russians workers, it goes without saying, know little about China and its history, and when they read in a telegram the strange-sounding surnames of Chinese public figures, they often can't tell them apart. But Russian workers *know from their own experience* what civil war is, what imperialist intervention is, and therefore when they learn that English, French, American and Japanese military vessels have gathered in Canton to threaten the revolutionary democratic government of the South, and are at present preparing to move towards Shanghai—this information is enough for Russian workers to understand that the same criminal act is brewing there that the workers of Russia fought against for many years, with weapons in their hands. But our *instinctive sympathy* for the Chinese people is not enough, sympathy will not make their lot any easier. It is our obligation to help the Chinese working masses in their struggle, and in order to be

⁶¹ Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁶² Sergei Tret'iakov, "U Zhel'togo moria—zhelt' i sin'," *Rabochaia Moskva*, 21 May 1927, 3. "У нас—людей из советской страны—почетная роль впервые увидеть Китай, не в образе хищного и опасного зверя, за решеткой, а в виде огромного, отсталого, замученного и просящего о товарищеском рукопожатии человека."

able to help them, our first duty is to try and *understand* what is happening in China.⁶³

This instinctive sympathy that Russian workers feel for China, Radek claims, is born from their own bodily experience, from living through revolution and the imperialist encirclement during the Civil War. For Radek, this reserve of instinctive sympathy, written into Soviet bodies by experience, allows the first hurdle, popular ignorance of China, to be bypassed. Sympathy is not enough in itself, however. Soviet collective consciousness (here voiced by Radek) must then proceed to apply the scientific tool of Marxist class analysis to Chinese social reality, thereby revealing that China is in chaos because no one class has been strong enough to seize power since the end of dynastic rule in 1911.⁶⁴ This combination of sympathy derived from experience and analysis derived from Marxism underpins the claim that the Soviet perspective on China possesses an interpretative authority unavailable to other foreigners, or, indeed, to the Chinese themselves.

Marxist method encouraged Soviet intellectuals and their audience to view the world in terms of underlying socio-economic structure, in contrast to which the super-structure of culture provides merely a surface illusion. On these grounds, Russia and China could be seen not as culturally distant, which they were, but as socio-economically similar: rural

⁶³ Karl Radek, “Rech’ t. K. Radeka,” in *Ruki proch’ ot Kitaia!* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), 1. (My emphases.) “События, происходящие в Китае, вызвали в нашей стране среди рабочих масс глубокий интерес. Русские рабочие, само собой понятно, плохо знают Китай, его историю, и когда читают в телеграмме странно звучащие фамилии китайских деятелей, то очень часто не могут в них разбираться. Но русские рабочие по собственному опыту знают, что такое гражданская война, что такое интервенция империалистов, и поэтому сведения о том, что английские, французские, американские и японские военные корабли собрались у Кантона с угрозами по отношению к революционному демократическому правительству Юга и в настоящее время собираются и Шанхая,— эти сведения были достаточны, чтобы русские рабочие поняли, что там готовится то же самое преступление, против которого рабочие России боролись с оружием в руках, в продолжение многих лет. Но нашего инстинктивного сочувствия к китайскому народу недостаточно, от сочувствуя ему легче не будет. Мы обязаны помочь китайским трудовым массам в их борьбе, и для того, чтобы мы были в состоянии им помочь, первый наш долг—постараться понять, что происходит в Китае.” On Radek’s role in shaping the public image of China, see Aleksandr Pantsov, ed., *Karl Radek o Kitae* (Moscow: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. M. V. Lomonosov, 2005), esp. Pantsov’s introductory essay, “Karl Radek — kitaeved.”

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

autocracies entering modernity at a lag from the industrialized West, marked by the uneven development and combination of historical stages that Trotsky noted in his history of the Russian revolution, and Chinese intellectuals like Li Dazhao saw all over their country's major cities.⁶⁵ Providing a platform for such structural understandings of trans-cultural similarity, Lenin argued that "national" culture was essentially a creation and projection of the dominating classes, and disguised an underlying commonality of democratic, socialist culture that unites the exploited masses across the globe:

The *elements* of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in *every* national culture, since in *every* nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life *inevitably* give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But *every* nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of "elements," but of the *dominant* culture. Therefore, the general "national culture" is the culture of the landlords, the clergy and the bourgeoisie.⁶⁶

The power of the Soviet perspective in China will express itself, time and again, in the capacity to see through or past this imposed, dominant national culture. Beneath the difference that dominant culture proclaims, the Soviet perspective discerns a commonality and commensurability of historical experience. At times, this will expand into notions of trans-Eurasian identity, or collapse back into exotic difference. But the simplest trope is kinship: Soviet Russia undertakes a fraternal but also paternal role in nurturing the Chinese social revolution, a revolution that is conceived as essentially an offspring of its Russian ancestor.

⁶⁵ Leon Trotsky, "Peculiarities of Russia's Development," in Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman (1932), accessed April 3, 2014 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch01.htm>. Li Dazhao described Beijing's Qianmen in 1918 as a site where "all the things of the twentieth century alongside those from the before the fifteenth are brought together in one place." Li Dazhao, *Li Dazhao wenji* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1984), vol. 1, 539. Quoted in S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18.

⁶⁶ Vladimir Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question," first published in *Prosveshcheniye* 10–12 (1913), accessed April 3, 2014 at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/2.htm#v20pp72-023> accessed 9.10.2013. (Emphasis in original.)

The language I have been using, it may be noted, foregrounds metaphors of vision and perception: perspective, gaze, viewing, seeing through. Soviet interpretative authority over China is frequently expressed as a capacity to see clearly, to master the field of the visual: most notably through the media of travel writing and documentary cinema. The link between visuality and modern forms of power has been widely theorized, perhaps most famously with Michel Foucault's model of the "panopticon." Foucault's panopticism, Spurr argues, can illuminate any situation wherein a dissymmetry of vision between observer and observed. This principle, Spurr writes, "has bearing on any occasion where the superior and invulnerable position of the observer coincides with the role of affirming the political order that makes that position possible."⁶⁷ This is precisely what Pratt finds in her analysis of colonial travel writing: the travel account presents distant territory as available and accessible to subordination and colonization, thus implicating the metropolitan readership in the colonial project. But do we not also find this dynamic in the travel sketches of Tret'iakov, whose claims to observational and interpretative power affirm the superiority of the Marxist-Leninist worldview, as his images of China assert the readiness of that society to join the Soviet internationalist order?

This is not to claim the simple identity of "imperial" and "anti-imperial," "colonial" and "Soviet" aesthetics. It is rather to suggest an abiding contradiction at the heart of the Soviet internationalist project. For all its liberational ideology, the attempt to impose Marxist-Leninist internationalism as a hegemonic vision of global politics represents an assertion of power. As Rey Chow notes, the twentieth century offered new technical resources to help in the production of hegemonic world pictures: print media began to incorporate photographs,

⁶⁷ Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, 16.

while cinema extended its images across the world.⁶⁸ Fore astutely notes that these media innovations accelerated massively in Russia in the 1920s, alongside the Soviet project to reimagine the world.⁶⁹ Technologized visibility is brought to bear, as Widdis notes, on the reclaiming of Soviet territory; but its ultimate purpose is the creation of a global cognitive map, and China is the first significant testing ground. Thus China is wrenched out of one world picture, only to be inscribed into another.

As Clifford has argued in the case of ethnography, an emphasis on visibility and the interpretative power of the observing gaze can obscure questions of linguistic and cultural translation.⁷⁰ How does the internationalist gaze account for the fact that different cultures have different systems of communication, different ways of understanding the world? Of the Soviet writers and artists considered here, only Ivin/Ivanov had a full command of Chinese speech and writing together with protracted, embedded exposure to Chinese social life. The problems of language and translation will surface in every chapter below. They raise the problem of difference from another perspective, one that may be illuminated by considering the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas argues that the relation of the self to alterity can either be possessive, an “imperialism of the same” that identifies the other ultimately as part of the self; or it can be metaphysical, retaining the absolute Other at a distance that does not permit incorporation into a self-centred system. Only the second relation, for Levinas, can truly ground ethics; the first remains a relation of power. The medium of the first system, or “totality,” is vision; the medium of the second, or “infinity,” is language.⁷¹ Perhaps the Soviet rejection of exotic difference effaces an otherness that, in

⁶⁸ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 16.

⁶⁹ Devin Fore, “Introduction,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 6.

⁷⁰ Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” 124–5.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 37–9.

Levinas' terms, potentially possesses ethical value? By privileging visuality over the language of the other, does the Soviet embrace of the Chinese within the internationalist gaze create a new "imperialism of the same"?

To put it another way: is there anything "dialogic" about this encounter? Do the Chinese speak to the Soviet audience thru the mediation of these images, or are they spoken for? And if what we find here is a Soviet monologue about "China," is there any real difference between imperial and anti-imperial aesthetics?

Besides the intense contacts between Comintern agents and members of the GMD and CCP, there seems to have been some interaction between Chinese intellectuals and those Soviet writers and scholars that made it to 1920s China. Ivin spoke and read Chinese well, and frequently quotes Chinese newspapers and other sources in his Russian-language articles. Those articles were in turn, it seems, mentioned with approval in the Chinese press.⁷² Lu Xun recalls talking to Ivin about Russian literature in the mid-1920s, and mentions that Ivin and Tret'iakov helped him to translate Aleksandr Blok's poem "The Twelve" ("Dvenadtsat").⁷³ The Sinologist Boris Vasil'ev met Cao Jinghua, translator of Russian literature and former student of Tret'iakov, in Kaifeng in 1925: through Cao's mediation, Vasil'ev produced the first Russian translation of Lu Xun's short stories, published in Leningrad in 1929.⁷⁴

⁷² Nikiforov mentions a glowing tribute to the authority of Ivin's writing in *Dongfang zazhi* (*Eastern Miscellany*), though sadly his source does not cite the issue. Nikiforov, *Sovetskie istoriki*, 146.

⁷³ In an issue of the magazine *Benliu* from 1929, Lu Xun recalls a conversation with Ivin, about Chinese readers' sense of Russian literature lagging behind revolutionary developments, taking place "four or five years ago." Lu Xun adds that Ivin and Tret'iakov were very "helpful and encouraging" (诱掖) in offering assistance with his own translation of "The Twelve" and Ren Guozhen's translation of "Literary Debates in Soviet Russia." Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quan ji* (Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 2005), 7: 186–7.

⁷⁴ Lu Sin' (Lu Xun), *Pravdivaia istoriia Ah-Keia*, ed. Boris Vasil'ev (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929). For Cao's mediation between Vasil'ev and Lu Xun see Charles J. Alber, "Soviet Criticism of Lu Xun," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1971, 26–32. Alber notes that several sources suggest a Russian translation of *Ah-Q* was published in 1927; however, P. E. Skachkov's *Bibliography of China* lists Vasil'ev's 1929 version as the earliest translation. P. E. Skachkov, *Bibliografiia Kitaia* (Moscow: Izd. vostochnoi literatury, 1960), 514.

While Vasil'ev's translation appears not to have made much impact on Soviet readers, the status and influence of Russian literature among Chinese readers in this period was enormous. Seeking an alternative path to modernity that would evade the imperialist associations of the West, many Chinese intellectuals looked to Russian literature, in the words of Mark Gamsa's extensive study, as both a "moral example" and a "manual of practice." The classics of nineteenth century Russian literature were received in China primarily as works of social criticism that championed the "insulted and injured," while the new Soviet literature was welcomed by some as a repository of positive revolutionary values.⁷⁵

Given these various levels of contact, we might observe that Soviet images of China in the 1920s share many typical features with the image of China that emerges from contemporary Chinese critical realist literature, a trend typically connected to the May Fourth Movement.⁷⁶ The anti-imperialism that fuelled the demonstrations of May 4th, 1919 was also a central theme of Soviet internationalism. Both approaches to China deplore the evil influence of Confucian tradition, with its strict hierarchies and veneration of the past: Lu Xun's madman reading Chinese tradition as thinly disguised cannibalism lies in close sympathy with Sergei Tret'iakov's description of China as "this country in which the dead

⁷⁵ Mark Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China: A Moral Example and Manual of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷⁶ The "May Fourth Movement" is a broad term, often used to encompass the New Culture movement that arose in the mid-1910s, the student demonstrations triggered on May 4, 1919 by the granting of Germany's concessions in China to Japan at the Treaty of Versailles, and the literary movement of critical realism that developed out of the confluence of these two processes. For a summary of May Fourth as a literary movement see Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For a recent interpretation of twentieth-century Chinese history that places May Fourth at the centre of the narrative, see Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a critique of the May Fourth paradigm as a holistic explanation of China's entry into "modernity," see Kai-wing Chow, Tze-ki Hon, Hung-yok Ip and Don C. Price, eds., *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

hold the living by the throat like nowhere else.”⁷⁷ Oppressed coolies and rickshaw drivers, an obligatory presence in Soviet images of China, also provide the central characters for seminal Chinese texts of the period, from Lu Xun’s *True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q Zhengzhuan* 阿Q正传, 1921–2) to Lao She’s *Rickshaw/Camel Xiangzi* (*Luotuo Xiangzi* 骆驼祥子, 1937). Indeed, Richard So argues that in this period the term *kuli* 苦力, a loan word whose Chinese form translates literally as “bitter labor,” expanded its referent from migrant hired workers to embrace anyone “Chinese, poor, and without power or agency.”⁷⁸ These are precisely the forms of oppression that Soviet observers sought to highlight in China, particularly with their focus on the coolie work-cry, which was mobilized as a generalized and trans-cultural symbol of oppressed toil (see Chapter Two).

Could it be that the Soviet image of China in fact betrays the influence of May Fourth discourse, refracted into Soviet culture through Ivin and then Tret’iakov? Tret’iakov admits that it was Ivin who first taught him to “see” China; Tret’iakov’s texts in turn became the most prominent attempts to change the image of China held in the mind of the Soviet public.⁷⁹ There may be a line of influence here, but its contours are obscured. It is tempting to imagine Tret’iakov, Ivin, Lu Xun and Li Dazhao locked in conversation somewhere in Beijing some time in 1925, but concrete evidence is scarce. If we attempt to measure influence in terms of translation, meanwhile, it must be acknowledged that the rapidly expanding interest in translating modern Russian literature into Chinese that Gamsa describes

⁷⁷ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Moskva—Pekin (Put’ fil’ma),” *Lef* 3 (1925): 53. “эта страна, в которой мертвые держат живых за горло, как нигде.” In Lu Xun’s first vernacular short story—whose title, “Diary of a Madman,” reveals its author’s familiarity with Russian literature—the titular madman scans the pages of written history only to find, concealed beneath their monotonous assertion of “virtue and morality” (仁义道德), the two characters *chī rén* 吃人: “eat people.” *Lu Xun quan ji* (1981), 1: 425.

⁷⁸ Richard Jean So, “Coolie Democracy: US-China Literary and Political Exchanges, 1925–1955,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2010, 9.

⁷⁹ Sergei Tret’iakov, *Chzhungo*, 2nd expanded edition (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1930), 339.

was not matched by a similar demand for translated Chinese literature among readers of Russian.⁸⁰

This attraction to Russian culture drew significant numbers of Chinese writers and students out of China and into Soviet Russia. Writers including Qu Qiubai, Jiang Kanghu, Lin Keduo and Hu Yuzhi published accounts of journeys to Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸¹ Chinese students travelled to Moscow in even greater numbers, to study at the Communist University for the Workers of the East and, later, the Sun Yat-sen University for the Workers of China. Here they learned Russian, took Russian names, and had affairs with Russian women. They also contributed to many of the texts that are discussed in this study: Chinese students advised on stage decorations for Tret'iakov's play *Roar, China*, and offered up their life-stories for Tret'iakov's "bio-interview," *Den Shi-khua*; they translated slogans for the ballet *The Red Poppy*, and helped the composer Reinhold Glière to form his sense of Chinese music.⁸² All this is part of a complex and long-standing historical experience that Elizabeth McGuire calls the "Sino-Soviet romance."⁸³

What we begin to sense through these connections and interactions is the hidden and overt presence of Chinese intermediaries, who stand behind these Soviet images of China.

⁸⁰ See Gamsa, *Reading of Russian Literature*, as well as his earlier volume, *The Chinese Translation of Russian Literature: Three Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁸¹ Qu Qiubai, "E xiang ji cheng" [Journey to the Land of Hunger] and "Chi du xin shi" [A History of the Heart in the Red Capital], first published 1920–22, in *E xiang ji cheng chi du xin shi luan tan duo yu de hua* (Changsha: Yue lu shu she, 2000); Jiang Kanghu, *Xin E you ji* [Travels in the New Russia] (Shanghai: Shang wu, 1923); Lin Keduo, *Sulian wen jian lu* [A Record of Things Seen and Heard in the Soviet Union] (Shanghai: Guang hua shu ju, 1932); Hu Yuzhi, *Mosike yin xiang ji* [Impressions of Moscow] (Shanghai, Xin sheng ming shu ju, 1931).

⁸² On *Roar, China!* and *The Red Poppy*, see Chapter Four; on *Den Shi-khua*, see Chapter Five. The requesting of translations for the ballet from KUTV students is attested in RGALI f. 648 op. 2 ed. khr. 541 l. 92. Glière recalls: "My work on the ballet *The Red Poppy*, based on a story from Chinese life, received considerable assistance from my meetings with Chinese students studying at the Communist University for the Workers of the East, where for several years I directed choral groups." Reinhold Glière, "Narod – velikii uchitel'," in Glière, *Stat'i, vospominaniia, materialy* (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1965), 1: 298.

⁸³ Elizabeth McGuire, *The Sino-Soviet Romance: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution*, forthcoming book manuscript.

Their contribution is sometimes openly acknowledged—Tret'iakov, for example, admits at several moments in his sketches that his Chinese students helped him to understand what was really happening in Beijing. Elsewhere, Chinese mediation lingers as a suggested or unacknowledged presence. In any case, the representational balance of power is such that we cannot access any possible Chinese original directly; everything is filtered through an authoritative Russian translation.

The most compelling exploration of this dynamic will be found in the discussion of Sergei Tret'iakov's "bio-interview" *Den Shi-khua*, which closes this dissertation's final chapter. Tret'iakov presents this long, detailed text as the authentic life story of "Den Shi-khua" (Deng Shihua), one of his former students from Beijing. Den purportedly relayed his autobiography in a series of interviews over six months in Moscow, and Tret'iakov then shaped this "factual material" into a coherent Russian narrative. Here we have what appears to be a productive dialogue between the most prominent Soviet producer of China images and a Chinese "native informant" who promises factual access to Chinese reality. Yet Tret'iakov's text ultimately represents a translation without an original. How are we to access Den's true voice, when we are told that he spoke Russian with difficulty and often resorted to sketches to express his meaning, yet the narrative of his life proceeds in smooth literary Russian?

The complex power dynamic and open-ended conclusion of *Den Shi-khua* expresses both the Soviet desire to shape the narrative of the Chinese revolution, and the limitations that Soviet representational authority encountered. Although *Den Shi-khua* gestures towards the standard shape of a Communist *Bildungsroman*, Tret'iakov's factual approach refuses to conceal that fact that Den ultimately remained committed to the Guomindang, and did not join the Communists. As Roy Chan points out, other Soviet representations of China often prefer to obscure the important fact that the radical Chinese response to modernity was

primarily nationalist, not internationalist, in character.⁸⁴ The New Culture and May Fourth movements sought to use the imported foreign form of literary realism to enact a national revival, to compensate for the perceived failure of the political revolution.⁸⁵ Soviet internationalist aesthetics, in the 1920s at least, produced images of China as vivid, urgent microcosms of a scientifically determined process of world revolution. (As Soviet culture became more nationally focused in the 1930s, the image of China changed, as we shall see in the Epilogue.) The material from Chinese reality on which these discourses choose to focus may be similar, but the parameters of the world they imagine are quite different. The texts considered below seek to incorporate China into a total image of the world both revealed by and exclusively available to the privileged Soviet perspective.

IV. Genre and Media, Documentary and Myth

The question of authority is not limited to analytical perspective and instinctive sympathy. At issue is also the authority of particular generic modes and media forms to represent the world in a correct, revolutionary manner. The urgency of representing China anew in the 1920s means that these two contests for authority coincide. In the newly mediatized environment described by Fore, fiction and the travel narrative compete with photography and film, classical ballet stakes its claims against Meyerholdian biodynamics, and the battleground in each case is “China.”

For this reason, this study is structured around different generic and media forms, rather than individual authors or strict chronology. The search for an internationalist aesthetics led its participants to move between genres and even invent new ones, as they tried to overcome the flaws in Soviet knowledge of China. Take this study’s most prominent author, Sergei Tret’iakov. “Each epoch,” Tret’iakov declared, “must produce and master

⁸⁴ Roy Chan, “Broken Tongues: Race, Sacrifice, and Geopolitics in the Far East in Vsevolod Ivanov’s *Bronepoezd No. 14–69*,” *Sibirica*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 31, 38, 44–5.

⁸⁵ Anderson, *Limits of Realism*, 3.

aesthetic techniques that are adequate to its specific historical moment.”⁸⁶ Tret’iakov’s search for aesthetic techniques adequate to the new era received vital impetus from his involvement in China: beginning with poetry, Tret’iakov’s China texts move into sketch-prose, embrace drama and the screenplay, and end with biography. Boris Pilniak shows similar variation in his approach to “China” as a theme, beginning in impenetrable ornamentalism and progressing through subjective journo-travelogue to end, too, with biography. One of the first Soviet expedition films, 1925’s *The Great Flight*, charted a journey to China. *The Red Poppy* (premiered 1927), one of the earliest attempts to create a truly revolutionary ballet on a contemporary theme, is set in China. China was at the centre of the great search for new forms that characterized early Soviet culture.

Chapter One deals primarily with fiction about the Civil War, exploring the ambiguous symbolic role played by the figure of the Chinese Red partisan: a migrant soldier equally capable of standing for internationalist solidarity or foreign threat. Chapter Two is devoted to reportage and travel writing, focused around a comparison between the anti-exotic sketches of Sergei Tret’iakov and Boris Pil’niak’s “Chinese Story,” which flits fragmentarily between documentary, diary, and fiction. Chapter Three considers the internationalist gaze as expressed in cinema, incorporating fiction film but centring on two prominent documentary films on 1920s China: *The Great Flight* (*Velikii perelet*, 1925) and *Shanghai Document* (*Shankhaiskii dokument*, 1928). Chapter Four watches China being performed on the Soviet stage of the 1920s, and finds the documentary urge coexisting with motifs of revolutionary sacrifice in two seemingly very different productions: the Meyerhold Theater’s *Roar, China!* (*Rychi, Kitai!*, 1926) and the Bolshoi ballet *The Red Poppy* (*Krasnyi mak*, 1927). Lastly, Chapter Five explores the biographical form in fiction and the literature of fact, concluding with a reading of Tret’iakov’s “bio-interview,” *Den Shi-khua*, within the confessional context

⁸⁶ Quoted in Fore, “‘All the Graphs’,” 56.

of Soviet political culture. Such an arrangement makes clear to what extent the vital contests of early Soviet culture—contests about the correct way to represent the world for a revolutionary society— were played out over the issue of China. In each chapter, furthermore, a tension and contradiction can be sensed between two trends, which might be dubbed the documentary and mythical tendencies.

The existence of a “documentary moment” in early Soviet culture has been confirmed in recent studies by Elizabeth Papazian and Devin Fore.⁸⁷ Both focus heavily of Tret’iakov as a key figure in this documentary moment, though neither explicitly consider why it might have been Tret’iakov’s trip to Beijing in 1924–5 that initiated his documentary practice and “factographical” experiments. In cinema, Widdis notes that one of the pioneers of the Soviet “expedition film,” Vladimir Shneiderov, followed his first film, *Around Uzbekistan*, with *The Great Flight*, a documentary account of an aviation expedition to China.⁸⁸ Important debates over representation, exoticism, and the liberatory possibilities of ethnography receive their early focus in images of contemporary China. In writing, film, and theater, there is a striking congruence between the urge towards documentary and the urge to “see” China anew.

Borrowing a term from the theorist of documentary film Bill Nichols, we might consider this documentary mode a “discourse of sobriety,” under which the superficial exotic—including the neo-exotic of revolutionary China as chaotic adventure space—gives way to calm sociological truth. A. Adjarov begins one of his “Sketches of Contemporary China,” published in *Vecherniaia Moskva (Evening Moscow)* in 1925, with a plea to replace decoration with substance:

The procession of exotic generals’ names, the crackle of the machine gun, the clanging of spurs, the rustle of English pounds and American dollars – all this is the

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Astrid Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: the Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009); Fore, “‘All the Graphs’.”

⁸⁸ Widdis, *Visions*, 112.

shiny tinsel of Chinese events that fills the newspaper columns. But it is not this tinsel that imbues the history of this genuine Chinese Renaissance with content. All that is but tomorrow's dust of history. A new China has arisen to political agency: not "gold," but red.⁸⁹

This discourse of sobriety was intended to replace older knowledge systems that were tainted by their imperial associations. As Widdis notes, debates on ethnography in the later 1920s "focused on the need to discover a mode of objective representation that would liberate ethnography from the complex heritage of Tsarist colonialism."⁹⁰ In the 1920s, Widdis argues, "knowledge was consistently articulated as the means of liberating the nation from repressive Imperial structures and building an equal society. [...] 'Authentic' ethnographic detail was presented as a prerequisite for the genuine equality of the peoples."⁹¹ Widdis is speaking here of ethnographic studies of peoples within the Soviet Union; but her analysis also fits the drive to produce new, "authentic" knowledge of China. The "sober" tools of the ethnographic gaze and the documentary camera eye were put forward as the best media for transmitting that truth.

Other texts, however, employ what Nichols calls "intoxicated" discourse, a discourse of inspiration and possession. These largely fictional texts present the Chinese revolution as a sacred process of cleansing violence and blood sacrifice, set in a world defined by cruelty, brutality, and bravery. To place these two discourses in opposition, however, is to ignore the degree to which they interpenetrate one another. As we saw in Tret'iakov's exhortation to "Love China," the documentary discourse of sobriety is never entirely free from the inspirational, intoxicating urges that mark the discourse of rapture.

⁸⁹ A. Adzharov, "Ocherki sovremennogo Kitaia. 4. Kitaiskie rabochie," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, November 24, 1925. "Вереница генеральских экзотических имен, треск пулеметов, бряцание шпор, шелест английских фунтов и американских долларов — все это мишура китайских событий, наполняющая столбцы газет. Не но это мишура наполнит содержанием историю подлинного китайского возрождения. Все это — лишь завтрашняя пыль истории. Для политического творчества поднялся новый Китай: красный, вместо «золотого»."

⁹⁰ Widdis, *Visions*, 113.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

Indeed we might sense here a tension at the heart of the Soviet project, one that Peter Holquist identifies as a conflation of the scientific and the aesthetic in Soviet society's self-conceptions.⁹² Holquist is perhaps following the lead of Michel Foucault, who asks in his *History of Madness*: "What figure of science, however coherent or tight it might be, does not allow more or less obscure forms of practical, moral or mythological consciousness to gravitate around it?"⁹³ Soviet society aspired to a new, scientific form of total knowledge, but that knowledge appeared encircled by vivid and compelling myths about the bright future, utopia, and the violence of the struggle towards its attainment. These revolutionary myths borrowed from older mythical forms, primarily religious, but reshaped them into foundational narratives for the new society: thus it is perhaps better to call this impulse in Soviet culture not mythological, but rather mythopoetic. Offering a key contribution to this mythopoetic perspective on Soviet culture, Katerina Clark reads the Socialist Realist novel as a ritual enactment through biography of the eschatological narrative of history offered by Marxist-Leninist theory. Central to this ritual, Clark notes, is the motif of sacrifice; and as we shall see, it is self-sacrifice, accompanied usually by intense, visceral levels of violence, that dominates the mythical shape of these China images.⁹⁴

Documentary and myth are not mutually exclusive; rather, the combination of both—sober knowledge of Marxist truth, and reverent commitment to the new terms of the revolutionary sacred—are what guarantee the power of the Soviet perspective. This point will be illustrated most vividly in Chapter Four, where the documentary and mythical impulses collide onstage. Tret'iakov's agitational "docu-drama" *Roar, China!* processed a newspaper

⁹² Peter Holquist, "State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism," in *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 22.

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006), 163.

⁹⁴ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 177–9.

event into a paradigmatic myth of the Chinese masses achieving consciousness through self-sacrifice. Likewise, the collective that staged *The Red Poppy* at the Bolshoi Theatre evoked a documentary aesthetic while employing the key tropes of revolutionary sacralisation: self-sacrifice and the repayment of unjust with just violence. In this repeated trope of violent sacrifice—glimpsed even in the documentary film *Shanghai Document*—we see the mythical image of Russia’s revolution projected, proprietorially, onto its Chinese sibling.

V. China in the Russian Cultural Imagination

These new images of China did not emerge into a vacuum. Over two centuries of Sino-Russian cultural contact had produced a significant canon of China images in Russian culture, sometimes distinguished from and sometimes blending into a generalized “Asia.” These images of China have received considerable attention in recent scholarship, in the wake of a broadly postcolonial turn in Russian studies since the mid-1990s and an increased interest in Russia’s relation to “the East.” Book-length studies by Aleksandr Lukin (*The Bear Watches the Dragon*) and Susanna Lim (*China and Japan in the Russian Cultural Imagination*), complemented by various monographs, articles, chapters and dissertations, have attempted to trace the development of the Russian image of China.⁹⁵ Here I will draw on their findings to provide a pre-history to my own study, and seek to elucidate some striking patterns that either endure or expire with the advent of Soviet society.

⁹⁵ Susanna Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685-1922: to the Ends of the Orient* (London : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013); Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon: Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations since the Eighteenth Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003). See also Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Barbara Widenor Maggs, *Russia and “le rêve chinois”: China in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1984); Dany Savelli, “L'asiatisme dans la littérature et la pensée russes de la fin du XIXème au début du XXème siècle (K. Leont'ev - V. Solov'ev - V. Brjusov - A. Blok - A. Belyj - B. Pil'njak),” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Lille, 1994; David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001); Schimmelpenninck, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

European culture, broadly speaking, has for centuries positioned China as one of its paradigmatic others, a parallel yet alien civilization on the opposite side of the globe. Geographical distance offers here an effective metaphor for cultural difference, note the editors of the recent volume *Sinographies*: “distance corresponds via metaphor to a felt difference, so that discussion of China take place in the mode of the *faraway* (as Roland Barthes says of his invented Japan), with the distance serving to explain the difference, and vice versa.”⁹⁶ Geography’s ideological signification changes, however, when we reach Russia, a geopolitical space that, as Mark Bassin has argued, troubles and disrupts the neat separation of Europe and Asia.⁹⁷ This confluence of geography and ideology leads us immediately to the crucial difference between Russian and Western images of China. “China” from a Russian perspective is both distant *and* adjacent, both “distant China” (*dalekii Kitai*) *and* a neighbouring country with a common border stretching for several thousand kilometres. Echoing this geographical ambiguity, Russian images of China display over time a complex shuttling between the poles of difference and similarity, distance and proximity, in a manner that distinguishes them from their Western counterparts. This tension shapes the discourse of the 1920s, which proclaims revolutionary commensurability despite the abiding presence of cultural difference. It runs, however, through several centuries of contact.

The earliest and least documented period of Sino-Russian contact comes with the almost simultaneous conquest of Rus’ and Jin-Dynasty China by the Mongols, and their

⁹⁶ Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy and Steven G. Yao, “Sinographies: An Introduction,” in Hayot, Saussy and Yao, eds, *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), viii.

⁹⁷ Mark Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, 1 (Spring, 1991): 1–17.

incorporation into the Mongol Empire.⁹⁸ Though direct contact between these distant parts of the Mongol domain appears to have been limited, this moment of Eurasian imperial union set a precedent: it was across the Eurasian steppes, and not by sea, that Russia was to develop its contacts with China.⁹⁹ Indeed, the Sinologist A. S. Martynov identifies a geo-economic commensurability between Russia and China as the “two greatest centers of agriculture” on the Eurasian continent, connected and divided, “like the two bowls of a scale,” by a “long balance beam: the endless belt of Eurasian steppes and deserts, stretching from the Carpathians to the Great Wall of China.”¹⁰⁰ From a geographically determinist perspective, this “battle between field and steppe,” between settled agriculture and nomadic invasion, shaped political and economic development—contributing, some historians contend, to the dominance of autocracy in both states.¹⁰¹

Although Mikhail Fyodorovich, the first Romanov tsar, sent an (unsuccessful) envoy to China as early as 1618, modern Russo-Chinese political relations took shape in the late seventeenth century, when the establishment of Cossack fortresses on the Amur river provoked armed reaction from Kangxi’s Qing Empire.¹⁰² In 1685 Qing forces destroyed the fortress at Albazin, taking some 50 Russians back to China as prisoners. Emperor Kangxi made them bannermen, and granted them the right to maintain their Orthodox religion. The

⁹⁸ The Jin capital at Kaifeng fell to the Mongols in 1234; Mongol forces reached Riazan’ in 1237, and took Kiev in 1240. Nikolai Samoilov, “Rossiia i Kitai,” in *Rossiia i Vostok*, eds S. Ivanov and B. Mel’nichenko (St Petersburg: Izd-vo S.-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 2000), 222–23.

⁹⁹ Samoilov notes that some Chinese soldiers accompanied Batu Khan on his campaign against Rus’, while the prominent early Russian Sinologist Father Paladii (Petr Ivanovich Kafarov) identified a regiment composed of transported Russians in 14th-century Beijing. Samoilov, “Rossiia i Kitai,” 223; Otets Paladii (P. Kafarov), “Russkoe poselenie v Kitae v pervoi polovine XIV veka,” in *Kitai u russkikh pisatelei*, ed. A. D. Romanenko (Moscow: Algoritm, 2008), 62–65.

¹⁰⁰ A. S. Martynov, “Rossiia i Kitai: skhodstvo naslediiia — obshchnost’ sud’by,” *Zvezda* 10 (1995): 168. Quoted in Samoilov, “Rossiia i Kitai,” 217.

¹⁰¹ Samoilov, “Rossiia i Kitai,” 217–20.

¹⁰² Lim, *China and Japan*, 19–21.

Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, established in 1715 to tend to the spiritual needs of the *Albazintsy* and their descendents, persisted into the twentieth century, serving as an informal embassy and the foundational point for Russian sinology.¹⁰³ The border between the Russian and Chinese empires, meanwhile, was fixed for the first (but not last) time at the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689—the first such treaty between China and a European power.¹⁰⁴

Barbara Maggs identifies a distinctive ambiguity in the images of China available to Russians in the eighteenth century. Accounts written by Russians engaged in religious, political and economic missions to China display an unflattering negativity.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, large numbers of Western European works praising Chinese civilization found their way into Russian, building on accounts of the Qing Empire disseminated by Jesuit missionaries.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the most influential were the writings of Voltaire, who held up China as a positive example of a rational polity ruled by a benevolent monarch: a perspective with obvious relevance to the Romanov dynasty and the people living under them.¹⁰⁷ Thus Russia, facing Europe, participated in *le rêve chinois* that captivated French society of the time, while Russia's direct contacts with its East Asian neighbour produced a more critical perspective.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ On the founding of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing, see Eric Widmer, *The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking during the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), esp. 1–51. The Mission's role in the development of Russian Sinology is outlined in Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 181–91.

¹⁰⁴ R. K. I. Quedstedt, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History* (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin Inc., 1984), 40–41.

¹⁰⁵ Maggs, *Russia and "le rêve chinois,"* 5.

¹⁰⁶ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 132–4.

¹⁰⁷ Maggs, *Russia and "le rêve chinois,"* 127–8. Maggs does note, however, that Russian readers were also exposed to the writings of Voltaire's contemporaries, Montesquieu and Rousseau, both of whom were far less positive about China as a political model. For more on Enlightenment perspectives on China, see Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 81–100. Russian views are almost entirely absent from Spence's overview of "Western sightings of China," which draws a firm line between Russia and the West.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Maggs finds here an illustration of a “‘geographic’ theory of images” that she ascribes to Voltaire: images of neighbouring, rival countries are more typically critical, while images of distant, unreal places can embrace admiration without risk.¹⁰⁹ Russia’s idiosyncratic position, looking culturally towards Europe while abutting China geographically, produces a complex image distinct from its European counterparts.

In the nineteenth century, as European economic designs on China increased, the prevailing European stereotype of China shifted. The Jesuits’ image of an enlightened monarchy was replaced with a stagnant despotism outside history, an attitude encapsulated in Johann Gottfried Herder’s description of China as “an embalmed mummy wrapped in silk.”¹¹⁰ Filtered through Russia’s idiosyncratic position, Petr Chaadaev and Vissarion Belinskii used Chinese stagnation—*kitaishchina*—as an Asiatic mirror image for the despotism and historical belatedness they perceived in Tsarist Russia.¹¹¹ Flipping this equation in search of a more positive vision of Russia’s future, Alexander Herzen argued that a Chinese form of stagnation had, in the wake of 1848, enveloped western Europe.¹¹² In this formulation, which was to be echoed by the Eurasianists in the early twentieth century, Russia stood as a young and vibrant cultural force between the two stagnant poles of Europe and China.

Representations of China increased in intensity and significance in the later part of the nineteenth century, as Russian imperial expansion, its southern movement checked by the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁰ Lim, *China and Japan*, 62.

¹¹¹ Lim, *China and Japan*, 63–4.

¹¹² Ibid., 68–73; David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2010), 225–8.

Crimean War, turned towards Central Asia and then the Far East.¹¹³ As Susanna Lim cogently argues, China at the turn of the twentieth century fuelled, in the Russian imagination, both fantasies of power and anxieties over powerlessness.¹¹⁴ On the one hand, imperial dreams of Russia's Pacific destiny reached their peak in the reign of Nicholas II. The most prominent political Asianist, Prince Esper Ukhtmoskii, argued that Russia and Asia already belonged to each other, in a kind of inevitable organic union that equated to the imperial rule of the latter by the former:

Asia—we have always belonged to it. [...] Through us the Orient has gradually arrived at a consciousness of itself, at a superior life... We have nothing to conquer. All these peoples of various races feel themselves drawn to us, and are ours, by blood, by tradition, and by ideas. [...] This great and mysterious Orient is ready to become ours.¹¹⁵

These dreams, borne east along the tracks of the newly constructed trans-Siberian railroad, were dashed by Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5).

Even before that defeat, however, the Russian expansion into East Asia had provoked anxieties over the role the once stagnant, now modernizing nations of China and Japan might play in world history. These anxieties receive their most famous expression in the writings of the religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev. In the essay "China and Europe" ("Kitai i Evropa," 1890), Solov'ev declared that China's insistence on cultural uniqueness, alongside its newfound attraction to the technological progress of the profane West, constituted a significant obstacle to the final victory of universal Christianity (*vseedinstvo*).¹¹⁶ The

¹¹³ On late imperial ideological attitudes towards the Far East, see Bassin, *Imperial Visions*; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Toward the Rising Sun*; Sun Zhengqing, *Kitaiskaia politika Rossii v russkoi publitsistike kontsa XIX – nachala XXvv.: "zheltaia opasnost'" i "osobaia missiia" Rossii na Vostoke* (Moscow: Russkaia derevnia, 2005).

¹¹⁴ Lim, *China and Japan*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Vladimir Solov'ev, "Kitai i Evropa," in S. M. Solov'ev and E. Radlov, eds., *Sobranie sochinenii Vladimira Solov'eva*, 10 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1911-1914; reprint edition with two additional volumes, Brussels, 1966-1970), 6:93–150. For a detailed reading of Solov'ev's essay, see Susanna Soojung

outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 led Solov'ev to pen the poem "Pan-Mongolism" ("Pan-Mongolizm," 1894), which anticipates an apocalypse carried to Russia by the risen peoples of the Far East.

This vision of a new Mongol conquest is developed in "A Short Tale of Antichrist" ("Kratkaia povest' ob antikhriste") the concluding section of *Three Conversations (Tri razgovora*, 1900). Solov'ev forecasts a future invasion of Russia and Europe by a risen Chinese army, trained and led by the Japanese under the banner of Pan-Mongolism: a movement created in imitation of such European movements as Pan-Hellenism and Pan-Slavism, but turned against European dominance. The same year that Solov'ev's "Tale" was published, the anti-foreign Yihetuan Movement, or Boxer Uprising, broke out in China. Solov'ev read in these convulsions a vindication of his predictions, declaring: "The knowledge of the events of May and June in China could only have been obtained by means of clairvoyance."¹¹⁷ For Solov'ev, a China rising from historical stagnation marked the commencement of the apocalypse.

Solov'ev's anxiety about the threat from the Far East echoes through Silver Age literature. Again, however, the axis shifts from difference to similarity: the traces of Yellow Peril anxiety in Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg* posit a threatening Asiatic presence already within Russia, a part of Russian identity. "What was unique about the Silver Age was its identification of the coming apocalypse as something internal rather than coming from abroad," argues David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye. "To Bely and his contemporaries, the other, whether as Mongol or Scythian, was even more distinctly part of Russia's exotic

Lim, "Between Spiritual Self and Other: Vladimir Solov'ev and the Question of East Asia," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 332–35.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Lim, "Between Spiritual Self and Other," 339.

self.”¹¹⁸ Such attitudes are vividly summarized by this excerpt from the diary of Aleksandr Blok in 1911:

China is already among us. Irredeemably, impetuously, the purple blood of the Aryans is becoming yellow blood [...] there remains only one last small act to play – the visible conquest of Europe. This will be achieved without noise and without apparent brutality[.]¹¹⁹

An external threat in Solov’ev, Blok’s China is internalized, a part of the metaphorical racial body.

A more positive turn towards Asiatic identity distinguishes the pronouncements of the group known as the Eurasianists, which formed in exile in the 1920s. However, Nikolai Trubetskoi, one of the movement’s founders, excluded China from his religiously unified Eurasian cultural space. The Chinese religious mentality, he declared, was “absolutely alien” to the Slavo-Turanian identity he sought to define.¹²⁰ A more inclusive vision of pan-Asian identity can be found in the pronouncements of the Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov. Vividly combining the Eurasianist perspective on geography and history with the internationalist rhetoric of the recently victorious Bolshevik Revolution, Khlebnikov wrote a series of manifestos in 1918 calling for “Asiaunion” and an “Indo-Russian Union”:

We proclaim ourselves the first Asiatics, aware of our insular unity.
May the citizens of our island pass from the Yellow Sea to the Baltic, from the White Sea to the Indian Ocean, without ever encountering a frontier. [...]
We summon Russia to immediate unification with young China for the education of the world’s great interior, Asia, the greater Switzerland.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 223. For an overview of this motif in the work of Andrei Belyi and Dmitri Merezhkovskii, see Georges Nivat, “Du ‘Panmongolisme’ au ‘Mouvement Eurasien’: Histoire d’un theme littéraire,” *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 7, no. 3 (1966): 460–478.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” 469–70.

¹²⁰ Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetzkoy, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan and Other Essays on Russia's Identity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1991), 131.

¹²¹ Velimir Khlebnikov, “An Indo-Russian Union,” in Khlebnikov, *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 1, *Letters and Theoretical Writings*, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 341–2. Harsha Ram significantly alters the translation of the last sentence from the same manuscript in RGALI, reading “южным” (“southern”) where Schmidt clearly reads

Khlebnikov's manifestos, Harsha Ram argues, stand at the intersection of imperial ambitions, Pan-Mongolist visions of history, and the emergence of Leninist internationalism. Converting Solov'ev's fears into historical destiny and celebrating the Russian turn to Asia as Russia made Asiatic, the poet envisions in an ecstatic mode the contours of what became the internationalist political project for extending the Russian Revolution over Eurasia.¹²²

Khlebnikov thus serves as a transitional figure, demonstrating how existing ideologies of empire and geographical identity endure in revitalized form through the apparent temporal rift of 1917. Can such long-standing traditions of thought and representation be simply eradicated by the Revolution, by the proclaimed inauguration of a new episteme and new aesthetics? Or do they, in certain ways and to certain extents, remain? Ukhtomskii's interest in "blood" and "mystery" would be rejected by Tret'iakov as the worst kind of mystification. Yet the concept of an East awakened to consciousness by Russia, and progressing inevitably towards union with a Russia-centred political power, is not so far from the image of China presented by the writers considered below.

A central question that this study must pose, even if it cannot be answered definitively, is this: how do we understand these continuities between the Imperial and Soviet periods? It seems simplistic to say that the Soviets simply dusted off and continued Ukhtomskii's project for a Russia-dominated Asia, or positioned themselves as the latest inheritors of the Empire of Genghis Khan. And yet, the similarities demand our attention. For the retention and rebranding of existing images of China and East Asia both facilitated, and ultimately hindered, the development of an internationalist aesthetics.

“ЮНЫМ” (“young”): “We appeal to Russia to unite immediately with southern China in order to constitute Asia as a universal rearguard, a greater Switzerland.” Harsha Ram, “The Poetics of Eurasia: Velimir Khlebnikov Between Empire and Revolution,” *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Madhavan K. Palat (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 228.

¹²² Ram, “The Poetics of Eurasia,” 216.

Chapter One

Violent Strangers and Foreigner Talk: The Image of the Chinese Migrant in Revolutionary Russia

“I am Chinese, nobody understands me.”
(Я китаец, никто меня не понимает.)¹²³
Osip Mandelstam, 4th Prose

Before we travel with our Soviet observers to revolutionary China, this preliminary chapter explores the images of Chinese migrants within Soviet Russia that were produced in 1920s literature. The key figure here is the Chinese Red partisan, whose ubiquity testifies to the significant number of Chinese migrants that did in fact fight in the Russian Civil War. The literary Chinese partisan represents more than a historical trend, however; his combination of revolutionary affiliation and ethnic strangeness offers a testing ground for the power of internationalist sentiment to overcome cultural boundaries. These texts thus present both an introduction and a challenge to internationalist aesthetics. The grotesque appearances, estranged language, and shocking violence we find below constitute aesthetic effects that, in different hands, can both affirm and undermine internationalist sympathy.

I. Chinese Migrants as Historical Reality and Grotesque Image

Even before Comintern policy and diplomatic recognition provided the impetus for an outburst of China images in the mid-1920s, Chinese migrant workers had become a visible presence in Russian society in an unprecedented manner over the previous decade. Chinese immigration into Russian territory, overwhelmingly male in composition, was concentrated from the mid-nineteenth century in the Priamur and Primor'e regions, which had been ceded from Chinese control by the treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860).¹²⁴ After the Qing government loosened restrictions on migration into Manchuria in 1878, an estimated 200,000

¹²³ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Chetvertaia proza,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 2, *proza* (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971), 183.

¹²⁴ On the background to and negotiation of the Aigun and Peking treaties, see R. K. I. Quedsted, *The Expansion of Russia in East Asia, 1857-1860* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1968); Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions*, chapter 4.

Chinese migrants entered the Russian Far East between 1878 and 1908.¹²⁵ At the turn of the century, territorial expansion into China and the enhanced possibilities of movement provided by the Trans-Siberian, China Eastern and Amur railways raised racialized fears of a demographic invasion by the “yellow” peoples of China and Korea, prompting exclusionary policies on labour and land leasing.¹²⁶ Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, however, the demand within Russia for cheap labour greatly increased, and much of this demand was satisfied by Chinese workers. Russian figures suggest that some 160,000 Chinese workers entered the Russian Empire between January 1915 and April 1917, though other estimates are much higher.¹²⁷ This marked the first time that Chinese workers migrated in significant numbers into European Russia, where their labour was primarily needed.

With the collapse of the Russian economy following the revolution and civil war, and with the new administration unable to repatriate fully this migrant population, as of mid-1921 there were some 90,000 Chinese without permanent employment in the European part of Russia, and around 30,000 in the Red-controlled regions of Siberia.¹²⁸ Whether through simple need or genuine attraction to Bolshevik ideology—which did after all promise both the empowerment of workers and the rejection of trans-national prejudice—many Chinese migrants joined the Red Army and Red partisans. Various estimates suggest that between 30,000 and 70,000 Chinese fought on the side of the Reds in the Civil War.¹²⁹ Perhaps more from novelty than numbers, the Chinese Red partisan became something of a stock literary

¹²⁵ John Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 71. By contrast, Stephan estimates that some 243,000 peasants migrated into the Russian Far East from other regions in the Russian Empire between 1882 and 1907. (*Ibid.*, 65.)

¹²⁶ For a discussion of how race became an element in Russian Imperial policy in the Far East at this time, see Chia Yin Hsu, “A Tale of Two Railroads: ‘Yellow Labor,’ Agrarian Colonization, and the Making of Russianness at the Far Eastern Frontier, 1890s–1910s,” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2006): 217–53.

¹²⁷ A. G. Larin, *Kitaitsy v Rossii vchera i segodniia* (Moscow: Muravei, 2003), 68.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

figure in Civil War literature, appearing most famously in Vsevolod Ivanov's 1922 tale *Armoured Train 14-69* (*Bronepoezd No. 14-69*) and the highly popular 1927 stage adaptation. Elsewhere, Chinese migrants were most conspicuous in the role of laundry workers in Moscow and other urban cities. The Chinese laundry worker also entered the Russian literary system, striking an ambiguous posture of comedy and threat in Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 play *Zoika's Apartment* (*Zoikina kvartira*).

We might expect the figure of the Chinese partisan, at least, to offer a positive example of international solidarity and new forms of trans-cultural affiliation. Such an image can indeed be found in Iosif Utkin's 1925 poem, "A friend from the Sungari" ("Sungariiski drug"). Utkin's lyric nostalgically recounts a friendship forged in battle with a Chinese partisan from the Sungari river, which flows through Manchuria and the city of Harbin. In a "turbulent age" (Тревожен век), Utkin's lyric persona has been obliged to wander beyond his accustomed boundaries (мне пришлось скитаться), but this disruption of normalcy has brought him together with a sad-eyed Chinese comrade in defence against "attacks from all around" (круговых атак) on Utkin's homeland.¹³⁰ Fighting together under the banner of an idea, Utkin and his friend from the "distant" Sungari discover a new form of kinship that transcends the ties of blood implied in a visually marked racial difference:

Да,
Никогда нам так не породниться,
Как под единым знаменем идей!
И в ногу шли:
Китаец желтолицый
И бледнолицый иудей.¹³¹

[Yes, / Never could we be brought so close in kinship / As under the united banner of ideas! / And in step there marched: / A yellow-faced Chinese / And a pale-faced Jew.]

¹³⁰ Iosif Utkin, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1966), 67.

¹³¹ Ibid.

This union, however, is only temporary, an act of solidarity in a time of war. Once the danger has passed, Utkin's Chinese friend returns to the Sungari, where he belongs: "Мой друг живет на дальнем берегу, / На дальней Сунгарии – / И это неизбежно" (My friend lives on a distant shore, / On the distant Sungari – / And this is inevitable), the poem remarks in a common-sense register. If war ever comes to the Sungari, they will of course join forces again; but until then, Utkin would not think of inviting his friend to leave his proper home and come to Russia:

Я не скажу ему:
"Сюда, мой друг, скорей!"
Я не скажу,
Прекрасно понимая,
Что родину и матерей
Никто и никогда не забывает!¹³²

[I will not say to him: / "Come here, quickly, my friend!" / I will not say this, / Understanding perfectly / That nobody ever forgets / Their homeland and their mothers.]

This attachment to home, family, and origins is expressed as a self-evident truth. The model of internationalism put forward and celebrated in Utkin's poem has each nation located in its fixed home, a place of roots and belonging, but coming together in mutual defense at times of danger. The friend from the Sungari came to Russia, fought in solidarity, and then went home to his proper place; he did not stay and look for work after the Civil War, as did the Chinese migrants who became a visible part of the social landscape in 1920s Russia.

Utkin's friend, in other words, is not a "stranger" in the same way as these latter migrants, if we accept the definition of a "stranger" given in Georg Simmel's 1908 essay of that name. Simmel characterizes the relationship with "the stranger" through a combination of proximity and distance. The stranger, as Simmel describes him, is not simply a transient wanderer, but rather a "*potential wanderer*;" not simply someone "who comes today and goes

¹³² Ibid., 68.

tomorrow,” but rather “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow.”¹³³ Coming from outside the group and staying within it, he has not belonged to the group from the beginning and the possibility always remains that he will leave. The stranger is physically present, but culturally different, retaining a sense of distance even though close. Those who are absent or entirely imagined do not produce this peculiar combination of proximity and estrangement. There is a key difference, in other words, between the alien who lives in his distant place, “at home,” and the alien who comes to live among “us.”

Simmel’s explanation of what makes a stranger strange employs a gradation of possible degrees of commonality. Relationships, Simmel suggests, are based around certain “common features”: attributes or characteristics that individuals hold in common. But there is a significant difference, Simmel argues, between something that members of a group consider common to them and only to them, and something they consider common also to a wider group, or even to humanity in general. Everyone eats, for example, but only we eat this particular dish. The greater the exclusivity of a common feature, the more the relationship based on that feature will be felt to be necessary and organic. By contrast, the more widespread a common feature within humanity as a whole, the more the relationship’s intensity is diluted: such a relationship could be had with anyone.

In other words, Simmel is saying, the stranger may be similar in many ways, but this similarity is not enough to make us feel a close, “organic” connection with him, because these connections could just as well connect us to anyone else. There is no motivation for a specific connection with the stranger: “The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and

¹³³ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402.

connect us only because they connect a great many people.”¹³⁴ Simmel’s position on the stranger clearly poses serious questions for any concept of international solidarity.

Relationships based on generalizable common features, he implies, will always retain a degree of abstraction and coolness. By implication, the more specific the common features that can be found, the closer the relationship will be.

Simmel does not specifically invoke the category of “ethnicity” in his essay, though he gestures towards it when he notes that the Jews in Europe are the classical model for the kind of stranger he is talking about. But Simmel’s scheme of commonalities provides a logic for understanding ethnic identity as determined by relative degrees of commonality and difference. When Chinese figures appear in early Soviet literature, they do so largely as representatives of an ethnicity. These individual representatives of the Chinese ethnicity are sufficiently tied to their ethnic identity that it can often stand in for or entirely replace their individual names (which in turn essentially function as indicators of ethnic identity). Colleen Lye deploys the concept of “racial form” to describe how stereotypes of Asian economic efficiency in American culture at the turn of the twentieth century express cultural anxieties about loss of Anglo-Saxon frontier identity and the rise of industrial capitalism.¹³⁵ Adapting this perspective, we might ask: what did “Chineseness” mean, as an “ethnic form,” in these early Soviet images of Chinese migrants? What cultural transformations and anxieties are refracted symbolically through the image of the ethnically Chinese migrant in literature?

This chapter will argue that the Chinese stranger signifies a world in turmoil; he is one of many markers in this period that suggest a social order turned upside down, its borders breached and its hierarchies disrupted, in a manner that slides along the scale of value from positive to negative. More explicitly, we might say that Chinese migrants come to be used as

¹³⁴ Ibid., 406.

¹³⁵ Colleen Lye, *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

symbolic figures that explore the problems of ethnic difference and its implications for the post-revolutionary world. The difference and strangeness of the Chinese in revolutionary Russia suggest challenges to established identities that can be interpreted as liberatory or destructive, two sides of the same historical coin.

Chinese difference is expressed in these images primarily through appearance and language, both of which are subject to distortions that might summarily be described as grotesque.¹³⁶ The grotesque combines elements whose proper place might be considered to be in separate spheres: animal and human, animate and inanimate, the comic and the horrific, laughter and disgust. This dynamic of mutual invasion by opposing spheres is the opposite of purity, operating in a zone of violent, unsettling ambivalence. Philip Thomson defines it as “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response,” meaning both the work of art and the response it provokes are characterized by this unresolvable ambivalence.¹³⁷ This dynamic of confusion, Thomson suggests, may explain why “the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation.”¹³⁸ It is not hard to see in post-revolutionary Russia just such a society and an era. Furthermore, this dynamic of juxtaposition and contradiction mirrors the movement of the stranger from his own sphere into the sphere in which he is now present as a strange element. Like an animal head on a human body, he is out of place, and the effect is jarring. In

¹³⁶ The concept of the grotesque has its origins in the sixteenth-century rediscovery of Roman murals that depicted abnormal, unfeasible combinations of plant, animal, human and inanimate forms. The murals were discovered underground, in excavations that resembled caves, or, in Italian, *grotte*—hence *grottesco*, *la grottesca*. Over the following centuries, the term came to be applied to an aesthetic that, in the words of John Ruskin, is “composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful.” See Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), 12–13; John Ruskin, “Grotesque Renaissance,” in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (New York: George Brazillier, 1963), 207.

¹³⁷ Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 27.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 11.

this sense the Chinese stranger carries the ideological load of working out symbolically the post-revolutionary period's sense of its own grotesque nature.

The aesthetic of the grotesque is usually linked primarily to the human body and physical form, and examples of grotesque appearance indeed abound in early Soviet images of Chinese migrants, as we shall see. Language, however, is also a primary site of estrangement, and the speech of the literary Chinese migrant can be seen as producing grotesque effects through its distortions of linguistic purity and parodic reductions of revolutionary discourse. Language was well prepared as a site of Chinese difference: the Russian phrase “Chinese writing” (*kitaiskaia gramota*), as K. F. Pchelintseva notes, had long been used in colloquial speech to denote incomprehensibility.¹³⁹ Language was also a focal point for some of the more utopian aspirations of early Soviet culture, which imagined socialist internationalism as a creed that could overcome linguistic difference with the power of its message. According to Daniel Collins, early Soviet ideology adapted the spiritual model of the Pentecost to represent revolutionary enthusiasm's capacity to transcend communicative boundaries, in such a way that “enthusiastic communists are able to achieve mutual understanding regardless of differences in linguistic form.”¹⁴⁰ The various images of linguistic heterogeneity that Collins identifies in production novels may thus be interpreted “as a manifestation of a linguistic myth—the emergence of a pan-proletarian language, which would eventually embrace all humanity in the classless society of the triumphant collective spirit.”¹⁴¹ Although the texts to be considered here pre-date the Five Year Plan period that

¹³⁹ K. F. Pchelintseva, “Kitai i kitaitsy v russkoi proze 20-x i 30-x gg. kak simvol vseobshchego kul'turnogo neponimaniia,” *Put' Vostoka. Universalizm i partikuliarizm v kul'ture*. Materialy VIII Molodezhnoi nauchnoi konferentsii po problemam filosofii, religii, kul'tury Vostoka, “Symposium” series 34 (2005): 162.

¹⁴⁰ Daniel Collins, “The Tower of Babel undone in a Soviet Pentecost,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 424.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

forms the centre of Collins' analysis, this ideological signification of linguistic difference and the utopian implications of its transcendence can be detected in the early 1920s as well.

The distinctive characteristics of the Russo-Chinese relationship must also be taken into account. Despite the common perception of absolute distance implied by the colloquial connotations of "Chinese writing," Sino-Russian contact since the seventeenth century had been mediated by the existence of a contact language, most commonly designated as Chinese pidgin Russian.¹⁴² This existed in slightly differing forms in the three main areas where Chinese- and Russian-speakers came into contact: Kyakhta, Manchuria, and Ussuri Krai. Although never subject to creolization, this pidgin's high degree of stability can be attributed to the fact that it was embraced and normalized by the Chinese state, which established a school at Kalgan (Zhangjiakou) where merchants trading with Russia were obliged to take exams in "Russian" (in fact, Chinese pidgin Russian).¹⁴³ According to Johanna Nichols, some distinctive features of Chinese pidgin Russian include the loss of inflection, the use of the Russian imperative form for most predicate stems, and the use of possessive pronouns in place of personal pronouns (without stable adherence to gender, so "moia" for "ia," but "ego"

¹⁴² The term "pidgin" refers to a contact language developed between two adult groups of language speakers whose contact requires them to form an "auxiliary" medium of communication, for example for the purposes of trade. Pidgins develop in contact situations where the two sides lack a common language. Although pidgins are stabilized and standardized systems of communication, they have no native speakers; when the respective sides talk among themselves, they revert to their first language. When a pidgin becomes the native language of a generation, it becomes a creole. See Mark Sebba, *Contact Languages: Pidgins and Creoles* (London: Palgrave, 1997), 14–16. The most commonly cited etymology of the term traces it to a Chinese approximation of the English word "business," locating its origin in trade contacts between the British and Chinese at Canton (Guangzhou). Yang Jie, however, rejects "pidgin" as a Sinicization of "business," arguing that it does not follow the usual phonetic rules for rendering foreign words in Chinese (which would produce something along the lines of *pi-zi-ni-si*). Instead, Yang considers the Chinese term 逼真/*bizhen*, meaning "very similar" or "verisimilar," to be the more likely etymon for the term, and traces its origin to Sino-Russian trade contacts at Kyakhta from the early eighteenth century. Yan Tsze (Pinyin: Yang Jie), "Zabaikal'sko-Man'chzhurskii prepidzhin: opyt sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia," *Voprosy iazykoznanii* 2 (2007): 67–70.

¹⁴³ V. I. Belikov, "Russkie pidzhiny," in *Malye iazyki Evrazii: sotsiolingvisticheskii aspekt*, ed. A. I. Kuznetsova, O. V. Raevskaia and S. S. Skorvid (Moscow: Filologicheskii fakul'tet MGU im. M. V. Lomonosova, 1997), 96.

for “on”).¹⁴⁴ Despite the name, this pidgin was also learned and used by individuals whose first language was neither Russian nor Chinese. Hence the most famous literary speaker of Chinese pidgin Russian is the Gold’ trapper Dersu Uzala, and it is Dersu Uzala’s speech as relayed by V. K. Arsen’ev that Nichols uses as her basic source for the pidgin.¹⁴⁵

While all the writers we shall consider in this chapter use elements of Chinese pidgin Russian, it seems unlikely that any of them had sufficient exposure to the pidgin to reproduce it with full accuracy. They combine Chinese pidgin Russian with other strategies to represent Chinese discourse as “foreigner talk”: the marked speech of a foreigner. Working in the field of sociolinguistics, Charles Ferguson has identified “foreigner talk” as a form of simplified speech that the speaker of a language believes is appropriate to use in conversation with a foreigner (i.e. anyone who is not a native speaker of the language in question). Native speakers then tend to attribute this foreigner talk to foreigners themselves, even though it may not coincide with the way foreigners actually speak the language. Thus, for example, “a novelist may use foreigner talk in representing the speech of persons whom he wants to

¹⁴⁴ Johanna Nichols, “Pidginization and Foreigner Talk: Chinese Pidgin Russian,” in *Papers from the Fourth International Conference on Historical Linguistics*, ed. Elizabeth Closs Traugott, Rebecca Labrum and Susan C. Shepherd (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V., 1980), 398. Nichols offers the following sample of Chinese pidgin Russian, from V. N. Arsen’ev’s *Po Ussuriiskomu kraiu*:

“Моя дома нету. Моя постоянно сопка живи. Огонь клади, палатка делай — спи. Постоянно охота ходи, как дома живи?”

Translation: “I don’t have a house. I’ve always lived in the mountains. I make a fire, put up my tent, and sleep. If you’re always hunting, how can you live in a house?” (Ibid.)

¹⁴⁵ See V. K. Arsen’ev, *Po Ussuriiskomu kraiu; Dersu Uzala; V gorakh Sikhote-Alinia; Skvoz’ taigu*. Nichols (405–6) also offers the hypothesis that Chinese pidgin Russian may in fact descend from an earlier Russian-Uralic or Russian-Turkic contact language, which was then stabilized through its adoption by Chinese traders at Kyakhta. E. Perekhval’skaia endorses this theory to the extent of naming the pidgin “Siberian pidgin Russian” rather than “Chinese pidgin Russian,” on the grounds that “it was not only used in contact situations with the Chinese” and “did not in fact develop in the course of contact between Russians and Chinese.” Perekhval’skaia instead argues that Siberian pidgin is ultimately derived from a standard form of “foreigner talk” in use in Russia since at least the seventeenth century, possibly in connection with the presence of English traders at the Angliiskii dvor in Moscow. E. Perekhval’skaia, *Russkie pidzhiny* (Saint Petersburg: Aleteia, 2008), 80–1, 116–128.

characterize as foreign, even though in the situation portrayed such a person would not in fact speak in that way.”¹⁴⁶

While Ferguson seeks the rules of a generic English-language foreigner talk that can be used in all situations of talking to foreigners, it seems to me that what we see reflected in the texts I will consider here is the existence of a particular Chinese-foreigner talk among Russian speakers in the early twentieth century. This specific imitation of the way the Chinese were thought to speak Russian implies a certain degree of familiarity with Chinese pidgin Russian, which itself gestures to the validity of Simmel’s stranger model: the Chinese stranger was a sufficiently established presence for his marked speech to be widely familiar. But we also find extended use of what Nichols calls “Simplified Russian.” Whereas Chinese pidgin Russian, Nichols insists, is a fully functioning pidgin with observable rules, and “Broken Russian” is Russian produced with mistakes, “Simplified Russian” is defined as “Russian without actual grammatical errors, but distinctive in its simple syntax, word order, lexical infelicities, etc.” Simplified Russian, Nichols suggests, is often used to produce a Russian version of Ferguson’s foreigner talk.¹⁴⁷ In addition, we find consistent mutations of printed language in these texts, in a manner intended to convey distortions in pronunciation. The Chinese migrant’s simplified syntax is thus rendered complex once more by the barrier of his accent, an aspect that moves us away from foreigner talk as Ferguson understands it.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Charles A. Ferguson, “Toward a Characterization of English Foreigner Talk,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 17, no. 1 (Jan., 1975): 2. See also Charles A. Ferguson, “Absence of Copula and the Notion of Simplicity: A Study of Normal Speech, Baby Talk, Foreigner Talk, and Pidgins,” in *Pidginization and Creolization of Language*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 141–50.

¹⁴⁷ Nichols, “Chinese Pidgin Russian,” 398–9.

¹⁴⁸ Though it is perhaps important to note that one of the earliest accounts of Kyakhta pidgin, commonly attributed to Iakin and published in *Moskovskii telegraf* (21, 1831), reproduces the pidgin in a form heavily distorted by accent. “Э-дин лю-ди бо-ли-ше-лэ” corresponds to “один человек пришел” (one person came). “Ти-би, бу-ли-я-ти-л, я не ше-на-лэ” is translated as “Тебя, приятель, я не знаю” (Friend, I do not know you). Quoted in Yang, “Zabaikal’sko-Man’chzhurskii prepidzhin,” 70.

This double movement of simplification and alienation produces, I argue, a grotesque effect. As simplicity of syntax and lexicon renders the Chinese migrant simple, even childish, with all the comic potential of such a reduction, so the barrier of accent and non-normative usage makes his language strange and impenetrable, alienating and troubling—an effect enhanced by the authors’ frequent use of elaborate, distancing metaphors to describe his appearance.

All these elements—the simultaneous proximity and distance of the stranger, expressed in grotesque forms of both appearance and marked foreigner speech—combine to express the Chinese migrant’s difference as a riddle to be solved or a problem to be overcome. As a first example, let us take Vladimir Mayakovsky’s agit-poem “Muscovite China” (“Moskovskii Kitai”), published in *Prozhektor* in 1926 (see overleaf).¹⁴⁹ Mayakovsky begins with a specific aspect of linguistic strangeness, Chinese names, which appear to estrange the Cyrillic alphabet itself:

Чжан Цзо-лин да У Пей-фу да Суй да Фуй —
разбирайся, от усилий в мыле!
Натошак попробуй расшифруй
путаницу раскитаенных фамилий!

[Zhang Zuo-lin and Wu Pei-fu and Sui and Fui — / good luck working that out,
while the soap is flying! / Try on an empty stomach to decipher / the tangle of
Sinified surnames!]

As with many of his agitational poems, Mayakovsky here adopts a kind of “man-in-the-street” voice to present the common opinion he will subsequently attempt to refine. Hence the colloquial conjunction “da” above, or the interrogative phrase “chto li” in the following section, which seeks an explanation for the presence of this stranger at work in the heart of Moscow:

Что несет их к синькам и крахмалам,
за 6 тысяч верст сюда кидает?
Там земля плохая? Рису, что ли, мало?
Или грязи мало для мытья в Китае?

¹⁴⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Moskovskii Kitai,” *Prozhektor* 9 (1927): 28. All subsequent quotations are from this page.

[What carries them to the suds and starch, / Flings them here over 6 thousand versts? / Is the land there bad? Not enough rice, or something? / Is there not plenty of dirt to wash in China?]

The answer is intended as the first step on the road from estrangement to solidarity: civil war back in China could mean possible death, whereas here, “любой рабочий защищен” (“every worker is protected”). Chinese linguistic strangeness abides, however. Mayakovsky describes the impetus to work in a Sino-Russian voice: “надо шибака работать” (“must work good”). The Siberian dialectical terms *shibko* (“very,” *ochen*’) was a popular term in Chinese pidgin, often appearing in the combination *shibko shango* (“very good,” *ochen’ khorosho*).¹⁵⁰ The mutation of *shibko* into *shibaka*, in turn, is an additional marker of foreigner talk, transposing into accented Russian the tendency of Chinese syllables to consist of a consonant sound followed by a vowel sound. This strangeness, reinforced by an illustration that shows a skeletal man with a small head, tiny eyes and extended neck beside a relatively normal-looking cat, expands into racial insult, placed at a distance in the mouths of young children:

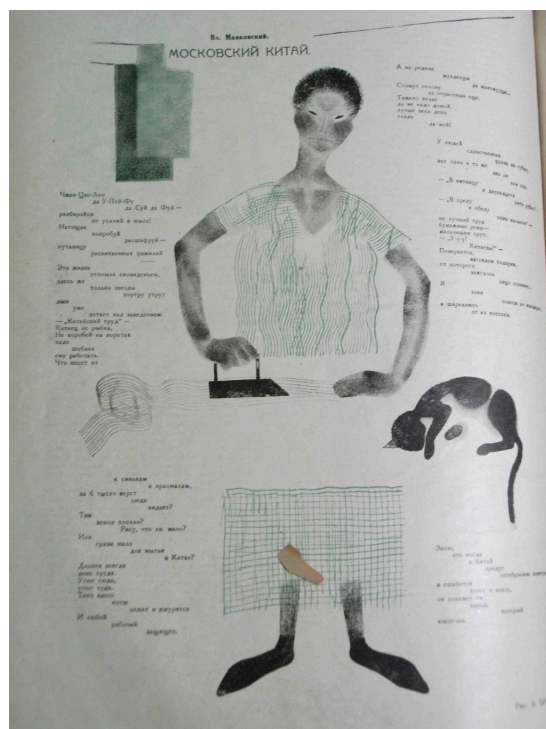


Figure 1: Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Muscovite China," 1927

¹⁵⁰ Perekhval'skaia, *Russkie pidzhiny*, 344.

Мальчишки орут: — У-у-у! Китаёзы! —
Повернется, взглядом подарив,
от которого зажглось лицо осеннее...

[Little boys shout: — Oo-oh! Chinkies! / He turns, struck by a glance / that
inflames his autumnal face...]

Again, Mayakovsky offers this example of racial hostility in an attempt to transcend such behaviour. What he hopes will overturn this aggression towards the Chinese stranger is his similarity in one important detail—his readiness, when the time comes, to rise up against his oppressors with violent reprisal:

Знаю, что — когда в Китай придут октябрьские повторы
и сшибется класс о класс —
он покажет им, народ, который
косоглаз.

[I know, that when October's refrain comes to China / and class collides with
class, they will show them, this people with slanted eyes.]

Mayakovsky's rhetoric may seem simplistic, and shot through with the language of racial difference that sustains the imperialism his political stance seeks to overthrow. Nonetheless, his poem offers an attempt to deal with the figure of the stranger along lines quite similar to those laid down by Simmel. The Chinese laundry worker is by now a fixture of Moscow life: he is “close,” yet he remains distant, in part because his origins and the motivations for his presence are unclear. By revealing those motivations and projecting forwards to future uprising, Mayakovsky does not necessarily reduce strangeness: reactions of confusion and even hostility to ethnic difference remain active forces in the poem's world. But a common cause in class struggle is presented as something that can transcend, without necessarily erasing, those differences. The question that Simmel's analysis raises is, would the holding in common of such a generalizable cause be enough to overcome the racial hostility that Mayakovsky's poem acknowledges?

II. Boris Pil'niak: "This is from his, China's, wanderings..."

A more "metaphysical" account of the Chinese stranger can be found in the early works of Boris Pil'niak. In *The Naked Year* (*Golyi god*, 1921), Pil'niak exploits the place name "Kitai-gorod"—which translates as "China-town" yet refers to an old district of Moscow that was never in fact occupied by Chinese people—to position "Kitai" as the symbol of a sinister Asiatic element present in the heart of Russia.¹⁵¹ Pil'niak's Kitai, though abstract, symbolic and vague, shares several features with the stranger as described by Simmel. If we look closely at Pil'niak's elusive and allusive uses of this symbol, we will find that the positioning of "Kitai" in *The Naked Year* replicates the spatial contradictions embodied in Simmel's stranger: the paradoxical combination of distance and proximity.

Like the stranger, Pil'niak's Kitai is a wanderer: "This is from his, China's, wanderings," begins the section of the novel entitled "Kitai-gorod."¹⁵² This Kitai is encountered first of all in the heart of Moscow, the location of the historical Kitai-gorod, where Kitai's presence is described in the past tense: "They began in Moscow, in China-town, behind the Chinese wall, in the stone side streets and town houses, among the gas-lamps—a stone desert."¹⁵³ Already here geographical clarity is under threat. Is this "Chinese wall" simply the wall around Moscow's Kitai-gorod, or rather its more obvious referent, the

¹⁵¹ Peter Jensen suggests that the true etymology of Moscow's "Kitai-gorod" connects it to the word "kita" — "a kind of rope used to secure the palisades around the central part of the town in the 16th century." Peter Jensen, *Nature as Code: The Achievement of Boris Pilnjak, 1915–1924* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1979), 177. At a recent conference on "Russia in East Asia" at Columbia University in February 2014, Mark Gamsa suggested the "kitai" in "kitai-gorod" could also be a corruption of Italian "città," in reference to Ivan IV's Italian architects: this would then create a tautology, "city-city." The name "Kitai" for China, according to Susanna Lim, derives from the Khitan, a Mongolic nomadic people who founded the Liao Dynasty that ruled over much of what is now Mongolia, the Russian Far East, northern Korea, and northern China in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD. Lim, *China and Japan*, 18.

¹⁵² Boris Pil'niak, *Golyi god*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh* (Moscow: Terra-knizhnyi klub, 2003—henceforth *SS*), 1:37. "Это из его, Китая, бродяжеств."

¹⁵³ Pil'niak, *SS*, 1:37. "Начали в Москве, в Китай-Городе, за китайской стеной, в каменных закоулках и подворьях, в газовых фонарях — каменная пустыня." Translation taken from Boris Pilnyak, *The Naked Year*, trans. Alexander R. Tulloch (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1975), 31.

Great Wall that so iconically separates China from the outside world? This spatial confusion only increases as we read on. By day, we are told, this Kitai-gorod was a bustling site of modern, capitalist trade, “all bowler-hatted, altogether Europe.”¹⁵⁴ At night, however, the bowler hats disappeared, and “peoplelessness and silence” (безлюдье и безмолвье) arrived in their place. And then Kitai made its first appearance:

And then, in this desert, out of the courtyards and from under the gates it crawled: China without a bowler hat on, The Celestial Empire, which lies somewhere beyond the steppes to the East, beyond the Great Stone Wall, and looks at the world with slanting eyes, like the buttons of Russian soldiers’ greatcoats.¹⁵⁵

This Kitai, it seems, is both here and far away. Crawling out into the deserted streets of Moscow in the past tense, it is also, in the present, firmly located somewhere out to the east, behind its famous wall. This spatial contradiction is complemented by a series of combinations from separate spheres that add a grotesque character to the image. This is an empire that somehow crawls, an embodied, hatless country with eyes. Those eyes, in turn, are likened to something from the realm of the inanimate: the buttons from a soldier’s greatcoat.

Next Kitai moves, or migrates, producing two additional locations for Kitai-gorod (described now in the present tense). The second Kitai-gorod is located at the Kanavino market in Nizhnii-Novgorod, where September’s vibrant international trade sees an abundance of goods exchanged for “rubles, francs, marks, sterling, dollars, lira and so forth,” and October passes in a similarly global debauchery, “under the curtain of wines poured by the Volga, caviars, ‘Venice,’ ‘Europeans,’ ‘Tatars,’ ‘Persians,’ ‘Chinese,’ and litres of

¹⁵⁴ “Kitaj-gorod had previously been presented as the quintessence of capitalist enterprise, namely by P. D. Boborykin in the novel *Kitaj-gorod* (1882).” Jensen, *Nature as Code*, 177.

¹⁵⁵ Pil’niak, *SS*, 1:37. “И тогда в этой пустыне из подворий и подворотен выползал тот: Китай без котелка, Небесная Империя, что лежит где-то за степями на востоке, за Великой Каменной Стеной, и смотрит на мир раскосыми глазами, похожими на пуговицы русских солдатских шинелей.”

spermatozoa[.]”¹⁵⁶ But in November the snow returns, the stalls are boarded up, “peoplelessness” (безлюдье) returns, and Kitai emerges once more: “China. Silence. Inscrutability. Without a hat. Soldier’s buttons instead of eyes.”¹⁵⁷ As the Moscow Kitai appeared at night, so this Kitai appears in winter, at a time of darkness and inactivity: when spring comes, Kitai is washed down the Volga and into the Caspian Sea. Finally, Kitai appears in a third place, an unnamed location “further that way” (там дальше)—further East, if the trajectory from Moscow to Nizhnii Novgorod is maintained. Here, in a hollow near a town, a factory stands idle, its shop floor given over to snow and rust. And out of the “steel silence” (стальная тишина) of the abandoned machines stares “China, the soldier’s buttons grin (how they can grin!)”¹⁵⁸

The Kitai-gorod motif is repeated once in its entirety, and appears in flashes at several other moments in *The Naked Year*: as has often been noted, Pil’niak’s early, ornamentalist poetics rely heavily on repetition to provide unity to an otherwise fragmentary collage of textual elements.¹⁵⁹ Such interpreters of the novel as Georges Nivat, Peter Jensen, and Tatiana Filimonova all broadly concur that Pil’niak uses Kitai here as a metonymic symbol for Asia, structuring Russian space and history through a triptych of West–Russia–East inherited from the writers of the Silver Age.¹⁶⁰ Europe, the West, represents activity,

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. “после сентябрьских миллионов пудов, бочек, штук, аршин и четвертей товаров, сменных на рубли, франки, марки, стерлинги, доллары, лиры и прочие, — после октябрьского разгуля, под занавес разлившегося Волгой вин, икор, «Венеции», «европейских», «татарских», «персицких», «китайских» и литрами сперматозоидов[.]”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 38. “Китай. Безмолвие. Неразгадка. Без котелка. Солдатские пуговицы — вместо глаз.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. “Китай, усмеваются [как могут усмеяться!] солдатские пуговицы.”

¹⁵⁹ For a contemporary critique of this device as “mechanical” and superficial, see Viktor Shklovskii, “O Pil’niake,” *Lef* 3 (1925): 126–36.

¹⁶⁰ This genealogical argument is outlined convincingly in Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” *passim*. In her recent dissertation, Tatiana Filimonova argues that Russia in *The Naked Year* offers a positive model of Eurasian community that stands between the mechanized emptiness of the West and the sinister chaos of the East. Tatiana Filimonova, “From Scythia to a Eurasian Empire,” 98–104.

modernity, and efficiency in the light of day. China, the East, is linked to inactivity, the desert, “peoplelessness and silence”—even, in the arresting image of the soldier-button eyes, the war currently sweeping through Russia. Both West and East are positioned right in the heart of Russia, which thereby contains them both but is not entirely defined by them.

The Civil War thus becomes, in Pil’niak’s novel, a war over Russia’s historical and civilizational identity. In a dynamic reminiscent of Andrei Belyi’s *Petersburg*, Russia is both Occidentalized and Orientalized, invaded from both West and East. Pil’niak’s novel seeks an authentic Russian cultural identity between these two civilizational poles, to be uncovered by the revolution’s transformative violence. Jensen argues that the leather-jacketed Bolsheviks of *The Naked Year* represent just such a third historical alternative, offering Asia-defying activity without a return to capitalism.¹⁶¹ Gary Browning, likewise, links the Kitai-gorod motif to the novel’s constant oscillation between “the poles of motion and rest, civilization and primitiveness, progress and stagnation, order and anarchy,” pitting revolutionary Russia as a battleground between “native” and “foreign” cultural systems.¹⁶² Furthermore, Browning sees in the motif’s repetition a kind of progress—a movement discernable also in the shift from past to present tense noted above. By the time we reach the third “Kitai-gorod,” the deserted factory, Kitai has been driven out of Moscow, located in the spatio-temporal past: “There, a thousand versts away, in Moscow the vast millstone of the Revolution has ground down Ilin’ka, and China has crawled away, has crawled to...” Here unattributed voices enter the text: “‘To where?’ ‘Has it crawled as far as Tazheva?’ ‘You’re lying! You’re lying! You’re lying! The blast furnace will be lit again, the blocks will start rolling, the lathes and mills will dance once more!’”¹⁶³ By the time of the motif’s later repetition, Browning notes,

¹⁶¹ Jensen, *Nature as Code*, 178.

¹⁶² Gary Browning, *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 121.

¹⁶³ Pil’niak, *SS*, 1:38. “Там, за тысячу верст, в Москве огромный жернов революции смолот Ильинку, и Китай выполз с Ильинки, пополз...”

the hopes of this last voice are fulfilled, and factory in the third tableau is up and running; “Chinese” stagnation has been driven out by Bolshevik activity.¹⁶⁴

Pil’niak’s “Kitai” taps into a lengthy heritage of China images. In the discourse of many nineteenth-century Russian and European thinkers, from Hegel and Mill to Belinskii and Herzen, China figures as the paradigm of stagnant immobility, supposedly inward-looking and uninterested in the outside world.¹⁶⁵ Pil’niak’s China retains the sense of stagnant inactivity, but has become a de-centred wanderer, stretched paradoxically between home and abroad: the Middle Kingdom is indeed far away behind its stone wall, yet it is also here in the heart of old Russia. In this he echoes Silver Age writers such as Vladimir Solov’ev and Dmitri Merezhkovskii, who, alarmed by the apparent entry into modernity of East Asian nations such as China and Japan, voiced fears of a new “Mongol” invasion and penetration into Russia.¹⁶⁶ Pil’niak’s China, hidden yet present, recalls Merezhkovskii’s fears of insidious invasion, but without the latter’s racial rhetoric and implicit identification (inherited from Herzen) of China with the embourgeoisement of Europe.¹⁶⁷ In his firm juxtaposition of Europe and China as civilizational opposites fighting over the Russian soul, Pil’niak’s real predecessor, as he himself admitted, is Belyi.¹⁶⁸ The East as expressed through

— Куда?!

— Дополз до Таежева?!

— Врешь! Врешь! Врешь! Загорит еще домна, покатыт болванки, запляшут еще аяксы и фрезеры!”

¹⁶⁴ Browning, *Boris Pilniak*, 122.

¹⁶⁵ See Introduction. On Belinskii and Herzen’s attitudes towards China, see Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 17–20.

¹⁶⁶ See Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” 460–478.

¹⁶⁷ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 25.

¹⁶⁸ “I came out of Belyi and Bunin” (Я вышел из Белого и Бунина), admits Pil’niak in the foreword to *Machines and Wolves*, written 1923–4. Pil’niak, *SS*, 2:8. On the influence of Belyi’s writing on *The*

his abstract “China” suggests a kind of spiritual death, a loss of vigour and energy, both “invasive and anaesthetic” in Nivat’s succinct formulation.¹⁶⁹

When Pil’niak attempts to introduce a more concrete, historical China into his writing, however, the results are very different. The enigmatic short story “Sankt-Piter-Burkh” (1921) interweaves Russian and Chinese history as they oscillate between imperial construction and revolutionary destruction. Once again we have the familiar triptych, West—Russia—East, though Europe and Asia so dominate that Russia itself is hard to locate. In the story’s opening chapter, scenes of Peter the Great founding St Petersburg in the eighteenth century—bringing “distant” Europe “close” to Russia—are interspersed with scenes from the dawn of Chinese imperial history. Pil’niak, as Nivat notes, is asserting a historical parallel across two millennia between two great founder-Emperors: Peter I and Qin Shi Huangdi, who consolidated China into an empire and began construction of the Great Wall.¹⁷⁰ These two lines come together in the present, when both empires fell to revolutions within a six-year period (1911, 1917). As far as a coherent plot can be discerned, it goes as follows: the Chinese peasant Li-yang, fleeing the turmoil and violence of post-revolutionary China, migrates into Russia to become the Red Guardist Liyanov. In Petersburg, suspected of treason when English coins are found on his person, he is imprisoned by a professor with a comically Russian name, Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov. Ivan Ivanovich is later compelled to execute his friend, the engineer Andrei Liudogovskii; Liyanov, however, is released, and incongruously sets about tilling the soil in war-torn Petersburg. Finally we return to China, where Ivan Ivanovich’s brother, a White Russian officer named Petr, ends the story begging on the streets of Beijing.

Naked Year, see Vladimir Alexandrov, “Belyi Subtexts in Pil’njak’s Golyi god,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 27, no. 1 (1983): 81–90.

¹⁶⁹ Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” 474.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 475–6.

The juxtaposition and interweaving of the Russian and Chinese historical narratives seem prefigured in the story's opening image, which represents history as a deck of playing cards: "The centuries stack up sedately like packs of cards. The packs of the centuries are encrusted with years, and the years are shuffled into ages—with Chinese cards."¹⁷¹ This metaphor of history as a succession of solidified epochs is linked from the start to China, the epitome of dynastic periodization, as well as the place where playing cards were reportedly invented.¹⁷² This card-deck metaphor seems to suggest at this point a definite linearity to historical progression: the centuries fall one by one, card after card, and the "encrustation" of certain years shuffles the deck into ages or epochs.

As the story proceeds, however, this repeated motif changes to imply a form of historical repetition, mimicking the way that the Russian and Chinese narratives are "shuffled" together by the course of history: "The centuries stack up sedately, like packs of cards: the years repeat the packs of the centuries once, and twice, because history repeats itself."¹⁷³ This repetition is enacted on a symbolic level, as Nirman Moraniak-Bamburach has observed, through the motif of stone.¹⁷⁴ "Sankt-Piter-Burkh" is translated, through a pun on Peter/petros/stone, as "Sviatoi-Kamen'-Gorod," "Sacred-Stone-Town."¹⁷⁵ This then forms a

¹⁷¹ Boris Pil'niak, "Sankt-Piter-Burkh," in *Povest' Peterburgskaia* (Berlin: Gelikon, 1922), 9. (Столетия ложатся степенно колодами. Столетья колоды годы инкрустируют, чтоб тасовать годы векам — китайскими картами.) I have used and slightly adapted Beatrice Scott's translation in Boris Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon and Other Stories*, trans. Beatrice Scott (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 99.

¹⁷² Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1:131–2.

¹⁷³ Pil'niak, "Sankt-Piter-Burkh," 19. "Столетия ложатся степенно, колодами: столетий колоды годы повторяют и раз, и два, ибо история — повторяется."

¹⁷⁴ Nirman Moraniak-Bamburach, "B. A. Pil'niak i 'Peterburgskii tekst'," in *B. A. Pil'niak: issledovaniia i materialy* (Kolomna, Kolomenskii pedagogicheskii institut, 1991), 45.

¹⁷⁵ Pil'niak, "Sankt-Piter-Burkh," 25.

parallel with China's "Great Stone Wall," built by the first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, as stone Petersburg was built by the first Russian Emperor, Peter.

Construction in stone links the two Eurasian empires, these two "Empires of the Middle," and juxtaposes them in both cases to the desert: the Gobi beyond the Wall, and the desert that was the Neva until Peter arrived.¹⁷⁶ The equation of these two Eurasian agricultural empires is not unique to *Pil'niak*. As noted in the Introduction, the Sinologist A. S. Martynov identifies Russia and China as the "two greatest centers of agriculture" on the Eurasian continent, balancing the great expanse of steppe and desert between them.¹⁷⁷ Commensurabilities between the two polities can be traced, Martynov claims, to the fact that they have been shaped by the same fundamental dynamic: the battle of the field with the steppe.¹⁷⁸ As Filimonova points out, however, Russia and China are also connected as historical entities that have wrestled with intrusions from the West. Our Chinese protagonist's father fought in the Boxer Uprising, the major anti-foreigner rebellion in 1900 that prompted Solov'ev to claim clairvoyancy. In Russia, meanwhile, the building of Petersburg is presented as a foreign intrusion into the native culture. By having Li-yang settle down to farm the land in the Moscow district of Petersburg, Filimonova argues, *Pil'niak* presents an anti-Western, agricultural union between the two great Eurasian agricultural powers as a positive, regenerative force.¹⁷⁹

Expanding on Filimonova's analysis, I want to explore how *Pil'niak* takes the Silver Age's tropes of sinister Asiatic invasion and revalorizes them as positive Eurasian

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, 47.

¹⁷⁷ Martynov, "Rossiia i Kitai," quoted in Samoilov, "Rossiia i Kitai," 217.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Filimonova, "From Scythia to a Eurasian Empire," 104–6. Filimonova relies in part here on the analysis of this story given in Khe Fan's dissertation, which unfortunately I have been unable to access. Khe Fan, "Evraziistvo i russkaia literature 1920–1930kh godov XX veka," PhD dissertation, Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2004.

interconnection. As several scholars have noted, the rejection of Petersburg as foreign and tainted links Pil’niak’s story to the canonical “Petersburg text,” most notably Andrei Belyi’s novel *Petersburg*.¹⁸⁰ Pil’niak’s Petersburg, like Belyi’s, is unreal, un-Russian, and penetrated by an Asiatic element. Consider the office of Ivan Ivanovich’s friend, the engineer Andrei Liudogovskii, wherein East and West are equally cold and uncomfortable: “Masks of Chinese devils grimaced in the engineer’s study—bone, bronze and porcelain—grimaced with a cold solidity; and there was a cold Venetian window in the study, facing out onto the white nights with the coolness of white study walls.”¹⁸¹ The Red Guardist Liyanov has the same face as these grimacing masks, a face whose alterity is grotesque and incomprehensible (and grins like Kitai in the frozen factory): “The Chinaman’s face was... all teeth, strange teeth, the jaw of a horse; with these he grinned: who will understand?”¹⁸² Besides this toothy face, Liyanov has other grotesque physical traits: a “feminine gait,” nostrils “like a prostitute’s” above that horsey jaw, and a “dead smile.”¹⁸³ In Ivan Ivanovich’s feverish dreams, the map of the world becomes a chessboard across which Liyanov crawls—the same form of locomotion favoured by Kitai in *The Naked Year*. China crawls across Europe; the sunset above the Neva turns an ominous yellow, and the Great Wall itself rears up through the fog on the riverbank.¹⁸⁴ No wonder Georges Nivat identifies here the final link in a chain that leads back to Solovev’s

¹⁸⁰ See for example Moraniak-Bamburach, “B. A. Pil’niak i ‘Peterburgskii tekst’,”; M. Iu. Liubimova, “O Peterburgskikh povestiiakh B. Pil’niaka,” *Boris Pil’niak: Opyt segodniashchnego prochtenia* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), 55–62. The latter points out that Pil’niak visited Petersburg for the first time in 1921, the year he wrote the story (Liubimova, “O Peterburgskikh povestiiakh,” 59).

¹⁸¹ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 31. “У инженера корчили хари в кабинете китайские черти, кость, бронза и фарфор — твердым холодком корчили хари; и было в кабинете холодное венецианское окно, уходившее в белые ночи холодком белых стен кабинета.” Translation from Pil’nyak, *Tale*, 108 (slightly modified).

¹⁸² Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 37. “На лице у китайца были — только зубы, чужие, лошадиная челюсть, он ими усмехался: — кто поймет?” Translation from Pilnyak, *Tale*, 110.

¹⁸³ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 43.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 40, 47.

“panmongolism” and the “sinification” fears of Merezhkovskii.¹⁸⁵ Pil’niak himself claimed in his letters that he wrote “Sankt-Piter-Burkh” in honour of Aleksandr Blok, who had recently died.¹⁸⁶ The same Blok, echoing Merezhkovskii, had written in his 1911 diary: “China is already among us. Irredeemably, impetuously, the purple blood of the Aryans is becoming yellow blood [...] there remains only one last small act to play: the visible conquest of Europe.”¹⁸⁷ In the 1922 Gelikon printing, this “sinification” is announced on the title page, where the name of Sankt-Piter-Burkh is translated into Chinese characters that hover above the Cyrillic title.¹⁸⁸

This reading of Liyanov as a symbol of the Yellow Peril, however, only really takes into account the second of the story’s three chapters. A reading of the story as a whole suggests that Liyanov only becomes strange, grotesque and threatening once he appears in the context of Petersburg, when he mutates nominally from Li-yang into Liyanov. In the first chapter his early life is recounted as the gradual acquisition of a legitimate and comprehensible cultural system. Within this Chinese world Li-yang is not strange at all, he is normal, he is learning how to be normal in the terms of his home culture:

The boy learned the meaning of his fathers’ toil, he understood what it meant to plow a field by hand, to bring manure from Argali-Jiang by hand, to strip each clump of maize and kaoliang by hand, so as not to starve and to live in the loess — and he learned to work. He learned about yin and yang, and the Two Powers. The

¹⁸⁵ Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” 473–7.

¹⁸⁶ Boris Pil’niak, *Pis’ma* (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2010), vol. 1, 364, 367, 371.

¹⁸⁷ Nivat, “‘Panmongolisme’,” 469–70.

¹⁸⁸ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 7. The Chinese translation given here is 彼得堡, *bīdébǎo*, a phonetic approximation of “Petersburg.” (Contemporary standard usage in Mandarin uses a different character with the sound *bǎo*, 堡, which could be considered a better match as it has the meaning of “fortress,” as does the German root “Burg.”) Although the “Sankt” here is not actually translated, the three Chinese characters line up neatly on the title page with the three elements in the city’s name, which Pil’niak will later translate again, this time into Russian, as “Sviatoi-Kamen’-Gorod.” Thus the city with three elements to its name also has three different versions of that name in the 1922 edition, to go with the three chapters that comprise the text. This constant playing with the city’s name as subject of seemingly inevitable translation chimes with the fact that the city’s name had recently been “translated” into Russian, as Petrograd, the name it officially bore when Pil’niak was writing his story.

world, and his ancestors, stood before him by the will of Lao-zi, for whom the Great Wall had once been built, for Lao-zi spoke of Dao, the Great Equivalent.¹⁸⁹

For another page or so, Pil'niak bombards his reader with authentic Chinese cultural detail, describing how Li-yang mastered the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucian tradition, the eight “gua” (trigrams) used in divination, and “like everyone,” the Book of Odes.¹⁹⁰

Aspects of this world would no doubt strike the Russian reader as exotic and confusing: who is Laozi, what are “yin,” “yang” and “gua”? But there is nothing grotesque as such about these descriptions; they are located in a place where they can be assumed to make sense.

They also introduce elements that render prerevolutionary China more commensurable with pre-Petrine Russia. If in *The Naked Year* Kitai was equated with the desert, Li-yang's China is an agricultural world opposed, like Russia, to desert and nomadic steppe. Furthermore, this social world dominated by patriarchal religious tradition recalls the positive image of pre-Petrine Russia endorsed by such opponents of “Europeanization” as Nikolai Trubetskoy, one of the early theorizers of Russian Eurasianism.¹⁹¹ Indeed, we might say that Pil'niak deliberately uses the device of a child's perspective here to introduce us to a world that is strange yet fundamentally commensurable, located in Russia's agricultural double on the other side of Eurasia.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 18. “Мальчик узнал, что значит труд отцов, что значит руками вспахать землю, руками принести а Аргели-дзян назем, руками охолоть каждый куст кукурузы и гаоляна, чтобы не умереть с голода и жить в лессе, — и он научился трудиться. Он узнал и ян и ин, и Двух Силах, — мир, как его отцы, стал перед ним в воле Лао-дзы, для него некогда строилась Великая Стена, ибо Лао-дзы сказал о Тао, Великом Равнодействующем.” Translation from Pilnyak, *Tale*, 102, with modifications.

¹⁹⁰ Pil'niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 19. To judge by the text, Pil'niak's research does not seem to have clarified that both the eight trigrams, which make up the *Yi Jing* or *Classic of Changes*, and the *Shi Jing*, which Pil'niak calls the “books of odes” (книга од), are actually included within the five classics.

¹⁹¹ See Trubetskoy, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan*, 190–209.

¹⁹² For example, as a child, Li-yang is afraid to go into the caves where the mysterious rites of ancestor worship takes place—his own culture is as strange and unnerving for him here as it might be for Pil'niak's readers Pil'niak, “Sankt-Piter-Burkh,” 17.

Li-yang begins the story inhabiting a human world that makes sense on its own terms, only to be driven from that world by revolution and political chaos. He is presented, in this first chapter, as the image of the small individual whose life is disrupted by historical forces beyond his understanding or control. After his father, a veteran of the anti-Western Boxer Uprising, is killed in post-revolutionary violence, Li-yang, who “understood nothing,” flees across Mongolia towards Russia, “to confuse in his memory Vladivostok, Port-Said, oceans.”¹⁹³ On his way he passes a marble block, on which is carved a memorial to a military expedition against the Mongols by the Ming Emperor Yongle. This block had been mentioned already in the Russo-Chinese imperial parallelisms that began the chapter, but here it means nothing to Li-yang, who thinks only of his personal situation on a small, familial scale:

But her did not know this; his only thought was that his mother came from here, from the village of Sudetoi; here his mother had caught lizards when she was little, his mother, whom he, like all the others, had abandoned as a woman. And with him went dozens of others, men who had lost all, abandoned all—fathers, mothers, sons and fatherland.¹⁹⁴

This is hardly the marauding Asiatic army of Solov’ev’s nightmares; more a trickle of homeless, bereaved individuals, as much the victims of cosmic confusion as its perpetrators.

The elements of grotesque alterity only appear when Li-yang reaches Russia and becomes Liyanov. Now the descriptions of his strange, distorted appearance begin, and are matched by distortions in language: the one word he produces in Russian is “kius-no,” a heavily marked distortion of “skuchno” (boring).¹⁹⁵ In line with Simmel, the stranger is

¹⁹³ Ibid. 23.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 24. Но он не знал этого, он думал лишь тогда о том, что отсюда, из деревни Судетоу — его мать: его мать здесь ловила ящерок маленькой, — его мать, которого он бросил, как все, как женщину. И вместе с ним шли десятки других, потерявших, бросивших — и отцов, и матерей, и братьев, и отечество.” Pilnyak, *Tale*, 105, with slight modifications.

¹⁹⁵ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 43. Even here, we are reminded of the estrangement produced by a foreign cultural environment when Liyanov talks to the Chinese prison guard in whispered Chinese.

produced by expansion beyond the narrow boundaries of the ethnic group. Pil'niak's juxtapositions and interweavings of three cultural spheres—Europe, Russia, China—suggest that strangeness is a matter of perspective, not essence. And perspectives in this Petersburg seem decidedly warped. The marauding Chinese soldier crawling across Europe is produced by the feverish visions of Ivan Ivanovich. The Great Wall rearing out of the Neva fog is witnessed by an improbable collection of Romanov empresses out for a boatride, who are dubbed the “twelve buxom sisters of fever.”¹⁹⁶ At the end of chapter two, as the engineer Liudogovskii is led to execution, we see the Chinese faces of his executioners explicitly from his point of view: “—oh, what slanting eyes! And who touched the face, pressing it in, smashing the bridge of the nose, this face, like a poster, with inset teeth? And the gait of the Chinese is feminine...”¹⁹⁷ This observation, with its grotesque comparison of a three-dimensional, living face to a flat, inanimate poster, is clearly from Liudogovskii's perspective. But chapter two as a whole is characterized by constant repetitions, unattributed utterances and an almost complete lack of sequential clarity. The boundaries between characters' subjectivities and the narrator's voice are unclear, and the impression arises that this Petersburg is the mutual delirium of Ivanov and Liudogovskii, a delirium inherited from Belyi, a feverish neurosis in which the threatening image of China takes shape.

At the beginning of the third and final chapter, we are referred briefly back to the earlier description of Li-yang's childhood, where it was revealed that, living on the fringes of Mongolia, he had not known trees. Now seemingly released, Li-yang, referred to in this final chapter only as *kitaets* (“a Chinese man”), takes to cultivation, cutting down trees and

Here, speaking his own, undistorted language, he is able once more to assert his real, pre-distortion name, declaring: “Vo xin Li Yan” (*wǒ xìng Li Yang*, “my name is Li Yang”). Ibid., 47.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 46–7. “двенадцать дебелих сестер лихорадок.”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 50. “— ах, какие косые глаза! — и кто так провел по лицу, чтоб вдавить лицо внутрь, раздавив переносицу, лицо, как плакат, с приставными зубами? — а походка — у китайцев — женская...” Translation from Pilnyak, *Tale*, 115, with modifications.

planting corn, millet and potatoes in the “wasteland” (*pustyr*) behind a deserted house. This house and its adjoining wasteland appeared at the beginning of chapter two, which described war- and revolution-ravaged Petersburg as a dying city returning to desert. The house has been abandoned in a foul state by its Russian inhabitants. Li-yang, “with his own hands” (a phrase repeated three times), working from dawn till dusk, gathers human excrement from all corners of this collapsing house to fertilize the soil outside. The Asiatic intruder here is not destructive, he is constructive: he rebuilds agricultural order on a human scale out of the collapse of stone-bound imperial grandeur.

Li-yang’s ultimate agricultural role departs from Simmel’s stranger, who “is by nature no ‘owner of soil.’”¹⁹⁸ Li-yang seems to act out of cultural automation: he does what we saw him learning to do in chapter one, but now he does it alone, removed from his cultural context. Nonetheless, it is not inappropriate: this migrant from the other Eurasian agricultural empire simply reverts to the economic order that existed before Peter’s city attempted its acceleration into European modernity. As Filimonova notes, this return to agriculture takes place in a region of Petersburg called the “Moscow” district, suggesting a reversion to the pre-Petrine order of Muscovite Rus’.¹⁹⁹ This Asian migrant does not destroy Russia, he renews its authentic past.

As he works, Li-yang sings a martial song from the Boxer Uprising, in which his father participated. We heard the song’s first two lines, in their own cultural context, back in chapter one.²⁰⁰ Here we get four lines, and a translation:

Тен-да-тен мынь кай!
Ди-да-ди мынь кай!
Жо сюэ тен шень куй. —
Во цин ши-фу лай! —

¹⁹⁸ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 403.

¹⁹⁹ Filimonova, “From Scythia to a Eurasian Empire,” 106.

²⁰⁰ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-burkh,” 21.

песню, в которой говорилось о том, чтоб — «небо растворило небесные ворота, земля растворила земные ворота, чтобы постигнуть сонм небесных духов[.]»

[Ten-da-ten myn' kai!
Di-da-di myn' kai!
Zho siue ten shen' kui. —
Vo tsin shi-fu lai! —

a song which exhorts “heaven to burst open its heavenly gates, earth to burst open its earthly gates, so as to grasp the host of heavenly spirits.”²⁰¹

The Boxer Uprising was met with considerable alarm in Imperial Russia, perhaps most famously provoking Solov'ev to declare that his “Panmongolist” predictions had been justified by history.²⁰² This alarm was strongest in the Russian Far East: the Priamur region was put on military alert, and a possible attack on Vladivostok was anticipated. Fearing an uprising, the administration of Blagoveshchensk, on the Russo-Chinese border, drove the Chinese population of the city into the Amur River, where several thousand drowned.²⁰³

Russian troops subsequently joined the international expeditionary force that suppressed the Boxer Uprising. Indeed, it seems likely that Pil'niak found this song recorded in the memoirs of Dmitrii Grigorevich Ianchevetskii, a correspondent for *Novyi Krai* who witnessed the Boxer attack on Tianjin in 1900 and the subsequent Russian participation in the storming of Beijing. Pil'niak's transcription matches Ianchevetskii's almost exactly, though he renders his translation more mysterious by omitting the fourth line: “I call on the teacher to come.”²⁰⁴ In the chapter where he quotes the song, Ianchevetskii describes a group of

²⁰¹ Ibid., 53.

²⁰² Lim, “Solov'ev and the East,” 339.

²⁰³ Larin, *Kitaittsy v Rossii*, 41–2.

²⁰⁴ Dmitrii Grigorevich Ianchevetskii, *U sten nedvizhnovo Kitaia* (St Petersburg: Izd-vo P. A. Artem'eva, 1903), republished as *1900: Russkie shturmuiut Pekin* (Moscow: Yauza; Eksmo, 2008). The song is quoted on p. 145 in the 2008 edition. Ianchevetskii in line three has хуй where Pil'niak, perhaps blushing, writes куй. His translation uses imperatives that Pil'niak, following the чтоб in his own text, transforms into past tense forms: “Небо! Раствори небесные ворота! / Земля! Раствори земные ворота! / Чтобы постигнуть сонм небесных духов, / Я молю учителя сойти!” (Heaven, burst open your heavenly gates! Earth, burst open your earthly gates! So as to grasp the host of heavenly spirits, I call on the teacher to come!) In Chinese, I have found this song rendered thus: “天

heavily-armed Boxers stirred into frenzy by a leader who urges them to “punish traitors with the most terrible punishments and cut out the heart of every *yangguizi* [*trans: foreign devil*]!”²⁰⁵ Any Russian reader familiar with Ianchevetskii’s text or the history of the Boxer Uprising more generally might be expected to connect this song with the threat of savage Chinese violence, and indeed it appears in Pil’niak’s second chapter as an inhuman, animal howl: “he howled, like a dog at the moon—the Chinese man began to sing a martial song[.]”²⁰⁶ But when the song recurs in chapter three, it proves capable of provoking sympathy, resounding “with unbelievable melancholy to a Russian ear.”²⁰⁷ The threatening collective war song has become a lone work song tinged with sadness.

Li-yang in these final scenes is a figure that inspires not fear or confusion but sympathy, a lonely migrant whose sadness we are encouraged to feel. When the cousins of Maiakovskii’s abusive schoolchildren make an appearance, the insults that they shout only increase our sense of Li-yang’s isolation: “Hey, *khodia*, you slant-eyed devil! Who cut off your pigtail?”²⁰⁸ *Khodia* (ходя) was a term used to refer to Chinese migrants in China in the early twentieth century—it occurs in most of the texts considered below.²⁰⁹ Its combination

打天门开，地打地门来，要学神拳术，搬请师傅来” (pinyin: *tiān dǎ tiān mén kāi, dì dǎ dì mén lái, yào xué shén quán shù, bānqǐng shīfu lái*). The third line is notably different from Ianchevetskii’s version. English: “Break open the gates of heaven, break open the gates of earth. If you want to study the sacred technique of the fist, call the master to come.” Jian Bozan, *Yi he tuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai ren min chu ban she, 1957), vol. 1. Quoted in <http://2011.yingkou.net.cn/zjyk/2007/08/14/2623.html>, accessed 4.17.14.

²⁰⁵ Ianchevetskii, *1900*, 144.

²⁰⁶ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-Burkh,” 46. “завыл, как собака при луне, — запел боевую песню китаец[.]”

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 53. “— Эй, ходя, косоглазый чорт! Кто тебе косу то обрил?”

²⁰⁹ The etymology of *khodia* is disputed, but most variants suggest the idea of migrant traders: some link it to the Russian verb *khodit’*, in the sense of “come and go,” while others find a connection with the Chinese term 货家, *huojia*, meaning “trader in goods” or, in Russian, “коробейник.” See for example <http://laowaicast.ru/2013/05/solinado/>, accessed 05.12.2014.

with generic ethnic stereotypes here increases our sense that Li-yang, never referred to by name in this final chapter, has become, in his isolation, simply a signifier for his ethnicity. Our final images of Li-yang emphasise the pathetic loneliness of the stranger, masturbating at night in the room he has repaired, unknowable (“What was the Chinese man thinking, who knows?”) and isolated in his difference (“alone, foreign to everyone, slant-eyed”).²¹⁰

If Li-yang remains different and strange, he is also given a backstory that replaces the threatening image of the migrant stranger with a sympathetic portrait of a lonely human being. This sympathetic connection to Li-yang is reinforced by his concluding juxtaposition to Petr Ivanovich Ivanov, the brother of Ivan Ivanovich, who ends the story begging on the streets of Beijing. In this final leap between the Russian and Chinese cultural zones, parallelisms preserve the link to Petersburg and to Li-yang. Although Petr’s perspective sees only strangeness—“what a strange sight for the eyes of a European!”—Beijing, like the Russian city founded by his namesake, is made up of stone slabs and stone bridges.²¹¹ Up on the city walls, in the “silence and peoplelessness” (тишина и безлюдье) that characterized Pil’niak’s Kitai-gorod, Petr sleeps on a “granite block” (гранитная глыба); the material points to Petersburg as the object echoes the monument to Yongle that Li-yang passed on his way out of China.²¹² Passing the execution ground, Petr observes with horror the decapitated heads on bamboo poles, an echo of the death of Li-yang’s father.²¹³ A concluding list of Petr’s predicates shows him to be Li-yang’s inverted double: “White Guardist, lord, officer of the

²¹⁰ Pil’niak, “Sankt-Piter-Burkh,” 54. “Что думал китаец, кто знает? [...] один, всем чужой, косоглазый.”

²¹¹ Ibid., 55. “какое странное зрелище для глаз европейца!”

²¹² Ibid., 56.

²¹³ Ibid., 59.

Russian Army, emigrant, brother, Petr Ivanovich Ivanov.”²¹⁴ A similar list for his mirror-image Li-yang might read: “Red Guardist, peasant, soldier of the Soviet Army, emigrant, son, Li-yang.”

This carefully organized diptych of the Chinese and Russian migrants, fleeing their own revolutions to each other’s countries, introduces a dimension that was lacking in the Symbolist attitude to the threatening Orient. Solov’ev, Merezhkovskii and Blok portrayed the East as a potential invader at a time when Tsarist Russia was working to assert itself in East Asia and seize territory from China. These Panmongolist fears survive in Pil’niak, in the sinister symbolism of *The Naked Year* or the feverish nightmares of “Sankt-Piter-Burkh.” But the growing presence of Chinese strangers in Russia and a commensurate movement of Russians to China encourages Pil’niak to set up a new model of historical parallelism between the two countries, one that enables sympathy through a commonality of suffering and confusion. In the context of a world thrown into unprecedented chaos, Li-yang holds the Eurasian mirror up to Russia.

Pil’niak was not the only writer drawn to the Chinese migrant wandering Petrograd as an image of post-revolutionary disintegration and disorientation. In the Petrograd of 1919, a city that had “become overgrown, like a camp abandoned by troops,” Viktor Shklovskii recalls Issac Babel “watching with slow deliberation the hungry whoring of the city.”²¹⁵ As Shklovskii remembers it, at that time Babel’ “wrote slowly, but stubbornly. Always one and the same story about two Chinese in a brothel. [...] The Chinese and the women kept changing. They got younger, they got older, they smashed the windows, they beat the

²¹⁴ Ibid., 60. “Белогвардеец, барин, офицер русской армии, эмигрант, брат, Петр Иванович Иванов.”

²¹⁵ Viktor Shklovskii, “I. Babel': kriticheskie romany,” *Lef* 6 (1924): 153. “Бабель жил, неторопливо рассматривая голодный блуд города.”

women, they tried it every which way.”²¹⁶ Shklovskii recalls Babel’s leaving Petrograd with the story unfinished. A fragmentary text on this theme was published, however, in 1923, under the title “Khodia.” A subtitle to that first publication claims this story is an extract from “*Peterburg, 1918*,” though no such book ever appeared.²¹⁷

Babel’s short, elusive fragment echoes the dark, deserted atmosphere in which the “China” of Pil’niak’s *Naked Year* first appeared: “Nobody on Nevsky. Ink bubbles burst in the sky. Two o’clock in the morning. Implacable night.”²¹⁸ The only people on the street are readily identifiable as “former people” fallen on hard times: a prostitute named Glafira and an older man, Aristarkh Terent’ich, who seems to be helping her to find customers. A Chinese man in a leather jacket—the uniform of the Bolsheviks made famous, *inter alia*, by *The Naked Year*—walks by and begins to negotiate. Glafira asks that Aristarkh Terent’ich, who she says is her godfather, be allowed to come with them and sleep by the wall. “The Chinese slowly nodded his head. O, wise solemnity of the East!”²¹⁹

At the hotel, the sexual act is elliptically omitted, and the near-silent Chinese man seems to be slipping back into the night: “Late in the night the Chinese got out of bed and set off into the darkness.”²²⁰ But when Glafira asks him where he is going, he leans down to wake Aristarkh Terent’ich and indicates that he, too, should copulate with Glafira. “Get

²¹⁶ Ibid. “Бабель писал мало, но упорно. Все одну и ту же повесть о двух китайцах в публичном доме. [...] Китайцы и женщины изменялись. Они молодели, старели, били стекла, били женщину, устраивали и так и эдак.”

²¹⁷ Isaak Babel’, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 1, *Odesskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Vremia, 2005), note to “Khodia,” 555.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 270. “Никого на Невском. Чернильные пузыри лопаются в небе. Два часа ночи. Неумолимая ночь.”

²¹⁹ Ibid., 271. “Китаец медлительно кивает головой. О мудрая важность Востока!”

²²⁰ Ibid. “Поздно ночью китаец слез с кровати и пошел во тьму.”

away, you dog,” she objects, “your Chinese has finished me off” (lit. “killed me”).²²¹ But the Chinese man insists, in his longest utterance of the story, rendered in heavily accented foreigner talk: “‘Me friend,’ said the Chinese man. ‘He cahn. Eh, slat...’” (— Ми друг, — сказал китаец. — Он — можна. Э, стерфь...).²²² Glafira takes Aristarkh Terent’ich to her, whispering in conclusion that he is old and understands nothing. Here the story ends, with none of the positive reconstruction attached to Pil’niak’s Chinese migrant. This short, dark fragment, with its atmosphere of dread and invocations of incest, blasphemy and murder, links the collapse of the social order to the enigmatic figure of the Chinese man in a leather jacket wandering through post-revolutionary Russia.

III. The Chinese Partisan: Violence and Comedy

A very different model of the Chinese partisan as symbolic figure is offered in Vsevolod Ivanov’s novella *Armoured Train 14-69* (*Bronepoezd No. 14-69*), first published in 1922. This hugely popular Civil War tale, based on a true story and adapted into a hit play in 1927, recounts the attempts of a group of Red Partisans to stop an armoured train heading to a Russian Far Eastern town to put down an uprising.²²³ When the original plan to blow up a bridge falls through, the single Chinese member of the partisan brigade, Sin-Bin-U, lies down on the rails and shoots himself. The train stops, the driver is shot, and after a protracted battle, the train is captured.

In a recent article on the ideological functions enacted by the figure of Sin-Bin-U, Roy Chan reads *Armoured Train 14-69* as expressing both the utopian horizons of Soviet internationalism and the enduring obstacles that hinder the attainment of those horizons. The

²²¹ Ibid. “— Уйди, пес, — сказала Глафира, — убил меня твой китаец.”

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Although the self-sacrificing partisan in the historical incident was reportedly Chinese, Roy Chan notes that Ivanov changed the location of the event from Western Siberia to the Far East. Roy Chan, “Broken Tongues: Race, Sacrifice and Geopolitics in the Far East in Vsevolod Ivanov’s *Bronepoezd No. 14-69*,” *Sibirica*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter 2011), 31.

utopian element is communicated, for Chan, primarily through the text's treatment of language. The various characters in the story express themselves in a range of confusing and sometimes mutually incomprehensible modes of speech, from Sin-Bin-U's pidgin-inflected broken Russian to the Far Eastern Russian dialect of the other partisans and the English of a captured American soldier. The surpassing of these linguistic divisions in turn implies the power of the Soviet message to transcend cultural and linguistic difference. Sin-Bin-U's readiness to sacrifice himself can be taken as the ultimate expression of this power.

On the other hand, Chan suggests that Sin-Bin-U's commitment to the internationalist cause conceals the fact that nationalism, not internationalism, was the dominant Chinese response to its early twentieth century sovereignty crisis—and Chinese nationalism represented a potential challenge to Soviet sovereignty over this contested Far Eastern territory. This overriding of Chinese nationalism by Soviet internationalism is encapsulated in the moment when, his home and family destroyed by the Japanese, Sin-Bin-U throws his copy of the Chinese Classic of Poetry, or *Shijing*, down a well and heads off to join the Red partisans.²²⁴ The utopianism of a fractured yet transcendent language is counterbalanced, for Chan, by the abiding concerns of inter-state *Realpolitik*: “This text and its successors promulgate a vision of the utopian possibilities of linguistic internationalism while simultaneously and paradoxically reminding the reader of the difficulty and perhaps impossibility of making commensurate competing visions of nation and history.”²²⁵ Sin-Bin-U becomes the ethnic outsider whose body and distinct history must be sacrificed for the greater good of the Soviet project. This in effect constitutes a Soviet-internationalist reworking of the “Butterfly myth,” a “longstanding narrative by which the subordinate Asian

²²⁴ Chan, “Broken Tongues,” 44–5. Note that this is the same “Book of Odes” that Pil’niak’s Li-yang read in childhood: in both texts the *Shijing* represents an embeddedness in Chinese culture that must be abandoned.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

is granted acceptance by White society, but only through sacrifice.”²²⁶ In assigning important but subordinate roles to ethnic minority figures within a Russian-led project to control the Far East, Chan concludes, the new Soviet internationalism ends up looking markedly similar to the old Tsarist imperialism.²²⁷

Both Sin-Bin-U and Li-yang are forced from their homes in a stable Chinese cultural universe by war and violence, becoming exiles from their own tradition in a manner symbolic of their culture’s traumatic passage into modernity. Nevertheless, the differences between them are significant. Li-yang’s presence in Russia and the Red Army is a product of confusion and flight with no clear ideological basis or commitment. At the story’s end, he reverts to agriculture through a kind of cultural automatism, not from any explicit commitment to post-revolutionary reconstruction. Sin-Bin-U, by contrast, is presented as an ideologically committed member of the Red cause. True, his commitment apparently stems from a personal desire for vengeance against the Japanese rather than any grand global vision of socialist justice. But the motivations of Ivanov’s other partisans are similarly local, tied to their land and their immediate concerns.

Nevertheless, Sin-Bin-U’s strangeness, like Li-yang’s, is constantly marked in a grotesque manner that distances him from the rest of the partisans. Whereas Li-yang became grotesque and sinister in the fevered perspectives of Petersburg, Sin-Bin-U, right up to his sacrificial suicide, is primarily a comic figure. Take, for example, his first extended set of utterances:

Син-Бин-У сказал громко:
- Казаки цау-жа! Нипонса куна, мадама бери мала-мала. Нехао, казака
нехао! Кырасна русска*1...

²²⁶ Ibid., 47. Chan borrows the concept of the “Butterfly myth” from Gina Marchetti, who identifies narrative echoes of *Madame Butterfly* in classic Hollywood cinema. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). We shall return to this myth when considering the narrative dynamics of the ballet *The Red Poppy* in Chapter Four.

²²⁷ Chan, “Broken Tongues,” 48.

Он, скосив губы, швыркнул слюной сквозь зубы, и лицо его, цвета песка золотых россыпей, с узенькими, как семечки дыни, разрезами глаз, радостно заулыбалось.

- Шанго*2!..

Син-Бин-У в знак одобрения поднял кверху большой палец руки.

Но не слыша, как всегда, хохота партизан, китаец уныло сказал:

- Пылюха-о*3...

И тоскливо оглянулся.

[Sin-Bin-U said loudly, “The Cossacks are bad! The Japs are scoundrels, they rape women... That’s not good. The Cossacks are bad! The ‘Russ’ are good...” Tightening his lips, he flung a gob of spit through his teeth; his face, the color of the sand of gold mines, with little narrow slits like melon seeds for eyes, broke into a joyful smile, “It’s good!..”

As a sign of approval Sin-Bin-U stuck up his thumb.

But, as usual, he didn’t hear the laughter of the partisans and said sadly, “It’s bad...”

And he looked back wistfully.]²²⁸

Sin-Bin-U’s language shows several signs of familiarity with Chinese pidgin Russian, most notably the use of the imperative (*beri*) as an indicative verb, and the pidgin lexical items *kuna* (girl or young woman, from Chinese *gūniang* 姑娘), *mala-mala* (*nemnogo*, “a little”), and *shango* (*khorosho*, “good”).²²⁹ But these combine with markers of accentual complication (“*Kyrasna*” for “*krasnaia*”) and deliberate admixtures of Russian and Chinese lexemes. “*Hexao*” (*nekhao*) is a combination of Russian *не*, “not,” and Chinese *hǎo* 好, “good”; “*цхау-жа*” (*tsau-zha*), which Ivanov translates in his footnote as “*плохи*” (bad, bad people), probably originates from *càozhe* 齨者, “fuckers.”

The immediate effect of such non-normative speech is jolting and disorienting to the native speaker of Russian; but alongside this unnerving effect there is also potential comedy

²²⁸ Vsevolod Ivanov, “Bronepoezd No. 14-69,” *Krasnaia nov’ 1* (1922): 81. Translation is Frank Miller’s, from Evgeny Zamyatin, *The Islanders / Vsevolod Ivanov, Armoured Train 14-69* (Ann Arbor: Trilogy, 1978), 55. Miller makes no attempt to translate Sin-Bin-U’s broken pidgin, opting instead to translate, with a few accentual marks, the translations into Russian provided by Ivanov with the original text:

*1 Казаки плохи. Японец - подлец, женщин берет. Нехорошо. Казаки плохи...

*2 Хорошо.

*3 Плохо...

²²⁹ Perekhval’skaia, *Russkie pidzhiny*, 324, 326, 344.

in any example of simplified foreigner talk. This combination of the frightening and the funny is typically grotesque, though Chan sees in this grotesque appearance the possibility of a more utopian reading. In particular, Chan picks out the utterances “nekhao” (see above) and “pylyokha-o” (an inventive splicing of Russian *plokho* with Chinese *bù hǎo*, the negated *hǎo* / “good”) as concrete representations of Sin-Bin-U’s attempts to transcend linguistic boundaries for the sake of a common cause.²³⁰

Yet the utopian implications of Sin-Bin-U’s language are offset by the inherent comic potential of foreigner talk and the comic figure he presents through the commentary of the narrator. Quite apart from the grotesque introduction of mineral and vegetable connotations into the human image through his golden-sand face and melon-seed eyes, Sin-Bin-U’s conduct is simplistic and exaggerated, in a broad, comic manner. He speaks loudly, yet incomprehensibly. The Manichean worldview contained in his utterances is exaggerated by the confirmatory gesture made with his thumb, and by the speed with which he swings from the poles of positive and negative, from smiling “joyfully” (*radostno*) to speaking “sadly” (*unylo*) and looking around “mournfully” (*toskливо*). The reader is perhaps encouraged to join the partisans in their laughter; Sin-Bin-U’s failure to notice said laughter, consumed as he is by the journey from “shango” to “pylyokha-o,” can only increase his comicality.

Most of Sin-Bin-U’s appearances in the story have him enacting this polarized swing between the positive and the negative in a comical vein. In his first spoken words, he is explaining to the passing partisans, “with malice” (*so zlost’iu*), how they need to fight the Japanese:

— Японса била надо... у-у-ух, как била!
И, широко разводя руками, показывал, как надо бить японца.

[“You should have beat the hell out of the Japs... o-oh, how you should have!”]

²³⁰ Chan, “Broken Tongues,” 34.

And spreading his arms widely, he showed how they should have beaten the Japanese.]²³¹

His statements are once again backed up with expansive physical gestures. But here the message is immediately endorsed by the partisans' captain, Vershinin, who confirms the cruelty of the Japanese towards the Chinese. Hearing himself discussed, Sin-Bin-U reacts with almost childish pleasure: "The Chinese man liked this conversation about himself and started walking beside Vershinin and the others."²³² Once again we see the sudden and complete switch in moods, from malice to joy.

Words describing joy and malice, from the roots *rad* and *zlo*, occur with striking frequency in *Armoured Train 14-69*. The adverb *radostno*, "joyfully," occurs 13 times in the 1922 text, together with one instance of the adjective *radostnaia*, three appearances of the noun *radost'* and six uses of the verb *ob/radovat'sia*. Meanwhile the nouns *zlost'* and *zloba* both occur five times, as does the adverb *zlobno*, with one appearance apiece for the adjectives *zlobnoe* and *zloi* and the adverb *zlo*. Though not every instance can be cited, it can be generally postulated that the *rad*-root words accrue largely to the Red partisans, to nature, or to the narrator, while *zlo* roots are more or less equally associated with the Whites and the Reds. At the end of the first chapter, for example, the armoured train filled with White soldiers and officers is described hurtling through the darkness, carrying within it "hundreds of human bodies, filled with melancholy and anger [*zloboi*]."²³³ Shortly afterwards, the Red partisans are described "rushing off into the hills in confusion and anger [*zlobe*]."²³⁴

²³¹ Ibid. 80. Translation from Miller, *Armored Train*, 54.

²³² Ibid. "Китаец обрадовался разговору о себе и пошел с ними рядом."

²³³ Ibid., 79. "летели в тьму тяжелые стальные коробки вагонов, несущих в себе сотни человеческих тел, наполненных тоской и злобой." (My emphasis.)

²³⁴ Ibid., 81. "Партизаны, как стадо кабанов от лесного пожара, кинув логовища, в смятении и злобе рвались в горы." (My emphasis.)

As early as 1922, Aleksandr Voronskii—the editor of the journal *Krasnaia nov'*, in which *Armoured Train 14-69* was first published—had identified *radostnost'* as the key element in Ivanov's poetics. Voronskii declared that Ivanov's achievement was to experience all the blood and horror of the Civil War and yet transform it into writing infused with “a great, loving, warm, life-affirming feeling, joyfulness, intoxication with the gifts of life.”²³⁵ This aptitude, for Voronskii, emerges from Ivanov's childhood in Siberia and close connection to the vital energies of nature.²³⁶ If we introduce the *zlo* words as a counter-tone to *rad*, however, we can see *Armoured Train 14-69* as offering two alternative motivations for the fighting in which all its characters are engaged: hate or love. The greater ability of the Red partisans to move successfully from *zlo* to *rad* indicates that they, unlike their enemies, have discovered a positive model of solidarity that does not simply depend on hatred of the opposition. Moments of trans-national communication serve as key demonstrations of that solidarity.

Thus the interplay of *rad* and *zlo* is especially stark in the famous scene where the partisans attempt to “convert” a captured American soldier. A *muzhik* on horseback “joyfully” informs the partisans (“*radostno orala glotka*”) that the American had been caught.²³⁷ As they crowd around him, however, the mood changes, their bodies emitting a “dry, chilling malice” (“*sukhaia, znobiashchaia zlost*”).²³⁸ However, the general consensus to execute the captive is interrupted by Znovov, who suggests “propagandizing” him instead. After bashing his head against the problem of trans-lingual communication, Znovov makes

²³⁵ A. K. Voronskii, “Literaturnye siluety: II. Vsevolod Ivanov,” *Krasnaia nov'* 5 (1922): 256.

“большое, любовное, теплое, жизнепринимаящее чувство, радость, опьяненность дарами жизни.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

²³⁷ Ivanov, “*Bronepoezd*,” 83.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

the breakthrough when he pronounces the single word “Lenin”: “The American’s whole body started; his eyes shone, and he answered *joyfully* [*radostno*], “There’s a chap!”²³⁹ When he responds to the words “sovetska respublika” with the exclamation “that is pretty indeed!,” joy spreads to the previously malicious crowd: “The peasants began to laugh *joyfully*”.²⁴⁰ The passage from enmity to brotherhood is sealed by one final, joyous utterance from the captive: “The American pointed at his chest with his hand and in a drawling stammer pronounced *joyfully* and proudly, ‘Pro-le-tar-i-at... We!’ The peasants hugged the American, felt his clothing, and squeezed his hands and shoulders as hard as they could.”²⁴¹

What is Sin-Bin-U’s role in all of this? He enters the conversion struggle after the victory has already been won, and performs in typically comic fashion, rushing forward and speaking at great speed while trying to prevent his trousers from falling down:

Син-Бин-У подскочил к американцу и, подтягивая спадающие штаны, торопливо проговорил:

— Русики ресыпубылика-а. Кытайси ресыпубылика-а. Мериканысы ресыпубылика-а пухао. Нипонсы, пухао, надо, надо ресыпубылика-а. Кыра-а-сна ресыпубылика-а нада-нада*1.

И, оглядевшись кругом, встал на цыпочки, и, медленно подымая большой палец руки кверху, проговорил:

— Шанго.

[Sin-Bin-U jumped over to the American, and holding up his pants which were falling down, said hurriedly, “Lussia is a lepublic, China is a lepublic, Amelica is bad lepublic. The Japanese ale all bad, we need Led Lepublic.”

And looking around, he stood on his tiptoes, stuck up his thumb slowly, and said, “Good.”]²⁴²

²³⁹ Ibid., 86. “Американец вздрогнул всем телом, блеснул глазами и *радостно* ответил: — There’s a chap!” Translation from Miller, *Armored Train*, 61. (My emphasis.)

²⁴⁰ Ivanov, “Вронепоезд,” 86. “Мужики *радостно* захохотали”

²⁴¹ Ibid., 86. “Американец указал себе рукой на грудь и, протяжно и *радостно* заикаясь, гордо проговорил: — Про ле та ри-ат... We! Мужики обнимали американца, шупали его одежду и изо всей силы жали его руки, плечи.” (My emphasis.) Miller, perhaps tired of the repetition, translates *радостно* as “happily” here.

²⁴² Ibid., 86–7. Again, Miller (*Armored Train*, 62) translates and accentually distorts the translation in the footnote, including the word “sovsem,” “all,” which does not have an equivalent in Sin-Bin-U’s original utterance. Ivanov’s footnote reads thus: “*1 Россия - республика, Китай - республика, Америка - плохая республика, Японец - совсем плох, надо красную республику.”

This binary system of “good” and “bad” is essentially the same logic Znobov used to “propagandize” the American. But Sin-Bin-U expresses it in a crude, caricatured form, emphasised by the repetition of the accentually distorted “resybylyka-a” for “respublika,” and the repeated alternatives of “nado” (need, must have) and “pukhao” (Chinese *bù hǎo* 不好, “not good”). The exaggerated physical gestures and simplistic repetitiveness of Sin-Bin-U’s speech lend his contribution a comic quality that is absent from the partisans’ noble forgiveness or the American’s frightened salvation.

Of the two available motivations, hatred and love, it seems Sin-Bin-U is primarily driven by the first. His single-minded hatred for the Japanese and desire for revenge is expressed in almost every utterance he makes. This violent resentment presents a threatening contrast to the comic elements in his demeanour: after killing three Japanese, we are told, Sin-Bin-U “needs nothing, he is content.”²⁴³ When the partisans are debating whether to try and stop the train, their leader Vershinin argues that the Japanese are losing the will to fight. Immediately Sin-Bin-U jumps up and makes a long speech, whose incomprehensibility Ivanov describes with a metaphorical flourish, before offering a short and simple translation:

Sin-Bin-U got up on the walker, and, as if emitting from his mouth a colored paper ribbon that rustled incomprehensibly, spent a long time saying why it was necessary to stop the armoured train that very day.²⁴⁴

The eccentricities of his speech conceal always the same message; their volume and repetitiveness assert the depth of his anger, and the comparative absence of other emotions. Earlier, when Vershinin asks him what all this war, chaos and destruction is really for, Sin-Bin-U offers only ignorance: “— Ни зынаю, Кита. Гори-гори!.. Ни зынаю!.. [...]-

²⁴³ Ibid., 88. “Син-Бин-У убил трех японцев и пока китайцу ничего не надо, он доволен.”

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 103. “Син-Бин-У влез на ходок и долго, будто выпуская изо рта цветную и непонятно шепурчашую бумажную ленту, говорил: почему нужно сегодня задержать бронепоезд.”

Нисиво!.. нисиво ни зынаю!..” (I no knowee, Kita. It just misely! I no knowee!.. [...] I no knowee nothing!.. Nothing!..).²⁴⁵

Sin-Bin-U is motivated by a violent desire for vengeance. In René Girard's account of the institution of sacrifice in human societies, this is precisely the urge that sacrifice seeks to minimize. Girard reads sacrifice as a means of rechanneling the violent impulses that would otherwise seek release within a community onto a victim whose death will not incur reprisal: “sacrifice is primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance.”²⁴⁶ Yet at the climactic (and highly ambiguous) moment of sacrifice, Sin-Bin-U seems driven by a different emotion. When the suggestion is made that a body on the rails is the only way to stop the train—for the somewhat implausible reason that the driver will have to stop to fill out a report—red-haired former miner Vas'ka Okorok steps forward and lies down on the rails. When Vas'ka cries out in fear—“He могу-у!.. душа-а!..” (I can't do it!.. My soul!..)—the *muzhiki* remain silent. But Sin-Bin-U rushes forward to join him, saying: “Сыкмуучна-а!.. Васикья!” (Lowwenely-y! Vasika!)²⁴⁷ This first word seems to be a distorted rendering of *skuchno*, a term most commonly translated as “boring.” This, coincidentally, is the single Russian word that Li-yang speaks (as *kius-no*) in his Petersburg jail.²⁴⁸ Pitched somewhere between question and affirmation, Li-yang's *kius-no* neatly fits the immediate tedium of incarceration. But within the wider scope of the story, which sets in parallel the isolated, exiled fates of Li-yang and Petr Ivanovich, “kius-no/skushno” takes on the extra connotation of loneliness, closer to the verb *skuchat'* (to miss somebody or something). This, surely, is Sin-Bin-U's meaning: Vas'ka is lonely up there on the rails, so he goes to keep him company. Interpreted this way,

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 89. Translation from Miller, *Armored Train*, 65.

²⁴⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Continuum, 2005), 13.

²⁴⁷ Ivanov, “Bronepoezd,” 110.

²⁴⁸ Pil'niak, “Povest' Peterburgskaia,” 43, 47.

Sin-Bin-U's sacrifice becomes an act of empathetic love, unconnected at the moment of action to hatred of the Japanese or some abstract notion of international revolution.

But Sin-Bin-U is not well repaid for his brotherly love. Almost immediately Vas'ka abandons him, and the last words any partisan addresses to him are not sympathetic but demanding: “— Ковш тот брось суды, манза!.. Да и ливорвер-то бы оставил. Куды тебе ево?.. Ей!.. А мне сгодится!..” (Throw the ladle over here, Chink!.. And you could also leave your livorver here. What do you need it for?.. Eh!.. But I can use it!..) ²⁴⁹ Manza (in Chinese *manzi*—满子) is a term of disputed origin applied to Chinese inhabitants of Ussuri krai from the time of its acquisition by Russia in 1860. ²⁵⁰ At the moment of his sacrifice, Sin-Bin-U is not even addressed by name—he remains defined, for his comrades, by his ethnicity. After his death he is mentioned only once more. Vas'ka does not, in the end, survive the battle, and after the fighting is over an unattributed drunken voice recalls fallen heroes: “Someone is crying drunkenly behind the doors, ‘Vaska... the bastards, Vaska—they killed him... I’ll rip open the guts of five of them—for Vaska and the Chinaman... Bastards...’ ‘Well they can all... Dogs...’ ‘I’ll get them... for Vaska!’” ²⁵¹ Sin-Bin-U, once more reduced to racial generality, is remembered second and then forgotten again. His sacrifice may be the

²⁴⁹ Ivanov, “Bronepoezd,” 110. Translation from Miller, *Armored Train*, 91. Miller smooths out, however, the peasant’s mangling of *revol’ver* as *livovrer*, which illustrates the point that Sin-Bin-U is not the only character who floats on the margins of “correct” speech. A. Voronskii argued that Ivanov’s Far East is entirely exotic, the local Russians as much as the Chinese: “У Вс. Иванова Сибирь экзотична. О ней и о людях ее читаешь, как об Австралии” (The Siberia of Vs. Ivanov is exotic. One reads about it and the people that live there as if it were Australia). “Literaturnye siluety”; quoted in A. Kruchenykh, *Novoe v pisatel’skoe tekhnike* (Moscow: Izdanie Vserossiiskogo Soiuza Poetov, 1927), 24. Kruchenykh links this to a moment of flux and chaos in the Siberian countryside, when “Смешались сибиряки, китайцы, японцы и американцы! Слова распоясались” (The Siberians, Chinese, Japanese and Americans all mixed together! Words were ungirdled). *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵⁰ See e.g. V. K. Aresn’ev, *Kitaitsy v Ussuriiskom krae* (Moscow: Kraft, 2004), 67.

²⁵¹ Ivanov, “Bronepoezd,” 120. “За дверцами кто-то плачет пьяно: — Ваську-то... сволочи, Ваську - убили... Я им за Ваську пятерям брюхо вспорю - за Ваську и за китайца... Сволочи... — Ну их к... Собаки... — Я их... за Ваську-то!..” Translation from Miller, *Armored Train*, 103.

one thing readers remember about *Armoured Train 14-69*, but the text itself forgets him quite easily.

Even at his climactic moment of sacrifice, description serves to make Sin-Bin-U as inaccessible as possible, even dehumanized. His head on the rails is “flat and emerald-eyed, like a cobra”; twice the “emerald-eyed cobra” lifts its head to look around at its silent, watching comrades. In response to the request for his gun, he appears to move to throw it into the bushes, only to shoot himself suddenly in the back of the head. Is there a hint of mocking reply here to the peasant’s insistence that Sin-Bin-U no longer needs the gun, or simply a forestalling of any potential second thoughts? Perhaps this gesture contains a note of defiance directed at his watching comrades as much as at the onrushing train. But Ivanov leaves Sin-Bin-U’s final actions open for interpretation, undisturbed by any reports from inside the cobra’s head.

The comic elements in the image of Sin-Bin-U thus coexist with a significant capacity for violent anger and a fearlessness in the face of death that approaches the inhuman. Such a composite, contradictory figure provokes responses that might be considered typical towards strangers. Their inability to communicate or behave correctly suggests a kind of childishness that can be comic, yet they are also suspected of “abnormal” and possibly threatening powers. In the context of the history of China images, Sin-Bin-U retains some of the sense of threat inherent in the “Yellow Peril” mentality, while ostensibly embodying a positive image of revolutionary progress. In his ambiguity, expressed through the dynamic of the grotesque, we see a paradigmatic overlaying of “old” and “new” attitudes towards China.

By embracing death on the train tracks when none of his Russian comrades can, Sin-Bin-U taps into an established stereotype about the abnormal fearlessness of Chinese partisans. Perhaps we can sense in this trope an echo of the anxieties provoked by the Boxers, whose claims to magical invulnerability were relayed to Russian readers by eyewitnesses

such as Ianchevetskii.²⁵² Consider the following assessment by the Soviet military commander I. E. Iakir, who commanded a battalion including Chinese soldiers:

The Chinese is tough, he fears nothing. His own brother gets killed in battle, and he won't bat an eye: he'll go to him, close his eyes, and that'll be the end of it. Then he'll sit down next to him, with ammunition in his cap, and he'll calmly fire off round after round. If he understands that he is up against an enemy, that's bad news for the enemy. A Chinese will fight to the last.²⁵³

These qualities of unsentimentality and composure in the face of battle are presented by Iakir in a tone of admiration. This is not even a question of bravery, which would suggest the overcoming of fear. Iakir's Chinese soldiers instead possess a seemingly superhuman capacity not to feel fear at all.²⁵⁴

One clear literary descendent of Sin-Bin-U who displays these qualities of committed fearlessness can be found in Nikolai Ostrovskii's Socialist Realist classic *How the Steel was Tempered* (*Kak zakalialas' stal'*, 1932–34). Here a Chinese partisan appears at the head of some Red Army troops, heavily armed and battle-crazed: "A bronzed Chinese with bloodshot eyes, clad in an undershirt and girded with machine-gun belts, runs fully upright, a grenade in each hand."²⁵⁵ As with Sin-Bin-U, however, this fearlessness and readiness for violence is

²⁵² Ianchevetskii, *1900*, 144–5.

²⁵³ Quoted in Larin, *Kitaitsy v Rossii*, 92. "Китаец — он стоек, он ничего не боится. Брат родной погибнет в бою, а он и глазом не моргнет, подойдет, глаза ему прикроет, и все тут. Опять возле него сядет, в фуражке — патроны, и будет спокойно патрон за патроном выпускать. Если он понимает, что против него враг, то плохо этому врагу. Китаец будет драться до последнего."

²⁵⁴ The trope of Chinese fearlessness was not confined to early Soviet Russia. In his hugely influential 1894 book *Chinese Characteristics*, the American missionary Arthur Smith argued that the Chinese physiognomy was distinguished by an "absence of nerves," which enabled the Chinese not to feel pain. Quoted in Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54. Smith's book was widely translated; Russian translations appeared in 1904 and 1916. See A. G. Smith, *Kharakteristiki kitaitsev*, ed. E. Spal'vina (Vladivostok: Dal'nyi Vostok, 1904); Smith, *Kharakteristiki kitaitsev*, trans. E. A. Laberbis (Vladivostok: Dalekaia okraina, 1916).

²⁵⁵ Nikolai Ostrovskii, *Kak zakalialas' stal'* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1936), 107. "He скрываясь, бежит загорелый, с воспаленными глазами китаец, в нижней рубашке, перепоясанный пулеметными лентами, с гранатами в обеих руках." Translation modified from Nikolai Ostrovsky, *How the Steel was Tempered: A Novel in Two Parts*, trans. R. Prokofieva (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 150.

combined with a joyous embrace of comradeship. Thus the unnamed “Chinese” vouches for Serezha Bruzhak to the suspicious partisans:

— Моя его знает, — *радостно* улыбался китаец. — Его клицала: "Дластвуй, товалиса!" Его большевика - наса, молодой, холосая, - добавил он *восхищенно*, хлопая Сережу по плечу.²⁵⁶

[“Me know him,” the Chinese smiled *joyously*. “Him shouted: ‘Gleetings, comlades!’ Him Bolsevik — one of us, young, good,” he added *with delight*, slapping Serezha on the shoulder.]

This *kitaets* exhibits similar speech distortions to those of Sin-Bin-U, an admixture of pidgin Russian (“moia,” “ego” and the SOV word order of his first phrase) with correct but simple Russian (a pidgin speaker would not produce “znaet”) and distorted pronunciation. His accent is if anything more comically distorted—the s for sh, the d for zd, the l for r—and stands out more in a text that, by contrast with Ivanov, is marked far less by distortions from a relatively clean, standard literary Russian. Nonetheless, it is this marked linguistic outsider that welcomes Bruzhak as “nasa” (“ours”): this distorted affirmation of comradeship insists that allegiance, in the world the novel describes, transcends ethnic boundaries.

This generic image of the Chinese partisan as both fearless and cheerful is reduced to grotesque simplicity in a brief scene from Andrei Platonov’s *Chevengur* (1926–28).

Aleksandr Dvanov hops a train home, and travels briefly with some “sailors and Chinese” headed for Tsaritsyn. On the way they stop at a meal station so the sailors can beat up the commandant and take his soup. The participation of the Chinese in the narrative is confined to these two sentences:

The Chinese ate up all the fish soup, which the Russian sailors turned down, then gathered up with bread all the nutritious moisture from the walls of the soup pails and said to the sailors, in response to their question about death: “We love death! We love it very much!” Then the Chinese, sated, lay down to sleep.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Ostrovskii, *Kak zakalialas’ stal’*, 108. (My emphases.)

²⁵⁷ Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur. Kotlovan. Rasskazy* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2011), 95. “Китайцы поели весь рыбный суп, от какого отказались русские матросы, затем собрали хлебом всю

These Chinese act and speak simplistically and in chorus, displaying a collective interweaving of pleasure and death drives. The communal refrain of “we love death!” perfectly attains the grotesque balance of unsettling comedy: a child-like enthusiasm for the end of life, followed by a collective mimesis of death in sleep. Pchelintseva presents this passage as a typical example of the “incomprehensibility” that the Chinese theme represents in 1920s prose; however, the accumulation of such examples leads me to see it rather as common knowledge taken to grotesque extremes.²⁵⁸ Chinese in post-revolutionary Russia were jobless, penniless and often starving, with little to lose and a natural hatred of the ruling classes; such historical circumstances could feasibly produce this image of the Chinese migrant-partisan as both preoccupied with survival and fearless to the point of irrationality in the face of death. Platonov, however, condenses a generalized cliché to the level of absurdity. His Chinese partisans reduce the fascination with death that runs through *Chevengur* to its most simplistic extreme. Sin-Bin-U’s individual act of heroism is replaced by a collective death drive so free of reflection as to become disturbing, and the super-human elements that Iakir admires take on a sub-human cast.

A similar structural balance between foreigner comedy and violent sacrifice can be found in Aleksandr Samokhoilov’s short story for older children and teenagers, “Khodia” (1927). Samokhoilov’s titular Chinese migrant combines comic incomprehension with a single-minded and indeed violent devotion to what his broken Russian dubs “Zavetska vlast’!” (“Soviet power!”). The story is recounted in the skaz-toned Far Eastern Russian of a fellow partisan, whose sense of the “khodia’s” strangeness and absurdity is openly expressed. Kicked out of a train carriage, the khodia is later found by the narrator sleeping on

питательную влагу со стенок супных ведер и сказали матросам в ответ на их вопрос о смерти: ‘Мы любим смерть! Мы очень ее любим!’ Потом китайцы сытыми легли спать.”

²⁵⁸ Pchelintseva, “Kitai i kitaitsy,” 162.

the buffers, covered in snow. Later, put on guard duty, the khodia refuses to let the narrator pass unless he produces the password, “midge” (*mushka*). Our narrator appeals to his past favours until the khodia offers them the answer: “you mangy devil, say “midge”—you can go. You don’t say “midge”—you can’t go!”²⁵⁹ Later, however, it transpires that the confused khodia approached each passing group in turn with both a threat and the password: “Say midge, say midge, or I’ll kill you on the spot!”²⁶⁰

Comedy is inevitably followed, however, by heroic sacrifice. When the partisans defend a village against their Polish enemies, they station the nameless khodia in a windmill, armed with a machine-gun, which he operates with aggressive commitment: “he turned the heat on from there! Relentlessly!”²⁶¹ However, commitment is repayed, as for Sin-Bin-U, with his comrades’ indifference: when the partisans withdraw, they forget the khodia, who stays at his post in the windmill, firing away. The Polish soldiers call up to him that the village is taken and he had better surrender:

— Слезай, сукин сын, — ты пленный!
 А ходя с мельницы:
 — Ты сам пленный, белая сволочь! Моя Завецка власть!
 — Слезай, говорят тебе, башка дубовая! Деревня наша!
 А ходя кроет:
 — Пошел сам, чорт паршивый. Я тебе пулеметом дырку сделаю!
 А ферт этот не унимается:
 — Слезай добром, так тебя да раз—эдак, а нет нулей сниму!
 — Ах ты, чорт паршивый! Не ты меня посадил, не ты меня снимай. Завецка власть!²⁶²

[“Come down, you son of a bitch, you’re captured!”
 But the khodia replied from the windmill:
 “You’re the captured one, you white bastard! Me Sawviet power!
 “Come down, we’re telling you, oak-head! The village is ours!”
 But the khodia snaps back:

²⁵⁹ Aleksandr Samokhoilov, *Khodia* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1927), 26. “— чорт паршивый, скажи 'мушка'—тогда едешь. Не скажешь 'мушка'—тогда не едешь!”

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28. “Скажи мушка, скажи мушка, а то убью на месте!”

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35. “жарил оттуда! Отчаянно!”

²⁶² *Ibid.*

“Get out of here, you mangy devil. I’ll put a hole in you with my machine gun!
 But this young buck doesn’t give up:
 “Come down for goodness’ sake, or we’ll knock you down double-quick!”
 “Ah you mangy devil! You didn't put me here, you no take me down. Sawviet
 power!”]

Combining comic simplicity with violent heroism in this final scene is not enough to save this Chinese partisan, however: the narrator casually mentions his sacrificial death in a final line.

Aleksandr Bogdanov's poem “Van Iu-Chan” offers less comedy and less heroism, but repeats the basic structure of a Chinese migrant-turned-partisan who eventually sacrifices himself for the Leninist cause. The opening of the poem accentuates Van’s debased, drunken victimhood as a migrant worker in pre-revolutionary Vladivostok, with a family waiting for him in Qufu. Plague and Japanese occupation only add to his misery. Enraged at his lot, he curses Confucius for condemning the Chinese to servitude:

Рогульщики, ходи и кули,
 Как черви, ползем на ступени...
 Мы высохли, черны, как тени.
 Мы в гное, в грязи утонули.

[Porters, khodias and coolies, / We crawl on our feet, like worms... / We're dried out, black as shadows. / We've drowned in the mud and mire.]²⁶³

From these depths of worm-like debasement, Van is recruited by a Red Army captain, who skillfully translates Leninist rhetoric into Sino-Russian dialect:

Капитан:	В большой стране был плач и стон, Но вот пришел тайфун. Богатых мандарин – вон, А бедным кули – тун... [footnote: все] О–го!
Ван Ю-Чан:	Шанго!..
Капитан:	Там мудрый, пламенный старик, Талойе [footnote: Большой человек] Ленин встал. Для бедных ходей, кули, рикш Его слов – устав...

²⁶³ Aleksandr Alekseevich Bogdanov, *Van Iun-Chan: poeta* (Moscow: Moskovskoe tovarichestvo pisatelei, 1933), 21.

Ван Ю-Чан: О-го!
 Шанго!..²⁶⁴

[Captain: In a great country there was weeping and groaning,/ But then a typhoon came. / The rich mandarins – out! / The poor coolies – dong...
 [footnote: everything] / O-ho!

Wang Yuchang: Good!

Kapitan: There a wise, fiery old man / The Taloie [footnote: great man] Lenin arose. / For poor khodias, coolies, and rickshaw drivers / His words were a command... / O-ho!

Wang Yuchang: Good!]

This manipulation of Sino-Russian pidgin into Russian verse, accomplished with extensive footnotes and glossary, is the poem's most striking characteristic. Bogdanov shows considerable familiarity with Sino-Russian pidgin, as when he has his hero sing “Солнце юла и миюла,” an attested pidgin translation of the convict song “Солнце всходит и заходит” (The Sun Rises and Sets).²⁶⁵ Van, meanwhile, spreads the Leninist message among his compatriots, and becomes a Red scout. Captured and tortured by the Japanese, he is rescued by his Red comrades, and survives to address Confucius one more time:

Конфуций! Не было в мире чудес,
 Сказаний не знала таких гольтьба,
 Какие слагал в эти годы лес,
 Какие творила геройством борьба!²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 33.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 15. “Солнце юла и миюла, / Чега фанза пушанго! / Караула юла-юла, / Мию фангули в окно.” (Bogdanov, *Van Iun-Chan*, 15.) “юла/iula” renders Chinese *youle* 有了, “appeared”; “миюла/miula” corresponds to *meiyoule* 没有了, “disappeared.” Translation: “Солнце есть и нет, / Это жилище плохое, / Караул здесь сидит, / Я не разбиваю окно” (The sun appears and disappears, / This house is no good, / There is a guard sitting here, / I do not break the window). Bogdanov's version differs slightly from the version recorded by the Sinologist Aleksandr Shprints (1907–74) in the Russian Far East on the cusp of the 1920s and 1930s—in Shprints' version, the guard is asleep, and the window is broken: “Солнца юла и миюла, / Чега фанза бушанго, / Караула сыпила юла, / Мая фангули акыно” Translation: “Солнце есть и нет, / Это жилище плохое, / Караул уснул, / Я разбил окно” (The sun appears and disappears, / This house is not good, / The guard has fallen asleep, / I broke the window). Quoted in N. B. Vakhtin and E. V. Golovko, *Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language* (St Petersburg: European University in St Petersburg, 2004), 145.

²⁶⁶ Bogdanov, *Van Iun-Chan*, 49.

[Confucius! There were never such miracles in the world, / the people never knew such legends, / as those the forest composed in these years, / or battle created with its heroism!]

This rejection of the past and its now inadequate myths echoes the moment noted by Chan in *Armoured Train 14–69*, when Sin-Bin-U threw the *Shijing* down a well and went off to enlist in the Red Army. These rival national traditions must be overthrown for new forms of filiation and loyalty to coalesce.

IV. Mikhail Bulgakov and the Violent Chinese Stranger

By 1923 the image of the Chinese partisan as both fearlessly violent and comically strange was sufficiently established to become the object of parody. This is what we find in Mikhail Bulgakov's "A Chinese Story" ("Kitaiskaia istoriia"). Bulgakov, a writer far from positive in his attitude towards the Soviet regime, reproduces to an extent the image of the Red Chinese partisan found in White propaganda from the Civil War. According to the White perspective, these Chinese partisans were not volunteers giving their lives for the revolution, but hired foreign mercenaries, paid killers whose especial savagery came from their lack of cultural sympathy with the native population.²⁶⁷ Bulgakov's Chinese protagonist in "A Chinese Story," who adopts and inverts many of the aesthetic elements we have seen above, can thus be seen as expressing a critique and even rejection of "internationalist" values.

Even at the time of publication, the critic Leonid Averbakh attacked Bulgakov's tale of a Chinese migrant who joins the Red partisans and becomes an expert machine-gunner as a

²⁶⁷ For a summary and indeed revival of this perspective, see Viktor Suvorov, *Ochishchenie: Zachem Stalin obezglavil svoju armiiu?* (Moscow: Izd. AST, 1998), 179–189. It is also striking that, in the wake of recent inter-ethnic tension and violence in Moscow, this history has been rediscovered in the right-wing Russian media, and presented as an example of the danger posed by hired immigrants with no cultural connection to the native population. See for example Vladimir Tikhomirov, "Kak migranty otomstili Rossii," *Istoricheskaia Pravda*, October 17, 2013 (<http://www.istpravda.ru/research/5598/> accessed 03.11.14), which contains some remarkable reproductions of White propaganda posters showing Chinese Red partisan brutality in the Civil War.

cynical parody of Ivanov.²⁶⁸ For a start, there is his name, Sen-Zin-Po, which mimics the double-hyphenated graphic form of Sin-Bin-U and copies two out of three letters in the first two syllables. Then there is his career, which seems to undermine the kind of internationalist solidarity that Ivanov (albeit ambiguously) endorses. Sen-Zin-Po joins the Red army after trading all his money and clothes for opium. Whereas Sin-Bin-U knows enough broken Sino-Russian to preach his Manichean internationalism to comrades and converts, Sen-Zin-Po's Russian consists entirely of parroting useful or important-sounding words, including obscenities. It turns out, however, that the clueless Sen-Zin-Po is remarkably good at shooting a machine gun. Seemingly incomprehending of the military situation he finds himself in, Sen-Zin-Po practices his lethal skill until he is killed in a White attack.

Bulgakov's Chinese partisan is defined by incomprehension, both unknowable and unknowing. At the beginning of the story he sits by the riverbank in an unnamed Russian city, though a number of details conspire to suggest he is by the Kremlin in Moscow. These include onion domes, crenellated walls, tram lines, and a black clock with yellow hands on a tower—surely a reference to the clock on the Kremlin's Spasskaya tower. The Chinese stranger, as in Pil'niak's *Naked Year*, is once more in the heart of Russia. His presence, however, is not given the motivational backstory that both Pil'niak and Ivanov supplied, but instead is described as an inexplicable, almost magical fact: "Nobody knows why the mysterious khodia flew several thousand versts, like a dry leaf, and wound up on the bank of a river beneath a chewed-up, serrated wall."²⁶⁹ Note that yet another metaphor from a non-

²⁶⁸ Leonid Averbakh, "M. Bulgakov. 'Diaboliada,'" *Izvestiia*, September 20, 1925. Referenced in Lesley Milne, *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 56.

²⁶⁹ Mikhail Bulgakov, "Kitaiskaia istoriia," first published in *Illustratsii Petrogradskoi pravdy* 7, May 6, 1923. Reprinted in Mikhail Bulgakov, *Diabolida: rasskazy* (Moscow: Izd-vo Nedra, 1925), 135. "Никто не знает, почему загадочный ходя пролетел, как сухой листик, несколько тысяч верст и оказался на берегу реки под изгрызенной зубчатой стеной." In supplying translations for this story, I have consulted Carl R. Proffer's translation, published in Mikhail Bulgakov, *Diaboliad and*

human sphere (“like a dry leaf”) provides here an additional touch of grotesque alienation. Like his presence, the utterances of this “mysterious” arrival are, predictably, incomprehensible: “ ‘O-o-o!’ The khodia muttered something and added a few more words mournfully in a language that no one understood.”²⁷⁰ The addition of “nikomu” (no one) emphasizes the stranger’s isolation, but it also reminds us that he is incomprehensible only to a certain audience, and implicitly identifies the readers as that audience.

Bulgakov’s narrator, however, identifies only partially with this position of incomprehension in which he has placed his audience, thereby establishing an ironic narratorial tone that plays with ignorance while simultaneously knowing more than it at first claims. An example comes in the story’s first line: “This was a remarkable khodia, a real saffron representative of the Celestial Empire, about 25 years old, or maybe forty. The devil only knows! Apparently, he was 23.”²⁷¹ After rhetorically throwing up his hands in exasperation at the impossibility of establishing the Chinese stranger’s age, the narrator comes straight back with the right figure. Later he will go on to translate large chunks of the “incomprehensible” language of his protagonist. By establishing a limited narrator who then reveals himself to be much closer to omniscience, Bulgakov prepares the ground for the representation of his Chinese stranger as both mysterious and, ultimately, transparent.

Despite these mysteries, then, we now learn that the narrator can in fact gain access to this Chinese migrant’s mind. Therein we find a commensurable mood of incomprehension and alienation with demonic overtones:

Other Stories, ed. Ellendea Proffer and Carl R. Proffer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

²⁷⁰ Bulgakov, *Diavoliad*, 136. “— O-o-o! — что-то пробормотал ходя и еще тоскливо прибавил несколько слов на никому не понятном языке.”

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 135. “Это был замечательный ходя, настоящий шафранный представитель Небесной империи, лет 25, а может быть, и сорока? Черт его знает! Кажется, ему было 23 года.”

One look at the river was enough to be convinced that this was a *devilishly* cold, *alien* river. Behind the khodia was an empty tram line, in front of the khodia porous granite, beyond the granite on the slope a rowboat with a broken bottom, beyond the rowboat that same damned river, beyond the river more granite, and beyond the granite were houses, stone houses, *the devil knows* how many houses. *For some reason* the stupid river flowed right through the center of the city.²⁷²

This landscape of cold, unwelcoming granite recalls the stony Petersburg that greeted Pil'niak's Li-yang. The Russian urban scene is represented through Sen-Zin-Po's eyes as strange, demonic, and incomprehensible—as incomprehensible to him as his presence and speech are to others. This ignorance is compounded by structure: the text is subtitled “six pictures/scenes instead of a story,” and the connecting incidents between the scenes are not necessarily clear. When we twice encounter the statement that Sen-Zin-Po set off “in an unknown direction,” it is unclear even to whom this direction is unclear: to the narrator, to us, or to Sen-Zin-Po.

In the second scene we are transported from the heart of the city to the outskirts, on the edge of that wilderness (*pustyr* ') that seemed always to frame Pil'niak's China images. Here we meet a second, older Chinese character, who expands the demonic motif that Sen-Zin-Po first linked to the river. An opium dealer, he sits in a dilapidated shack on the edge of the city feeding woodchips into a small, smoke-belching stove. His eyes, in the flickering light of the stove, alternate between “evil like a demon's” and “cold, deep and sad.” When he blows on the woodchips in the stove, his inflated cheeks give him the look of “a Chinese evil spirit.”²⁷³ We may recall here Liyanov's resemblance to the Chinese devil masks in Liudogovskii's study; but Bulgakov employs these sinister associations to contrast the older man's devilishness with Sen-Zin-Po's clueless naivety. For it is the old man who leads him astray.

²⁷² Ibid., 135–36. “Одного взгляда на реку было достаточно, чтобы убедиться, что это дьявольски холодная, чужая река. Позади ходи была пустая трамвайная линия, перед ходей - ноздреватый гранит, за гранитом на откосе лодка с пробитым днищем, за лодкой эта самая проклятая река, за рекой опять гранит, а за гранитом дома, каменные дома, черт знает сколько домов. Дурацкая река зачем-то затекла в самую середину города.”

²⁷³ Ibid., 137–38.

Despite insisting once more that no one, Sen-Zin-Po excepted, can understand this man's speech, the narrator is in fact able to "translate" a good section of it into Russian. This translation renders the old man's discourse in largely standard, if simplistic, Russian, a combination of what Johanna Nichols calls "Broken Russian" and "Simplified Russian." As mentioned above, Nichols defines Broken Russian as Russian produced with grammatical errors, while "Simplified Russian" represents "Russian without actual grammatical errors, but distinctive in its simple syntax, word order, lexical infelicities, etc." Other characteristic features of Simplified Russian include "unvaried choppy sentences" and the "absence of subordinating conjunctions and particles[.]"²⁷⁴

These elements can all be found in Bulgakov's translated "Chinese." The old man's speech is simplistic but not excessively deformed, with a basic grasp of inflection. His discourse patterns also echo the binary structure that we saw in Sin-Bin-U's utterances, representing a world made up of presences and absences: "По-русски было бы так: Хлеб — нет. Никакой — нет. Сам — голодный. Торговать — нет и нет. Кокаин — мало есть. Опиум — нет."²⁷⁵ (In Russian it would go like this: Bread — no. None. I'm hungry myself. To sell — nothing at all. Cocaine — there's a little. Opium — no.) At first it seems that absence dominates. But as the room gets hotter and his interlocutor more sleepy, the old man moves onto a string of positives: "Ленин — есть. Самый главный очень есть. Буржуи — нет, о, нет! Зато Красная армия есть. Много — есть. Музыка? Да, да. Музыка, потому что Ленин. В башне с часами — сиди, сиди. За башней? За башней — Красная армия."²⁷⁶ (Lenin is. Most important, very much is. Bourzhuis – no, oh no! Instead the Red Army is. Much there is. Music? Yes, yes. Music, because Lenin. In the tower with the clock

²⁷⁴ Nichols, "Chinese Pidgin Russian," 399.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 137.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 138

— sit, sit. Behind the tower? Behind the tower is the Red Army.) The Spasskaya tower returns here. Already in the first scene, Sen-Zin-Po had been struck by the music of its bells, which seemed to “want to play some melody fluently and triumphantly” (складно и победоносно).²⁷⁷ Now the tower with its music is explicitly connected to Lenin and his Red Army.

The old man’s words have influence. After finally pleading his way to some opium, Sen-Zin-Po falls into an opium trance on the floor. In his dream he lives in a “crystal hall” where the golden-handed black clock strikes every minute, its movements controlled by a distinctly Sinified, joyous Lenin:

a very joyous Lenin walked out wearing a yellow jacket, with a huge, shiny, tightly wound queue, wearing a cap with a button on the crown. He grabbed the pointer-pendulum by the tail and pushed it to the right—then the clock rang out to the left, but when he pushed it to the left—the bells rang out on the right. Having rung the bells loudly for a while, he took the coolie out onto the balcony, to show him the Red Army.²⁷⁸

This “crystal hall,” reminiscent of the “crystal palace” of scientific socialism that Dostoevskii’s *Underground Man* railed so famously against, is offered here to Sen-Zin-Po by Lenin and his newfound power over Russia’s historical time.

But Sen-Zin-Po’s motivations for desiring the crystal hall have nothing to do with the triumph of reason or global justice. The crystal hall appeals, first of all, because it is warm, and second of all, because the “indescribable beauty” Nast’ka is there, walking across the mirrored room with feet small enough to “hide inside a nostril.” Third, Nast’ka’s “scoundrel,” who wounded the older Chinese with a Finnish knife, can here be dispatched by Sen-Zin-Po, who, “brave as a giant,” decapitates his rival. In reward Lenin hangs a star on his chest and plays a “thunderous” melody on the bells, and at the dream’s conclusion the crystal

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 136.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 139. “выходил очень радостный Ленин в желтой кофте, с огромной блестящей и тугой косой, в шапочке с пуговкой на темени. Он схватывал за хвост стрелу-маятник и гнал ее вправо - тогда часы звенели налево, а когда гнал влево - колокола звенели направо. Погремев в колокола, Ленин водил ходю на балкон - показывать Красную армию.”

hall is transformed into a vision of Sen-Zin-Po's childhood, echoing motifs familiar from Pil'niak and Ivanov: sorghum, scorching sun, his mother carrying water towards him.²⁷⁹ But Sen-Zin-Po takes on none of Lenin's ideology along with his blessing: his motivations are limited to survival, lust, petty hatred, and homesickness.

So Sen-Zin-Po goes off to join the Red Army. His first encounter with his comrades recalls in simplistic, comic form the complex, ambiguous notion of camaraderie developed in Ivanov. Feeling obliged to speak, he rattles off the sum total of words that he learned on his journey from China to Russia: "khleb" ("bread"), "pusti vagon" (simplified version of "let me into the train carriage"), "karas-ni" (distorted pronunciation of "red"), "kitai-sa" (distorted pronunciation of "Chinese"), and a three-word obscenity that, experience tells him, has "miraculous" effects. In this case the reaction is, once more, joy, though far from the fraternal joy of communion that ran through *Armoured Train 14-69*:

In this case the consequences were happy ones. A thundering wave of laughter struck the arched hall and washed up to the very ceiling. The khodia replied to this first roll with smile No. 2—it had a slight conspiratorial shade—and a repetition of the three words. After this he thought he would be deafened. A piercing voice cut through the racket:

"Vanya! Get over here! This Chinese volunteer does a great job of mother-swearing!"²⁸⁰

Sin-Bin-U's first utterance, we recall, was also marked by an obscenity, though one given in Chinese. Furthermore, his curse was produced out of authentic hatred for the Japanese, not a clueless desire to please. The joy of this laughter, meanwhile, is caused by difference, not communion. When the partisans laughed at Sin-Bin-U, he did not notice; Sen-Zin-Po is delighted by his comic effect and seeks repetition. Four times in this scene we are told that

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 139–40.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 141. "В данном случае произошли радостные последствия. Громовой вал смеха ударил в сводчатом зале и взмыл до самого потолка. Ходя ответил на первый раскат улыбкой No. 2 с несколько заговорщическим оттенком и повторением трех слов. После этого он думал, что он оглохнет. Пронзительный голос прорезал грохот: — Ваня! Вали сюда! Вольноопределяющийся китаец по матери знаменито кроет!"

Sen-Zin-Po is smiling. But these smiles are the opposite of communication. Sen-Zin-Po's smile compensates for an absence of communicability, as when he responds to repeated demands for his name with only a repeated grin: "The khodia shrouded himself in a radiant and sated smile."²⁸¹

This name is not in fact learned until the fifth of six scenes. Until then the protagonist is designated simply as *khodia* (in distinction to the older Chinese character, who is consistently referred to as *kitaets*). As *khodia*, then, he is not simply a representative of an ethnicity but specifically a representative of Chinese migrants in Russia. His name, when it does appear, serves in its strange gibberish to enhance his "Chineseness," while also offering a parodic nod to Ivanov. But the appearance of his name in fact coincides with a general shift in the story from ignorance to knowledge. As the skies clear over the changing seasons, so the air of mystery surrounding the Chinese stranger is dispelled somewhat by the discovery of his true purpose:

And when the sky turned from gray into blue with puffy cream-coloured clouds, everyone already knew that just as Franz Lizst was born to play his monstrous rhapsodies on the piano, so the *khodia* Sen-Zin-Po appeared in the world in order to shoot a machine-gun.²⁸²

The comparison with Lizst carries over into later descriptions of Sen-Zin-Po in battle, playing a "terrible rhapsody" on his machine gun. This, it seems, is the "music" whose existence is guaranteed by Lenin and his Red Army.

Despite finding his true essence in the automatic, mechanical operation of a Maxim gun, Sen-Zin-Po remains bemused about everything else. The final scene, ironically entitled "A Brilliant Debut," recounts his death in battle after he fails to realize that his side has retreated. This situation, it will be noted, is closely reminiscent of Samokhoilov's *Khodia*,

²⁸¹ Ibid., 142. "Ходя замкнулся в лучезарной и сытой улыбке."

²⁸² Ibid., 142. "И когда небо из серого превратилось в голубое, с кремowymi пузатыми облаками, все уже знали, что как Франц Лист был рожден, чтобы играть на рояле свои чудовищные рапсодии, ходя Сен-Зин-По явился в мир, чтобы стрелять из пулемета."

which was in fact published after “Kitaiskaia istoriia”—except that there is nothing heroic about Sen-Zin-Po’s resistance. Even when his commander shoots himself in front of him, Sen-Zin-Po turns back to his gun and keeps firing—but not out of bravery, commitment, or self-sacrifice. Rather he does not understand what is happening, and does not know how to do anything else; or, as Lesley Milne suggests, he does not know the word for “surrender.”²⁸³ The only words he can muster are a mangled reproduction of the promises of financial reward earlier made in recognition of his talent: “—Премии... карасий виртузи... палата! палати!” (i.e.: “премиальные... красный виртуоз... плата! плати!” Rendered by Carl Proffer as: “Bo-noose... Led Almy viltuosi... payee! Payee!”)²⁸⁴ But soon his relatively useless voice is silenced when a junker stabs him in the throat. His last thoughts are of home, and then finally of the black clock, the bells and the crystal hall. Somehow the hall protects him from pain, and he dies “painless and peaceful,” with a frozen smile on his face.

If I am right to identify the crystal hall with the promise of scientific socialism, and if we read the Spassky clock, through its association with Lenin and the Red Army, as signifying the centre of the new Soviet power, then it seems Averbakh may have underestimated the degree to which Bulgakov’s story subverts the model of internationalist solidarity that Ivanov (albeit ambiguously) explored. This is serious satire. Bulgakov’s *khodia*, who understands nothing and seeks only pleasure and relief from pain, is led to the socialist cause by a combination of necessity and narcotic hallucination. His mechanical aptitude for killing is unconnected to any apparent sense of the identity of his targets. He really just wants to go home. At his isolated and violent death, however, the fantasy of the “crystal hall” returns to offer him a kind of sanctity, the ironic compensation of a delusion. If the preceding images of Chinese partisans complicate the notion of internationalist solidarity

²⁸³ Milne, *Bulgakov*, 56.

²⁸⁴ Bulgakov, *Diavoliad*, 145; translation from Proffer, *Diaboliad*, 158.

with their estranged language and grotesque combinations of comedy and violence, Bulgakov's story dismisses the idea of solidarity entirely, reducing Sen-Zin-Po's motivation to confusion and self-interested opportunism.

Bulgakov later reworked many of the motifs from "A Chinese Story," along with the story's dubious attitude towards international brotherhood, when he included two Chinese characters in his 1926 stage comedy of NEP-era vice, *Zoika's Apartment* (*Zoikina kvartira*). As in "A Chinese Story," we have in the play one older Chinese man and one younger.²⁸⁵ The younger man shares the same name as the earlier figure, Sen-Dzin-Po, though this name is mentioned only once. In the cast list and through most of the play he is referred to, for reasons that will become clear, as "Kheruvim." The elder man's name, exploiting the tri-syllabic arrangement common in Chinese names to humorous effect, is "Gan-Dza-Lin, also known as Gazolin [i.e. Gasoline]."²⁸⁶ The Civil War is over, and the NEP era offers somewhat less heroic stereotypical occupations for Chinese migrants in Russia. Gazolin and Kheruvim run a laundry, though their real source of income seems to come (again, as in the earlier story) from selling narcotics. They come into contact with Zoya and her apartment because Zoya's husband, the ruined aristocrat Obol'ianinov, has become a hopeless morphine addict. Kheruvim, who brings the morphine to the apartment, falls in love with the maid, Maniushka. Determined to return with his beloved to Shanghai, Kheruvim murders corrupt local Party boss Gus' with a Finnish knife—the same knife wielded by Sen-Zin-Po's love rival in "A Chinese Story." As the play ends, Kheruvim flees with Gus's money and Maniushka.

²⁸⁵ The exclusively male gender of the Chinese migrant figures in these texts corresponds to the historical composition of the Chinese migrant population in Russia from the mid-nineteenth century on. Larin estimates that the gender ratio was 7 women to every hundred men in the mid-1920s. Larin, *Kitaittsy v Rossii*, 123.

²⁸⁶ Mikhail Bulgakov, "Zoikina kvartira," in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 3, *p'esy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1992), 77.

Language is the primary mark of difference in the play's text, though the "Chinese" appearance taken on by Russian actors, to judge by a recent Moscow production, can also be exploited for exotic effect.²⁸⁷ Bulgakov's interest in using Chinese foreigner talk in his comedy is neither anthropological nor utopian but, of course, primarily comic: the speech of his Chinese characters must be audibly strange while still understandable to a non-specialist audience. Thus his Chinese characters, as in "A Chinese Story," do not speak Chinese pidgin Russian but rather a mixture of what Nichols calls Broken Russian and Simplified Russian, with occasional elements that gesture towards Chinese pidgin Russian. They are also encouraged by the printed text to speak with a systematically deformed accent. Regular features include l for r, s for sh, ts for ch, and the interspersions of extra vowels between consonants (e.g. *palakhoi* for *plokhoi*).

Take, for example, this first exchange between Gazolin and Kheruvim. Realistically, we would expect this conversation to take place in Chinese. For the sake of the play, however, it must proceed in a language that is comprehensible to the audience while still recognizably Sinified. The result is a form of foreigner talk explicitly manipulated for comic effect:

Г а з о л и н. Ты зулик китайский. Бандит! Цесуцю украл, кокаин украл. Где пропадаль? А? Как верить, кто? А?
 Х е р у в и м. Мал-мала малци! Сама бандити есть. Московски басак.
 Г а з о л и н. Уходи сицас, уходи с працесной. Ты вор. Сухарски вор.
 Х е р у в и м. Сто? Гониси бетни китайси? Сто? Мене украли сесуцю на Светном, кокаин отбил бандит, цуть мал-мала меня убиваль. Смотри.
 (Показывает шрам на руке.) Я тебе работал, а тепель гониси! Кусать сто бетни китаси будет Москве? Палахой товалис! Убить тебе надо.

[GASOLINE: Chinese bandit! You crook! You steal silk, you steal cocaine! Where you go so long time? How can believe you?

CHERUBIM: Hold on, hold on, shut up! You bandit, you!

GASOLINE: Get out my laundry, you thief!

²⁸⁷ In 2013 I saw the Hermitage Theater's production in Moscow, which has been running since 1998. The Chinese characters, stripped to the waist in heavy facial make-up, appeared in a cloud of smoke on the left of the stage. Beside them on far stage left there sat a huge golden Buddha, which glowed threateningly at moments when Kheruvim's plot was formed and accomplished.

CHERUBIM: What? What? You kick out poor Chinaman? They steal silk! On Svetnoy Boulevard! Some bandit steal cocaine, try kill me, look, look! (Shows the scar on his hand.) I work for you, now kick me out! Where get food, one poor Chinaman in Moscow? You bad comrade! Should be kill.]²⁸⁸

There are gestures here to Chinese pidgin Russian, suggesting that Bulgakov shared a general cultural awareness of its patterns. Kheruvim's repeated use of "mal-mala" recalls the popularity of "malo-malo" as a phrase in Chinese pidgin Russian, attested for example in the speech of Dersu Uzala. Kheruvim's use of the dative pronoun in place of prepositional pronoun phrases ("mene ukrali" for "u menia ukrali," "ia tebe rabotal" for "ia dlia tebia rabotal") mirrors Chinese pidgin Russian's tendency to eliminate prepositions. The feminine "sama" used to refer to Gazolin may echo Chinese pidgin Russian's gender-disregarding use of "moia" and "tvoia" as universal personal pronouns, though it may equally reflect the accentual distortion rule whereby a consonant must be followed by a vowel. Later in the scene, Gazolin will refer to Kheruvim as "ona" (she), a mistake the maid Maniushka emphasises by parroting: "A ona umeet?"—"And she can?"

However, features such as declension ("s prasetnoi" for "s prachechnoi"), conjugation ("gonisi" for "gonish'," again reflecting the consonant-vowel model but also echoing Chinese pidgin Russian's use of the imperative as the basic verb form), and the use of the past tense are decidedly alien to Chinese pidgin Russian. "Moskve," given in the prepositional but without the preposition "v" (in), is pure Broken Russian, made more jarring by the fact that Kheruvim has just produced the correct prepositional phrase "na Svetnom." In the main, Bulgakov uses parataxis in place of subordination—a tendency Nichols identifies as a primary feature of Simplified Russian—and adds a range of accentual distortions to render this dialogue as foreigner talk. The range of potential utterances is limited to simple,

²⁸⁸ Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3: 84–5. Translation taken from Mikhail Bulgakov, *Zoya's Apartment: A Tragic Farce in Three Acts*, trans. Nicholas Saunders and Frank Dwyer (Toronto: Samuel French, 1990), 18. This translation makes no attempt to replicate the accentual distortions of Bulgakov's original, but rather aims at a convincing form of English foreigner talk suitable to a stage Chinaman from the Anglophone theatrical tradition.

one-phrase questions and assertions, which once more reduce complexity to a binary universe where all is either “good” or “bad.”

The proximity of foreigner talk to baby talk is offset, however, by the criminality and violence that make up the dialogue’s content. We are first given to suspect here that Gazolin and Kheruvim’s main occupation is not laundering but selling narcotics. This in itself does not set them apart in any great way from the majority of the play’s characters, all of whom are engaged in various shady and illegal forms of activity. The comic exposure of the seedy underbelly of NEP society is, after all, the play’s satirical target and primary source of humorous effect. What is more particular to the Chinese characters is the emphasis on theft, violence and murder. These themes, presented on our first acquaintance with these characters, anticipate Kheruvim’s climactic murder of Gus’ and theft of his money. They may also have been themes that a contemporary audience for *Zoika’s Apartment’s* would have readily associated with Moscow’s Chinese population. Milne peruses the contemporary press in search of Bulgakov’s sources:

a survey of *Vechernaya Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*) from July to November 1925, the period of the play’s gestation, produced the following: the discovery of no fewer than five brothels, seven opium dens (three of them run by Chinamen), three cases of drug-running, three cases of drug addiction, and the murder of one Chinaman by another; on 3 November there was a report of an opium den that had for three years been operating behind the front of a Chinese laundry.²⁸⁹

An audience member who read the papers would be well prepared to regard the Chinese migrant population as a potentially dangerous criminal element.

But we can also see here a connection of the Chinese migrant to violence and death that links back to Ivanov and Bulgakov’s earlier story. The sense of childishness produced by the approximation of foreigner talk to baby talk once more stands juxtaposed to a jarring capacity for serious, adult action beyond the barrier of language. Beneath baby talk lurks

²⁸⁹ Milne, *Mikhail Bulgakov*, 117.

frightening violence. This linguistic deception is compounded in Kheruvim's case by appearance. Indeed, his "Russian" name itself derives from the Russian characters' repeated exclamations over his cherubic appearance. When Maniushka first meets him she declares: "Ah, isn't he beautiful. Like a cherub."²⁹⁰ Later Obol'ianinov and Gus', who both become his victims in different ways, repeat the assertion. The original Sen-Zin-Po was similarly angelic: repeating the word "virtuoso" that he had heard applied to his shooting skills, he took on the appearance of a "Chinese angel."²⁹¹ But where Sen-Zin-Po was defined by naivety to the end, Kheruvim is increasingly revealed as a demon in cherubic form.

This devilishness is expressed in a ruthless pursuit of self-interested acquisition. At the moment when he tempts Obol'ianinov with a constant supply of morphine, and also offers to tattoo him, the stage directions explicitly state that Kheruvim becomes "strange and terrifying."²⁹² His lust for Maniushka is violently acquisitive: we learn of it at the end of their first scene together, when he describes her as "fine" ("khorosaia," a distorted "khoroshaia") and then, voraciously, "tasty" (vkusnaia).²⁹³ Once it is revealed that she reciprocates his attraction, he informs her matter-of-factly that they will soon be leaving for Shanghai, where he will sell opium and she will produce "seven, eight, nine children." When she appears disappointed by the lack of romance in this proposal, Kheruvim, suspecting Maniushka of wanting to marry Gazolin instead, threatens her with a knife to the throat. Maniushka eventually acquiesces to what she calls this "Shanghai-style proposal... a fiancé with a dagger!"²⁹⁴ Kheruvim promises he will not beat her in their future life together, though if she kisses anyone else he will cut her throat.

²⁹⁰ Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 85. "Ах, какой хорошенький. На херувима похож."

²⁹¹ Bulgakov, *Diavoliada*, 143. "стал похож на китайского ангела."

²⁹² Bulgakov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 87. "странен и страшен."

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

Later in the same scene, Gazolin arrives with a knife to make his own proposal to Maniushka. As they fight over her with their knives, Maniushka calls both Chinese characters “d’iavoly;” on two other occasions, the second after he has committed the murder, she calls Kheruvim a devil (“d’iavol” – the only uses of this word in the play, which is otherwise overflowing with another devil word, “chert”).²⁹⁵ Once he has Maniushka, all he needs is the money to return to Shanghai, and he pursues it with fetishistic determination. Allowed by a drunk and despondent Gus’ to touch his money, Kheruvim whispers “Ah, tsirvontsiki, lovely tsirvonchiki” (twice mangling the word *chervonets*, meaning a ten-ruble coin), before stabbing Gus’ in the back.²⁹⁶ His last words are a threat to cut Maniushka’s throat if she will not go with him.

If *Zoika’s Apartment* stages NEP-era vice unsuccessfully hidden behind innocent exteriors, Kheruvim is the character that expresses this dynamic to its fullest extent: angelic in appearance, comic in accent, murderous in intent. While Ivanov’s Sin-Bin-U pursued the internationalist ideal to a dramatic act of self-sacrifice, and the first Sen-Zin-Po expressed displaced alienation within the chaos of civil war, Kheruvim represents the extreme reduction of the materialist, acquisitive drive that Bulgakov’s play identifies and satirizes within NEP culture. Even his consuming desire for the money to return to Shanghai mirrors, in the opposite direction and to greater success, the longing of Russian characters such as Alla to escape Moscow for Paris. But Kheruvim is the most ruthless, the most single-minded, and the most successful. Like the language he speaks, the character of the Chinese migrant is a distillation of the moral situation that pertains among the Russian characters, revealing the essence of that moral situation in exaggerated, distorted form.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 125. “Ай, предложение шанхайское! Ай, женишок с ножичком!”

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 126, 129, 144.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 143. “А, цирвонцики, цирвончики миленьки.”

While the Chinese Red partisan offered a ready symbol of trans-national solidarity, the Chinese migrant within Russia, as a literary figure, was obliged to represent many of the basic social anxieties of the age: confusion, violence, the grotesque distortion of a disrupted world. Many of these anxieties link back to the Orientophobia of the late Imperial period, which arose when Russia's Pacific ambitions encountered the alarming rise of East Asia as a possible threat to European global dominance, as expressed in such events as the Boxer rebellion and the Russo-Japanese war.²⁹⁷ The examples in this chapter show that these anxieties lived on into the post-revolutionary period, compromising the notions of trans-national solidarity that figures such as the Chinese partisan could potentially express. Even the partisans we have seen are ambiguous: alternately comic and disturbingly violent, their dedication seems tainted by a linguistically asserted simplicity that tends towards childishness or sub-humanity.

The model of internationalism suggested by Utkin's "Sungarskii drug," wherein each nationality remains in its native place with fond memories of the time they came together in battle, seems far more comfortable than the historical situation reflected in the unsettling strangers who actually stay. As we proceed to explore the images of internationalist solidarity produced by writers and film-makers who actually travelled to China, we would do well to remember that these other Chinese images were also in circulation in the Soviet cultural system of the time, and offered an ambiguous, at times threatening impression of Chinese foreignness when introduced into the destabilized space of home.

²⁹⁷ Lim, *China and Japan*, 5.

Chapter Two **Unmasking the Exotic: Reporting the Chinese Revolution**

Beginning in 1924, as the Soviet Union won diplomatic recognition from the Beijing government and Comintern agents cemented their influence with the Guomindang in Guangzhou, a series of Soviet reporters travelled to China to produce eyewitness accounts of this distant neighbour moving towards revolution. These claimed to depart from the long tradition of Russian and European travel writing about China. According to their most prominent practitioner and theorist, Sergei Tret'iakov, the task of Soviet reports on China was not to produce exotic tales of Oriental difference, but instead to unmask the exotic image of China and replace it with an authentic account of contemporary Chinese reality. This improved, authentic image was not simply produced, however, by the presence of the reporter. Instead, it was the privileged position and perspective of the Soviet eyewitness in China, armed with the analytical power of Marxist thought but also infused with a sympathy for oppressed China born of Russian experience, that ensured the validity of his account.

In aesthetic terms, this means an emphasis on the power of observation to strip away fantasy and delusion, and a translational focus on non-linguistic sounds and signs from the sphere of everyday life, that can be reinvested with revolutionary meaning. These standard tools of internationalist aesthetics are both endorsed and subverted in the “Chinese Tale” of Boris Pil'niak, with which this chapter concludes.

I. Erdberg and the Orientalists

In 1929 a Comintern activist named Oskar Tarkhanov published *Chinese Novellas*, an account of his experiences in China. Tarkhanov, who wrote under the name of Oskar Erdberg, had worked on the staff of Mikhail Borodin, the Comintern's chief agent in Guangzhou during the alliance with the Chinese Nationalists (Guomindang). After the collapse of the Comintern's China policy in 1927, Tarkhanov escaped with Borodin through the Gobi Desert by car. Tarkhanov, in other words, was one of the titular “conquerors” from

André Malraux's 1927 novel *The Conquerors*: an agent from a European country who sought to influence political developments in China while claiming to act out of solidarity with the Chinese people. I begin with his *Chinese Novellas* because they vindicate this complex and ambiguous positionality by claiming for the Soviet reporter in China a special form of authority. The construction and deconstruction of that authority shall be the subject of this chapter.

A foreword "from the author" finds our narrator sitting in the smoking room of a plush Peking hotel, eavesdropping on a group of Western Orientalists ensconced in leather chairs as they trade Egyptian, Indian and Chinese reincarnation myths. These men demonstrate great skill in deploying the knowledge that is the source of their prestige: linking Orientalist knowledge to another trope of Western privilege, Tarkhanov/Erdberg describes them moving through the realm of mythology "with the ease of fox-trotting pairs on the parquet floors of dance halls."²⁹⁸ For Erdberg the critical eavesdropper, however, their total control over "China" as a set of mythical and religious narratives serves only to obscure the transformations taking place in the contemporary social reality around them: "They speak of resurrections, transfigurations and metamorphoses in the myths of Buddhist and Daoist legend," he chides, "so as not to see those transfigurations that are happening *in front of their eyes* in China."²⁹⁹ These men fail, indeed refuse, to be eyewitnesses, hiding from reality in a mythical space they can control. Half a century before Edward Said, the Soviet observer is already unmasking Orientalist knowledge as a form of imperial power.

Later, when the newspapers come, the Orientalists read only the economic and political news of the foreign community in China: the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, the

²⁹⁸ Oskar Erdberg, *Kitaiskie novelly* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1959), 11. "с такой же легкостью, как фокстротирующие парочки на паркетных полах танцевальных залов."

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12. Emphasis in original. "Они говорят о возрождениях, перевоплощениях и перерождениях в мифе буддийских и даосистих легенд, чтобы не видеть тех перевоплощений, которые *на их глазах* происходят в Китае."

Diplomatic Corpus, the British-controlled Customs Service. In these newspapers, for Erdberg, “there is no China”; only a “no man’s land” criss-crossed by foreign interests.³⁰⁰ In both cases the accusation is the same: real, contemporary China is invisible to these Europeans, even as they participate in its domination. Erdberg, by contrast, returns to his room and a different text: the volume of Lenin he left open on the table. Here he seems to find the conversation about resurrections, transfigurations and metamorphoses continued, but in a radically different key: “A population hundreds of millions strong, downtrodden and made savage in their medieval stagnation, is now awakening to new life and to the struggle for the elementary rights of man.”³⁰¹ Erdberg’s China is being “transfigured” in the “inextinguishable fire of struggle”: the language of metamorphosis is appropriated from colonial discourse and repurposed within the figurative discourse of Leninist internationalism.³⁰²

Two things should be noted about this scene. The first is the position Tarkhanov occupies: embedded in the European world within China, he nonetheless views it critically, from the outside. In the collection’s first story, “The 18th of March,” he expands this position in the other direction. Visiting the tomb of Sun Yat-sen—a symbolic place from which to begin Tarkhanov’s narrative of the Guomindang’s corruption and betrayal—Erdberg befriends a group of students. Later he joins them at the violently suppressed student demonstration that took place in Beijing on May 18, 1926.³⁰³ After the massacre, one of the students, a Korean Communist named Pando, asks Erdberg to take him as his companion and translator on his journey south. The true purpose of Erdberg’s southwards journey—

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 11. “Китая нет! Есть но man’s land, «ничья земля»[...]”

³⁰¹ Ibid., 12. “Сотни миллионов забитого, одичавшего в средневековом застое населения проснулись к новой жизни и к борьбе за азбучные права человека...”

³⁰² Ibid. “Но все же Китай перерождается. Порабощенный, скованный, он пылает неугасимым огнем борьбы. И в этом огне Китай очищается, плавится, перевоплощается.”

³⁰³ On this massacre, see Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 263.

revolutionary agitation on Comintern orders—is suppressed in the text. But his trans-national companion and interpreter enables him to enter a world that his Western Orientalist counterparts cannot see, their vision blocked by their deep leather chairs.

The second important element to note is that Soviet discourse on China explicitly defines itself as an inversion of Western, imperialist discourse. Erdberg’s stories claim to unmask the illusory, exotic image of China propagated by that discourse, replacing it with an authentic image produced from eyewitness experience. To this end, every story concludes with a precise date and location, a marker of historical authenticity. But as we have seen, Erdberg adopts and inverts the terms of the discourse he seeks to undermine, transposing the trope of “metamorphosis” from myth to Leninist theory. Can this be done without transforming Leninist theory into myth? Does inversion actually escape the structures of imperial discourse?

In the story “On Lushan Mountain,” for example, Erdberg describes his eagerness to see the Chinese rivers he had read about in books, “serene streams” nourishing “immortal civilizations” of “unity, harmony, skilled craftsmanship and idyllic peace.”³⁰⁴ This distanced image is demolished when Erdberg encounters waterways choked with foreign warships and rotting corpses. In place of the “serene streams” of fantasy, Erdberg sees “enormous abscesses on the infected, expiring organism of a country exhausted by the fevers of war and wounded by the venomous stings of foreigners.”³⁰⁵ This unmasking, however, simply

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 117. “благостные потоки, несущие влагу от хрустальных снегов Памира на жаждущие поля земледельцев, прохладу тенистых рощ на их берегах, бессмертные цивилизации, возникшие под тысячелетний шепот их быстрых струй, торжествующий труд в плодоносных лёссовых равнинах, единение, гармонию, искусные ремесла и идиллический мир среди прибрежных жителей.”

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 118. “И все эти благостные потоки, все эти родники древнейшей культуры представлялись мне огромными гнойниками на зараженном, изнуренном лихорадками войн, израненном ядовитыми укусами иностранцев, гибнущем организме страны.”

replaces one figure with another: the peaceful Middle Kingdom is transformed into the Sick Man of the East, whose ailments can only be cured by revolution.³⁰⁶

Erdberg presents his time in China as a personal journey from ignorance to understanding, and offers through the retelling of his experiences to draw the reader down the same path. But to unmask the illusions of the Sinologists, Erdberg does not head straight for the streets. Instead, he returns first to the volume of Lenin in his room. His observations must be transformed into an interpretation, and that interpretation requires a framework: the Leninist theory of revolutionary internationalism. After the European socialist revolutions predicted by Marx failed to materialize in the wake of World War I, Bolshevik theory had to explain how backward Russia had become the vanguard of world revolution. Trotsky's theory of uneven development, first expounded in *Results and Prospects* (1906), now came to the fore, as the Comintern congresses of 1920–21 shifted the focus of the revolutionary future to the colonized world. This theory suggested that the contradictions produced by uneven development in the non-West—the disparity between the advanced capitalist mode of production introduced by the imperialists, and the heritage of medieval society still present in the daily life of the majority—could generate a revolutionary dynamic.

China, vast, neighbouring, and seized by transitional turmoil, became the site where this theory of revolutionary developmentalism was to be tested. Accordingly, Soviet reporters in China tended to focus upon what Ernst Bloch, writing of Germany in the early 1930s, called “non-synchronism,” the simultaneous coexistence of seemingly contradictory historical phases: the wooden Chinese junk alongside a steel destroyer in Shanghai harbour, or the steam train that passes through fields arranged under the principles of ancestor

³⁰⁶ On the rhetorical figure of China as the Sick Man of the East, a title originally conferred on Turkey, see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World*, 39.

worship.³⁰⁷ The clash of these antagonisms was expected to awaken the Chinese into a properly revolutionary consciousness.

This theoretical perspective rendered Russia and China broadly commensurable as spaces of belated development, within a Marxist-Leninist sociology that posited fundamentally identical structures of oppression across cultures. In contrast to the salvational impulses of Western ethnography, Soviet images of China do not seek to capture a culture apparently untouched by modernity, but on the contrary describe a culture in the process of being forced out of tradition into modernity by the contradictions of imperialist capitalism. Marxist ethnography is, as Elizabeth Papazian notes, inherently modernizing.³⁰⁸

The basic contours of this ethnographic image of China describe a culture whose strangeness is dying, overcome by the economic forces pushing it towards global revolution. For example, Galina Serebriakova, the wife of a Soviet diplomat stationed in China, published her *Sketches of China (Zarisovki Kitaia)* in 1927. One sketch, entitled “The Culture of Disappearing China” (Byt ukhodiashchego Kitaia), presents an ethnographic portrait of a place whose cultural system is, paradoxically, both resiliently ancient and on the very brink of transformation:

Having preserved intact their national costumes, like the Japanese, and cherishing the wise verses of Confucius, most Chinese venerate the cult of ancestors, which is dying for the last time, together with the old China. New forms of culture and social life, however, are bursting forth and despotically accelerating the process of metamorphosis. This new, nascent China will transform and erase many of its archaic customs, which are as obsolete and useless as the great Chinese wall, the ghost of disappearing China.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977): 22–38.

³⁰⁸ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 45.

³⁰⁹ Galina Serebriakova, *Zarisovki Kitaia* (Moscow: Ogonek, 1927), 8–11. “Сохранив, подобно японцам, неприкосновенными национальные костюмы, оберегая мудрые стихи Конфуция, большинство китайцев чтит культ предков, умирающих в последний раз, вместе со старым Китаем. Новые формы быта и общественности, однако, врываются и деспотически ускоряют процесс перерождения. Новый нарождающийся Китай резко изменит и вычеркнет многое из

Serebriakova observes the endurance of Chinese tradition only to assert confidently its imminent collapse. Echoing Erdberg, she employs the language of “metamorphosis” (перерождение) in a sense more biological than mythological, a process of transformation whose despotic speed is incontestable. Here we see the combination of Marxist cultural evolutionism with the Leninist belief in acceleration that, for Francine Hirsh, defines the Soviet ethnographic attitude.³¹⁰ As with Erdberg, the illusion (“ghost”) of the past, revealed in all its frailty, is to be replaced by the powerful (“despotic”), inevitable development of the future.

Soviet discourse on China presents itself as explicitly anti-imperial, defining itself in opposition to a colonial discourse of power that it critiques in terms strikingly similar to the post-colonial critiques of more recent times. At the same time, however, these Soviet images seek to inscribe China into a new discourse of power, one that proclaims the hegemony of revolutionary internationalism as a developmental force driven by the contradictions produced by global capitalism. In proclaiming the hegemony of this new global model, Soviet reporters in fact perpetuate many of the tropes and technologies of colonial discourse in ostensibly inverted form.

This chapter will focus on the techniques of *observation* and *translation*, both of which have been accused of complicity in the extension of imperial power. In their studies of travel writing and journalism, Mary-Louise Pratt and David Spurr invoke Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon and Heidegger’s critique of the technological attitude to read the relation between the detached observer and the objectified, observed world as an assertion of dominance and

архаических обычаев, устарелых и непригодных, как великая китайская стена, призрак уходящего Китая.”

³¹⁰ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4–10.

possession.³¹¹ Talal Asad, meanwhile, provides an illuminating critique of the concept of “translation” as applied to the study of societies. Asad claims that the conception of ethnography as translation maintains a power dynamic in which the ethnographer reserves the right to assert the “true” meaning of foreign social practices, which are thereby removed from active social context to be inscribed into the master discourse of Western theory.³¹²

We will find the most famous Soviet reporter of China, Sergei Tret'iakov, to be preoccupied with the problem of point of view, and the conversion of visual experience into knowledge. The solution enacted by Tret'iakov and his Beijing University colleague A. A. Ivin confirms the power of the Soviet gaze through a narrative movement from illusion to truth, while relocating China within a developmental chronotope issuing from Moscow. Tret'iakov performs a similar overcoming of the translation barrier; both he and the reporter Nikolai Kostarev find that the universal significance of Soviet revolutionary discourse can overcome the problem of linguistic difference. Observation and translation are stretched to the point of collapse, however, in the Chinese travelogue of Boris Pil'niak, where the nostalgic desire for the nation undermines the authority of the internationalist narrative.

II. Observation: The Soviet Point of View

In the period between the two world wars, the reporter became something of a heroic figure for global leftist culture, his commitment to witnessing the traumas and transformations of the present elevated by advocates above the fantasies of fiction.³¹³ Recent

³¹¹ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, esp. ch. 1, “Surveillance: Under Western Eyes,” 13–27.

³¹² Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 141–164.

³¹³ For a succinct summary of the 1920s cult of the reporter, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 185. A brief glance at reportage as a global phenomenon of leftist literature in this period shows a strong attraction to Russia and China as crucial sites of the present moment. The reporter was especially prominent in Germany, where the quintessential figure was Egon Irwin Kisch, whose published work included accounts of

investigations into 1920s Soviet culture have also focused on the prominence of documentary techniques in the public culture of this period.³¹⁴ Within the Soviet Union, this post-war drive to document a changed world was linked to the political desires of the new Bolshevik government. For the Bolsheviks, the representation of their country and the wider world as progressing in line with a teleology inaugurated by the October Revolution was an essential part of forming the new, Soviet identity, which in turn would legitimize their rule.

The attraction of Soviet cultural producers to documentary forms must therefore be viewed in terms of their relationship to the revolutionary project. For the leftist avant-garde, it was the task of art to contribute to the construction of a revolutionized social reality. The members of the Left Front of the Arts (Levyi front iskusstv—LEF), particularly Nikolai Chuzhak and Sergei Tret'iakov, developed the concept of a “literature of fact” to describe this new documentary imperative. Chuzhak and Tret'iakov rejected fictional literature as a relic of previous class dominations, an idealist, contemplative “literature of knowledge of life” (литература жизнепознания) that needed to be replaced by a materialist, interventionist “literature of construction of life” (литература жизнестроения). Rejecting fantasy, abstraction, and subjective experience, this new literature would focus on the concrete details of social life, thereby assisting in its organization.³¹⁵

Soviet reportage on China sought to “organize” its audience, shaping in them a worldview that would influence their actions. Partly this discursive authority came through institutional support. Tret'iakov's articles on China, for example, were published in *Pravda*,

both Russia and China. See Harold B. Segel, *Egon Irwin Kisch, the Raging Reporter* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1997). The USA produced such major figures as John Reed, Agnes Smedley, Anna Louise Strong, and Edgar Snow, whose work collectively embraced Russia and China as the pivotal spaces of the age. The pioneer text for reportage in China was Qu Qiubai's *Journey to the Land of Hunger (Exiang jicheng)*, which describes a journey to Moscow in 1920. See Charles Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage: the Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 47.

³¹⁴ See Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*; Fore, “‘All the Graphs’.”

³¹⁵ Nikolai Chuzhak, “Pisatel'skaia pamiatka,” in Chuzhak, ed., *Literatura fakta*, 20–21.

Rabochaia Moskva, *Krasnaia nov'* and the photo-journal *Prozhektor*: high-profile publications that played a major role in forming the Soviet citizen's sense of the world.

Jeffrey Brooks has noted that one of the first things the Bolsheviks did after seizing power was assert monopoly control over the press, recognizing its capacity to impose "a structure on thinking even among nonbelievers."³¹⁶ In the high period of Soviet involvement in China, between the diplomatic treaty between the two countries in March 1924 and the catastrophic defeat of the Canton Uprising in December 1927, the Soviet press covered China with greater intensity than any foreign country outside the West.

Reportage aspires to an indexical form of writing, staking its discursive authority on the presence and experience of the writer in the world he represents.³¹⁷ This indexicality is often asserted through the use of photographs to accompany the text: China coverage, for example, was particularly high in *Prozhektor*, the photo-journal sister publication to *Pravda*. But the claims of the Soviet reporter in China, as we have seen in Erdberg, go beyond presence to assert a particular kind of positionality. Soviet policy proclaimed a complete reversal in Russia's relationship with China: where Tsarist Russia had been one of the imperialist powers scheming to carve up the Chinese melon, Soviet Russia now presented itself as China's ally against imperialist encirclement. Popular feeling in China at this time does indeed seem to have been favourable towards the Soviet Union, and many intellectuals looked to Soviet Russia for an alternative path to modernity after the West's betrayal at the Treaty of Versailles.³¹⁸ Building on these factors, the Soviet reporter claimed to occupy a fundamentally different position to his "imperialist" equivalents, Tsarist or Western. The combination of a Marxist-Leninist theoretical framework and the trust and acceptance of the

³¹⁶ Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!*, 3; xiv.

³¹⁷ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 14; Fore, "'All the Graphs,'" 28.

³¹⁸ Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China*, 4.

Chinese population enabled these reporters, according to themselves, to produce a more truthful account of contemporary China.

Many early Soviet writers on China were, like Erdberg, political activists first and writers second. Early post-revolutionary monographs on China were written by Vladimir Dmitrevich Vilenskii-Sibiriakov and Grigorii Naumovich Voitinskii, who were among the first Soviet agents to enter China in 1920.³¹⁹ A. E. Khodorov, who worked for the Soviet news agency ROSTA in Beijing from 1919–1922, published *Global Imperialism and China* (*Mirovoi imperializm i Kitai*) in 1922 with the progressive Russian newspaper *Shanghai Life* (*Shankhaiskaia zhizn'*).³²⁰ Sergei Alekseevich Dalin, author of the eyewitness accounts *In the Ranks of the Chinese Revolution* (*V riadakh kitaiskoi revoliutsii*, 1926) and *Sketches of the Revolution in China* (*Ocherki revoliutsii v Kitae*, 1927), began his career working in the Komsomol in Orel' and Orenburg.³²¹ His first two trips to China (in 1922 and 1924) were to attend communist youth meetings. By the time of his third visit, in 1926–7, Dalin was teaching at Moscow's Sun Yat-sen University for the Workers of China and looking to recruit students.³²² Galina Serebriakova, a member of the Bolshevik Party from 1919, came to China as the wife of Leonid Petrovich Serebriakov, a significant figure in the Trotskyist

³¹⁹ See for example V. Vilenskii-Sibiriakov, *Kitai i Sovetskaia Rossiia: iz voprosov nashei dal'nevostochnoi politiki* (Moscow: Serii dal'nego vostoka, 1919), *Sun' Iat-sen — otets kitaiskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1924), *Za velikoi kitaiskoi stenoj (liudi, byt i obshchestvennost')* (Moscow: deviatoe ianvaria, 1923), expanded and republished as *Za kitaiskoi stenoj* (Moscow: 1925); G. Voitinskii, *Chto proiskhodit v Kitae?* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1924). Grigorii N. Voitinskii was sent to China in 1920 and became one of the Comintern's key agents there, playing a major role in the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party. See Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 6–7. Vladimir Dmitrevich Vilenskii-Sibiriakov first entered China in 1919, having previously served as National Commissar for production and then foreign affairs in the Soviet Siberian government. See Nikiforov, *Sovetskie istoriki*, 67–8.

³²⁰ Abram Evseevich Khodorov, *Mirovoi imperialism i Kitai: opyt politiko-ekonomicheskogo issledovaniia* (Shanghai: Shankhaiskaia zhizn', 1922).

³²¹ Sergei Alekseevich Dalin, *V riadakh kitaiskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1926); Dalin, *Ocherki revoliutsii v Kitae* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1927).

³²² Nikiforov, *Sovetskie istoriki*, 139–40. Dalin met repeatedly with Sun Yatsen on his earlier visits, and accompanied the Guomindang government north to Wuchang on the Northern Expedition of 1926–7.

opposition conducting diplomatic negotiations for the Soviet state.³²³ The journalists A. Lebedenko, V. Mikhel's and Zinaida Rikhter accompanied the Great Flight in 1925, an aviation expedition from Moscow through Mongolia to China; all three published books endorsing the symbolic significance of the flight as a connective spatial act linking Russia to China, and positioning themselves as representatives of their state. (See Chapter Three.)

The most prominent Soviet reporter on China in the 1920s, however, was the writer, theorist, and prominent LEFist Sergei Tret'iakov. Tret'iakov first entered China in 1921, fleeing White-occupied Vladivostok and passing through Tianjin, Beijing and Harbin on his way to Chita.³²⁴ That visit produced the poem "Night. Beijing," which drips with the mysterious, alien atmosphere Tret'iakov came later to reject as dangerous exotica. Invoking tropes of abjection and horror that Spurr identifies with colonial discourse, Tret'iakov recounts how "the corpulent odour of gangrenous food laid siege from the sores of eating houses," while "lanterns like oranges watch monstrosly from doorways."³²⁵ Tret'iakov returned in 1924 for a more extended stay as a teacher of Russian at Beijing University, arriving soon after the Sino-Soviet Agreement and staying through 1925. This time he chose to inaugurate a very different kind of writing practice, using China as the testing ground for the nascent theories of the literature of fact.

The articles that Tret'iakov produced on the basis of his experiences in China were published extremely widely in the Soviet Union, making Tret'iakov the most high-profile reporter of China in the 1920s. In 1924–5 his articles on China appeared in *Prozhektor*,

³²³ A. D. Romanenko, ed., *Kitai u russkikh pisatelei* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2008), 308.

³²⁴ Roman Belousov, "Sergei Tret'iakov o Kitae," in *Solntse v zenite: Vostochnyi almanakh 10* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1982): 560.

³²⁵ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Noch'. Pekin," in *Iasnysh: Stikhi, 1919–1921g.* (Chita: Ptach, 1922), 49, reprinted in Tret'iakov, *Itogo* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 41. "Из язв харчевен тучный выпих / Гангреной пищи обложил. И апельсины фонарей / Чудовно зреют у дверей." On abjection and horror, see Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, ch. 5, "Debasement: Filth and Defilement," 76–91.

Pravda, *Krasnaia gazeta*, *Krasnaia nov'*, *Krasnaia molodezh'*, *Krasnaia panorama*, *Shkval*, *Zhurnal'st*, the cinema periodicals *Ekran* and *Kino*, and the Harbin newspaper *Tribuna*.³²⁶

The articles in *Prozhektor* were accompanied by extensive photographic illustrations; although these are unattributed, it seems likely from Tret'iakov's own comments that he took at least some of these photos himself.³²⁷ These articles were later collected, reworked and republished in 1927 as a two-and-a-half month sequence of sketches that ran in the newspaper *Rabochaia Moskva*.³²⁸ That same year, a shorter sequence of the same articles also appeared in the Georgian newspaper *Zaria Vostoka*, to coincide with Tret'iakov's arrival in that country for his next writing project.³²⁹ A single volume of these China sketches was published under the title *Chzhungo* in 1927 (republished and expanded 1930).

The context for the reception of Tret'iakov's reports on China changed greatly between these first and second waves of publication. In 1924–5 Soviet optimism about China was at its height. The Sino-Soviet agreement had been signed, and the Tsarist embassy in Beijing turned over to the Soviet government. The Comintern's agents were cementing their authority within the GMD-CCP alliance in the south, and anti-imperialist sentiment was flaring up into protests and strikes in Shanghai and Guangzhou. By the time this material returned to print in May 1927, the Guomindang had overthrown Soviet influence, massacring their Communist

³²⁶ For a full publication history of Tret'iakov's China articles and other writings, see B. M. Tolochinskaia, ed., *Russkie sovetskie pisateli – prozaiki: bibliograficheskii ukazatel'*, vol. 7, pt 2 (Moscow: Kniga, 1972), 348–96.

³²⁷ In an article about China and the cinema from 1927, Tret'iakov admits that he was constantly “snapping China with my Kodak to provide illustrations for my articles” (Общелкивая своим кодаком Китай на предмет получения иллюстраций для моих статей). And indeed, here the photographs of China on this and the facing page are attributed by caption to Tret'iakov. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Kitai na ekran,” *Sovetskoe kino* 5–6 (1927): 16.

³²⁸ Tolochinskaia, *Russkie sovetskie pisateli*, 391–2.

³²⁹ On the parallels between Tret'iakov's China writings and his work in Georgia, see Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, Tat'iana Vinogradova, “Kitaisko-gruzinskie paralleli v tvorchestve S. M. Tret'iakova,” in *Natale grate numeras? Sbornik statei k 60-letiiu Georgiia Akhilovicha Levintona* (St Petersburg: Izd-vo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2008), 421–6.

allies in Shanghai in April and forcing Borodin and his comrades to flee through the Gobi by car. Given that the Soviet press was jubilant at the success of the Northern Expedition and the workers' movement in Shanghai right up until the April massacre, it seems likely that Tret'iakov's republished articles were intended to complement the triumph, not the defeat, of Soviet policy in China.

Despite this distribution over time, we can sense a unity of approach to Tret'iakov's China sketches. Tret'iakov introduced the complete series in *Rabochaia Moskva* as united by the theme of old Chinese culture slowly cracking under the assault of the new: "Chinese culture, formed over the centuries, like a million-pound ally of reaction and counter-revolution, slowly, too slowly crumbling under the blows of the new China—that, essentially, is the theme of my sketches."³³⁰ This fundamental temporal structure of slow yet forceful cultural transformation shapes Tret'iakov's sketches on various aspects of Chinese life: the family, marriage, the status of women, education, religion, theatre, and politics. As Papazian notes, these sketches are united by "a sort of (non-fictional) plot—in this case, a "modernizing" ethnography conveying a snapshot of the Marxist historical narrative."³³¹ Tret'iakov also offers eyewitness accounts of major political events: Feng Yuxiang's capture of Beijing, the death of Sun Yat-sen, the student protests of 1925. The authenticity of this material is purportedly guaranteed by their author's embedded presence in the world he describes: the introduction to *Chzhungo* establishes that Tret'iakov was teaching in Beijing for 18 months, giving him the opportunity to witness these major historical events while also observing everyday Chinese life.³³² Disparagingly comparing the superficial insights of the

³³⁰ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Zhelt' i sin'." "Китайский, веками сложившийся быт, как миллионно-пудовый союзник реакции и контр-революции, медленно, слишком медленно крошащийся под ударами нового Китая — вот по существу тема моих очерков."

³³¹ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 45.

³³² Sergei Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 5.

tourist, “flinging himself from place to place,” Tret’iakov bases the authority of his texts on the validity and duration of his point of observation.³³³

Writing of the complex process by which ethnographic texts claim the authority to represent social reality, the anthropologist James Clifford notes that a combination of participant observation and authoritative theoretical framework was being established in the 1920s as the dominant mode of professional ethnography in the West.³³⁴ Presence, often given indexical proof through the inclusion of photographs, became a guarantee of valid knowledge, a promise of truth that Clifford neatly summarizes: “You are there, because I was there.”³³⁵ However, despite this rhetorical validation of presence, in reality these new fieldworker-theorists often stayed in a location for shorter periods and acquired less linguistic mastery than their predecessors. This was compensated by “an increased emphasis on the power of observation. Culture was construed as an ensemble of characteristic behaviors, ceremonies and gestures, susceptible to recording and explanation by a trained onlooker. [...] Of course, successful fieldwork mobilized the fullest possible range of interactions, but a distinct primacy was accorded to the visual: interpretation was tied to description.”³³⁶ These interpretations were authorized by “certain powerful theoretical abstractions” which “promised to help academic ethnographers ‘get to the heart’ of a culture more rapidly than someone undertaking, for example, a thorough inventory of customs and beliefs.”³³⁷

This description of ethnographic authority fits Tret’iakov’s assertions of his images of China in several respects. Tret’iakov’s articles constantly assert the fact of presence and the power of observation. As mentioned above, many of the original articles and both editions of

³³³ Ibid. “туристическое метание с места на место.”

³³⁴ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983): 124.

³³⁵ Ibid., 118.

³³⁶ Ibid., 125.

³³⁷ Ibid.

Chzhungo supplemented textual description with photographs, many of them probably taken by Tret'iakov himself: indexical signs of his presence and involvement in Chinese reality. Tret'iakov is also armed with a powerful theoretical abstraction: the Marxist-Leninist theory of revolutionary developmentalism, which confers authoritative meaning on his limited sample of observations. This theoretical background, however, gives Tret'iakov's ethnographic texts a very different temporal structure to the ethnographies Clifford describes. Ethnographers like Malinowski, Clifford notes, tended from their short stays to produce synchronic depictions of an "ethnographic present," and to confer on this present something of the character of eternal, unchanging social truth.³³⁸ Tret'iakov's Marxist ethnography, by contrast, is necessarily diachronic: he records Chinese social life only in order to assert its transformation.

Tret'iakov had even less linguistic skill than the post-Malinowskian ethnographer: though he peppers his texts with the odd Chinese phrase, his need for interpreters recurs constantly in his sketches.³³⁹ Instead, the introduction to *Chzhungo* is filled with visual terminology. Tret'iakov announces that he was a "witness" (свидетель) to major political events, but also had the chance "to observe Beijing at length" (длительно наблюдать на Пекин): an essential element to his authority, since "it is impossible to grasp China without scrutinizing everyday Chinese life" (без приглядки к китайскому повседневностью нельзя взять Китай наощупь).³⁴⁰ As Clifford noted the primacy of visual observation in post-war ethnography, so Tret'iakov describes his reporting methods in *Rabochaia Moskva* as

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ For example, the final sketch in *Chzhungo* recounts Tret'iakov's meeting, on his way home, with General Feng Yuxiang. Tret'iakov's translator for this interview becomes a significant character in his own right: a graduate of the Communist University for the Workers of the East (KUTV), he engages Tret'iakov in a discussion about the contemporary literary scene in Moscow. Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 246–49.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 5–6. (My emphasis.)

beginning from observation, validated by presence, and proceeding only later to verbal sources:

These sketches contain what I saw *with my own eyes* on the streets of Tianjin, Beijing, Harbin, through the windows of train carriages, what I read in the newspapers, and, finally, what came to me in conversation with people who have been burned by the heat of the Chinese sun and the furnace of the Chinese Revolution.³⁴¹

The need for sources other than his own eyes is sometimes emphasised by Tret'iakov, sometimes concealed. Balancing claims for the power of observation with admissions of the need for translators and intermediaries, these sketches can be read as a progressive search for a correct ethnographic method; or, to use Tret'iakov's own terms, a search, through the medium of China, for a method for the new literature of fact.

As we saw in the Introduction's discussion of "To Love China," the first article included in *Chzhungo* in 1927, Tret'iakov's China reports align with and in effect initiate the movement that was later to receive the name "factography" or the "literature of fact." Indeed, Tret'iakov's choice of title for his collection offers a neat expression of his factographic intentions and their roots in avant-garde techniques of disruption and estrangement.

Chzhungo (Чжунго) is a cyrillicization of *zhōngguó* 中國, or "middle country," one of the Chinese names for China. (Tret'iakov proposed the same title, spelt *Dzhungo*/Джунго, for the trilogy of film scripts he wrote for an unrealised collaboration with Sergei Eisenstein—see Chapter Three.) On Aleksandr Rodchenko's striking cover design, Чжунго appears between the characters 中 and 國, within a design balanced out by two identical red spheres and unified by a red, white and black colour scheme. Thus the equation of these two terms, both potentially impenetrable to the reader, is vividly asserted. The disorienting jolt experienced on encountering this title, in place of the standard Russian *Kitai*, expresses immediately

³⁴¹ Tret'iakov, "Zhelt' i sin'." "В эти очерки вошло то, что я видел своими глазами на улицах Тянь-цзина, Пекина, Харбина, сквозь окна вагонов, что вычитывалось мною из газет и, наконец, что приносили в разговорах своих люди, обожженные зноем китайского солнца и раскалом китайской революции."

Tret'iakov's confrontational challenge to the reader: you know so little about the real China, this title implies, that you do not even know its real name.

The moment of linguistic estrangement experienced on first glimpsing this title shakes the reader from complacency and points the way towards a more authentic, factual knowledge of *zhongguo*, freed from the automatized stereotypes of pre-existing images of China. As the example of this title shows, Tret'iakov's entire China project was conceived as a tool to reshape the Soviet public's conception of China, scraping away the accumulated layers of false exotica that he ascribed to the works of writers such as Pierre Loti and Gustave Mirbeau.³⁴² As Nikolai Chuzhak critiqued the Turgenevian realist novel for producing a false view of the world that existed only in an ideal realm, so Tret'iakov insists that the bourgeois-imperial system has produced a powerful fantasy about China through its cultural products that conceals the realities of European domination.

For a contemporary reader in the Western academy, such an argument cannot but recall post-colonial critiques of the relationship between cultural production and imperial power, beginning with the hugely influential work of Edward Said in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. Less well known, perhaps, is the degree to which the contours of these critiques were already being shaped in the anti-imperial rhetoric of Soviet publicist-scholars in the 1920s. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye offers this summary, citing anonymously the pioneer of Soviet Oriental studies, Mikhail Pavlovich:

Said's notion of Orientalism as the instrument of Western imperialism would have sounded very familiar to Soviet ears. In 1922 the editor of a Moscow-based journal, *Novyi Vostok* (The New East), argued that, for British, French, and German orientological societies, "scholarly study of the East is merely secondary," adding that, "their primary goal is to do whatever they can in to help their respective governments conquer ... Asian lands."³⁴³

³⁴² Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 199.

³⁴³ Schimmelpenninck, *Russian Orientalism*, 6.

Schimmelpenninck cites Vera Tolz's observation that Said's own intellectual legacy can be traced back, via Arab intellectuals who studied in the USSR in the 1960s, to the internationalist intelligentsia of the Soviet 1920s.³⁴⁴ This unmasking of Western images of the East is pioneered in the Soviet 1920s, and its chief exponent in the Chinese context is Tret'iakov.

Tret'iakov guides his reader through this process of unmasking by employing a travel chronotope that structures an epistemological journey from darkness to light: a broadly chronological movement from arrival and ignorance towards greater proximity and understanding. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope encourages us to see the ideological implications behind every particular arrangement of space and time in a literary text. One of his key examples is the "chronotope of the road," a temporal movement through space that enables social distances to collapse, so that "people who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet[.]"³⁴⁵ Bakhtin delineates two forms of space that the textual road can pass through: "familiar territory" and an "exotic, alien world."³⁴⁶ Most accounts of travel writing identify a chronotope that moves through exotic space while attempting at times to translate this exotic terrain into familiar, domestic space.³⁴⁷ Tret'iakov's travel sketches, I argue, move through exotic space in order to uncover commensurabilities that stop short of full domestication. Bakhtin also reminds us of the "rich

³⁴⁴ Ibid. Tolz traces this genealogy back still further, to the "Rozen school" of Russian Orientologists in the late imperial period, whose "conclusions about the relationship between power and knowledge at times sound so topical that I propose that contemporary post-colonial scholarship should be viewed as a 'descendant' of the early twentieth-century Russian Orientalology." Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: the Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

³⁴⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 243.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 245.

³⁴⁷ See for example Thea Pitman, *Mexican Travel Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 47–8.

metaphorical expansion of the image of the road as a course,” embracing as one variant the “course of history.”³⁴⁸ Tret’iakov’s journey towards commensurability can credibly be read as the movement of history that is driving such disparate societies as Russia and China towards a modern convergence.

In his first *Rabochaia Moskva* sketch, Tret’iakov admits that his initial encounter with China was one of incomprehension and alienation: “In those first days I felt especially distinctly the difference—*purely external, of course*—between Chinese life and our own European customs.”³⁴⁹ Everything seems, at the level of surface appearance, to be backwards. Men dress in skirts, women in trousers. Old women are bald, old men wear ponytails. Windows face into the courtyard, not out onto the street. But the longer Tret’iakov’s eye examines the streets and peruses the newspapers, “the more everything inexplicable, strange, and exotic became comprehensible, troubling, and sometimes even a little frightening, since through these peculiarities there peered out the 4000-year slavery of the Chinese people.”³⁵⁰ The epistemological method of de-exoticizing China is presented as a chronotope of travel: time passed in alien space will replace initial alienation with a growing awareness of the universality of structures of oppression.

Tret’iakov’s arrival in China is recounted in a sketch that is also an openly self-referential experiment in method: “Moscow—Beijing: A Journey-Film” (“Moskva—Pekin: put’ fil’ma”), published in *LEF*, the journal of the Left Front of the Arts, in 1925. This journey from Moscow to Beijing stands in a line of symbolic spatial acts that can be traced back beyond the building of the trans-Siberian railway to Dostoevsky and Vasil’ev’s

³⁴⁸ Bakhtin, “Forms of Time,” 244.

³⁴⁹ Tret’iakov, “Zhelt’ i sin’.” (My emphasis.) “в эти первые дни особенно выпукло чувствовалась разница, чисто внешняя, конечно, между китайским бытом и нашим привычным европейским.”

³⁵⁰ Ibid. “тем больше все это необъяснимое, странное, экзотическое, становилось понятным, надоедливым, а иногда и страшноватым, поскольку сквозь эти странности проглядывало четырехтысячелетнее рабство китайского народа.”

fantasies of Russian domination of Eurasian space through railway technology.³⁵¹ In the mid-1920s, this journey's linking of two national spaces by railway—the epitome of modern mechanized technology—was a ready symbol for Soviet internationalist solidarity and the extension of revolutionary progress to the East. Indeed, this same symbolic journey was enacted by plane in the Great Flight, which took place in the same year that Tret'iakov's travelogue was published (see Chapter Three). That journey produced a cinematic document, the film *The Great Flight*, as well as a series of reporters' textual accounts. Likewise, Tret'iakov calls his "Moscow—Beijing" a "journey-film" (путьфильма), emphasizing the indexical, documentary nature of his intentions.

The text begins with a discourse on method, as the voice of "Osya" (presumably Tret'iakov's LEF colleague Osip Brik) gives Tret'iakov his instructions for the composition of this journey-film. Brik's orders reflect the influence among the LEF group of Aleksei Gastev's "scientific organization of labour" (*nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*—NOT), a Soviet interpretation of Taylorism that sought to achieve optimal efficiency in social activities. Tret'iakov's initiation of the literature of fact represents an attempt to apply the scientific organization principles of NOT to the production of literature, as Osya explains:

You are going to Beijing. You must write travel notes. But they must not be notes just for yourself. No, they must have social significance. Proceed in accordance with NOT and fix what you see with a sharp, thrifty eye. Be observant. Do not let a single detail slip away. You are in the train carriage: Kodak every line, every conversation. You are at a station: make a note of everything, right down to the posters washed away by the rain.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Susanna Lim, *China and Japan*, 102–3.

³⁵² Sergei Tret'iakov, "Moskva—Pekin (Put'fil'ma)," *Lef* 3 (1925): 33. "Ты едешь в Пекин. Ты должен написать путевые заметки. Но чтоб они не были заметками для себя. Нет, они должны иметь общественное значение. Сделай установку по НОТ и зорким хозяйским глазом фиксируй, что увидишь. Прояви наблюдательность. Пусть ни одна мелочь не ускользнет. Ты в вагоне—кодачь каждый штрих и разговор. Ты на станции—все отметь вплоть до афиш смытых дождем." For a detailed discussion of Gastev's theories of NOT and their influence on *LEF*, see Fore, "All the Graphs'," 135–169.

As in the title of the sketch, the writer is equated here to a camera, an instrument that produces a “journey-film,” capable of “Kodaking” (the neologistic verb *kodachit*) both sight and sound. Such a commitment to objective documentary writing, according to Olya, will give Tret'iakov's travel notes genuine social significance, in contrast to a sentimental focus on the self. It also demands that travel writing focus entirely on the (temporal and spatial) present, with no digressions into history or social context.

As Fore notes, Tret'iakov's practical experiment in applying NOT's functional techniques of industrial rationalization to literature is subject to a certain degree of parody in “Moskva—Pekin.” The strictures of NOT interrupt the stock scene of emotional farewell at the train station, to specify precisely how many kisses can be achieved in the time available.³⁵³ Once on the train, Tret'iakov dutifully reports on the state of the bathrooms, the cost of bed linen, and the various ways to pass the time, producing “catalogs of banal detail so limitless that they border on the absurd.”³⁵⁴ When the train enters China, however, a different imperative to interpret and explain creeps into the report, and the comic element subsides. Observing a Chinese family on the train, Tret'iakov moves from observed image to an ethnographic conclusion about family structure: “A Chinese man sits down, and sits his son down (his wife stands, a wife is an inferior creature, below a son — to ask a Chinese man about his wife is to insult him cruelly).”³⁵⁵ Later Tret'iakov sees the landscape dotted with graves, and draws from this sight a conclusion about the hierarchy of power in Chinese society, which he considers dominated by Confucian notions of filial piety and the cult of ancestors: “China is pimpled with a syphilitic rash of graves, this country in which the dead

³⁵³ Tret'iakov, “Moskva—Pekin,” 33.

³⁵⁴ Fore, “‘All the Graphs’,” 171.

³⁵⁵ Tret'iakov, “Moskva—Pekin,” 52. “Сядет китаец, сына посадит (жена стоит, жена существо низшего сорта, ниже сына—о здоровье жены спросить китайца, значит жестоко его оскорбить).”

hold the living by the throat like nowhere else.”³⁵⁶ There follows a discourse on the hindrance these graves offer to agriculture, and the financial burden placed on the young by the old through the cultural importance of funerals.

This is not information produced simply from the interface of recording device and external reality; these conclusions require extra, secondary knowledge obtained from supplementary sources. Entering China, Tret’iakov also enters into the established terms of foreign-authored discourse about China, which frequently focused on such issues as gender relations and the rule of the old over the young.³⁵⁷ In the course of his journey Tret’iakov thus travels between the two poles of objectivity and instrumentality that Papazian identifies as the tension within documentary forms: the writer begins as a recording machine, and ends as an interpreter and polemicist.³⁵⁸ In so doing, he also introduces the key outlines of his own interpretative perspective: from the speeding modernity of the Moscow—Beijing train, what Tret’iakov focuses upon is the destructive hold of tradition on Chinese society.

However, Tret’iakov’s observing gaze from the camera-like frame of his train window is not enough to produce useful knowledge on China. As with Clifford’s ethnographers, local knowledge may also be required. The sketch “A Coup in Beijing” (“Perevorot v Pekine”) describes Feng Yuxiang’s 1924 coup against Wu Peifu as a confused mixture of multiple rumours and ineffective eyewitnessing.³⁵⁹ While various rumours as to which general has the upper hand “crawl” around the city and the Russian embassy, Tret’iakov’s observations see

³⁵⁶ Ibid. 53. “Сифилитической сыпью могил испрыщен Китай, — эта страна, в которой мертвые держат живых за горло, как нигде.”

³⁵⁷ Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn, in their Introduction to *A Century of Travels in China*, remark that gender is “something almost all our travellers remark on.” Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn, eds, *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 4. Both John Dewey and Harry Franck made the same point about graves stealing useful farmland. See Nicholas Clifford, “With Harry Franck in China,” in Kerr and Kuehn, eds, *Century of Travels in China*, 140.

³⁵⁸ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 13.

³⁵⁹ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Perevorot v Pekine,” *Prozhektor* 23 (20 December 1924): 22–24.

only empty streets and then soldiers. Only when Tret'iakov turns to a fruit-seller he knows who speaks a little English can he confirm that the troops are “‘Tong-tong Feng Yuxiang.’ (Tong-tong means all.)”³⁶⁰ Here Tret'iakov makes a show of his reporterly credentials: local acquaintances and (albeit limited) multi-linguistic capabilities enable him to get the information the embassy lacked and eyewitnessing alone could not provide.

This combination of eyewitness detail and informant explanation shapes Tret'iakov's report on Sun Yatsen's arrival at Beijing train station. Presence at the scene is established by an almost cinematic abundance of precise visual detail. Like an extended tracking shot, Tret'iakov's narration, devoid here of any authorial “I,” takes us down the road to the station, noting the paper flowers adorning its façade, then pans along the densely-packed crowds of young people waiting in the square. This disembodied gaze picks out the red flags in the crowd, then zooms in on the hieroglyphs written on them, and finally a close-up on the Guomintang sun, white on blue, in the corner. Tret'iakov describes the cloth hoods worn by the crowd on this frosty, snowy day, the long scarves of the students, and the hats and decorations of arriving dignitaries. Only after two pages of such disembodied description does the authorial “I” appear in the narrative, and in doing so reveals Tret'iakov's position within this huge and crowded scene: embedded with his Chinese students from Beijing University. “I quickly find acquaintances. Students appear from all sides.”³⁶¹

His students act as information sources that supplement his observations: where Tret'iakov sees only soldiers in furry hats, his students can identify the student volunteers from Hu Jingyi's 2nd National Army.³⁶² They also serve as his translators. After Sun's death, Tret'iakov recounts a series of “‘overheard” political disputes among different social groups:

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 23.

³⁶¹ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 170. “Быстро нахожу знакомых. Студенты подходят с разных сторон.”

³⁶² Ibid., 172.

he admits that the last, between a nationalist supporter of the GMD and a monarchist, was translated for him by one of his students.³⁶³ The students are presented as authentic inhabitants of Chinese reality, and by extension, Tret'iakov's close relationship with them becomes a guarantee of his account's authority.

Tret'iakov's use of informants is not just about ethnographic method: there is a political dimension to the fact that he, a Soviet Russian, can allegedly gain access to Chinese reality in a manner that is denied to other Europeans. During Beijing's "Day of Rage," after the shooting of Shanghai protestors by British troops in May 1925, he is with his students as they join the demonstrations at the diplomatic quarter. In this scene we see both the ambiguity of Tret'iakov's position, and the fundamental difference between Soviet Russian and western imperialist that he is so keen to assert:

I walk through the seething crowd with the students. Distrustful looks from the crowd. Who is this foreigner? Perhaps the accursed "yingguoren" (Englishman)? My student companion keeps projecting on all sides "eguoren" (Russian), "sunguoren"[sic] (Soviet person), and the hateful eyes are extinguished, and the ranks part amicably, allowing the camera to enter their dense core.³⁶⁴

Here we find a condensed assertion of the privileged position and perspective of the Soviet observer in China. Aided by his student friends, Tret'iakov's status as a Soviet Russian allows his politically and aesthetically modern documentary project (metonymized here in his camera) to penetrate right into the heart of contemporary Chinese reality. The very words "Russian" and "Soviet" obtain a kind of mystical power, and grant their referent immunity to the violent heat of Chinese popular anger: "Foreigners do not risk entering the cauldron of the demonstration. Only we, the Soviets, walk through the flame of Chinese rage without getting

³⁶³ Ibid., 185.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 225. "Сквозь кипение толпы прохожу со студентами. Недоверчивы взгляды толпы. Что за иностранец? Может быть, проклятый «ингожень» (англичанин)? Студент спутник все время бросает направо и налево «огожень» (русский), «сунгожень» (советский человек), и гаснут ненавидящие глаза, и дружелюбно расступаются ряды, пропуская в самую гущу фотографический аппарат." "Сунгожень" seems to be a typo for "Suguoren" (苏国人), the standard Chinese translation for "советский человек"—perhaps a revealing one, in that it overlays Sun Yatsen's surname onto the name of the USSR.

burned, and the thickest, most scowling-faced columns open fraternally before us once they hear the word “*eguoren*” — Russian.”³⁶⁵ Tret’iakov acknowledges here that he does belong to the category of “foreigners,” but only in order to insist that his position, as a Soviet Russian, is fundamentally different from that of the other foreigners in China, be they administrators, bankers, missionaries, soldiers or writers. He is *inside*, he insists, in a way they cannot be, in a way that is ruled out by imperialist policy as by imperialist culture.

During a student-led lantern procession to Sun Yat-sen's hotel on New Year's Eve, Tret’iakov positions himself in a triangulated position that allows him to observe both the protesting Chinese in the street and the Westerners gathered to celebrate in a hotel ballroom. The Westerners break from their foxtrot, the quintessential symbol of capitalist decadence in 1920s Soviet art, to observe the Chinese through the windows, as Tret’iakov earlier observed rural scenes from his train seat. These other Europeans remain in their enclosed, separated space, whereas Tret’iakov, over the course of the sketch series, gradually enters the Chinese crowd. During Sun's funeral procession, “a Guomintangist in the chain extends a hand to me, and I am included in the chain.”³⁶⁶ Elsewhere Tret’iakov and his comrades break into rousing song at a Chinese “Communist wedding,” pushing the marriage into a metaphor for Sino-Soviet alliance: “And finally Russian and Chinese voices were knitted together in the single tight knot of the Internationale.”³⁶⁷ Tret’iakov has got out from behind his window, and rides various waves of revolutionary enthusiasm to cross the line of exclusion that separates foreign and local.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 228. “Иностранцы не рискуют в котел демонстрации. Только мы, советские, проходим в пламени китайского гнева, не обжигаясь, и перед нами братски расступаются самые плотные, самые наупленные колонны, слышав слово «огожень» — русский.”

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 188. “Гоминдановец в цепи протягивает мне руку, и я включаюсь в цепь.”

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 121. “А под конец и русские и китайские голоса связались в одном тугом узле Интернационала.”

III. Soviet Russia in the Middle: Beijing under Soviet Eyes

This movement from ignorance to involvement is replayed as a single journey in Tret'iakov's longest China sketch, "Beijing" ("Pekin"), which uses multiple vantage points to provide a highly detailed eyewitness report on everyday life in the Chinese capital. Although Tret'iakov indicates at points that the chapter is in fact the result of several months of residency and observation, the text itself is structured around the chronotope of arrival in and exploration of an unknown city.³⁶⁸

Our first sight of Beijing is veiled in the language of exotic fantasy: compared to Tianjin, where traditional Chinese buildings rub shoulders with cranes and factory chimneys, "Beijing is a city from another world entirely."³⁶⁹ In fact the city itself is literally invisible from the outside, contained within the "stone collar" of its walls: "only some fantastic multi-coloured towers, reminiscent of boats or the tiaras of Chinese actors, break the monotonous toothed line of these mountainous walls."³⁷⁰ These metaphors should give us pause; it seems Tret'iakov is employing the very aesthetic devices that he elsewhere denounces as illusory and deceptive. For example, in an essay on aerial perspective entitled "Through Unwiped Glasses" ("Skvoz' neprotertye ochki," 1928), Tret'iakov suggests that there are two types of metaphorical imagery: there are metaphors that help to elucidate the objective nature of things and processes, and there are metaphors that obscure this objective reality through an aesthetic appeal to the subject as consumer. The distance produced by aerial perspective

³⁶⁸ The chapter in *Chzhungo* reworks and greatly expands the first of Tret'iakov's China reports to be published in *Prozhektor*: "Pekin," *Prozhektor* 11 (33), 20 June 1924, 12–14. The *Prozhektor* version begins at the centre of the city and works its way outwards, an order that is inverted in the version published in *Chzhungo*. The sketch was expanded still further for the revised edition of *Chzhungo*, published in 1930.

³⁶⁹ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 19. "Пекин — это город из совершенно иного мира."

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27. "только фантастические разноцветные надворотные башни, похожие то ли на корабли, то ли на тиары китайских актеров, разнообразят зубчатую линию стеного хребта."

heightens the tendency towards such aestheticized metaphor as “the strip farms look like a patchwork quilt,” which tell us nothing, Tret’iakov points out, about the practical functioning of strip farms.³⁷¹ A more acceptable form of figural language is suggested by Tret’iakov’s comparison of humans and termites: here, at least, the fact that both transform the landscape through their productive activity elucidates their function rather than fixating entirely on aesthetic appearance.³⁷²

Returning to “Beijing,” it seems that Tret’iakov’s use of metaphorical similarities on the approach to the city accentuates the mythical and distances the practical. Under Tret’iakov’s metaphorical gaze, a tower is not a structure intended for defence, but a boat, or then again a tiara. From the outside, at a distance, a sense of the fantastic and exotic are retained. Next Tret’iakov switches his (and our) vantage point from the train to the walls themselves, a popular promenade for tourists and thus a common perspective in China travelogues. From this elevated vantage point he sees, “as far as the eye can see, like a petrified dead wave, the dull, grey undulation of the tiled roofs of Beijing’s one-storey houses.”³⁷³ Earlier the towers along the walls were like boats, and now the roofs of the houses become waves. If we follow Tret’iakov’s own theory of metaphor from “Through Unwiped Glasses,” these metaphorical descriptions distance what Beijing seems to be from what it is, form from function, appearance from reality.

These preliminary, distanced vantage points perform an aestheticization of the city, a transformation of a complex social reality into a poetic metaphor. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt describes a recurrent trope in travel writing that she calls the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene. In such a scene, a white male imperialist traveler stands in an elevated

³⁷¹ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Skvoz’ neprotetye ochki,” *Novyi Lef* 9 (1928): 20–24.

³⁷² Tret’iakov, “Skvoz’ neprotetye ochki,” 23. For a further development of this argument see Tret’iakov, “Obrazoborchestvo,” *Novyi Lef* 12 (1928): 43.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 29. “каменной мертвою зыбью, насколько хватит глаз, тусклое, серое волнение черепичных крыш одноэтажных пекинских домов.”

position (a promontary over a lake, the balcony of a hotel) and expresses mastery over the place he views by describing it. One major aspect of this expression of mastery, for Pratt, is the aestheticization of landscape. A descriptive focus on the beauty of the scene and the pleasure it gives the viewer serves to mask political and economic motivations by suggesting that “the esthetic [*sic*] qualities of the landscape constitute the social and material value of the discovery to the explorers’ home culture.”³⁷⁴ Aestheticization equates the view to a painting, which places the viewer in the double position of painter (in words) and judge: the landscape exists for his own pleasure, not for the propagation of actual economic lives. Tret’iakov’s initial aestheticization of Beijing seems to mimic the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene, transforming a large and complex city into an elegant (if clichéd) poetic image. But Tret’iakov aestheticizes here as the first step towards de-aestheticization, or more accurately a replacement of aesthetic distance with socio-political proximity; he will have to take us further into the life of the city before we can start to reconcile appearance and reality.

Tret’iakov’s next vantage point gives access to actual Chinese social life, though still from a spatial and temporal distance. The “law of profit and trade competition” on the city’s major arteries, Tret’iakov notes, is “turning one-storey China into two-storey.”³⁷⁵ Our Marxist ethnographer uses the elevated position of this commercialized modernity to observe the older forms of life in the one-storey *hutongs* below: “Living on the second floor of a flat-roofed building, on several occasions I observed at length these courtyards, in which Beijingers pass three quarters of their life.”³⁷⁶ Looking down from elevated modernity,

³⁷⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 205.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. “Живя на втором этаже плоскокрышего дома, я не раз подолгу глядел в эти дворики, на которых протекает три четверти жизни пекинцев.” The *Prozhektor* version of the sketch shows a photograph of a Beijing courtyard from an elevated position, captioned “The inside of a Beijing house (taken from the neighbouring roof)” (Нутро пекинского дома [снято с соседней крыши])—possibly the photographic record of the view described in *Chzhungo*. Tret’iakov, “Pekin,” 14.

Tret'iakov's camera-eye sees everything. Despite his admission that these observations took place over a period of extended residence, in the descriptions that follow they are condensed into a single, simultaneous act of viewing, united in the present tense and heightened in their immediacy by parataxis and indexical injunctions.

Tret'iakov's gaze now picks out not fantastic imagery but concrete economic processes of socially necessary labour. "Here is the house of a collier": a detailed technical description follows (in accordance with Gastev's NOT) of the labour process through which the collier and his assistants convert discarded fragments of charcoal into cheap fuel, mixing them with coal dust and clay into little pellets that dry in the sun.³⁷⁷ Next Tret'iakov's gaze pans round to another courtyard, where the products of this labour are being consumed: "And here, in another courtyard, I see the pellets being poured into a portable white clay stove, reminiscent of a toilet bowl."³⁷⁸ The pan is followed here by the close-up, as Tret'iakov's vision zooms in on the blue flame that heats a long-nosed copper kettle. The inhabitants of the courtyard use the boiled water to wash off the city's "poisonous dust" and prevent scabs: Tret'iakov's gaze seems to learn the meaning of this cultural practice simply from observation.

In a third courtyard, a meal is being prepared. Chinese cuisine has often functioned in European travel accounts as a symbolic expression of Chinese culture's difference and distance. For Victorian British travellers, Ross Forman notes, "Chinese food continued to enthrall and repulse with its alterity," while chopsticks represented "the basic contradiction of an ancient culture that staunchly resisted incorporation into Western systems of behaviour."³⁷⁹ But Tret'iakov's description of the meal lacks any strangeness, and chopsticks are explained by Tret'iakov in practical, "organizational" terms: "The Chinese do not use

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid. "И вот я вижу, как на другом дворике в белую глиняную переносную печь, напоминающую клозетный унитаз, засыпают катышки."

³⁷⁹ Ross G. Forman, "Eating Out East," in Kerr and Kuehn, *A Century of Travels in China*, 65.

knives during a meal. The knife is an instrument for the kitchen. Food should be brought to the table in such a form that it can be put straight in the mouth and chewed.”³⁸⁰ As with the two preceding scenes, eating here is a technical, goal-oriented form of social labour, a universal activity that takes different concrete forms in different societies.

As his gaze moves down from his vantage point and through the streets, Tret'iakov's Beijing continues to gain complexity, subdividing into distinctions and subcategories. The typical homes of the rich, middle-class, and poor are described in turn. The various types of transport on the main roads are differentiated, from automobiles to camel caravans. Differentiation even enters the portrait of the rickshaw driver, that typical image of Chinese oppression: Tret'iakov's rickshaw drivers are subdivided into hierarchies, the young above the old and the privately employed above those that hunt for every fare.³⁸¹ Entering the commercial district of the city, Tret'iakov describes an exhaustive gallery of Chinese trades, crafts and occupations. The homogeneous grey sea observed from the walls breaks up into a complex, differentiated social system.

The abstract framework through which Tret'iakov processes these observations of economic life is the contradiction between tradition and modernity, expressed in the confrontation between traditional labour and the introduction of machines. The machine, he notes, breaks the guild system's connection between master and apprentice: the former becomes an entrepreneur, the latter a worker.³⁸² Rickshaw drivers, desperate to preserve their livelihood, lie down in protest on the newly constructed tram lines that spread through the city.³⁸³ The contemporary American travel writer Harry Franck lamented Beijing's

³⁸⁰ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo*, 31. “Нож китаец не знает за обедом. Нож — орудие кухни. Пища должна быть подана на стол в таком виде, чтобы ее можно было прямо класть в рот и жевать.”

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 47.

determination to “desecrate her streets with the ugliness and clamour of electric tramways,” declaring himself “glad to have known the inimitable Chinese capital before they came.”³⁸⁴ For Franck, mechanized transport destroys the authenticity of Beijing; for Tret'iakov, this is precisely the kind of authenticity he is looking for, signs of the social tensions and ruptures caused by the incursion of industrial capitalism. Hence his joy at finding in the market, among the traditional images carved into paper embroidery patterns, the shapes of aeroplanes, automobiles and bicycles. The aeroplane image is reproduced in the text, forming a striking contrast to two “traditional” patterns: the sole of a Chinese shoe and a flowering bamboo plant. All these details combine to present a dynamic image of Chinese social life in the process of transformation under the impact of capitalist modernity.

Although we have seen in other sketches how Tret'iakov highlights the assistance he received from his students and other intermediaries, the complex processes by which our reporter came to know what he knows are concealed in "Beijing." The experience of eighteen months' residence is condensed into a single movement from the outside to the inside, in the course of which nothing in Beijing, it seems, is closed to Tret'iakov's roving eye. He moves through the impassable crowds of the New Year celebrations.³⁸⁵ A sight of some passing courtesans leads into a typical scene of courtesan-client relations.³⁸⁶ Moving beyond the commercial district into a residential area, Tret'iakov's gaze passes into “humble” private homes and observes the gastronomic customs enacted there. Again, it is with great attention

³⁸³ Ibid., 36. David Strand, who uses the rickshaw puller as a representative figure through which to explore the social history of 1920s Beijing, mentions this opposition to trams, which culminated in destructive riots in 1929. David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), xv.

³⁸⁴ Harry Franck, *Wandering in Northern China* (New York, London: The Century Co., 1923), 200.

³⁸⁵ Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 49.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. “Ухажер с прителями приезжает к ней днем как в клуб, они играют в «май-чжан», сплетничают и обдумывают интриги. Она поет им стихи китайских поэтов, аккомпанируя себе на скрипке или на тамбурине.”

to procedural detail that Tret'iakov convinces us of the authority and authenticity of his images: he knows, for example, that the bamboo shoots have been boiled for three days until soft and slippery.³⁸⁷ This all-access vision contrasts strongly with the experience of the western tourists from whom Tret'iakov differentiates himself. They flock instead to see the temples; indeed, “these days the temples are only kept alive by tourists.”³⁸⁸ As social spaces they are dead for the real, contemporary Chinese culture that Tret'iakov presents. The tourists' vision is drawn to the exotic and titillating, but requires assistance: they must pay the monks at the Lama Temple to lift the covers and reveal the notorious statues of Buddha copulating.³⁸⁹ Tret'iakov's gaze, drawn to the real and the current, seemingly needs no such local assistance to see everything he sees.

After giving us a detailed, typological view of the lives of Beijing's people, Tret'iakov concludes his tour of Beijing with a glimpse of the city's centres of power. The old centre, the Forbidden City, is now empty, its pleasure gardens turned into public parks in which the city's small but active intelligentsia gather. The new centre, and the end-point of Tret'iakov's journey, is the Diplomatic Quarter, which is metaphorized in a way fully fitting its function: “a stone loudspeaker, through which imperial capital dictates its orders to China.”³⁹⁰ The Diplomatic Quarter is heavily fortified and eerily quiet, both qualities that set it apart from the rest of the city. The quarter's main street is quiet and deserted; the atmosphere is the inverse of the bustle of the market, defined instead by “silence, emptiness, apprehension” (тишина, безлюдье, настороженность—the word for emptiness, безлюдье, is the same

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 50.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 57. “сейчас храмы только и живут туристами[.]”

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 61. “каменный рупор, через который империалистический капитал диктует свои приказания Китаю.”

term *Pil'niak* used to describe *Kitai-gorod*, but attached now to the non-China at the centre of Beijing).³⁹¹ This quiet suggests not tranquility but control, a place under permanent guard.

Against this ominous silence, as night closes in, flashes out the bright assertiveness of the chapter's concluding image: "It is getting dark. Chattering gangs drive past, returning from the cinema, and—silence. Guards pace outside embassy gates. But there are no guards at the gates of that embassy from whose bastion a red banner with our hammer and sickle flutters at Beijing."³⁹² By ending at the Soviet embassy, *Tret'iakov* retains for his tour of Beijing, with all the intricate knowledge it displays, the narrative shape of a single arriving journey. But it also places that embassy and the power it represents at the spatial centre and temporal climax of this journey, which condenses all of *Tret'iakov's* knowledge of Beijing into a single travelling movement. Arriving in ignorance, his vision clouded by fantasy, *Tret'iakov* learns as he moves and observes to understand Beijing as a society with a rich and complex culture, while at the same time recognizing that this culture is being transformed by the contradictory forces of development. The conclusion of this journey from outside to inside locates the centre of the city at the Soviet embassy, and suggests that it is here that a future resolution to the conflict of tradition and modernity may be found.

The affirmation of observational authority that we find in "Beijing" calls to mind Spurr's evocation of Foucault's panopticism to describe the visual balance of power that dominates most travel accounts, wherein the traveller observes and understands all but cannot himself be observed. For Spurr, the panopticon describes a dissymmetry of vision that "has bearing on any occasion where the superior and invulnerable position of the observer coincides with the role of affirming the political order that makes that position possible."³⁹³

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹² *Ibid.* "Стемнеет. Проедут еще болтливые оравы, возвращающиеся из кино, и — тихо. Около посольских ворот шагают часовые. Но нет часовых около ворот того посольства, с бастиона которого веет Пекину красное полотнище с нашим серпом и молотом."

Tret'iakov's sketch indeed plays such an affirmative role, and ends at the guardless Soviet embassy because this is the symbolic source of Tret'iakov's superior, de-exoticized vision. Most studies of travel accounts emphasise the ethnocentrism that characterizes the genre. For example, according to Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan: "travel writing frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstatement of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to 'other' cultures, peoples, and places."³⁹⁴ Tret'iakov, we might say, replaces ethnocentrism with politico-centrism. His global map is defined not by cultural difference, but by socio-economic commonalities. Superiority in the metaphorical chronotope of "Beijing" is a matter simply of revolutionary seniority: the future radiates out from the Soviet centre that Tret'iakov's all-seeing narrator moves towards.

A similar unmasking of Beijing is performed in a short sketch by A. A. Ivin (Aleksei Alekseevich Ivanov), who taught with Tret'iakov on the faculty at Beijing University. Ivin, as mentioned in the Introduction, was one of the few Soviet writers involved in the 1920s drive to reimagine China who actually spoke and read Chinese. Attracted to anarchism as a young man, Ivin had gone to study in Paris in 1904, but returned to Russia to participate in the 1905 revolution. Sentenced to four years of convict brigade labour for fighting in the streets, he returned to Paris in 1909, where he studied Chinese with Édouard Chavannes and Silvain Lévi. By 1917 Ivin was in Beijing, working at the Russian Orthodox Mission, when the revolution broke out. His support for the new Soviet government lost him his position at the Mission, but he eventually managed to get a job with the *Journal de Peking*, where the editor's laziness allowed him to turn the paper into a pro-Soviet voice in Beijing. Around 1919 Ivin began teaching French at Beijing National University—exactly the time that this university was taking its place, in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, at the centre of radical

³⁹³ Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, 16.

³⁹⁴ Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), viii.

thought on transforming China. While Li Dazhao was organizing the first Chinese study groups on Marx in his Beijing University office, Ivin was setting up the university's first Russian section, which provided teaching posts for other Soviet intellectuals such as Tret'iakov and the Sinologist Boris Vasil'ev (the first translator of Lu Xun into Russian).³⁹⁵

Tret'iakov encountered Ivin on his first visit to China in 1921, and later credited him with transforming his own vision of China: "A. Ivin, a veteran resident of Beijing, taught me to see China, laying it out before my maddened eyes carefully and tastefully, like a jeweller laying out precious stones."³⁹⁶ Tret'iakov's own writing on China is thus framed as an extension to his readership of an educational service that Ivin first rendered to him. Ivin published a large number of articles on China, including in *Pravda*, *Prozhektor* and *Krasnaia nov'*. Most of his output was in the objective-discursive vein, analyzing the current situation through a Marxist lens that focused in particular on the class complexities of semi-colonial China and the issues of the peasantry and land reform.³⁹⁷

One rare excursion into travel narrative is the short sketch "Revolutionary Beijing" ("Revolutsionnyi Pekin"), which first appeared in *Prozhektor's* special issue on the Chinese revolution in March 1927. This publication date marks the high point of Soviet involvement in 1920s China, right before the fall of Shanghai to the GMD and subsequent purge of the Communists.³⁹⁸ Ivin, like Tret'iakov, opens with arrival, and presents Beijing from an

³⁹⁵ Nikoforov, *Sovetskie istoriki*, 144–6.

³⁹⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo*, 2nd expanded edition (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1930), 339. "А. Ивин, старожилец-пекинец, темпераментнейший журналист, учил меня видеть Китай, раскладывая его перед моими ошалалыми глазами бережно и вкусно, как ювелир раскладывает камень."

³⁹⁷ Many of these articles were collected into books released by the state publishing house: *Kitai i Sovetskii Soiuz* (1924), *Pis'ma iz Kitaia* (1927), *Ot Khankou k Shankhau* (1927), *Ocherki partizanskogo dvizheniia, 1927–30* (1930); *Bor'ba za vlast' sovetov: ocherki sovetskogo dvizheniia v Kitae* (1933).

³⁹⁸ A. Ivin, "Revolutsionnyi Pekin," *Prozhektor* 5, 15 March 1927, 18–19. Reprinted, as "Pekin," in A. Ivin, *Pis'ma iz Kitaia: ot Versal'skogo dogovora do sovetsko-kitaiskogo soglashiia* (Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1927), 68.

external perspective as exotically distanced in time and space. “Before us is Beijing: those same cyclopic walls that surrounded the city many centuries ago surround it still,” he begins, comparing for elucidation the walls of Babylon in D. W. Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance*.³⁹⁹ Next Ivin moves, like Tret'iakov, to the vantage point of those walls. From here vision again tends towards distancing metaphors: Beijing now resembles a “garden in full bloom,” now a “sea of buildings” decorated with “fantastically curved roofs.”⁴⁰⁰ By the end of this first paragraph, these perspectives from outside and from above have drawn Ivin's observing subject out of contemporary reality into a realm of generalized Oriental fantasy: “it begins to seem that you have flown over the mountains and across the seas to be deposited by magic carpet in a fantastical land of fairy-tale.”⁴⁰¹ Beijing is inscribed, on first encounter, into a generic vision of an ancient, quasi-mythical East, which the Russian traveller reaches after travelling some impossible distance from his home.

However, as the reader is ushered down from this external vantage point and into the city proper, the distanced image of a mythical eastern city is disrupted by a host of temporal contradictions that Ivin describes as a “hotchpotch of the centuries” (винегрет столетий). The ancient and the modern are revealed to exist here side by side: the automobiles of the rich speed past a caravan of camels on the sidewalk, aeroplanes fly overhead, and bicycles and rickshaws share the road with two-wheeled carts that survive from the time of Genghis Khan. In a mammoth third paragraph that stretches a single sentence across thirty-nine lines, Ivin portrays Beijing as the epitome of Trotsky's uneven development, an explosively

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 18. “Перед нами Пекин: те же циклопические стены, что охраняли его много столетий назад, охраняют его и теперь, и если вам пришлось видеть в кинематографе «Intolérance» с импозантной инценировкой штурма стен вавилонских, то вы имеете некоторое представление о величественности пекинских стен, их колоссальных башнях-бойницах, их многочисленных гигантских воротах[.]”

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. “сплошным цветущим садом... море построек... причудливо-изогнутых крыш[.]”

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. “начинает казаться, что пролетели вы тридевять земель и тридевять морей, и опустил вас ковер-самолет в небывалую сказочную страну.”

contradictory combination of ancient Asia and Europeanized modernity.⁴⁰² The one-step and the foxtrot are danced in foreign hotels while hordes of chancrous beggars roam the streets; the complex traditional artform of Chinese theatre competes for attention with the brash new import of foreign cinema. Beijing now appears as “some kind of fantastical, monstrous blend of Europe and Asia”: the fantastic element endures, but transposed now to a scarcely credible present.⁴⁰³

These are not unique observations: as S. A. Smith notes, Ivin's contemporary and Beijing University colleague Li Dazhao described Qianmen in 1918 as a similar space of temporal contradictions, where “all the things of the twentieth century alongside those from the before the fifteenth are brought together in one place.”⁴⁰⁴ Ivin's innovation lies in the authority he ascribes to the Soviet Russian observer to decipher the “riddle” posed by the city's inhabitants, briefly typified through a string of standard figures—monk-like students, philosopher-infants, fragile girl-children.⁴⁰⁵ This riddle, it transpires, turns not on strangeness but on similarity:

This whole human anthill with its strange customs, understandings, beliefs and legends produces the impression of an *unknown* world that is at the same time *mysteriously close* to us, close to us Russians as to none of the Europeans. For despite all the *dissimilitude*, there is in this China something of Tatar, pre-Petrine Rus', of boyars' gowns, painted mansions and *lubok* garishness.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² “The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process. Their development as a whole acquires a planless, complex, combined character.” Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, ch. 1, “Peculiarities of Russia's Development.” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch01.htm> accessed 11.6.13.

⁴⁰³ Ivin, “Revoliutsionnyi Peking,” 18. “какая-то фанстически-уродливая смесь Европы и Азии[.]”

⁴⁰⁴ Li Dazhao, *Li Dazhao wenji* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1984), vol. 1, 539. Quoted in S. A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18.

⁴⁰⁵ Ivin, “Revoliutsionnyi Peking,” 19.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.* My emphases. “весь этот человеческий муравейник с его странными обычаями, понятиями, верованиями и легендами производит впечатление *неведомого* и в то же время *загаочно-близко* нам мира, близкого нам, русским, как никому из европейцев. Ибо, несмотря на всю *непохожесть*, есть в этом Китае что-то от татарской, допетровской Руси, боярских охабней, расписных теремов и лубочной пестроты.”

This atmosphere of fantasy and fairy-tale recalls in Russian observers their *own* exoticized, “Oriental” past, as epitomized for Ivin by Ivan Iakovlevich Bilibin's famous fairytale illustrations. This aesthetic echo is replicated on the level of ideology with “Confucian conservatism itself, which so smacks of the firmness in faith of our doctrinarians.”⁴⁰⁷ It seems that Ivin here retools the ethnocentrism of colonial discourse for a revolutionary age, domesticating strange China as Russia's own past. China can be understood by Russians instinctively, on the basis of their own historical experience.

What’s more, Ivin insists that “[t]his vague sense of proximity, kinship and similarity is mutual,” pointing to Chinese students’ enthusiasm for the works of historian Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii (1841–1911) and his descriptions of old Russian life: “Listen to their commentaries,” he exhorts, “and you will be convinced that, despite all the differences, we have much in common, and not only in terms of historical experience, but also in our thoughts, our feelings, our worldview...”⁴⁰⁸ With Chinese students immersed in Kliuchevskii, the stage is set for the final phase of Ivin's transformation of China, as embodied in Beijing, from exotic other to mysterious twin. Further acquaintance with the younger Chinese generation, he suggests as he leads his reader into their university auditoriums, will reveal such traits as veneration of science, rejection of all authorities and traditions, and disputes in various “circles” (Marxist, anarchist, feminist) over the role of the intelligentsia and its relationship to politics. “[I]n a word, before your eyes spring back to life our eighteen forties, sixties, seventies, and nineties, the period of student demonstrations and the first protests by

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. “даже самый конфуцианский консерватизм, так отдающий твердостью в вере наших начетчиков.”

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. “Послушайте их комментарии, и вы убедитесь, как, несмотря на все различия, много у нас общего, и не только в исторических переживаниях, но и в наших мыслях, наших чувствах, нашем мирозерцании...” Tret’iakov also reports a student interest in Kliuchevskii: Tret’iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 147.

the Russian workers.”⁴⁰⁹ If the traditional, archaic, Asiatic elements in China recall Russia's distant past, Ivin's reasoning runs, then the modern elements must recall the recent Russian past, the radical intelligentsia and the birth of the workers' movement. Harnessing the two countries together through a kind of aesthetic intuition, on the level of distant history, Ivin now extrapolates forward to a present moment when China, reacting against the same conservatism as did Russia, is growing towards the same revolution. China will overcome its exotic, Oriental-despotic past, as Russia has its own.

We are not there yet, however. All this is as yet in miniature (в миниатюре), indeed childish (по-детски): young China is still “on the school-benches” (на школьных скамьях), still at the stage of student demonstrations and manifestos. But a description of one such demonstration suggests ancient Chinese decrepitude transformed by Soviet example into youthful, martial valour: “The impression is inescapable,” Ivin assures us, “that decrepit, captive China has sent forth its first brigade, sent its youth in search of the Promised Land, news of which sounds forth incessantly from the great Russian plain.”⁴¹⁰

This notion of Sino-Russian similarity is not unique to Ivin. As we saw in the Introduction and in Chapter One, many writers and thinkers suggested likenesses between these Eurasian agricultural autocracies. Earlier Russian travellers had also seen a past Russia in present China: Ivan Goncharov, stumbling upon a market on the outskirts of Shanghai in the 1850s, felt “that I had suddenly stumbled onto some bustling marketplace in our Moscow or a fair in some provincial capital far from Petersburg, where wide streets and shops have yet to be introduced...”⁴¹¹ Nor is Ivin unique in projecting a similar past into a similar

⁴⁰⁹ Ivin, “Revoliutsionnyi Peking,” 19.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 20. “невольно кажется, что это дряхлый, плененный Китай выслал свой первый отряд, свою молодежь на поиски земли обетованной, весть о которой неумолчно звучит с великой русской равнины.”

⁴¹¹ Ivan Goncharov, *Fregat Pallada: Ocherki putestestviia*, 3rd edition (St Petersburg: Izd. Ivana P'icha Glazunova, 1879), 2:144. “Мне показалось, что я вдруг очутился на каком-нибудь нашем

revolutionary future: the Russian radical Sinologist would surely have been aware that such comparisons of Russian and Chinese historical destiny were popular among his Chinese intellectual contemporaries in Beijing, including his university colleague and fellow Marxist revolutionary Li Dazhao.⁴¹² Ivin's text, however, concentrates these notions of Sino-Russian similarity into a narrative shape that affirms the superiority of the Soviet gaze, and replaces exoticism with an affirmation of historical progress and messianic Russian seniority. The chronotope of arrival here takes on the metaphorical form of a temporal movement from difference to historical similarity, before accelerating in its conclusion towards revolutionary convergence.

IV. Translation: The Sounds of China Through Soviet Ears

We might say that Ivin's sketch performs a kind of translation: beginning from difference, the penetrative movement into the city reveals commonalities that enable understanding through equivalence. China equals Russia of the recent past. Ivin was unusual among Soviet reporters of China in that he actually could perform the linguistic translations that we would assume to be necessary for understanding a foreign cultural world. For most Soviet reporters in China, linguistic and cultural difference represented a serious obstacle to understanding.

московском толкучем рынке или на ярмарке губернского города, вдалеке от Петербурга, где еще не завелись ни широкие улицы, ни магазины[.]”

⁴¹² Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 47–61. Meisner notes that Li was close to the Soviet ambassador Lev Mikhailovich Karakhan, and indeed lived in hiding at the Soviet embassy for several months in 1926 before being captured in a raid on the embassy by Zhang Zuolin's troops, and subsequently executed (ibid., 236, 247). When the journalist Aleksandr Lebedenko arrived in Beijing with the Great Flight in 1925, he found Ivin working at the Soviet embassy. See A. Lebedenko, *Kak ia letal v Kitai* (Moskva: Gos. izd., 1928), 144. It seems likely that Li and Ivin would have known one another: indeed, Ah Xiang lists Ivin as one of the go-betweens that first introduced the Comintern agent Grigorii Voitinskii to Li in 1920. (Ah Xiang, “USSR / Comintern Alliance with the KMT & the CCP,” <http://www.republicanchina.org/USSR-Comintern-KMT-CCP.pdf>, accessed 11.7.13.)

The Chinese language posed a formidable barrier; but auditory impenetrability extended beyond the verbal sphere. In particular, Soviet ear-witnesses inherited the long-standing European attitude towards Chinese music as inaccessible and incomprehensible. Many Soviet accounts of the period include a mandatory visit to a Chinese theatre, which typically becomes the occasion to reflect on the strange and alienating sounds of the music accompanying theatrical performances. Galina Serebriakova, in her *Sketches of China* (*Zarisovki Kitaia*, 1927), describes “several instruments issuing sounds unusual to the ear of a foreigner: a gong, a wooden flapper, flutes and a one-stringed violin. At first Chinese music deafens with its unaccustomed idiosyncrasy.”⁴¹³ Zinaida Rikhter, arriving in the China with the Great Flight aviation expedition of 1925, states plainly: “The most powerful hurricane could not compare with the frenzied noise made by a Chinese orchestra.”⁴¹⁴ Leonid Ierokhonov, who wrote the screenplay for the 1929 film *The Blue Express* (*Goluboi ekspress*—a revolutionary melodrama, based on an earlier script by Tret’iakov, that depicted an uprising on a Chinese train), was so affected by the “nightmarish, wild music” emitted by the Chinese theatrical orchestra that, walking home after a performance, even the cool southern night air could not relieve “the headache induced by the ‘musicality’ of Chinese theatre.”⁴¹⁵

Tret’iakov agreed that the music of the Chinese theatrical orchestra “shocks and deafens a European to the point of headache,” but tied his aesthetic conclusions to an

⁴¹³ “Несколько издающих непривычные для уха иностранца звуки инструментов: гонг, деревянная колотушка, флейты и однострунная скрипка. В первый момент китайская музыка оглушает непривычным своеобразием.” Galina Serebriakova, *Zarisovki Kitaia* (Moscow: Ogonek, 1927), 19.

⁴¹⁴ “Самый сильный ураган не может сравниться с бешеным шумом, который производит китайский оркестр.” Zinaida Rikhter, *7000 kilometrov po vozdukhу: Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai* (Moscow: Avioizdatel’stvo, 1926), 126.

⁴¹⁵ “кошмарная дикая музыка... Прохладный воздух, мягкая южная ночь не избавили меня от головной боли, вызванной ‘музыкальностью’ китайского театра.” Leonid Ierokhonov, “*Oshibka*” *pekinskoi tiurny* (Moscow: Doloi negramatnosti, 1927), 107, 111.

ideological critique.⁴¹⁶ Chinese theatre, for Tret'iakov, occupied the socially central position held in the West by religious cult: an aesthetic narcotic that prevented its pacified spectators from perceiving the true nature of their social relations.⁴¹⁷ As the mouthpiece of medieval morality, promoting the ideology of the patriarchal family and the guild, traditional Chinese theatre was for Tret'iakov a major obstacle to progressive social change.⁴¹⁸

In place, then, of this alienating musical form, with its suspicious class connections, Soviet ear-witnesses focused on sounds from the economic sphere of daily life. Serebriakova, alienated by the music in the theatre, finds an “incomparable symphony” in the “so-called sound signs” used by traders and craftsmen on the streets of Beijing. Here the “tender melodic strain” of the fruit-seller interrupts the “hiss” (“shipenie”) of the water-seller, and the extended groans of a toy merchant are drowned out by the barber's click-clacking (“treshchotka”).⁴¹⁹ Tret'iakov was also drawn to these “sound-signs” when he first visited China in 1921, passing through Tianjin, Beijing and Harbin on his flight from White-held Vladivostok to Red Chita. Summarizing that trip retrospectively, Tret'iakov describes his first impressions as “overwhelming, but processed above all from an exotic perspective.”⁴²⁰ First on the list of these preliminary, exotic impressions is a sonic motif: the “mournful,

⁴¹⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1927), 86. “Европейца этот оркестр потрясает и оглушает до головной боли[.]”

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. 77.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. 82. Tret'iakov's expressed views on Chinese theatre were to change considerably by the time of Mei Lanfang's visit to Moscow in 1935. See Epilogue.

⁴¹⁹ “Нежный мелодический напев фруктовщика прорезывает шипение водовоза, продавец игрушек, несущий свой товар в ведрах, на коромысле, протяжно стонет, заглушаемый трещеткой парикмахера.” Serebriakova, *Zarisovki Kitaia*, 5.

⁴²⁰ “Первые впечатления были потрясающие, но воспринимались главным образом своей экзотической стороной.” Sergei Tret'iakov, “Rychi, Kitai!,” in *Chzhungo*, 2nd expanded edition (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1930), 339.

completely incomprehensible cries of the peddlers[.]”⁴²¹ Tret’iakov’s attention in the Chinese context seems to have been drawn to sound from the beginning; indeed, in their analysis of the poem “Night. Beijing” (Ночь. Пекин), written by Tret’iakov after this first visit, Aleksei Kosykh and Pavel Arsen’ev detect a distinct primacy of acoustic over visual images.⁴²²

When Tret’iakov returned to Beijing in 1924, to spend 18 months teaching Russian at Beijing University, he determined to replace these exotic impressions with a more authentic, documentary perspective on China. This longer stay allowed him more time, he notes, to observe and overhear the mundane details of everyday life. What he discovered was the ubiquitous and invulnerable abuse of the Chinese by foreigners, which began in turn to inflect the same soundscape with new meanings: “These stories and observations brought me to such a point of rage that the voice of an elemental, vengeful, righteous, inevitable rebellion, in the manner of the Boxer Uprising, began to whisper to me in every sound of the street, in every street vendor’s melody.”⁴²³ This transformation of Beijing’s street sounds from the objects of ethnographic or simply exotic curiosity into the sounds of a fervently desired uprising is

⁴²¹ “Тогда в первую очередь воспринимались заунывные, совершенно непонятные запевки разносчиков[.]” Tret’iakov, *Chzhungo*, 339.

⁴²² Kosykh, Aleksei, and Pavel Arsen’ev. “Kitaiskoe puteshestvie S. Tret’iakova: poeticheskii zakhvat deistvitel’nosti na puti k literature fakta,” *Translit*, 10–11 (2012): 17–19. Kosykh and Arsen’ev also note that Tret’iakov was, according to his own daughter, musically talented, with perfect pitch and a piano-playing ability that was admired by Scriabin. They further add that other early twentieth-century researchers were similarly attracted to the sound-scapes of foreign street life, citing in particular the linguist Evgenii Polivanov in Japan and the ethnologist Petr Bogatyrev in central Europe. (Ibid., 18.) Such audial street signs belonged also to the domestic exotic of a Russian past being lost to modernization: as Richard Taruskin notes, the orchestral introduction to Igor Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (1911) is based in part on traditional Russian street-hawkers’ cries. Richard Taruskin, “Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*,” in *Petrushka: Sources and Contexts*, ed. Andrew Wachtel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 70–71.

⁴²³ “Эти рассказы и наблюдения довели меня до такой степени возмущения, что голос стихийного мстительного, праведного, неизбежного бунта, подобного боксерскому восстанию, стал мне чудиться в каждом уличном шуме, в каждой мелодии уличного продавца.” Tret’iakov, *Chzhungo*, 345.

described and re-enacted in the poem “Roar China” (“Rychi Kitai”), precisely dated and located: “Beijing, 20 March 1924.”⁴²⁴

“Roar China” stands on the border between Tret’iakov’s Futurist poetic phase and his later advocacy of the literature of fact. Presented as an almost gramphonic recording of authentic Chinese reality, it also expresses an interest in the poetic capture of trans-linguistic sound that connects to Futurist investigations into *zaum*: “trans-sense” or “trans-rational” language. Velimir Khlebnikov theorized *zaum* as the foundation for a world language of the future, based on his purported rediscovery—largely from Russian examples—of the universal kinetic significations of phonemes.⁴²⁵ Aleksei Kruchenykh argued that the absence in this language of a defined meaning locked within a specific cultural system enabled *zaum* to entertain trans-national, global ambitions: “*Zaum* is the most universal art, even though its origins and originary character may be national. For example: Hurrah, Evan-evoe! etc. *Zaum* creations can provide a global poetic language that is born organically, not artificially like Esperanto.”⁴²⁶ Like the Georgian poet Aleksandr Chachikov, who experimented at this same time with the introduction of foreign words into Russian poetry, Tret’iakov explores the implications of Futurist *zaum* for political internationalism: can a trans-cultural poetic language be found to communicate within the new global community of the world proletariat?⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Rychi Kitai,” *Lef* 1 (5), 1924, 23–32.

⁴²⁵ For Khlebnikov’s programmatic theoretical statements, see “Khudozhniki mira” and “Nasha osnova,” both written in 1919. Translated as “Artists of the World!” and “Our Fundamentals,” in Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:364–70, 376–392.

⁴²⁶ “Заумь – самое всеобщее искусство, хотя происхождение и первоначальный характер его могут быть национальными, например: Ура, Эван-эвое! и др. Заумные творения могут дать всемирный поэтический язык, рожденный органически, а не искусственно, как эсперанто.” Aleksei Kruchenykh, “Deklaratsiia zaumnogo slova,” 1921, accessed online on March 31, 2014: http://hylaee.ru/kruch_publ_1.html.

⁴²⁷ The comparison between Tret’iakov and Chachikov is made by Tat’iana Nikol’skaia, “Aleksandr Chachikov, Sergei Tret’iakov i Vostok,” in *Avangard i ideologiya* (Belgrade: Izd-vo filologicheskogo

Tret'iakov's poem moves its ear away from the theatre and towards the street, investigating the division of labour in contemporary Beijing. Nine of the poem's 14 sections describe a particular occupation: peasant, rickshaw driver, knife-grinder, load-carrier, manure-carrier, water-carrier, fruit-seller, barber, and student. In an afterword appended to the first publication of "Roar China," Tret'iakov explains the aesthetic technique of the poem as an attempt to capture the "sound signs" that had attracted his own and Serebriakova's attention: "The basic core of the poem is constructed around the "sound signs" of the wandering street craftsmen and traders of Beijing: these are either cries, or sounds emitted by various instruments."⁴²⁸ Some of these sounds are reproduced phonetically: the water-carrier's cart goes "vzhi—zzi; vzhi—zzi" (вжи — ззи; вжи — ззи), while a device similar to a tuning fork announces the barber and his trade: "Dzzzzyi / I shave / Dzzzzyi / I trim" (Дззззый / Брею / Дззззый / Стригу).⁴²⁹ Elsewhere the sound is implied in the poem's verbal structure. The repetition of the verb "точу" (*tochu*, I grind, I sharpen) in the section devoted to the knife-grinder (точильщик) begins to sound like the militaristic trumpet blast with which, according to the post-script, he announces his presence.⁴³⁰ For the fruit-seller, the post-script provides the rhythmical notation that supposedly corresponds both to the rhythm he beats out on his stick-mounted drum, and to the rhythm that organizes his section of the poem.⁴³¹

fakul'teta v Belgrade, 2009), 315–321. See also Tat'iana Nikol'skaia and Tat'iana Vinogradova, "Kitaiskaia zaum' Aleksandra Chachikova," in *Vestnik vostochnogo instituta*, 2001, 1 (13), vol. 7, 19–23.

⁴²⁸ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Rychi Kitai," *Lef* 1 (5), 1924, 33. "Основная гуша поэмы построена на «звуковых вывесках» уличных бродячих ремесленников и торговцев Пекина — это либо выкрики, либо звуки, издаваемые разными инструментами."

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29, 30.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Whether or not we consider Tret'iakov's attempt to reproduce street sounds through poetry a success, we must note that the method itself, as explained to the reader in the appendix, claims to capture actual auditory experience. In the “Beijing” sketch, Tret'iakov describes how the sounds were recorded: On the first days after my arrival in Beijing, sitting on the second floor above the *hutong*, I would write down on notepaper the musical phrases arising beneath my window. Soon I could tell the time of day from the first notes of a tune, and then learned to recognize the product or trade that the tune proclaimed.”⁴³² This emphasis on recording connects “Roar China” to the nascent documentary project of the literature of fact, claiming an indexical reference to objective events in external reality. Even the poem’s most conspicuously narrative moment—the violent expulsion of a Chinese student from a restaurant dining car by a French major—is confirmed in the post-script as a verifiable, *factual* occurrence for which Tret'iakov claims a reliable source.⁴³³ This documentary act of recording enables a greater understanding of the Chinese social world: Tret'iakov begins to understand the significations of these sounds, revealing their functional social meanings in the world of the Beijing streets.

Once this social function is established, however, Tret'iakov performs a second interpretative move that claims to unearth the true meaning concealed behind this apparent, economic meaning. Each verse on a different tradesman begins with a description of their activity, vivified by their distinctive sound, but progresses in every case to conclude with the same political message: the hatred of the Chinese workers for the foreign imperialists who dominate and exploit their economic system will lead eventually to violent rebellion. What

⁴³² Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 40. “Первые дни по приезде в Пекин, сидя во втором этаже европейского дома над хутунгом, я записывал на лист нотной бумаги музыкальные фразы, возникавшие под окном. Вскоре по раздавшейся запевке я смог определить, который час, а потом научиться узнавать товар или труд, о котором кричит запевка.”

⁴³³ “Случай со студентом в вагон-ресторане—факт, рассказанный мне дипкурьером.” Tret'iakov, “Rychi Kitai,” 33.

Tret'iakov's post-script presents as an objective recording of experience in the present in fact builds in every case into a prophecy of uprising in the future.

For example, the section on the water-carrier (Водовоз), opening with the aforementioned sound of the cart (“vzhi—zzi; vzhi—zzi”), moves next to a description of typical activity in which the sounds associated with the cart (v, zh, i and z) are echoed in such verbs as “vezu” and “vizzhit”:

Воду, воду
Вези, вези.
Плечи под цепью. —
Тачка пой!
Везу водопой.
Визжит водопой.⁴³⁴

[Water, water / Bring, bring. / Shoulders to the chain. — / Sing, cart! / I bring the water trough. / The water trough screeches.]

As the poem progresses, the emphasis moves to the difficulty of the work, rather than simply its regularity or typicality:

Воду везу. Воду везу.
Плечи калечит цепь, цепь.
Визжит на мясе звеньями зуд.
Пилит пыль — морщ на лице.

[I bring water. I bring water. / Shoulders maimed by the chain, the chain. / Scratch screeches its links in flesh. / Dust saws a furrow in a face.]

Here the screech of the cart (“viz-zhit”) becomes the screech of its chain digging into the water-carrier’s body. This mutilating physical labour is juxtaposed to the leisurely existence of Europeans: “У белых, у белых сквозные шляпки. / У белых, у белых — белые лапки” (The whites, the whites have ventilated hats. / The whites, the whites have white paws).

These contradictions climax in a fantasy of violent vengeance:

В лоханьях пятнадцать пудов воды.
В ней тебя и твою утоплю.
Белым лицом рвану по грязи.
Вжи — ззи.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 29. Subsequent quotations from this section of the poem are all from the same page.

Вжи — ззи.

[There are fifteen poods of water in these tubs. / I will drown you and your woman in it. / I will grind your white face in the dirt. / Scree—chee. / Scree—chee.]

The screeching sound of the cart, “vzhi-zzi,” which once carried the neutral socioeconomic function of advertising water, migrates to signify first oppressive labour and then violent uprising, the sound of a hated face ground into the dirt.

Every section on an individual trade follows a similar pattern: from typical activity, through a sense of hardship, to the turning of the tools of that trade against the European imperialists. The manure-carrier throws the European into his excrement-filled basket; the barber offers to slit the collective throats of the Diplomatic Quarter. The knife-grinder’s sharpened tools become potential weapons: “Кто злобой гружен — / Ставь красную точку / Моим ножом” (Whoever is burdened with malice — / make a red dot / with my knife), he declares, turning his neutral trade into a weapon of violence. Next the verb “tochu,” equated through repetition with the knife-grinder’s trumpet blast, but now linked sonically to the blood-red *tochka* (dot) pierced by the sharpened knife, splits into two discrete sounds, “To — / Chu!” (To — / — Чу!): closer to distinct notes, but also to the one-two thrust of a knife pushed into a body. The common denominator of all these typified Chinese labourers and craftsmen, despite the differences in occupation, is their readiness to overthrow foreign dominance with a graphically expressed violence.

Tret’iakov’s poem engages two different forms of translation, and its ideological message demands the subjugation of the first to the second. The first translation move is, to use Roman Jakobson’s terminology, “intersemiotic.” Tret’iakov learns, for example, to translate the non-linguistic audial sign of the water-seller’s cart (vzhi-zzi) as a linguistic message: “I bring drinking water” (Везу водопой).⁴³⁵ In this inter-semiotic act of translation,

⁴³⁵ Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 114. Jakobson in fact defines intersemiotic translation

however, we remain entirely within the signifying terms of Beijing street culture: the sounds mean what they mean to inhabitants of that social milieu. Next, however, Tret'iakov performs an interpretative move that is closer to Jakobson's interlingual translation: he asserts the *true* meaning of these signs by exporting them out of their native cultural environment and importing them into the theoretical discourse of world revolution that he has brought with him from Moscow.⁴³⁶ These streets sounds do not for Tret'iakov signify a static, functioning socio-economic system; they are revalorized to signify a society that is on the verge of erupting into violent revolution because of the contradictions produced by foreign colonial domination.

Indeed, the poem-cycle as a whole follows this movement from economic description to revolutionary prescription. The first poem, "Walls" (Стены), presents the seemingly eternal processes of agriculture, observed we may assume from Tret'iakov's train as it enters China: "Жирный лесс / Родит рис. / Водоемных колес / Взмах вверх, / Взмах вниз. / И зеленый рисовый мех / Растет." (Bloated loess / bears rice. Water wheels / Swing up, / Swing down. / And the green rice fur / Grows.)⁴³⁷ By contrast, the final poem, prophetically entitled "I Know" (Знаю), is fully invested in accelerating historical time, confidently predicting a future mass uprising:

Миллионы храбрых
 Несущих штыки и гнев
 Шагнут от текстильных фабрик
 И сталелитейных огней.
 И станет труду иная цена.
 Не коппер, а Красный
 Интернационал.⁴³⁸

or "transmutation" in the reverse direction, as a verbal sign interpreted by a sign from a nonverbal sign system. In the Beijing streets, Tret'iakov finds an intersemiotic system operating effectively in the opposite direction, wherein nonverbal sound signs have become functionally attached to fixed semantic messages indicating the presence of this or that tradesman or craftsman.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Tret'iakov, "Rychi, Kitai," 23.

[Millions of brave people / Bearing bayonets and rage / Will step forth from the textile factories / And the steel-forging fires. / And labour will gain a new value. / Not a copper coin, but the Red International.]

Again, the chronotope of arrival is used to suggest Tret'iakov's movement from ignorance to understanding, as well as a historical movement from unconscious to conscious labour. As the first-person nature of this concluding prophecy ("I know") suggests, it is through the interpretative subjectivity of Tret'iakov the observer-narrator that this movement from experience to political prophecy is enabled. Tret'iakov's presence and interpretative activity are necessary for this prophecy to be made, for the old value of labour to be converted into its future, revolutionary value.

This transformation is demanded in sonic terms by the poem's imperative title: the everyday sounds of the accepted socioeconomic order are to be replaced by the conscious roar of revolution. But the verb *rychat'* ("roar") appears only in the title, never in the text. The closest we get is *orat'* ("yell," "bellow"), and its subject is Tret'iakov himself:

Это я в квартальный уют
От лица китайцев пою.
Это я в арсеналью дыру
От лица китайцев ору.
В обмен на тысячи плюх
Жадным зубом пера скриплю.⁴³⁹

[It is I in the comfort of the Quarter / Singing on behalf of the Chinese. / It is I in this armoured hole / Yelling on behalf of the Chinese. In exchange for a thousand thwacks / I scratch with the greedy tooth of my pen.]

Here we find again the distinctive positionality of the Soviet eyewitness reporter, the privileged location from which he speaks. Tret'iakov's poetic voice is located within the Diplomatic Quarter, the "arsenal" of dynamite at the heart of Beijing that, in the preceding

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁴³⁹ Tret'iakov, "Rychi Kitai," 26.

section, snatches bread from China's mouth with its teeth-like walls.⁴⁴⁰ Embedded at the centre of foreign, imperial power in China, Tret'iakov claims the right to roar on behalf of the laborers oppressed by that power—literally “from the face of” (*ot litsa*), as if Tret'iakov has donned a Chinese mask. The poem's imperative title demands that China roar, but thereby admits that China is not roaring yet: for now, Tret'iakov must roar on China's behalf.⁴⁴¹ Tret'iakov claims this apparently contradictory position as the source of his authority: granted access to the European enclave, his sympathies and duties lie with the Chinese, and thus he sees both perspectives in a way that neither side can. Donning his Chinese mask, Tret'iakov sings Beijing's street sounds in a new key, inspiring his Soviet readers to hear, not see, China, and embrace his ventriloquistic fantasy of violent uprising.

The methods of communication particular to Chinese culture are hereby transcended by a universal semiotics founded on revolutionary enthusiasm. Daniel Collins has interpreted this revolutionary enthusiasm (*entuziazm*) as an early Soviet reformulation of the Pentecostal concept of the Holy Spirit, a divine force that could reverse the separation of tongues enacted at the fall of the tower of Babel. “With the advent of the spirit of labor,” Collins writes, “the proletariat could fuse heaven and earth and build god-mankind without suffering the discord of a Confusion of Tongues. Enthusiasm would guarantee universal understanding regardless of language.”⁴⁴² Scenes where linguistic and cultural difference are transcended by revolutionary enthusiasm are frequently encountered in Soviet culture of this period,

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 25. The image of a wall as having teeth originates at the beginning of the first section, where we might assume, if this section describes an arrival, that it refers to the Great Wall.

⁴⁴¹ As Xiaobing Tang has shown, Tret'iakov's phrase did in fact cause reverberations within Chinese art and culture, most famously providing the title for Li Hua's 1935 woodcut. Indeed, Tang argues that the phrase's trajectory suggests that the “explosive potential of aurality” may debunk “the myth of seamless scopic regimes in modern life,” since “in comparison to a visual experience, an aural one may be even more immediate, more compelling, and more monumental.” Xiaobing Tang, “Echoes of Roar, China! On Vision and Voice in Modern Chinese Art,” *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Vol. 14, 2 (Fall 2006): 482–3.

⁴⁴² Collins, “Tower of Babel,” 428.

especially in locations on the eastern margins of the Soviet space. As noted in the previous chapter, Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armoured Train 14-69* contains a scene in which a captured American soldier, lacking any knowledge of Russian, responds to the word “Lenin” with the joyous exhortation “There's a chap!”⁴⁴³ A similar scene can be found in Vsevolod Pudovkin's film *The Descent of Genghis Khan* (*Potomok Chinghiz-Khana*, 1928—released in the West as *Storm over Asia*), when a Mongolian trapper under interrogation by British officers smiles warmly in reaction to the word “Moscow.”⁴⁴⁴

A replaying of this scene in revolutionary China can be found in the *Chinese Diaries* of Nikolai Kostarev, which went through five editions between 1929 and 1935. Kostarev, who had fought in the First World War and commanded Red Guard units during the Russian Civil War, spent nine months embedded with Guomindang troops in 1926–7 as a correspondent for *Rabochaia gazeta*.⁴⁴⁵ A chapter entitled “After John Reed” (Глава по Джону Риду) describes an experience in Shanghai that echoes a scene in the American journalist's *Ten Days that Shook the World*. In the original version, Reed and his companions are wandering through the Winter Palace, shortly after the October Revolution, and are challenged by soldiers who suspect them of being looters. The documents they offer up are at first no use as proof of identity, because the soldier who takes them is illiterate. Just as the situation appears to be becoming dangerous, however, Reed and his friends are saved by the intervention of an officer with superior linguistic skills, who vouches for the “foreign comrades from

⁴⁴³ Ivanov, “Bronepoezd 14-69,” in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: isd-vo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1968), 2: 81.

⁴⁴⁴ Julian Graffy, “The Foreigner's Journey to Consciousness in Early Soviet Cinema: The Case of Protazanov's Tommi,” in *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, ed. Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6.

⁴⁴⁵ Biographical information taken from Nikolai Kostarev, “Moia biografiia,” dated 10 December 1931, RGALI f. 1624 op. 1 d. 102. One of Kostarev's Civil War comrades was Vasilii Bliukher, subsequently the Comintern military advisor at the GMD's Whampoa academy. *Moi kitaiskie dnevniki* is dedicated to Bliukher.

America.”⁴⁴⁶ Kostarev’s deliberate use of the parallel indicates that he, like Ivin, wants his readers to see China as replaying the recent revolutionary stages of Russia.

In Kostarev’s version, he ventures alone out of Shanghai’s foreign settlement during the tumult of March 1927, and is swiftly arrested by Guomindang troops. Kostarev’s attempts to explain his special correspondent status are to no effect, and he is soon plunged into gloomy reflections on “the secret laws of nature which have produced such a variety of races and skin colours, and such total sonic exclusivity in language: each people has its own.”⁴⁴⁷ Determined not to succumb to this lamentable natural curse, Kostarev compensates for his limited capacities at interlinguistic translation by resorting to intersemiotic translation, introducing a multiplicity of other signifying practices:

I quickly drew a hammer and sickle in my notebook. Underneath them I wrote, in English, “Moscow.” I pointed with my finger to the emblem, and then to myself, saying:

— I ge yang! [*footnote: The same.*]

The Chinese smiled. He quickly doffed his cap to me in a friendly manner and moved on, increasing the pace.⁴⁴⁸

In his determination to be understood, Kostarev identifies himself with two signs which are themselves presented as equivalent: the visual image of the hammer and sickle, a trans-linguistic symbol of world revolution; and the sign “Moscow” written in English, which ironically identifies the Russian capital as the global centre of revolution in the language of its most prominent political adversaries. The semiotic identity of these different objects is

⁴⁴⁶ John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, accessed online on February 23, 2012: <http://www.archive.org/stream/tendaysthatshook03076gut/10daz10.txt>.

⁴⁴⁷ Nikolai Kostarev, *Moi kitaiskie dnevniki* (Moscow: gos. izv-vo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1931), 27–8. “Я грустно молчал и думал о трагедии немого среди говорящих людей; о таинственных законах природы, породивших такое разнообразие рас, цвета кожи и такое совершенно исключительное звучание языка: у каждого народа — свое.”

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28. “Я быстро в блок-ноте нарисовал серп и молот. Под ними я написал по-английски — Москва. Я показал пальцем на эмблему, а потом на себя и сказал: — Ига-ян! [*footnote: Все равно.*] Китаец улыбнулся. Быстро и дружелюбно закивал мне шляпой и двинулся дальше, ускоряя шаги.”

asserted by more signs: the indexical gesture of pointing, and a simple phrase in Chinese (*yi ge yang*, the same). Furthermore, the Chinese man's signs in reply are invested by Kostarev with implied meaning. The smile, the "friendly" doffing of the cap: all these imply that Kostarev's escort has understood the message and accepts that Kostarev can be identified with internationalist revolution. In transcending the Babelian separation of languages, Kostarev's inter-semiotic gesture places the hammer and sickle in a privileged position within this set of internationally valent signs.

Once they reach the army headquarters, Kostarev's escort repeats the sign of the hammer and sickle as equivalent to Kostarev by drawing it onto the palm of his hand. Kostarev nods, confirming his equivalence with the sign.⁴⁴⁹ Not everyone is convinced, however: Kostarev overhears the word "imperialist" (in what language, it is unclear). Meanwhile Kostarev's observations are continuing the domestication announced by his chapter title, as he senses himself transported backwards in time and space: "unexpectedly, by some wonderful jolt of history, I had been thrown back into our 1918. I was in a Red Guard base."⁴⁵⁰ A threatening man decked out with grenades and a machine-gun ribbon becomes "our Kronstadt sailor... this was a Chinese Red Guard from Piter."⁴⁵¹ History is replaying itself, in a way only the Soviet reporter can see. While Kostarev drifts into the recent Russian past, someone is found who knows him from the international settlement, and the situation is defused.

In the episode's final scene, the game of signs is played out once more. Kostarev says goodbye to his acquaintance, and asks him his name. But the pronounced name is no good to

⁴⁴⁹ Kostarev, *Kitaiskie dnevniki*, 29.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30. "неожиданно, каким-то изумительным толчком истории, я был переброшен в наш восемнадцатый год. Я находился в красногвардейском штабе."

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30–31. "наш кронштадтский матрос [...] это был китаец — питерский красногвардеец."

Kostarev; he takes out his notebook, and insists that his friend write down the name, in Chinese.

He wrote it down.

By chance, he opened the notebook at the very place where I had drawn the hammer and sickle.

Underneath then he “drew” his surname.

That notebook is lying beside me now, and I gaze at those squiggles, so dear to me now.

I said goodbye to him, a great, good friend.⁴⁵²

These “squiggles” are still incomprehensible to Kostarev at the intralinguistic or interlinguistic levels, in terms of the etymological composition of the character or the phoneme to which it is connected; but they are no longer meaningless. This is the model of international communication and friendship that Kostarev offers us: mutual incomprehension is averted by anchoring the discourse around the fixed sign that is the hammer and sickle. We, the readers, never learn the friend's name, as we might traditionally understand it: we do not see its character or receive a written rendition of its phonetic composition. But its connection to the international sign is enough to ensure his identity.

Indeed, if we refer back to the earlier passage in which Kostarev first draws the symbol, it appears that his friend has written over Moscow-in-English, or at least, written in the space where it used to be. This also means, according to the logic of Kostarev's semiotic equation (*yi ge yang!*), that his name means the same as Kostarev. In this sense, these “dear squiggles” now have a meaning that transcends their function within the Chinese language, even we might say within the Chinese cultural system as a whole. Attachment to the hammer and sickle has brought them into a whole new semiotic configuration where they mean the same thing as Moscow, and as Kostarev: they have entered a semiotic regime where

⁴⁵² Ibid., 34. “Он написал. Он случайно открыл блок-нот в том месте, где я нарисовал серп и молот. Под ними он «нарисовал» свою фамилию. Вот сейчас этот блок-нот лежит у меня здесь, возле и я смотрю на эти милые такие мне теперь закорючки. Я простился с ним — большим и хорошим другом.”

everything is, at its most radical, either identical with the hammer and sickle or excluded entirely.

Kostarev, then, identifies the problem of inter-cultural communication only to demonstrate, in its overcoming, the semiotic power of the symbols of the Russian revolution, which are hereby shown to have attained truly global significance. Revolutionary sentiment transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. In a similar vein, when Aleksandr Lebedenko arrives in Beijing with the Great Flight of 1925, the sheer enthusiasm of the crowds that greet the Soviet aviators overcomes the fact that they do not understand the actual words they are using: “They shouted out *something* in unison in Chinese, and we *understood* that this was a greeting to us. *From their eyes and flushed faces we saw* that this entire meeting was truly genuine and not simply the traditional politeness.”⁴⁵³ Lebedenko and his companions can read the meanings these Chinese students intend from the appearance of their faces; language is superfluous. Lebedenko and Kostarev extend Collins' Soviet Pentecost into China, as the spirit and symbols of the revolution affirm their power to overcome linguistic difference. For a more ambiguous approach to Babel's overcoming, we must turn to our final China report, Boris Pil'niak's *Chinese Story*.

V. Boris Pil'niak's *Chinese Story*: Communication, Solipsism, Nostalgia

When we turn to Boris Pil'niak, we must first acknowledge that we are dealing with a relationship to Soviet political power of a very different order. Tret'iakov was a committed Communist who unambiguously identified himself as an emissary of the Soviet state in his sketches. Indeed, his entire artistic project within *LEF* can be read as an attempt to re-orientate the functioning of artistic production in such a way that it might serve the same ends as revolutionary politics: the transformation of social life in an industrialized,

⁴⁵³ Lebedenko, *Kak ia letal v Kitai*, 128. (My emphases.) “Они что-то выкрикивали хором на китайском языке, и мы понимали, что это тоже приветствие нам. По глазам и покрасневшимся лицам мы видели, что вся эта встреча действительно искрення и не является простой обычной вежливостью.”

mechanized age. The other reporters on China we have mentioned—Tarkhanov/Erdberg, Ivin, Kostarev—were all agents or close allies of the Comintern’s mission in China.

Pil’niak, by contrast, was the first name on Trotsky’s list of *poputchiki*, or “fellow-travellers”: writers whose “transitional” works were “organically connected” to the revolution without grasping its true, proletarian character.⁴⁵⁴ Trotsky argued that the revolution as it appeared in Pil’niak’s novel *The Naked Year*, the work that made the writer’s reputation, was an elemental, rural, national phenomenon, incompatible with the urban, proletarian, industrial, and ultimately global vision endorsed by the Bolsheviks. Moreover, Pil’niak had an awkward tendency to assert that art need follow no political master.⁴⁵⁵ During his trip to the Far East in 1926, a scandal erupted back in Moscow around his “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon,” which dramatized the death of Mikhail Vasil’evich Frunze and pointed to the complicity of a thinly disguised Stalin. This scandal began Pil’niak’s fall from political grace, which ended with his arrest in 1937 and subsequent execution.⁴⁵⁶

In early 1926, however, Pil’niak was President of the Moscow branch of the All-Russian Writers’ Union, and one of the USSR’s most prominent and popular writers.⁴⁵⁷ Pil’niak was also known as a writer who travelled: in recent years he had visited England, Germany, Palestine, and Spitsbergen, and spent a month in 1925 flying round central European Russia in an aeroplane. These experiences produced a series of publications that

⁴⁵⁴ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ch. 2, “The Literary Fellow-Travellers of the Revolution,” http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch02.htm accessed 2.23.12.

⁴⁵⁵ On Pil’niak’s *apolitizm* see Browning, *Boris Pil’niak*, 20, 38.

⁴⁵⁶ For a detailed history of Pil’niak’s fatal relationship with the Soviet state, see Vera T. Reck, *Boris Pil’niak: A Soviet Writer in Conflict with the State* (Montreal: McGill – Queen’s University Press, 1975). Tret’iakov’s ambitions to fuse his artistic activities with the political work of the Bolshevik Party was not enough to save him from the same fate: both he and Pil’niak were arrested and executed in the late 1930s on charges that included spying for the Japanese, an association enabled by their work in the Far East.

⁴⁵⁷ Dany Savelli, “Shest’ neizdanykh pisem’ Borisa Pil’niaka o ego pervom prebyvanii na Dal’nem Vostoke (v Kitae i v Iaponii) v 1926 god,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 2001), 139.

explore and juxtapose a diverse range of global spaces, expanding outwards from provincial Russia to take in Europe, the Arctic and the Near East.⁴⁵⁸

Thus it seems understandable, after the events of 1925 in China had precipitated mass anti-foreigner anger and set in motion the Guomindang's Northern Expedition of reunification, that the Soviet authorities would want a writer of Pil'niak's stature to travel to China and produce an image of that country moving towards revolution under the guidance of Soviet example. And indeed, Pil'niak travelled under the auspices of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitsej—VOKS), though it appears VOKS had limited control over or even knowledge of his actual actions there.⁴⁵⁹ But the trip must be seen as motivated by personal as well as official desire. Besides a clear enthusiasm for travel and adventure, Pil'niak had shown a particular interest in China as a symbol within his explorations of Eurasian history and identity. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Chinese themes and motifs feature prominently in *The Naked Year* and "Sankt-Piter-Burkh," where they suggest a strange, sinister element from the East that has made its way into the heart of Russia. Pil'niak had his own reasons for wanting to see China: as early as July 1924, in fact, he had written to Vsevolod Ivanov suggesting they embark on a trip to China together.⁴⁶⁰ Indeed Dany Savelli,

⁴⁵⁸ For example: "Tret'ia stolitsa," written after a trip to Berlin in 1922; "Staryi syr," inspired by a trip to London in 1923; "Zavoloch'e," written after a 1924 journey to the Arctic Circle; "Rossiia v polete," which describes the 1925 airplane journey; and "Rasskaz o kliuzhakh i gline," which recreates a journey to Palestine later that same year. Before reaching China in 1926 Pil'niak also visited Japan, an experience recorded in *Korni iaponskogo sol'ntsa*.

⁴⁵⁹ The official records of VOKS describing Pil'niak's Far Eastern expedition note: "Pil'niak also visited China: in Beijing we rendered him the same assistance [as in Japan]. As to the results of his trip to China, we are unable to pass judgement, since we know about it only from his own words." In December 1926 the director of VOKS, O. Kameneva, wrote to a Soviet diplomat in Beijing: "The writer Pil'niak, who recently visited China, informs us that in Shanghai he supposedly set up an initiative group directed towards the creation of a Chinese society for closer relations with the USSR. We have not yet managed to confirm this fact. Do you know anything about this?" Boris Pil'niak, *Pis'ma*, 2:270.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

who has researched Pil'niak's 1926 visit to Japan in great detail, argues that the decision to travel to China and Japan was taken independently by Pil'niak, and only subsequently approved and endorsed by the authorities.⁴⁶¹

Pil'niak arrived in China in May 1926, then, as both a Soviet emissary and a writer drawn to seek eastern Eurasian connections within Russia's historical identity. This ambiguity shapes the text that the journey produced. *Chinese Story* (*Kitaiskaia povest'*, published in *Novyi mir* in June and August 1927) is a disjointed account of Pil'niak's experiences travelling through China and staying in Shanghai, where he spent several weeks waiting for a voyage home. Much in this curious travelogue fits the general outline of the Soviet "China text" as we have so far encountered it. We see war-torn northern China from the window of a train; we see Pil'niak walking the streets, attending parties with left-wing Chinese intellectuals, and commenting on the brutish behaviour of western imperialists. Echoing the aspirations of Tret'iakov's literature of fact, Pil'niak's text is filled with "documents": newspaper reports translated from English and Chinese, telegrams, diary entries, private letters.

Besides such elements of documentary form, there are moments when the rhetoric of revolutionary solidarity is openly proclaimed. Pil'niak declares at one point that he and his companions are in Shanghai "because the Russian Revolution has sent us, because we, the Russians, are now against the entire world."⁴⁶² Elsewhere he insists that, in contrast to the rapacious intentions of the capitalist powers, "[t]he USSR intends to see the entire Earthly Globe free, endowed with equal rights, working and educated."⁴⁶³ We see a rickshaw driver, standard symbol of oppressed Chinese labour, kicked in the back by an Englishman in a cork

⁴⁶¹ Dani Savelli, "Boris Pil'niak v Iaponii: 1926," in Boris Pil'niak, *Korni iaponskogo solntsa* (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2004), 181.

⁴⁶² Boris Pilnyak, *Chinese Story and Other Tales*, trans. Vera T. Reck and Michael Green (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 75.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 69.

helmet; like other Soviet reporters, Pil'niak gives us nightsoil traders, executions, and police violence.⁴⁶⁴ However, this discourse of solidarity is undermined by the experience of reading the text as a whole, in a manner that challenges the authority of Soviet reporting on China.

The first element in this challenge is the text's fragmentary structure, which disrupts the travelogue as a coherent chronotope. As we have seen, Tret'iakov structured his travelogues through a chronotope of arrival that drew the reader from ignorance through exploration to understanding. Other China travelogues of the period, such as Sergei Dalin's *In the Ranks of the Chinese Revolution* or Kostarev's *Chinese Diaries*, are similarly structured as chronological journeys of enlightenment. Moving chronologically through a series of discrete and defined locations, the narrator and, by extension, the reader move from a state of relative ignorance to one of relative knowledge. For example, Dalin's journey takes him from Harbin through Beijing and Shanghai towards a climactic meeting with Sun Yat-sen in Guangzhou, positioning the GMD leader as China's most authentic hope for revolution.⁴⁶⁵ Kostarev begins in the chaos and confusion of Shanghai in the spring of 1927, but a clearer picture of the social forces at war in China emerges as he moves to Wuhan and then into the Henan countryside with Guomindang troops. Kostarev's prologue even rejects the old colonial adage that the longer one lives in China, the less one understands it. "You could say this about old China. But about today's — no!" he insists. "Because today in China everything has come into movement — become differentiated in class terms, become defined."⁴⁶⁶ The movement of history has made China comprehensible to Kostarev's Marxist gaze.

⁴⁶⁴ Boris Pil'niak, *SS*, 3: 119, 152.

⁴⁶⁵ Dalin, *Vriadakh kitaiskoi revoliutsii*, passim.

⁴⁶⁶ Kostarev, *Kitaiskie dnevniki*, 5. "Но это можно сказать о вчерашнем Китае. О сегодняшнем — нет! [...] Потому что теперь в Китае все пришло в движение — классово дифференцировалось, определилось."

Pil'niak's narrative, by contrast, does not even observe a coherent progression in space and time. He begins with what seems to be a vivid assertion of location, announcing "I am standing on the bank of the Yangtze" (Я стою на берегу Ян-Цзы).⁴⁶⁷ But where exactly along the world's third-longest river Pil'niak is standing neither he nor we can know, because all he tells us is that he is opposite a village "whose name I will never know" (имени которой я никогда не узнаю).⁴⁶⁸ Across an ellipsis marked by a double dash (— —), we are next told that Pil'niak is staying in an international concession in the largest city on the shore of the Pacific, which must be Shanghai, though again the name of the city is withheld. Several pages in, we finally get a geographical and temporal marker, further inland and upriver: "Hankou, June."⁴⁶⁹ After a scene in Hankou, however, the narrative jumps again across space and time to recall a railway journey from Mukden through Beijing to Hankou, before the chapter eventually concludes with a boat journey from Hankou to Shanghai, which is now, finally, named. With external knowledge of China's geography and Pil'niak's biography, we can deduce that Pil'niak's actual journey through China began in the north-east and proceeded via Beijing and Hankou to Shanghai. The account in *Chinese Story* jumbles the different stages of Pil'niak's journey, disrupting the chronotope of arrival and producing in the reader a sense of travel, and of China, as disorienting and confusing.

Perhaps this initial confusion could, as in Tret'iakov and Ivin, represent the ignorance of arrival that is to be replaced by greater knowledge and understanding? Sure enough, in the second chapter Pil'niak announces that his true purpose is to tell the story of Liu Hua, a Shanghai trade union leader arrested by the British and executed by a local Chinese warlord. Here, Pil'niak finally seems to be getting round to his "mission": the depiction of semi-

⁴⁶⁷ Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:110.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

colonized China moving inexorably towards revolution. A lengthy passage cataloguing Shanghai's contradictions—the Chinese workers living on cramped boats beside huge Western hotels, the workers' unions that co-exist with the remnants of the feudal economy, the luxurious restaurants and dingy brothels—builds up rhetorical steam towards prophecies of revolution: “Oh, when the Canton revolution smashes through all this—even though three Hindu policemen stand on every corner here —oh, with what chilly joy one looks upon the Chinese who must inevitably be moved—not by marshals, but by revolutions!”⁴⁷⁰ This crescendo culminates with the naming of Liu Hua, a “worker, librarian, student” recently killed by shooting or strangulation. It seems that Liu Hua is being positioned as some kind of protagonist, through whose life-story Pil'niak will synecdochically represent the Chinese Revolution—precisely the approach taken by Tret'iakov in his “bio-interview,” *Den Shi-khua*, which began publication at around the same time *Chinese Story* appeared.⁴⁷¹

Immediately after this proclamation, however, Pil'niak abandons this line of narration, pleading exhaustion and homesickness: “Essentially, though, all this is not about me. I don't feel at all well. I am very tired. I would like to go home now, to Russia, onto the stove ledge, into thoughts, into books, into quiet—and far, far away from this unbearable heat, horrible and tormenting[.]”⁴⁷² The subjective experience of the narrator intrudes, disrupting the fulfilment of his mission. The re-mapping of China as a commensurable revolutionary space is interrupted by the desire to abandon this uncomfortable foreign place altogether and return

⁴⁷⁰ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 38. “Ах, как деранет по всему этому кантонская революция, — несмотря на то, что на каждом углу здесь стоит по три полисмена-индуса, — ах, как холодно-весело смотреть на китайцев, которые неминуемо должны задвигаться — не маршалами, а революциями!” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:129.

⁴⁷¹ The first instalment of *Den Shi-khua* was published in the July 1927 issue of *Novyi Lef* — in other words, right in between the two instalments of *Chinese Story*, which appeared in *Novyi mir* in June and August of that same year. On *Den Shi-khua*, see Chapter Five.

⁴⁷² Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 38. “Но, в сущности, все это — не обо мне. Я себя чувствую очень нехорошо. Я очень устал. Мне бы теперь домой, в Россию, на печку, в мысли, в книги, в тишину — и подальше от этой нестерпимой жары, ужасной, мучительной[.]” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:129.

to the comfort of home, effectively reversing the drive of the Comintern project outward from its Russian core. Pil'niak's turn away from internationalist sympathy here is not simply an affirmation of the self ("all this is not about me"); it is also an affirmation of the nation as the true home, a note of Russocentric homesickness that runs through *Chinese Story* and seems to put the possibility of global identity under a cloud. The fragmentary, confused narrative form endures, meanwhile, and prevents the discourse of solidarity from building any sustained momentum: the story of Liu Hua is only resumed after another thirty pages, almost a third of the text.

Next there is the issue of veracity, which is also an issue of genre. If this is documentary reportage, why the generic label, "povest'" (tale), in the title? In fact, after opening as a confused travelogue and briefly threatening to become a revolutionary biography, in its third chapter *Chinese Story* begins openly to violate the border between reality and fantasy. "I am making this up" (...я выдумываю — —), Pil'niak announces, as he begins to concoct a romantic narrative between Liu Hua and a visiting American missionary.⁴⁷³ These digressions into fiction perhaps make the reader question the authenticity of what they had hitherto read, trusting the generic markers of documentary and travelogue, as fact.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:147.

⁴⁷⁴ Extra-textual evidence supports such suspicions. For example, Pil'niak includes in *Chinese Story* a series of letters and telegrams purportedly from one of his housemates in Shanghai, the translator "Krylov," to his wife, who has returned to Russia. Here is the text of one such telegram: "Крылов послал сразу пять телеграмм — в разные адреса. [...] Крылов показал текст телеграммы: « — молчание считаю возмутительным требую объяснения»." (Krylov sent five telegrams at the same time, to various addresses. Krylov showed me the text of the telegram: "Consider silence outrageous demand explanation." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:125–26.) And here is a telegram sent by Pil'niak to his wife Olga Shcherbatskaia, who had returned to Russia rather than accompany him to China—the similarities are striking: "Передайте Шербиновской Последнее ее письмо от девятнадцатого Послал пять безответных телеграмм молчание считаю безобразием и требую объяснения[.]" (Pass on to Sherbinovskaia Her last letter from the nineteenth Have sent five telegrams without reply I consider this silence an outrage and demand explanation[.]) Pil'niak, *Pis'ma*, 267.

There is also the diary element in the text: the second and fourth of the text's four main chapters are arranged as a sequence of diary entries. The diary has been recognized as an ambiguous medium between the self and the world, "an uncertain genre uneasily balanced between literary and historical writing, between the spontaneity of reportage and reflectiveness of the crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public."⁴⁷⁵ Philippe Lejeune suggests we view the diary as the confluence of the monological chronicle and the dialogical prayer, a record of external events rooted in book-keeping that becomes a dialogue with the self and an exercise in self-fashioning.⁴⁷⁶ Kostarev's Chinese diaries maintain a complementary balance between external and internal: the events that Kostarev witnesses in China gradually transform and shape his inner self. In his post-scripted foreword, Kostarev begins with emotional experience: "Leaving China, I felt very sad." But as the foreword progresses and Kostarev realizes he has come to understand what is happening in China, his mood is transformed: "I am no longer sad," he declares, and "I wanted to go to China again!"⁴⁷⁷ Private experience is here publicized as an instructive example.

Kostarev does not use the diary as a form, however; he simply borrows the generic title to describe his memoir of experiences in China. Pil'niak uses the diary form itself, albeit

So perhaps these "documents" are fake? What then of "Krylov," whose name suggests fables, or the second housemate, known only as Loks—do they exist? And what of the other documents introduced into the text: the humorous newspaper reports on Chinese generals and their concubines, the poem by a Russian poet imprisoned in Beijing, the Chinese fable "translated" by "Krylov"? Even without this extra-textual evidence, Pil'niak works to undermine, rather than reassure, the reader's sense of his reliability.

⁴⁷⁵ Rachel Langford and Russell West, "Introduction: Diaries and Margins," in *Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History*, ed. Rachael Langford and Russell West (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 8. Quoted in Irina Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?" *Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 561.

⁴⁷⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, trans. Katherine Durnin, eds Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 93.

⁴⁷⁷ Kostarev, *Kitaiskie dnevniki*, 5.

sporadically. His second and fourth chapters are mostly made up of entries with specific dates and times of day (a short fifth chapter has no date, only the time: “2am”).⁴⁷⁸ Even though the text as a whole ends with an indication of date and place of writing (Moscow, on Povarskaya, 7 February 1927), still the use of the diary form produces what Irina Paperno, following Andrew Hassam, calls the “illusion of ‘authenticity’ and ‘immediacy’,” a sense of present access to the act of writing and the writer’s state of mind at that precise moment.⁴⁷⁹ This Chinese diary turns increasingly inward, away from China, to record Pil’niak’s discomfort, homesickness, and frustration over his delayed departure. By the end of chapter 4, this impatience is expressed in multiple entries per day, broken down by time, that communicate nothing new. A typical sample: “4 o’clock. Impossible to breathe!... Dreadful!... But in Moscow there is the coolness of nine o’clock in the morning.”⁴⁸⁰ Pil’niak’s diary-keeping produces neither greater understanding nor greater love for China, only a greater longing for home, a growing retreat into the self.

All this might seem unremarkable—why, after all, would we expect a romantic fellow traveller with Scythian tendencies, who spent a total of two months in the country, and most of that holed up in an apartment, to endorse either the Comintern’s mission in China or the *LEF* programme for a literature of fact? But in the course of subverting the travelogue, Pil’niak’s text calls into question the grounds of the entire Soviet project to reimagine China. A close reading of *Chinese Story* shows that it engages with but ultimately undermines all the tropes and devices on which other Soviet reporters of China based their authority. Pil’niak explores the reliability of observation and translation as methods for producing knowledge

⁴⁷⁸ Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:185.

⁴⁷⁹ Irina Paperno, “What Can be Done with Diaries?,” 565.

⁴⁸⁰ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 85. “4 часа. Дышать нечем!.. ужасно!.. — А в Москве прохлада девяти часов утра.” Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:172.

about China, and casts serious doubts on the privileged position of the Soviet eyewitness, his interpretative powers, and his capacity for trans-national solidarity.

Not unlike Tret'iakov or indeed Kostarev, Pil'niak begins in a state of profound sensory confusion. The following examples all occur in the first five pages of Chapter One, which, as mentioned above, relate in non-chronological order the writer's journey through China, via Beijing and Hankou, to Shanghai. First Pil'niak is troubled by the identity of this village on the Yangzi, whose name he cannot ever know; a rendition of this same scene in a private letter suggests that this is because the name is written in Chinese.⁴⁸¹ A jump in location takes us to a museum, where a collection of local fauna affirms the strangeness of this world: "yes, I am in a strange country, utterly strange; [...] A strange world! An *incomprehensible* world!"⁴⁸² At night he hears the boat-dwellers on the Nanjing canal shouting, and reacts with fear: "it is then, in the midst of all this *strangeness*, in this dark night—darker than any Russian night—that terror comes."⁴⁸³ Visiting some opium dens, he reaches his most complete expression of incomprehension and the impossibility of comprehension:

And it is here, on the threshold of these dens, in the same way as in the temples and in the streets, that I realize I *do not know, do not understand, and never will understand* China and the Chinese. I ask questions right and left to find some keys to China, but I do not have these keys, and everything that I look at only adds to my lack of knowledge.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸¹ Pil'niak, *Pis'ma*, 2:266. "Пароход стоит около какого-то города, имени которого я не знаю, ибо написано по-китайски."

⁴⁸² Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 20–21. "Да, я в чужой стране, совсем чужой, [...] — чужой мир! непонятный!" Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:113. (My emphasis.)

⁴⁸³ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 18. "тогда становится страшно в этой *непонятности*, в этой темной ночи, такой темной, каких в России не бывает." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:111. (My emphasis.)

⁴⁸⁴ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 22. "И вот, на порогах этих притонов, так же как в храмах и на улицах, — я познаю, что я *не знаю, не понимаю и никогда не пойму* китайцев и Китая. Я спрашиваю направо и налево всех, чтобы найти какие-либо ключи Китаю, — и этих ключей нет, все, что я вижу, я вижу для того, чтобы — *не зная*." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:114. (My emphasis.)

Observation appears unable to produce knowledge and understanding—indeed, the peculiar phrasing here suggests that sight *causes* ignorance.⁴⁸⁵ But how is the Soviet eyewitness to create sense and meaning from experience, if not on the basis of what he sees?

The solution lies in the use of analogies to enable translatability. Pil'niak establishes a series of inter-cultural equivalences to overcome his crisis of incomprehension. The discovery of these “keys” is announced with a certain totalizing relief: “China,” Pil'niak confidently declares, “is built entirely on analogies.”⁴⁸⁶ Thus the Chinese relationship with opium, which seems in the passage above to lead Pil'niak to a cognitive dead end, can be explained by reference to a universal principle of national narcotic predilection: “Every people, every nation has its own particular opiate.”⁴⁸⁷ The Chinese relationship with opium is thus rendered comprehensible by analogy with the Russian relationship with vodka, both somehow expressing some kind of national-cultural essence.

Another example is the Chinese expression “*manmande*” (Pinyin Romanization of Chinese 慢慢的, “slowly”). Two paragraphs after bemoaning the absence of the “keys” he needs to unlock China’s meaning, Pil'niak latches onto *manmande*, which he renders “*mamandi*,” as the basic expression of all that is fundamentally, quintessentially Chinese. At the same time, he providing a series of translations of the term that culminates in an idiomatic equivalent in Russian: “*Mamandi* means in Chinese ‘Wait a moment,’ ‘Don’t hurry,’ ‘Don’t rush,’ the same as the Russian *seichas*. This *mamandi* lies at the heart of Chinese distances,

⁴⁸⁵ In the rough draft of *Kitaiskaia povest'* preserved in RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts), a deleted line stands in place of this final phrase that presents the experience of ignorance as the fundamental message of the text: “Эта повесть написана о том, чего я не знаю и о том, что я видел для того, чтобы не знать.” (RGALI, f. 1692, o. 1, ed. khr. 32, l. 1.) Perhaps the deletion of this line anticipates the growing sense as *Kitaiskaia povest'* progresses that a kind of knowledge is produced, albeit one that is highly unstable and imbedded within subjective perspectives.

⁴⁸⁶ Pil'niak, *Chinese Story*, 23. “Весь Китай строится аналогиями.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115.

⁴⁸⁷ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 21. “У каждого народа, у каждой нации — свой наркотик.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:114.

Chinese time, Chinese dealings, Chinese philosophy.”⁴⁸⁸ This act of translation enables *mamandi* to function for the remainder of the text as a convenient signifier for the metaphysical peculiarity of Chinese culture. Anything that Pil’niak does not understand—the apparent disappearance of the ship on which he was supposed to depart, the delays in setting up his projected Sino-Russian Society for Cultural Relations (“Kitrus”)—all this can now be ascribed to *mamandi*. In a private letter written after his return to Russia, Pil’niak refers to *mamandi* as “this inexplicable Chinese disease,” suggesting that the concept is enmeshed so firmly within Chinese culture that it cannot be explained.⁴⁸⁹ In *Chinese Story*, however, we are told that *mamandi* is commensurable to something idiomatic in the Russian language: the use of “seichas” to mean “in a moment,” “wait a minute,” with the implication that something will get done and there is no need to hurry or worry. The identification of commensurable idioms opens up the possibility that they may refer to commensurable cultural practices: thus translation enables Pil’niak’s China, while remaining distinctive and different, to move towards similarity.

Directly after the translation of *mamandi* comes Pil’niak’s most emphatic assertion of similarity between Russia and China, a similarity that moves towards a kind of ecstatic identity. Awakening by the river in Hankou, Pil’niak is transported by auditory stimuli back to his childhood: “I awoke today with the most astonishing sensation of childhood, my

⁴⁸⁸ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 22. “Маманди — значит по-китайски — погоди, не торопись, не спеши, значит русское — сейчас. Это маманди скрыто в китайских расстояниях, в китайском времени, в китайских делах и в китайской философии.” Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:115. I have modified Reck and Green’s English translation here, to preserve Pil’niak’s slight mistake in not reproducing the first two syllables of the phrase: they correct him, and offer, under the Wade-Giles Romanization system, *man-man-ti*. The dashes are their own addition.

The transition from ignorance to some basic spark of knowledge is made more explicit in two deleted lines from the earlier draft, that top and tail this paragraph: “Единственное, что я знаю о Китае – это великую горечь маманди. [...] Я знаю это маманди, и оно мне очень страшно, оно очень много крови испортило, это страшное маманди.” (The only thing I know about China is the great bitterness of *mamandi*. [...] I know this *mamandi*, and it terrifies me, it has corrupted so much blood, this terrible *mamandi*.) RGALI, f. 1692, o. 1, ed. khr. 32, l. 2.

⁴⁸⁹ Savelli, “Shest’ neizdanykh pisem’ Borisa Pil’niaka,” 154. “такая необъяснимая китайская болезнь.”

childhood in Saratov, in the house of my grandmother Katerina Ivanovna, among the noises of the embankment, the boom of the barge haulers' song [*dubinushka*].⁴⁹⁰ This song, dubbed in Russian a *dubinushka*, is not just similar but *identical* to the music he remembers from childhood. Pil'niak takes the Russian title of the traditional Volga barge-haulers' song and transposes it wholesale to the music he hears by the river in Hankou. Doubts remain over the historical direction of this cross-cultural borrowing, but the newfound certainty of their identity, based on a memory provoked by sounds heard at the moment of waking, expands geographically to take in all of China as well as the whole length of the Volga: "I don't know whether they borrowed this *dubinushka* from us or we from them, but I *know* that the tune and the rhythm of it here in Hankow, as *everywhere* else in China, are *the same* as in Saratov and *everywhere* on the Volga."⁴⁹¹

As Pil'niak focuses his hearing on the music, the sense of identity expands from the song alone to embrace all the sounds heard along the river: "I listened hard: the Chinese "Ha-hey-ho!" is *exactly the same* as at my grandmother's—and the noises are *exactly the same*—both the roars of the steamers and the shouts of the crowd."⁴⁹² Liberated from the nightmare of sleep as from the nightmare of alienation, Pil'niak walks down the embankment and back into his childhood:

And in the morning, freed from the nightmare of sleep under a mosquito net, I went to the embankment to wander through my childhood, for the picture is *exactly the same*, amazingly so: *the same* barge haulers wearing a variety of national costumes, *the same* overseers, men carrying sacks and bales on their backs in *the same way* (how is it that their spines are not broken?). It is good to

⁴⁹⁰ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 22. "...Я проснулся сегодня в удивительнейшем чувстве детства, моего детства в Саратове, в доме бабки Катерины Ивановны, в шуме набережной, в гуле дубинушки." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115.

⁴⁹¹ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 22–3. (My emphasis.) "Не знаю, кто у кого взял дубинушку, эту портовую дубинушку, — но знаю, что мотив и ритм ее здесь в Ханькоу, как везде в Китае, таков же, как в Саратове, как везде на Волге." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115.

⁴⁹² Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 23. (My emphasis.) "Прислушивался, в китайской — «ха-хэ-хо!»: одно и то же, — как у бабушки! — и шумы одни и те же, и рывки пароходов, и крики толпы." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115.

remember one's childhood; I feel happy and sad at the same time, and it is certainly not too much to travel thousands of miles to stumble into one's childhood.⁴⁹³

The discomforts of travel are now justified, because they have brought Pil'niak back, quite by chance, to the home that is his own past. China, recently incomprehensible, is transformed by this act of aesthetic memory into home; in translation terms, fully domesticated.

Autobiographical memory provides an origin on which to ground the shifting, confusing experience of China.

Travellers who lack advanced linguistic or cultural knowledge of their destination always risk a certain infantilization: excluded to a large degree from the surrounding world of “adult” semiosis, orphaned from their mother tongue. Pil'niak's orphaned child responds to confusion and displacement by imaginatively discovering his lost home in the foreign place, transcending linguistic estrangement by latching onto a different semiotic expression—the coolie's song—that he is able to translate as something familiar. This surprising transformation, initiated by sound, is here extended to the faculty of vision, which has now attained the semantic clarity of speech: “Strange that what I *see* here should *speak* to me of Russia, Grandmother's Russia beyond the Volga.”⁴⁹⁴ If we compare the conclusion of just under a page before—“everything that I look at only adds to my lack of knowledge”—we

⁴⁹³ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 23. (My emphasis.) “И утром, освободившись от кошмарного сна в москитнике, я пошел на набережную — б р о д и т ь п о м о е м у д е т с т в у, ибо картина о д н а и т а ж е, разительно, — такие же разноплеменно одетые бурлаки, такие же надсмотрщики, так же на спинах (непонятно, почему не ломаются хребты) тащат люди мешки и тюки. Детство — хорошее память: мне грустно и хорошо, и совсем не зря колесить тысячи верст, чтобы угодить в детство.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115.

⁴⁹⁴ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 23. (My emphasis.) “Удивительно, но точно то, что я вижу, мне говорит о России, о заволжской, бабушкиной.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:115. Though it may seem less strange if we take into account the fact that, on the evidence of Pil'niak's letters, he most likely wrote *Chinese Story* while staying with his relatives in Saratov. On 4 January 1927, he wrote to M. L. Slominskii: “I am going to visit my German relatives beyond the Volga—to write about China and about Russia.” On 30 May he wrote to his then wife, Ol'ga Shcherbinovskaia, from Saratov: “In Saratov I am reminded of Hankou, as in Hankou I was reminded of Saratov...” *Chinese Story* was published the following month. See Pil'niak, *Pis'ma*, 2:294, 2:311.

will appreciate how far Pil'niak's narrator has come in extracting meaning from, or imposing meaning on, his Chinese surroundings.

In focusing on the coolie's work-cry, Pil'niak stands at the intersection of two traditions, an intersection that in fact characterizes his travelogue as a whole. On the one hand, following the methodology outlined by Tret'iakov in his poem "Roar, China," this song of the coolies drew the attention of Soviet reporters as a near-ubiquitous sound that could be interpreted as symbolizing the subjugation of cheap Chinese labour to the forces of international capital. Here was an element in Chinese reality that was appropriated to become, through repetition, a *sign* in Soviet discourse on China: the coolies' work-cry comes to signify both oppression and revolutionary potential.⁴⁹⁵ In his *Chinese Diaries*, Kostarev dubs this repetitive sonic motif the "Productive Rhythms" of Shanghai, uttered by every one of the 300,000 coolies in the city: "under their dozen-pood swinging weight they exhale by turns, in a kind of call-and-response, their monotonous "a! — a!": two tones (one higher, the other lower), like the groan of someone whose insides have been consumed by hunger."⁴⁹⁶ In Sergei Alymov's 1929 novel *Nanking Road (Nankin-rod)*, the same sounds ("E-khe-io!") greet the protagonist's arrival in Shanghai by boat.⁴⁹⁷ They also appear in Tret'iakov's stage directions for the opening to his play *Roar, China! (Rychi, Kitai!)*, first staged in 1926 (see Chapter Four), which began with a long scene of Chinese coolies unloading a boat under the supervision of their American boss. Oskar Erdberg, whose anti-Orientalist sketch opened this chapter, includes the coolies' cries in his story "Tai-an Symphony": "And a monotonous song is carried above the road, alternating high and low cries, inhalations and exhalations, a hymn

⁴⁹⁵ On the transformation of elements from reality into signs in a discourse through repetition, see Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, 20, 25.

⁴⁹⁶ Kostarev, *Kitaiskie dnevniki*, 39–40. "под это покачивание десятков пудов они попеременно, точно переключаясь, выдыхают это свое однообразное: а! — а! — в два тона (один — выше, другой — ниже), похоже на стон человека, у которого внутренности съедены голодом."

⁴⁹⁷ Sergei Alymov, *Nankin-rod* (Kharkov: Proletarii, 1929), 70.

of unbearable animal labour: ‘O-okh-okh!’ ‘E-khe-khe!’ ‘A-kho-li!’ ‘I-khi-khi!’⁴⁹⁸ The titular symphony is given a revolutionary resolution at the story’s end, when this hymn of oppression is offset by our worker-narrator singing the first few bars of the *Internationale* in Chinese.

In short, this coolies’ work song became a convenient Soviet sign for “oppressed Chinese labour” in various accounts of the period. Pil’niak even intimates his awareness of this revolutionary interpretation by dubbing the coolies’ song a “dubinushka.” The folk song “Dubinushka,” with its insistent labour chants (“Ei, ukhnem!”), had been revalorized as a song about the awakening power of the Russian working masses since the 1860s: an aural equivalent to Repin’s famous painting of the Volga Barge Haulers. As Boris Gasparov explains: “in the context of Russian revolutions—first in 1905, then in and after 1917—this labour song, with its ominously pushing rhythm, was interpreted as an emblem of the awakening masses whose thrust is aimed at the edifice of the old order.”⁴⁹⁹ The wildly popular 1927 ballet, *Krasnyi mak (The Red Poppy)*, opened with a scene that is almost identical to the opening of *Roar China!*: Chinese coolies unloading a foreign ship, to a slow, heavy musical accompaniment that ballet scholar S. Katonova describes as “a kind of Chinese *dubinushka*.”⁵⁰⁰ As the act progresses, this refrain returns in a triumphant mode, when the coolies revolt with Soviet assistance. (For a detailed discussion of *The Red Poppy*, see Chapter Four.)

⁴⁹⁸ Erdberg, *Kitaiskie novelly*, 48. “И однообразная песня, чередование высоких и низких воплей, вдохов и выдохов, гимн непосильного животного труда несетя над дорогой:

— О-ох-ох!
— Э-хе-хе!
— А-хо-ли!
— И-хи-хи!”

⁴⁹⁹ Boris Gasparov, *Five Operas and a Symphony: Word and Music in Russian Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 190.

⁵⁰⁰ S. V. Katonova, *Balety R. M. Gliera* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1960), 10. “Танец кули — это своего рода китайская «Дубинушка.»”

But Pil'niak does not extrapolate forward from these sonic connections to revolution, as do Tret'iakov, Erdberg and the creators of *The Red Poppy*. Instead he extrapolates backwards, into the historical past: the similarity of these songs does not imply similar structures of oppression of labour, but rather a genealogical, inter-ethnic link in the deep past between the Chinese and Russian folk traditions. The thesis of a common origin to Russian and Chinese folk music is not unique to Pil'niak. Exploring similarities between Puccini's opera *Turandot*, which is set in Beijing, and Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Gasparov suggests that:

For all the apparent difference in sound, East Asian and Russian music contained pertinent common features of harmony, voice leading, and musical form. [...] It would be tempting to attribute these similarities to a genetic relationship, however remote, between Russia and the East Asian world, a perspective that would view the Russian folk song as the westernmost offspring of the Chinese musical stock whose influence is felt throughout East and Southeast Asia.⁵⁰¹

Gasparov only suggests the temptation; Pil'niak, as we have seen, succumbs to it wholeheartedly. The song heard by the river provides a cognitive framework within which Pil'niak can make sense of China and his relation to it: the notion of a “genetic relationship” between Russia and China across the Eurasian space, a deep historical connection that can at times be glimpsed through surface cultural differences. Later, attending a film studio party in Shanghai, Pil'niak declares that China is more like Russia than any country he has visited, and links this similarity explicitly to shared history: “It is no accident,” he tells the reader, “that both China and Russia were conquered by the Mongols.”⁵⁰² We have encountered already in Ivin this “Eurasian” approach to China, which sees that country as a kind of mirror for Russia's own “Asiatic” element and pre-modern past. So what is so scandalous about Pil'niak's Eurasian analogy?

The scandal arises when Pil'niak, unlike Ivin, fails to project this similarity from the past forward into a revolutionary future. Echoing Kostarev's invocation of John Reed,

⁵⁰¹ Gasparov, *Five Operas and a Symphony*, 195–6.

⁵⁰² Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 40.

Pil'niak clearly sees the recent Russian past in the chaos of China's railways and the militarized state of Beijing, which he dubs "a city under arms of Russia's 1918."⁵⁰³ But, to recall Trotsky's criticism of Pil'niak, describing the chaos of the revolutionary present is not the same as describing what will be born from it in the future. As Alexander Bukh observes, Pil'niak's text fixes China at an unsurpassable temporal lag behind Russia, the same strategy of hierarchical differentiation through time that Johannes Fabian finds underpinning the modern discipline of anthropology.⁵⁰⁴ When Pil'niak is called upon to project an image of Sino-Soviet revolutionary solidarity into the future, his functioning as an emissary and an eyewitness breaks down completely, as we shall see in *Chinese Story's* final scene.

In Shanghai Pil'niak met the Communist writer Jiang Guangci (a graduate of Moscow's Communist University for the Workers of the East), and the dramatist and filmmaker Tian Han. *Chinese Story* describes them meeting to discuss the foundation of "Kitrus," or the Sino-Russian Society for Cultural Relations. Tian Han also convinced Pil'niak to make a cameo appearance in a film he was making at the time, entitled *Go to the People (Dao renmin qu)*. The title alone signals the significance of Russian precedent for Chinese leftists: Tian Han explicitly traced the motivation for the film to the Russian Populist movement of the late nineteenth century, which had exerted a major influence on other early Chinese Marxists such as Li Dazhao.⁵⁰⁵

The film was never completed due to financial difficulties, but a surviving synopsis suggests a revolutionary love triangle with a strong ideological message: indeed, Jay Leyda

⁵⁰³ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 24. "Пекин — военный город российского 18-го года." Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:116.

⁵⁰⁴ Alexander Bukh, "National Identity and Race in Post-Revolutionary Russia: Pil'niak's Travelogues from Japan and China," in *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions*, edited by Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (Leiden: Brill Modern East Asia in Global Historical Perspective Series, 2012), 188.

⁵⁰⁵ See Tian Han, "Women de ziji pipan — 'women de yishu yundong zhi lilun yu shiji,'" *Tian Han quanji*, 15:88. On Li Dazhao and Russian Populism, see Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 80–89.

calls it “the only [Chinese] film of the period that seems to welcome the revolution rather than resist or ignore it.”⁵⁰⁶ Two idealistic Shanghai students, the confident Zhang Qiubai and the indecisive Guo Qichang, both fall for Lu Meiyu, a waitress from the countryside who works in the café they frequent. Seeing a chance to put their talk of “going to the people” into action, they accompany Meiyu back to her village, where they meet “the people” for the first time. Zhang marries Meiyu, but gradually loses his idealism and becomes a capitalist and speculator. Meanwhile Guo, affected by his experiences in the countryside and later among the urban poor of Shanghai, goes to live in a new-style village commune, and eventually wins over Meiyu, who is disillusioned by her first husband’s moral decline. The story concludes with Zhang, his business bankrupted by foreign competition, arriving in the village, seeing the happiness of life there, and committing suicide.⁵⁰⁷

Pil’niak’s role is not included in this synopsis, but a description of it survives from a later article written by Tian Han in 1930. According to that text, Pil’niak played a “Russian revolutionary poet” travelling through the Far East, who meets the students in the opening café scene and recounts his impressions from his journey. The students discuss the best way to transform China: one advocates construction of a socialist state through class war, the other suggests that communism can be directly achieved by “going to the people.” The Russian writer does not adjudicate between these options, but encourages them to pursue

⁵⁰⁶ Leyda also confirms that the film was not completed because the Southern Society ran out of money; Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 54–55.

⁵⁰⁷ See Tian Han, “Dao renmin qu,” in *Tian Han quanji*, 10:10-17. Although the film was never completed, the encounter had other cinematic consequences. Through Pil’niak, Tian Han became acquainted with the Soviet consul in Shanghai, who arranged for a private screening to the Nanguo Society of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, released the previous year. See Tian Han, “Women de ziji pipan,” 103. Thus Pil’niak’s visit acted as catalyst for what Leyda claims was only the second screening of *Potemkin* in China, after a viewing in Guangzhou in December 1926. Leyda, *Dianying*, 56.

their goals, and, taking the waitress by the hand, declares: “Whichever one of you truly manages to change China shall win this girl!”⁵⁰⁸

Tian Han’s use of a Russian writer as a symbolic figure of authority within his film speaks to the growing importance and influence of Russian literature in China at this time. Mark Gamsa’s recent study suggests that, while Chinese readers looked to the classical Russian literature of the nineteenth century for “moral example,” left-wing intellectuals in the 1920s and beyond read the new Soviet literature as a “manual of practice,” seeking guidance on how to conduct a revolution and establish a revolutionary culture.⁵⁰⁹ Both these elements are distilled into the symbolic character Pil’niak plays in the film, who embodies the hopeful precedent of the Russian revolution and bestows his spiritual blessing on the students’ search for social change. Indeed Lu Xun, the leading Chinese writer of the period and an avid reader and translator of Russian literature, greeted Pil’niak’s arrival in China not just as a writer, but as a figure whose bodily experience could educate the Chinese as to the true nature of revolution: “He witnessed and experienced revolution. He knew that in its midst could be found destruction, bloodshed, contradictions, but also construction. Thus he never despaired. This is the spirit of a living human being in a revolutionary era.”⁵¹⁰ By contrast, the absence of such artists in China, Lu Xun goes on to argue, shows that 1911 in China, compared to 1917 in Russia, was not a true revolution.

⁵⁰⁸ Tian Han, *Tian Han quanji*, 15:92. “你们谁真达成了改造中国的目的的，便得者位姑娘！” Pil’niak’s own description of his role in *Chinese Story* is slightly different, omitting the element of sexual competition: “The students recognize me and ask to be introduced. We exchange visiting cards. We talk. They, the students, say that they welcome me, a Russian revolutionary writer. We all get up to drink a toast together – the students and the maids and we, science and art. And I put the hands of the students in the hands of the maids – European fashion – as a symbol of the alliance of science and democracy, the alliance of labor and learning! So it was conceived by Tian Han.” Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 99.

⁵⁰⁹ See Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China*, passim.

⁵¹⁰ Lu Xun, “Mashang riji zhi’er” (Impromptu Diary No. 2), *Lu Xun quanji*, 3:361–2. I have used, and very slightly modified, the translation of this passage given by Lee Ou-Fan Lee in *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 153.

Tian Han, then, sought to take advantage of Pil'niak's symbolic capital to create a cinematic image of a Soviet Russian writer fraternally endorsing the revolutionary efforts of Chinese youth. Here we see a Chinese perspective on this special position that Tret'iakov and others claim for the Soviet eyewitness in China. His experience bestows moral authority, yet his intervention is not prescriptive: he endorses the search for China's path to the future rather than laying down the correct path that must be followed. This image of revolutionary solidarity contrasts starkly, however, with Pil'niak's on-set experience as presented in *Chinese Story*, a hellish torment of cacophony, blindness under lights and unbearable heat. Pil'niak describes the filming process as “the tower of Babelissimus!”; the easy inter-cultural communication of the film scene itself is replaced by Babel, the epitome of inter-linguistic communication breakdown.⁵¹¹

Pil'niak's discomfort at this babble of foreign voices is carried through into his experience of the music played on set, which is the complete opposite of the nostalgic reverie down by the river:

Although the film was silent, a musician played the violin, and a man sang; but Chinese music and singing—to a European ear—seem the ultimate degeneration of hearing; my teeth began to ache from the singing and the violin just as they ache when cork is rubbed against glass.⁵¹²

Pil'niak's ear is not Russian or even Eurasian here but staunchly European, and this music, in its superfluity, seems to exist solely to cause him physical pain. At this point the reader may recall an earlier scene, where Pil'niak described his reaction to an evening concert in Shanghai's Jestfield Park, a space from which the Chinese residents of Shanghai were notoriously excluded. Here incomprehension, earlier a source of anxiety, is experienced as

⁵¹¹ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 98. “столпотворение творилось вавилонственнейшее!” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:183.

⁵¹² Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 98. “Хотя на киноленте и не слышно, — тем не менее, музыкант играл на скрипке и пел певец, — китайская же музыка и пение — на ухо европейца — кажутся окончательным вырождением слуха, от пения и скрипки у меня начинали ныть зубы, как они ноют, когда трут пробкою по стеклу.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:184.

relief: “I don’t know and I don’t understand music – but tonight I felt very good listening. The music was European. [...] I sat there and listened; it felt very good – to leave reality for the incomprehensible.”⁵¹³ Marvelling at how the English manage to “cut out” of China this authentic slice of England, Pil’niak divorces this aesthetic experience from politics completely, declaring: “The music and the beautiful night in Jestfield Park – are not a bit responsible for being beautiful.”⁵¹⁴

In the film studio, by contrast, a political motivation—making the film as a show of solidarity—cannot ameliorate the aesthetic displeasure of the experience. The distinction between the Soviet and Western observer, on which so much of the Soviet eyewitness's privileged authority seems to rest, collapses over the issue of music. Whereas the vocal song of the coolies could be interpreted through the prism of Eurasian commonality, an encounter with instrumentalized Chinese music has a very different effect. That “European ear,” whose sufferings in the Chinese theatre were acknowledged by Tret’iakov and Serebriakova, alienates Pil’niak at the very moment of Sino-Soviet collaboration. Hearing and sight, the tools of the eyewitness, are now equally dysfunctional: the painful music and the incomprehensible babble mingle repetitively with the artificial light to revive in Pil’niak the incomprehension and sensory alienation with which his travelogue began:

The director yells at Chiang. Chiang yells at me. Everyone yells. *Can’t understand anything*. And I stand there weeping, tears flow from the light and the pain in my eyes. Music howls. [...] Music plays, the singer sings, the sun incinerates, sweat pours, everyone yells in Chinese; *there’s no understanding anything*. The director yells at Chiang. Chiang yells at me. *I am blind and deaf.*⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 65. “Я не знаю и не понимаю музыку, — но сегодня мне было очень хорошо слушать. Музыка была европейской. [...] Сидел, слушал, мне было очень хорошо — уйти из реальностей в непонятное.” Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:154.

⁵¹⁴ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 65. “Музыка же и прекрасная ночь Джестфильд-парка — никак не виноваты в том, что они прекрасны.” Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:154.

⁵¹⁵ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 98–9. (My emphasis.) “Режиссер орет на Дзяна. Дзян орет на меня. Все орут. Ничего не понятно. И я стою, плачу, текут слезы от света и боли в глазах. Музыка воет. [...] Музыка играет, певец поет, солнце сжигает, пот течет, все орут по-китайски, ничего не понятно. Режиссер орет на Дзяна. Дзян орет на меня. Я слеп и глух.” Pil’niak, *SS*, 3:184.

This audio-visual experience produces no fond, homely connections with childhood memories. Instead, fleeing to his hotel and the sanctuary of the bathtub, Pil'niak remembers his experience of military enlistment, when his myopia was tested by pouring atropine into his eyes. A short final chapter shows Pil'niak in his hotel room, playing endless games of patience. His experiences of China are condensed into nightmares that haunt his waking state, with music woven among them: “dreams become confused in your waking hours: a nightmare of floodlights that blind you, steamships, Chinese music and hubbub, shrines, alleys.”⁵¹⁶ The travelogue ends with immobile homesickness, Pil'niak still stranded in his hotel room, dreaming of Russia and cool rain on an August night—a final desire for escape from this foreign place.

By representing his climactic collaboration with leftist Chinese artists as a Babelian hell that leaves him with nothing but nightmares, Pil'niak conclusively undermines the narrative of revolutionary solidarity that he appears elsewhere to endorse. The historical similarities between Russia and China unearthed by Pil'niak's translation practices fail to be projected into a revolutionary identity in the future. Instead, the position of Pil'niak's observer is unstable and fluctuating, immersed in the elements of China he can domesticate to a common “Eurasian” paradigm, but alienated by those elements that, in their strangeness, reveal him as a product of “European” culture. Gary Browning dismisses *Chinese Story* as a coerced and unsuccessful piece of *publitsistika*, “the flawed effort of an unwilling servant who completed his task grudgingly.”⁵¹⁷ Read within the contemporary drive to represent China anew, *Chinese Story* seems more like a deliberate undermining of the entire internationalist project, sunk between the opposing poles of domestication and alienation.

⁵¹⁶ Pilnyak, *Chinese Story*, 100. “И наяву тогда путаются сны: кошмарствуют прожекторы, от которых слепнешь, пароходы, китайская музыка и галдеж, кумирни, переулки.” Pil'niak, *SS*, 3:185.

⁵¹⁷ Gary Browning, *Boris Pilniak*, 35.

It may be objected that Pil'niak simply sees China through the superficial, tourist gaze that the embedded ethnographer Tret'iakov condemned. Writing in the journal *Novyi vostok*, S. L. Vel'tman elaborated this critique of *Chinese Story* as subjective and superficial: "Everything in it is juxtaposed to the author's own "I," and Eastern reality is depicted from this perspective. [...] B. Pil'niak, like a whole host of west-European writers, tries to grasp the East while approaching it as something external, seeking to capture the 'scent' of the East."⁵¹⁸ Such a critique links Pil'niak to fellow modernists from Gérard de Nerval to André Gide, who narrate travel in non-Europe as an exploration of a collapsing self.⁵¹⁹ By contrast, Vel'tman praised Tret'iakov's *Chzhungo* for its objective clarity, a "discrete and artistically crystallized reflection of the various aspects of Chinese life, which elucidates and accentuates the transition from old to new."⁵²⁰

What this critique overlooks, I think, is the degree to which Pil'niak's text engages with the same representational and political concerns as *Chzhungo*, including the developmentalist narrative of international revolution. What Tret'iakov and Pil'niak offer us are two contrasting visions of space and time in the new age of the 1920s, elaborated around the figure of China: one Marxist and revolutionary, the other romantic-nationalist and nostalgic. Both experience China as a space of contradictions, but these contradictions tell them very different things. Tret'iakov sees time moving confidently forward, through the energy of social contradictions, towards a global revolution that emanates spatially into China

⁵¹⁸ S. Vel'tman, "Literaturnye otkliki' (Vostok v izobrazhenii B. Pil'niaka, S. Tret'iakova i dr.)," *Novyi vostok* 19 (1927): 215, 219. "В ней все противопоставляется своему «я», и в этом разрезе рисуется восточная действительность. [...] Б. Пильняк, как и целый ряд западно-европейских писателей, старается охватить Восток, подходя к нему, как к чему-то внешнему, стремясь уловить 'запах' Востока."

⁵¹⁹ Spurr, *Rhetoric of Empire*, 142–147.

⁵²⁰ Vel'tman, "Literaturnye otkliki," 221.

from its Moscow centre. When he expresses a desire to return to Moscow, it is a desire for the future: he wants to keep up with the newest developments in art and political debate.⁵²¹

Pil'niak, by contrast, finds in China a host of similarities with Russia and at the same time a contradictory strangeness that he cannot ultimately overcome. China for Pil'niak is uncanny, both unsettlingly familiar and insurmountably foreign. In a letter written after his return home, he declares that "I know that there is no better country than Russia, there could not be, even though Russia is similar—catastrophically!—to China[.]"⁵²² This similarity is catastrophic, it upsets the order of things. Pil'niak does not project this similarity into a common revolutionary future; instead, his attempts to engage with contemporary Chinese reality only drive him to retreat into fantasies of a stable, deep Russian past, an imagined and secure childhood. This modernist nostalgia has been described by Svetlana Boym as a longing for the accelerated time of modernity to cease its relentless forward movement.⁵²³ Like the early Lukacs, Pil'niak voices the fear that this globalizing modernity will be defined by homelessness: the relentless nature of historical change produces confused orphans cut loose from the stable meanings of the past (a theme developed in later works such as *Mahogany*). China can only be accepted if transformed into Russia, fully identical with the true home of childhood; but this identity will inevitably collapse, catastrophically, and Pil'niak can find no identity of interests with which it might be replaced. Hence, perhaps, the collapse of the travelogue into the inherently private form of the diary. Pil'niak fails to fulfil the public role of his onscreen double: he cannot endorse the Chinese revolution because it does not belong to him.

⁵²¹ See for example the beginning of the final chapter of *Chzhungo*, "Domoi," Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 227; "Tret'iakov uexhal v Pekin. Otvet na zapros redaktsii," *Zrelishcha* 74 (1924): 8.

⁵²² Dany Savelli, "Shest' neizdanykh pisem'," 154. Savelli dates this letter to 17 September 1926. "я знаю, что лучшей страны, лучшей России, — нет, не может быть, хотя Россия похожа — катастрофически! — на Китай[.]"

⁵²³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv, 10–13.

Chapter Three **The Internationalist Gaze: China in Early Soviet Cinema**

Soviet reportage's claim to represent a real, contemporary China was shared by the newly prominent medium of film, whose form and function was the subject of such heated debate in the 1920s. Although many films on Chinese themes were planned during the China boom of the mid-to-late 1920s, including a projected trilogy scripted by Sergei Tret'iakov and directed by Sergei Eisenstein, the two most prominent films to bring China to Soviet audiences were both documentaries: *The Great Flight* (*Velikii perelet*, 1925) and *Shanghai Document* (*Shankhaiskii dokument*, 1928). These documentaries shared reportage's desire to transmit contemporary China to its audience as an eyewitness experience, but with the added authenticity of the camera's indexical recording capacities. By collapsing the space between the point of recording and the point of exhibition, and by juxtaposing multiple spaces within one film through the use of montage, film could bring this distant socio-spatial entity called "China" before the eyes of a larger Soviet audience than any other medium. These films also operated with the combination of analytical authority and emotional sympathy that characterized internationalist aesthetics: asserting the power of the Soviet perspective to order and explain Chinese reality, while presenting vivid images of exploitation, suffering and uprising that would deliver affective charges to their audience.

This chapter will focus on the ways in which these two filmic representations of China assert the power of Soviet culture's perceptual apparatus to conceive and indeed reorder global space. In *The Great Flight*, the expedition film is enabled by a heroic act of aviation, a conquest of space that brings China within reach of the Soviet internationalist gaze. In *Shanghai Document*, the juxtaposition of multiple spaces within the city of Shanghai expresses the global class struggle in microcosm. Although the expedition element is almost effaced from this later film by comparison with its predecessor, the use of parallel montage enables the Soviet cinematic gaze to become the only agent that can penetrate and perceive

all the contradictory spaces of this social totality. The heroic travelling capacity of the camera in the first film becomes a purely cognitive capacity in the second: as with Tret'iakov's travel sketches, the Soviet observer's privileged perspective enables an understanding of the social totality in China that is not available to either Europeans or Chinese.

I.

“Under-shooting, over-shooting, and hitting the target”: the Great Flight Moscow—Mongolia—China as a transformation of spatial perception

China should rightfully become as well-known and dear to us as America. China must be carefully and comprehensively squeezed into the consciousness of the masses through their pupils.

(Sergei Tret'iakov, in a review of the film *The Great Flight*, 15 December 1925.)⁵²⁴

At the turn of the century, cinema and aviation seemed to form a single moment. By 1914, aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records[...]; it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of *seeing*. (Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*.)⁵²⁵

On June 10 1925, six aeroplanes took off from the L. D. Trotsky aerodrome in Moscow, bound for China. Organized by the Society for Friends of Aviation and Chemical Defence and Industry (Aviakhim), this “Great Flight” aimed to reach Beijing by way of Baikal, Mongolia and the Gobi desert—the latter never before crossed by air.⁵²⁶ In an interview published in *Pravda* on the day the planes departed, Aviakhim Chair A. I. Rykov described the Great Flight as performing two fundamental tasks. The expedition would serve as “a sign of the strengthening of the fraternal link between the workers of the Soviet Union and the peoples of Mongolia and China,” while also providing “excellent training for our flight personnel and an observable test [наглядная проверка] of the achievements of our

⁵²⁴ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Nedolet-perelet-popadanie,” *Kino* 39 (1925): 4. “Китай в праве стать нам столь же знакомым и родным, как та же Америка. Через зрачки в сознание масс надо втиснуть Китай бережно и обстоятельно.”

⁵²⁵ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception* (London, New York: Verso, 1989), 22.

⁵²⁶ *Obshchestvo druzei aviatsionnoi i khimicheskoi oborony i promyshlennosti SSSR (AVIAKHIM)*, founded in May 1925 as a merger of two pre-existing societies, the Society for Friends of the Air Fleet (*Obshchestvo druzei vozdushnogo flota—ODVF*) and the Society for Friends of Chemical Defence and Industry (*Obshchestvo druzei khimicheskoi oborony i promyshlennosti—DOBROKHIM*).

aviation industry.” In conclusion, Rykov asserts that “the entire Soviet country should follow the progress of this flight.”⁵²⁷

Rykov’s language of observation and signification alerts us to the fact that aviation feats such as this were intended first and foremost as representations, laden with symbolic meaning. Emma Widdis reads the spatial aesthetics of 1920s Soviet cinema as celebrating a drive towards exploration (разведка) of the periphery, enabled by technical inventiveness (изобретение): “The heroism of the inventor was celebrated alongside the heroism of the traveller.”⁵²⁸ In the aviation feat, invention and exploration, technology and daring, combine in the conquest of space. In his study of Russian aviation culture, Scott W. Palmer argues that the airplane emerged in the twentieth century as perhaps the quintessential symbol of progress. Moreover, for Palmer, its signifying powers were national in reference.

Achievements in aviation reflected onto the prestige of individual nation-states:

As the quintessential marker of twentieth-century progress, the airplane, more so than any other technology, clarified the link between nationalist aspirations and the advent of the modern age. In promising military and economic advantage, and in demonstrating mastery over nature, the airplane emerged as the clearest measure of nations, distinguishing not only European civilization from those of Africa and Asia, but also the truly great powers among the Continent’s leading states.⁵²⁹

The Great Flight, however, sought to represent national achievements through an act of internationalist solidarity: this, from a Soviet perspective, was the meaning of Palmer’s “modern age.” In fact, as Anindita Banerjee has argued, the symbolic functions of mechanical flight in modern Russian culture oscillated from the mid-nineteenth century between appraisals of a future borderless humanity and affirmations of the power of the

⁵²⁷ “Perelet Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai,” *Pravda*, June 10, 1925.

⁵²⁸ Widdis, *Visions*, 104.

⁵²⁹ Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

nation state.⁵³⁰ *The Great Flight* inherits this ambiguity as its defining symbolic feature: a declaration of national, military power, it also served as a statement of internationalist solidarity with neighbouring China. This symbol was directed to three audiences: the peoples of Mongolia and China, the USSR's rivals in the West, and the Soviet audience itself. To achieve this symbolic status, the Flight had to pass into representation through the mass media technologies of print and film. With cinema in particular, aviation found a close partner for its complex aspirations of technological prowess, national assertion, and internationalist sentiment.

The Great Flight squadron consisted of six planes: four of Soviet construction, and two foreign-made "Junkers." These larger passenger planes were needed to transport the sizeable media crew that accompanied the expedition, making up around a third of the total number of participants.⁵³¹ Four correspondents from various press organs—Grigorii Rozenblat for *Pravda*, Zinaida Rikhter for *Izvestiia*, Aleksandr Lebedenko for *Leninskaia Pravda*, and V. A. Mikhel's for the Russian Telegraph Agency (*Rossiiskoe telegrafnoe agenstvo—ROSTA*)—filed daily telegrams updating readers on the Flight's progress along its route. In addition, a two-man film crew from Proletkino, cameraman Georgii Blium and director Vladimir Shneiderov, travelled with the planes and captured the expedition on film. This was the first time anywhere in the world, the newspapers declared, that a film crew had participated in a long-distance aviation expedition of this kind.⁵³² The Great Flight was thus produced as a media event that happened multiple times: reported near-simultaneously in newspapers through the summer of 1925, it was replayed in the film *The Great Flight (Velikii*

⁵³⁰ Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 42–51.

⁵³¹ There were six pilots, six engineers, the expedition's leader, I. P. Schmidt, and six representatives of the newspaper and cinema industries.

⁵³² "S kino-apparatom v Kitai," *Kino* 12 June 16, 1925): 1. Western film-makers, this article claimed, had hitherto filmed only the beginning and end of such expeditions, rather than accompany the entire flight.

perelet), which ran in the capitals' cinemas from December 1925 to January 1926. The experience could also be relived by reading one of the books that the aforementioned newspaper correspondents spun out of their aerial adventure in subsequent years.⁵³³

By the end of the Civil War, aviation had practically ceased to exist in Russia.⁵³⁴ Beginning in 1923, the Bolshevik government launched a concerted newspaper campaign to generate public interest in the renaissance of the aviation industry. Organizations such as ODVF, Dobrolet and Aviakhim were created to channel public support for aviation.⁵³⁵ This campaign soon sought to harness the symbolic power of arduous flights over impressive distances, in conscious rivalry with Western competitors. In 1925, a newly-established "Committee on Big Flights" proposed a flight to China as their first major project.⁵³⁶

The timing of a symbolic flight of solidarity to China could not have been more auspicious. Although Comintern agents had been working to direct China's political development since 1920, forming alliances with the Nationalist Party (Guomindang—GMD) and helping to found the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), press coverage on the Chinese situation increased considerably following the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1924.⁵³⁷ But it was the shooting of demonstrators by British police in Shanghai on May 30,

⁵³³ Of the four correspondents, Rikhter, Lebedenko and Mikhel's all published book-length accounts of their experiences. See Zinaida Rikhter, *7,000 kilometrov po vozdukh. Moskva–Mongoliia–Kitai* (Moscow: Avtoizdatel-stvo, 1926); A. Lebedenko, *Kak ia letal v Kitai* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1928); V. Mikhel's, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny — perelet Moskva–Pekin* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1927). It is possible that Rozenblat would have followed suit, had he not been killed in a plane crash at Kharkov in 1926, aboard a flight from Tiflis to Moscow. See "Gibel' samoleta 'Dorn'e-kometa': ubit sotrudnik 'Pravdy' tov. G. Ia. Rozenblat," *Pravda*, May 20, 1926.

⁵³⁴ Palmer, *Dictatorship*, 81.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 85–98. On ODVF, see note 526. *Dobrolet (Dobrovol'nyi vozdushnyi flot*, the "Voluntary Air Fleet") was founded in 1923 to act as "a self-financing commercial enterprise that would assist industry, trade, and business interests regarding the construction of a national air fleet." *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161. Mikhel's reports that the Flight's route was planned by the veteran pilot and engineer Kh. N. Slavorosov. Mikhel's, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 10.

⁵³⁷ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 309, 316.

1925 that really catapulted China to the top of the Soviet news agenda. That day, a large crowd gathered at a police station in Shanghai's International Settlement to demand the release of six students, who had been arrested *en route* to the funeral of a worker shot by Japanese factory guards in a dispute over a strike. When the crowd refused to disperse, the British police opened fire, killing at least eleven people and wounding twenty more. Social outrage at the May 30 massacre led to major strikes in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and yet more retaliation from the Western powers. Another 50 or so protestors were killed on June 23 when British and French troops fired on a demonstration in Canton.⁵³⁸

In the Soviet Union, the May 30 massacre and subsequent strikes made China the undisputed story of the day in the run-up to and throughout the Great Flight. China was on the front page of every issue of *Pravda* for the first week of June 1925. Inside the newspaper, Sergei's Tret'iakov's "letters from Peking" described the development of Beijing's student movement in recent months, while articles by Leon Trotsky and Grigorii Zinov'ev proclaimed that events in Shanghai were the first stage in global capitalism's collapse.⁵³⁹ On June 5, Karl Radek's front-page article compared China's 1925 to Russia's 1905, not least because of the surprise it caused among Western observers, who had not expected these immobile, frozen Eastern lands to spring suddenly into revolutionary life.⁵⁴⁰ On the following page, a cartoon showed a Chinese man in traditional dress and Qing-dynasty hairstyle break his chains while a capitalist on his knees shouted "Help! Sound the alarm!!" (караул!! Помогите!"):

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 322–3.

⁵³⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Na perelome (Pis'mo iz Pekina)," *Pravda*, June 3, 1925; "Den' unizheniia (Pis'mo iz Pekina)," *Pravda*, June 4, 1925; Lev Trotskii, "Moskovskii dukh," *Pravda*, June 6, 1925; Grigorii Zinoviev, "Vsemirnoe-istoricheskoe znachenie shankhaiskikh sobytii," *Pravda*, June 7, 1925.

⁵⁴⁰ Karl Radek, "Shankhaiskie sobytiia," *Pravda*, June 5, 1925.



Figure 2: "Help!! Sound the Alarm!" *Pravda*, June 5, 1925.

The queue that this male Chinese figure wears was, by 1925, an anachronism: the traditional hairstyle of the Manchu Qing dynasty, mandated for all their male subjects, was outlawed following the foundation of the Chinese Republic in 1912. Its retention in the pages of *Pravda* shows the gap between popular images of China and contemporary Chinese reality; but it also places the Chinese man firmly in the past of pre-modern tradition, rendering his sudden overthrow of the capitalist, and perhaps his own backwardness, all the more dramatic. Capital is on its knees, says *Pravda*, and China is rising.

The stage could not have been better set for a symbolic journey such as the Great Flight. The expedition asserted that Soviet, socialist modernity possessed the technology, the political empathy, and the daring to forge a new connection between Russia and China, thus overcoming the legendary “distance” that shaped one dimension of China’s pre-revolutionary image. That distance, traditionally metonymized in the impassable barrier of the Great Wall, was represented in accounts of the Flight by the Gobi desert. “Remember,” advised Rykov in his departure speech at the aerodrome, summoning the flight’s distant, mysterious destination, “there, beyond the Gobi desert, lives a people fighting for its independence.”⁵⁴¹ This mighty natural obstacle had never before been crossed by plane. The absolute novelty of this geospatial feat was to parallel the proclaimed novelty of the political gesture: Europeans

⁵⁴¹ S. Gekht, ““Velikii perelet’...” *Kino*, November 24, 1925. “Помните: там, за пустыней Гоби, живет народ, который борется за свою самостоятельность.”

arriving in China with a display of technological prowess intended to assert solidarity, not dominance.

Though the idea of crossing the Gobi by plane was new, the idea of a technologically enabled connection to China across Eurasian space had considerable pedigree in the Russian imperial imagination. Susanna Lim notes that nineteenth century writers from Fyodor Dostoevsky to the Sinologist Boris Vasil'ev and the science-fiction writer Vladimir Odoevskii hailed the new technology of the railway as enabling the expansion of Russian power across the Eurasian landmass.⁵⁴² Most notably, the Trans-Siberian Railroad became, in Steven Marks' phrase, a "road to power" enabling the colonization of Asian Russia.⁵⁴³

The Soviet project inherited the technology and the ambition for connection, but sought to reverse their signification. As Emma Widdis notes, contemporary films such as *Turksib* and *Salt for Svanetiia* presented the expansion of Soviet infrastructure as a heroic overcoming of backwardness.⁵⁴⁴ Connection to the new Soviet grid was represented as a liberation and reconfiguration of global space: "The destruction of social and spatial boundaries meant the creation of alternative connections, between peasant and worker, and between proletariats across the world."⁵⁴⁵ One of Tret'iakov's first travel sketches, "Moscow—Beijing," invokes precisely this motif of technological connection across Eurasian space as it describes the author's journey across Soviet space and into China along the Trans-Siberian Railroad.⁵⁴⁶ In the process, Marks' "road to power" is refigured as a road

⁵⁴² Lim, *China and Japan*, 102–3.

⁵⁴³ Steven G. Marks, *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia, 1850–1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵⁴⁴ Widdis, *Visions*, 104–111.

⁵⁴⁵ Widdis, *Visions*, 107.

⁵⁴⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Moskva—Pekin (Put' fil'ma)," *Lef* 3 (1925): 33–58. For more on this sketch, see Chapter Two.

to enhanced knowledge and internationalist solidarity.⁵⁴⁷ Revealingly, Tret'iakov described his travelogue as a "journey-film" (путьфильма), indicating that it shares the ambitions of the film *The Great Flight*: by documenting his journey to Beijing in as much detail as possible, Tret'iakov attempts to transfer to the reader the bodily experience of travelling by train to China.

The "journey-film" was becoming a significant Soviet genre precisely at this moment in the mid-1920s. Indeed, the director Shneiderov was something of a pioneer in this regard, producing, Widdis notes, "two of the first examples of the emergent genre of the travel film": *Around Uzbekistan (Po Uzbekistanu)* and *The Great Flight*.⁵⁴⁸ The fact that Shneiderov could follow an expedition film on Uzbekistan with one on China suggests, for Widdis, that at this time adventure space was "unbounded," that "the national border represented not a protective divide, but rather a point of transition or contact, Russia's immanent link with the international proletariat."⁵⁴⁹ But is a journey to China really the same thing as a journey around Uzbekistan? In this section I will argue that the model of connective journey to the backwards periphery works well when we are looking at the backwardness of Mongolia, and (to a degree) the exotica of old Beijing. Shanghai, however, offers the potentially alarming prospect of a rival Eurasian centre, a modernity equally if not more mechanized; a front line in the revolutionary war over which the Moscow centre can exert only a weak grip. In the narrative of *The Great Flight*, this tension is resolved when we reach Guangzhou, and find

⁵⁴⁷ Tret'iakov was not the only writer to attempt to reconfigure the signification of the Trans-Siberian Railroad: Anindita Banerjee reads Velimir Khlebnikov's poem "The Tree" ("Derevo") as appropriating and subverting the dominant discourses on the "road to power" and Russia's relationship with Asia, such that "the Trans-Siberian Railroad evolves from a spatial trope of imperial domination to a temporal trope of roots-searching." Anindita Banerjee, "The Trans-Siberian Railroad and Russia's Asia: Literature, Geopolitics, Philosophy of History," *Clio* 34, no. 1/2 (Fall 2004): 20.

⁵⁴⁸ Widdis, *Visions*, 112.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

there a revolutionary political force, the Guomindang (GMD), organized on Soviet lines and equipped for military violence.

The Chinese, it is asserted, are being linked to this new network of technologized connectivity for their own benefit, not for reasons of control or dominance. Mikhail Pavlovich, editor of *Novyi Vostok (The New East)* and a prominent Soviet authority on the East, made this point in the introduction to Mikhel's book:

When the expedition's aeroplanes appeared under comrade Shmidt's command above China, they were the *first* aeroplanes to speak to the Chinese people not of the threatening power of their enemies—who have at their disposal all the resources of modern technology, including mighty aerial squadrons equipped with machine-guns and bombs for battle with rising China—but of the friendship of a great neighbouring country that adjoins their own for several thousand kilometres, and an unwritten union with the great workers' and peasants' republic.⁵⁵⁰

The message that the planes pronounce to the Chinese people is perhaps more complex than Mikhail Pavlovich's "not A... but B" construction allows for here, however. In truth, it is more along the lines of "A but not A, because B." The arrival of the planes announces that the Soviet state does in fact possess all the "resources of modern technology" and their implied military capacities, but at the same time insists that these resources pose no threat to China, whose safety is guaranteed by neighbourly feeling and a somewhat ambiguous "unwritten union."

In fact, the military significance of the Flight was in no way concealed: Mikhail Pavlovich begins this same introduction with an extensive discussion of aviation's primary importance in "the coming war" (будущая война).⁵⁵¹ The inevitability of war with the Western powers was a constant theme in Soviet official discourse at this time, and was

⁵⁵⁰ Mikhail Pavlovich, "Predislovie," in Mikhel's, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 8. "Самолеты экспедиции, появившиеся под командой т. Шмидта над Китаем, были п е р в ы м и самолетами, которые говорили китайскому народу не о грозной силе его врагов, имеющих в своем распоряжении все средства современной техники вплоть до могучих воздушных эскадр, снабженных пулеметами и бомбами для борьбы с подымающимся Китаем, а о дружбе соседней великой страны, соприкасающейся с ним на протяжении тысяч километров, о неписаном союзе с великой рабоче-крестьянской республикой."

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

inextricably linked with the growing prominence of the aviation industry.⁵⁵² The mapping of an unprecedented air route to China through Mongolia, where the Soviets were at that time cementing their political influence, sent a clear global signal about the reach of Soviet aerial capabilities. Accordingly, military language saturates contemporary accounts of the Flight. Mikhel's, reporting on the efforts to organize landing points for the flight across the USSR, invokes the atmosphere of a military operation: "Communications from the VTsIK, from Dobrolet, and from the ODVF were regarded and carried out as combat orders."⁵⁵³ Rykov, in his speech at the aerodrome before the flight departed, described the expedition as "a battle with the aerial space separating the peoples of the USSR from the peoples of Mongolia and China," concluding that "the conquest of distance [победа над расстоянием] will play an important role in linking us with the peoples of the East [для смычки с народами востока]."⁵⁵⁴ The term *smychka*, suggesting the interlocking of links in a chain, was commonly used at this time to refer to the overcoming of the separation of town and village within the USSR. Widdis finds in the term a sense of equalization, a drive to reduce spatial hierarchy.⁵⁵⁵ In Rykov's speech, this stated ambition to connect with the East on equal terms coincides with the metaphorical language of conquest. The military significance of such a connection cannot be allowed to slip entirely from view.

⁵⁵² Indeed, Palmer argues that the merging of ODVF and Dobrokhim to form Aviakhim, thus linking aviation and chemical warfare, "indicated the Party leadership's growing concern with exploiting the military potential of flight technology." Palmer, *Dictatorship*, 115.

⁵⁵³ Mikhel's, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 11. "Обращения ВЦИК, Добролета и ОДВФ рассматривались и исполнялись как боевые приказы." VTsIK refers to the *Vserossiiskii tsentral'nyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet* ("All-Russian Central Executive Committee").

⁵⁵⁴ "Otlet vozdushnoi ekspeditsii Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai, *Pravda*, July 11, 1925. "Сегодня наша авиация приступает к созданию воздушного пути в борьбе с воздушным пространством, разделяющим народы СССР с народами Монголии и Китая. [...] Победа над расстоянием сыграет важную роль для смычки с народами востока."

⁵⁵⁵ Widdis, *Visions*, 21.

Aviation and war are inextricably linked; but we only begin to appreciate the complexity of the Great Flight's international work of signification once we introduce cinema into the mix. Paul Virilio, whose book *War and Cinema* draws multiple threads and parallels across what he calls "the osmosis between industrialized warfare and cinema," notes that the relationship between perception and modern warfare is double.⁵⁵⁶ On the one hand, perception became, in the twentieth century, the fundamental element that enabled military forces to assert dominance over the enemy. War, increasingly distanced from actual contact in combat, becomes for Virilio a game of hide-and-seek within ever more advanced fields of technologically mediated perception, in which "what is perceived is already lost."⁵⁵⁷ The conjunction of aviation and photographic technologies played a crucial role in this development from World War I, when reconnaissance planes proved capable of not just perceiving but recording, through serial photography, the movements of enemy lines in a manner that was simply inaccessible from the sightless position of the trenches.⁵⁵⁸

On the other hand, Virilio insists that war is always a spectacle, a display of power with "psychotropic origins in sympathetic magic," whose deep roots stretch back to "the world of ancient religions and tribal gatherings."⁵⁵⁹ War, as perception, is not just logistics but also aesthetics, and this aesthetic experience serves to bond and forge communal identities: "war is a symptom of delirium operating in the half-light of trance, drugs, blood and unison."⁵⁶⁰ War works psychologically on its audience, including combatants, victims, and spectators, to change their mode of perception itself:

⁵⁵⁶ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 73.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

There is no war, then, without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception—that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system, affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification and differentiation of objects.⁵⁶¹

Virilio's claim is that cinema, by turning the *son et lumière* effects of modern warfare onto the civilian audience, extends the state of entrancement produced by war to the general population. "Once cinema was able to create surprise, (technological, psychological, etc)," Virilio claims, "it effectively came under the category of weapons."⁵⁶² Cinema is war for Virilio in a double sense: the advanced visual precision of film enhances the military perspective, while its aesthetic powers, its capacity to shock and move, extend the delirious "magic" of war to the film spectator. In this way, for Virilio, cinema trains its audience to populate permanently militarized industrial societies.

This double movement of logistics and aesthetics that Virilio outlines in *War and Cinema* tallies closely with the combination of analytical power and affective sympathy expressed, I argue, through the Soviet internationalist perspective on China. In the film of *The Great Flight*, the Soviet audience was encouraged to share the military perspective enabled by aviation, and granted visual access to the Chinese Civil War, which they were encouraged to view as the front line in a global war with capitalist imperialism. At the same time, the film's visual excitement, adventurous narrative, and extensive portrait images of the residents of Mongolia and China sought to produce an emotional reaction that would bring the spectator to embrace the internationalist project and its militarized implications.

The militarized atmosphere of early Soviet culture certainly fits Virilio's sense of cinema as a war of and through images. Indeed, it could be said that Soviet culture was

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 10.

simply more explicit than its western counterparts about its status as militarized propaganda. Endlessly repeating Lenin's alleged mantra that "cinema for us is the most important of the arts," publications such as *Kino (Cinema)*, *Sovetskii ekran (Soviet Screen)* and *Sovetskoe kino (Soviet Cinema)* were filled in the 1920s with articles on cinema's educative function and the need to "cinefy" the countryside. In this discourse, cinema was frequently described as an "orudie"—a word meaning "instrument" that can equally signify "gun" or "weapon"—with which the consciousness of the newly Soviet population could be reshaped. Thus Eisenstein, writing of his planned but unmade film about China, argued that: "Perhaps for the first time, film was to become as fearsome a weapon as the machine gun."⁵⁶³

The enemy forces in this psycho-formational war were foreign films, particularly Hollywood productions—what Virilio calls the "American perceptual arsenal."⁵⁶⁴ As Denise Youngblood has shown, in the 1920s foreign-made films remained, on the whole, much more popular with cinema audiences than domestic Soviet produce.⁵⁶⁵ In 1925, *The Great Flight* was one of 62 Soviet films released in the USSR, as against 53 films imported from France, another 53 from Germany, and 241 from the USA.⁵⁶⁶ The sense of the cinematic field as a war for (and on) audiences is suggested, in part, by the Russian term used for "smash hit" or "blockbuster": "boevik," which carries also the meaning of "fighter" or "militant." *The Great*

⁵⁶³ "General'naia liniia (Beseda s S. M. Eizenshteinom)," *Kino* 32 *August 10, 1926): 1.

⁵⁶⁴ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 12.

⁵⁶⁵ Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6.

⁵⁶⁶ Vance Kepley, Jr and Betty Kepley, "Foreign Films on Soviet Screens, 1922–1931," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 4, 4, 1979, 431. This was the highest total number of American films imported into the USSR for any year in the 1920s, and also the highest number of American films as a proportion of total films shown.

Flight was promoted in the press precisely as a “sovetskii boevik”: a Soviet, documentary film that could compete at the box office with its foreign adversaries.⁵⁶⁷

The link between aviation and film as perceptual experiences, meanwhile, was identified in V. Pertsov’s review of *The Great Flight* for *Sovetskii ekran*. Pertsov argued that cinema and aviation were both modern technologies that expanded the radius of human consciousness through their transformations of perceptive experience: “Cinema is the prototype for the brazen daring of the modern innovator. The radius of ordinary human perception is expanding beyond measure. Cinema’s only competitor in this regard is another great force of modernity that is pushing outwards the radius of our possibilities: aviation.”⁵⁶⁸ The combination of these quintessential modern technologies of perception in a project like the Great Flight enabled the entire population to experience the transformative aerial (and implicitly military) perspective: “the multi-million masses of the population now participate in the aerial expedition Moscow—Beijing.”⁵⁶⁹ Pertsov even suggests cinema can be used as training for actual flight by reproducing the experience of a passenger in a plane—complete with shaking floor—just as artificial wooden horses are used to train cavalry in military

⁵⁶⁷ *The Great Flight* is described as a “sovetskii boevik,” for example, on the front page of *Kino 39* (November 24, 1925), and in the editorial on page two. In the cinema listings in *Vecherniaia Moskva*, November 26, 1925, the film, playing at the Malaia Dmitrovka cinema, is called a “russkii sverkh boevik” — a “Russian super smash-hit.” For all this fanfare, the film did not play in Moscow for very long. Judging by the cinema listings in *Vecherniaia Moskva*, *Velikii perelet*, which opened on 1 December 1925, played at the Malaia Dmitrovka and Mramornoe cinemas until Saturday 12 and Friday 11 December respectively, a little under two weeks. By comparison, Eisenstein’s *Stachka*, an ideologically sound, home-grown hit, ran for 37 days. (Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 22) Whereas *The Thief of Baghdad*, the biggest foreign hit of the 1920s, played in one of Moscow’s largest and most fashionable cinemas, the Malaia Dmitrovka, for over a year. (Kepley and Kepley, “Foreign Films on Soviet Screens,” 436–7.)

⁵⁶⁸ V. Pertsov, “Podniat’ v vozdukh!” *Sovetskii ekran*, 1 (1926): 14. “Кино — прообраз того, как наглет современный новатор. Радиус обычного человеческого сознания безмерно расширяется. В этом направлении с кино соперничает только другая огромная сила современности, расширяющая радиус наших возможностей — авиация.”

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.* “В воздушной экспедиции Москва — Пекин сейчас принимают участие многомиллионные массы населения.”

academies.⁵⁷⁰ Pertsov here anticipates the invention of flight simulators, which, Virilio notes, were to become a crucial element in military pilot training from the mid-1970s.⁵⁷¹ But Pertsov wants to use cinema's affective power to jolt the entire population into new ways of thinking about and seeing the world: taking all of peasant Russia up for a ride in a plane, he suggests, might help to "uproot their patriarchal thought structure."⁵⁷²

Pertsov here voices the cultural aspirations of the Soviet aviation project, aspirations that linked aviation technology to the mass transformation of perception. Palmer reports that agit-flights in the mid-1920s would indeed take local peasants up for a ride in their planes. Ostensibly this was done to remove from them any superstitious belief in a spirit-ordered cosmos.⁵⁷³ But it also introduced them to the aerial perspective that played so crucial a role in recent advances in military perception. The general population is thus encouraged, through the medium of cinema, to share this new military perspective. A film like *The Great Flight*, Virilio's study suggests, simply placed before a general audience the breakthroughs in technological perception that had been achieved by the development of reconnaissance aviation in World War One: "While war footage or aerial chronophotography remained under lock and key or was simply shrugged aside (as it mainly was in the United States), filmmakers served up the technological effects to the public as a novel spectacle, a continuation of the war's destruction of form."⁵⁷⁴ In expedition films such as *The Great Flight* this

⁵⁷⁰ "Мы думаем даже, что перед тем, как летать, следует пойти в кино для предварительной подготовки. Наподобие того, как в военных училищах (артиллерийских и кавалерийских) новичков обручают верховой езде на деревянной в настоящую величину лошади, образцово оседланной и взнузданной, нужно было бы создать фильму, воспроизводящую [sic] в точности ощущения пассажира при под'еме и полете. Если к тому же устроить в этом кинематографе качающийся пол, то задача будет разрешена (Вниманию 'Добролета', Дерулюфта и т. д.)." Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Virilio, 107–8.

⁵⁷² Pertsov, "Podniat' v vozdukh!"

⁵⁷³ Palmer, *Dictatorship*, 155.

⁵⁷⁴ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 26–7.

“destruction of form” enables the construction of a new spatial experience, based around the chronotope of travel but with dazzling new dimensions opened up by aerial shots of the landscape. Likewise, new temporal dimensions are revealed in the sheer speed with which Moscow gives way to Mongolia and then to China, as film editing mimics the aeroplane’s capacity to overcome distance and extend the reach of the technologically enabled Soviet gaze. As Pertsov argues, *The Great Flight* simulates the Great Flight cinematically: montage combines with the aerial perspective to reproduce the flight’s accelerated collapsing of Eurasian space, offering a psychological tool able to transform the perceptual experiences of the population.

The language of war and cinema overlap explicitly in Sergei Tret’iakov’s review of *The Great Flight*, entitled “Undershooting—Overshooting—Hitting the Target” (“Nedolet—Perelet—Popadanie”). Tret’iakov’s use of the language of military bombardment here stems from a pun on the word “perelet,” which in the title of the expedition and film implies a flight that crosses a significant quantity of territory, but also carries the potential meaning of “overshoot” in the context of artillery. Thus Tret’iakov openly equates filming and artillery fire, declaring at the start of his article: “China is taken under our cine-bombardment” (Китай взят под наш кинообстрел).⁵⁷⁵ The first phase of this bombardment, the “undershoot” (nedolet), was the writing of bad film scripts by people who either knew nothing about China, or nothing about writing film scripts. The second phase, the “overshoot,” is *The Great Flight* itself, which presents a “vivid, real contemporary China,” but does so in a way that is “thrown together hurriedly, feverishly and unsystematically.”⁵⁷⁶ What will “hit the target” (popadanie), for Tret’iakov, is a synthesis of these two tendencies: a combination of the under-shooters’ drive towards the script with the over-shooters’ resolve to gather footage in

⁵⁷⁵ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Nedolet-perelet-popadanie,” *Kino* 39 (1925): 4.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

China itself. This was indeed to be the formula pursued by Tret'iakov and Sergei Eisenstein on their uncompleted project, considered below, to make a trilogy of China films.

If Soviet cinema sought to train its audience to perceive the world as war, then China, in the mid-1920s, was presented as that war's turbulent centre, its violent front line. China in this formulation staged the sequel to the Russian Civil War, in the ongoing apocalyptic war of capitalism's downfall predicted by Lenin's *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The newspaper advertising campaign for *The Great Flight* gave the film the subtitle "Civil War in China," and promised the following sights: "Military action. The army of Feng Yuxiang. The army of the Guomindang. Bloody battles for Canton":



Figure 3: *The Great Flight*. Newspaper advertisement, November 1925.⁵⁷⁷

The film's advertisement promised to realize visually the complex details of the Chinese situation that filled the papers' pages every day. But the advertisement also offered a different kind of visualization: a map of the route, uniting Moscow, Mongolia, China and even Japan within the same, traversed space.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁷ *Vecherniaia Moskva*, November 19, 1925. This or similar advertisements for *Velikii perelet* appeared on the back of every issue of *Vecherniaia Moskva* from November 13 to November 30, excluding November 16 and 17.

⁵⁷⁸ A branch of the Great Flight flew on by invitation to Japan, while the rest of the expedition made its way to Shanghai. The Japanese leg of the expedition, despite appearing on the posters, was not accompanied by a camera and did not appear in the film.

Even in this period of “cinematification,” the map, an older technology of military perception, remained an important means of imagining global space as the space of global war. The importance of maps in the young Soviet state’s process of self-representation has been widely remarked.⁵⁷⁹ But the map is also crucial to the formation of the early Soviet sense of global, international space. Towards the end of Ostrovskii’s *How the Steel was Tempered*, a description of Pavel Korchagin’s room notes its simple furniture, piles of books and newspapers, several filled notebooks, and a “huge map of China studded with black and red flags.”⁵⁸⁰ Following the war in China by map is a sign of Pavel’s progress towards correct revolutionary behavior. In the various techniques used to visualize the Great Flight, however, we encounter the intersection of maps and cinema as visual technologies, focused upon China as the centre of global war.

This is a constellation that is also encountered in the animated film *China on Fire* (*Kitai v ogne*), released in the summer of 1925: another testament to the centrality of China in the Soviet internationalist imagination of the 1920s.⁵⁸¹ This film contains a series of

⁵⁷⁹ Noting that Walter Benjamin observed the prominence of maps during his sojourn in Moscow in 1926, Emma Widdis argues for mapping the new national territory as one of the fundamental tasks of inter-war Soviet film. See Widdis, *Visions*, 2–4. Francine Hirsch identifies the map, alongside the census and the museum, as one of the key technologies that enabled the production of the USSR as an ethnologically differentiated multi-national state. See Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁵⁸⁰ Ostrovskii, *Kak zakalialas’ stal’*, 303. “В комнате Корчагина, на столе у окна, груды принесенных из партийной библиотеки книг, стопа газет; несколько исписанных блокнотов. Хозяйская кровать, два стула, а на двери, ведущей в комнату Таи, огромная карта Китая, утыканная черными и красными флажками.”

⁵⁸¹ *Kitai v ogne* was produced by the Experimental Workshop of the State Technicum of Cinematography (*Gosudarstvennyi tekhnikum kinematografii*—GTK), an artistic collective consisting of Z. Komissarenko, N. Maksimov, Iu. Merkulov and N. Khodataev. The scenario was written by “Vinogradov and the collective,” and the photography done by Shulman. For this study I have used the copy available via youtube.com, accessed online on April 18, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tO4MfMIosRw>. Komissarenko, Merkulov and Khodataev had also worked together on GTK’s 1924 animated film *Mezhplanetnaia revoliutsiia* (*Interplanetary Revolution*), a fantastical expansion of proletarian internationalism into the cosmic realm of science fiction. (See opening credits for both films.) The animation technique of using cardboard cut-out dolls

sequences figuring China as a map that constitutes the focal point of global struggle, attacked by grotesque, ghoulish monsters that stand for imperialist capitalism. Consistent with the demands of internationalist aesthetics, *China on Fire* does not allow these maps to remain abstract, detached symbols; instead, they become concrete, even embodied sites of suffering, invested with emotional value.

In the film's opening sequence, the "Ruler of the World" (Владыка мира), a disembodied head with enormous cheeks, fanged jaws and a star-spangled hat, lurks by the spinning globe. As the globe rotates, this grotesque figuration of global capital darts out its obscene tongue and gobbles up India, Australia, Java, and the decapitated German Kaiser. Search beams shooting from the ruler's eyes herald the appearance of China, linking it immediately to war (and, Virilio would argue, to cinema):

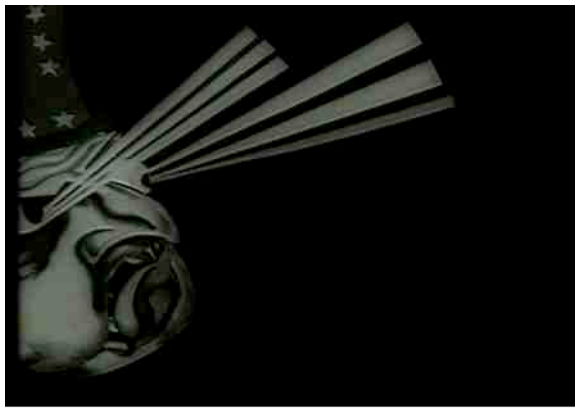


Figure 4: *China on Fire*. The Ruler of the World catches sight of China

These same eyes then pop out on stalks and begin to strafe lightning bolts across China's territory, now marked with the written signs of its resources—coal, gold, silver:

was carried over from this previous production, in which the all-consuming, fat-cheeked "Ruler of the World" also made an appearance.



Figure 5: *China on Fire*. Seeing China's resources

In this sequence, perception and illumination are presented as essential elements in capital's consumption of the globe. The eyes stick out before the tongue, their reach enhanced by electricity. The film itself becomes a reciprocal act of world-seeing: if the collective can show China to their Soviet audience, perhaps they can help China escape the eyes and jaws of capitalist power.

In this short but visually inventive film, maps are used to figure China as a passive, prone body, helpless in the face of imperialist violence. In one particularly horrifying sequence, a monstrous black spider with bulging eyes, a markedly Semitic nose, and the top hat of capital crawls across the map of China, which is centred on a soft-featured human face, its eyes closed in sleep or fear. Pulling in bags of raw material from all across the map, the spider sits on top of this face, wrapping its long legs around it. Capital sees, China is blind:



Figure 6: *China on Fire*. The spider of Capital wrapped around China

At the beginning of Part Three, letters spinning out of a hat inform us that we are in Beijing's Diplomatic Compound. Five figures sit around a table, representing the four Great Powers—the USA, Britain, Japan and France—and the puppet Chinese President. On the table is spread a map of China. The grotesque diplomats, their fangs bared, set about measuring out spheres of influence with compasses under the passive gaze of the nominally presiding President:



Figure 7: *China on Fire*. Carving up the map of China

In a later sequence we return to this map, now corporealized as a prone Chinese man with a Mandarin hat and, again, the anachronistic queue. The map, which had earlier embodied the raw materials that attract this foreign aggression, here becomes the body of the nation, an ethnically marked representative of the population that is greedily dismembered from four directions:

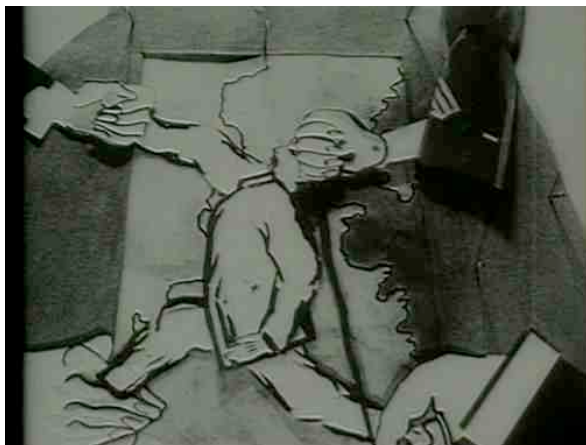


Figure 8: *China on Fire*. Dismembering China

As his limbs fly offscreen, the outlines of the map fade on the page: the nation's physical survival is threatened.

This sequence is immediately contrasted, however, with another that is structurally similar but opposite in outcome, as announced by dramatic titles: “BUT... they forgot one little thing” (НО... о малом забыли). In perhaps the most visually striking sequence of the film, we see another map being drawn, from scratch. Gradually it takes the shape of Russia, centred on Moscow, whose name is given (inaccurately) in Chinese characters. The drawing continues to develop, tracing the outlines of three torsos in imperialist military attire. On completion, these are topped with monstrous animal heads. Simultaneously, a star swells out from the point on the map that is Moscow, transforming into a hammer and sickle. The encircling monsters shoot lightning bolts from their eyes at the symbol—to see, again, is to destroy—and reach out their hands to grasp it:

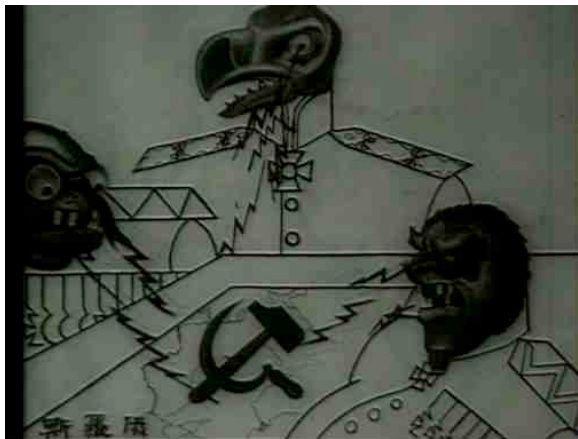


Figure 9: *China on Fire*. Imperialist encirclement of the USSR

But the hammer and sickle changes back into a star and thence into a cannon, which shoots back at the heads, turning them into white skulls as blackness engulfs their bodies and fills the space around the map. In this moment, we see the map transformed from a system of imperialist dominance into a site of resistance to imperial power. The star swells to fill the screen, adorned again with the hammer and sickle, then cuts to ambassador Lev Karakhan arriving in China on the Moscow—Beijing train. Thus cartographic parallelism, which

establishes the Russian Civil War as the positive predecessor to the Chinese situation, is immediately followed by a connective spatial act demonstrating the solidarity of the Soviet political space with the Chinese.

The Great Flight likewise sought to connect symbolically and spectacularly these two dynamic map-spaces: the threatened map-space of China, and the victoriously resistant map-space of the Soviet Union. The spatial and graphic parallelism of *China on Fire* concurs with Karl Radek's analysis at a meeting of the group "Hands of China" the previous year: the Chinese Civil War must be seen as a continuation of the Russian, itself an extension of the global struggle begun by World War I.⁵⁸² The connective act of the Great Flight, in explicitly linking these two spaces, is an act of alliance in this global war. This meaning was endorsed from both sides: approving messages from the Guomindang were printed in the Soviet press, affirming the "veracity and authenticity" of Proletkino's footage as against the "false information spread by the imperialist press."⁵⁸³ But the Soviet audience was also encouraged to visualize the Flight in terms of cartographic connectivity, even before the film itself appeared.

The coverage of the Flight in *Vecherniaia Moskva*, for example, included a series of front-page map images showing the current progress of the Flight on its path from Moscow to Beijing, each bearing the instruction, "follow this map" (следите за этой картой). Altering with each day's progress, this newspaper map became a slow-moving form of animation. One redaction of the map introduces the stock characters in this global war, neatly delineating the two opposing sides: the smiling proletarians of Moscow at the point of origin, against the panicking Western and Chinese bourgeoisie at the final destination:

⁵⁸² Radek, *Ruki proch' ot Kitaia!*, 1.

⁵⁸³ "Kitaiskoe natsional'noe pravitel'stvo o s'emkakh Proletkino," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, November 17, 1925. The statement from the Chinese National Government is attributed to Wang Jingwei.



Figure 10: “They are watching...” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, June 15, 1925.

The assertion that everyone is watching the flight (Наблюдают...) affirms the sense that this aviation expedition constitutes a crucial move on the focal battlefield of the day. But the spatial arrangement of the map, which ignores north-south orientation and frames the Moscow—Beijing route almost as a straight line within these rectangular contours, also replaces notions of Chinese distance with a stark assertion of Eurasian proximity. Landscape and borders pose no obstacles to this trajectory’s homogenous progress; indeed, the border separating Mongolia and China from the USSR is scarcely distinguishable from the Siberian rivers that punctuate the route.

If this map asserts proximity and accessibility, older tropes of distant China also persist in the various representations of the Flight. “To the distant, unknown, dangerous / Great Flight,” announce the film’s titles at the moment of departure from Moscow, accompanying shots of the pilots readying themselves and the planes starting to move.⁵⁸⁴ Zinaida Rikhter’s account, meanwhile, frames the expedition very much within the tradition of adventures to distant, peripheral spaces. Rikhter positions herself from the start as the correspondent with a thirst for adventures: her previous winter, she tells us, “flashed by in the swift running of deer, in the rays of the polar sun, in the icy tundras of midnight Lapland.” Considering options for her next escapade, she is seduced by the lure of “golden” Aldan, the

⁵⁸⁴ *Velikii perelet*, RGAKFD N. Uchetnyi 2721, pt. 1. “В далекий, неведомый, опасный / Великий перелет.”

“Soviet Klondike,” with its “wild nature.”⁵⁸⁵ Rikhter is evoking here the language and geography of the American writer Jack London, who set such novels as *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* in the extreme environment of the Klondike gold rush. But with the announcement of the Great Flight, all her plans change: “7,000 kilometres by air... yes, that is a journey out of Mayne Reid! A lust for distant journeys and dangerous adventures immediately spoke forth within me.”⁵⁸⁶ This journey evokes the tales of Thomas Mayne Reid, another American writer of exotic adventure novels. Rikhter was not the only one positioning the Flight within the adventure canon: the inside cover for Mikhel’s book advertises such expeditionary titles as “Abode of the Snows (A Journey to the Himalayan Glaciers)” and “The Dead City of Khara-Khoto, discovered by the Russian Explorer P. K. Kozlov,” alongside “A Basic Summary of the Fundamentals of Aviation.” This placement of Mikhels’ volume within its media environment clearly seeks to link the technological feat of long-distance aviation with an earlier tradition of heroic imperial exploration.⁵⁸⁷

Indeed, the exotic travel narrative, reformulated as a mission in internationalist solidarity, remained a popular form in the 1920s. Widdis notes the enduring success of the pre-revolutionary journal *Vokrug sveta* (*Around the World*), which repackaged its tales of exotic adventure to express the newly Soviet attitude of “discovery, not conquest—of exploration, not exploitation.”⁵⁸⁸ Indeed, several adventure novels written for young Soviet

⁵⁸⁵ Rikhter, *7,000 kilometrov*, 9. “Зима 1925 года промелькнула для меня в быстром беге оленей, в лучах полярного сияния, в ледяных тундрах полуночной Лапландии. Передохнув в Москве, в мае я уже снова готовилась к поездке. Манил меня своей дикой природой золотой Алдан, — советский Клондайк.”

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.* “7,000 километров по воздуху... да, ведь, это майнридовское путешествие! Страсть к далеким путешествиям, опасным приключениям сразу заговорила во мне.”

⁵⁸⁷ Mikhel’s, inside front cover. Original titles: “БЕК, К.— Обитель снегов (Путешествие на гималайские ледники). Сокращенн. перевод с немецк. Э. Пименовой. Изд. 2-е. ФЕДЯЕВСКАЯ, В. —Мертвый город Хара-Хото, открытый русским путешественником П. К. Козловым. РИХАРД МИЗЕС. — Основы авиации в элементарном изложении. Перевод с немецкого инж. В. А. Лыкошина, под редакц. Н. А. Рынина.”

readers sent their heroes on adventures of solidarity to revolutionary China. Nikolai Karintsev's *Around the World in an Aeroplane* (*Vokrug sveta na aeroplanе*, 1926), like the Great Flight, celebrated aviation as a liberatory technology that could bring the global oppressed under the Soviet gaze. A round-the-world aviation expedition led by a Russian exile desperate to return to the USSR, flying in close techno-competition against devious capitalist rivals, culminates in China, where our hero is imprisoned for siding with the Chinese in Shanghai and later meets Sun Yatsen in Guangzhou.⁵⁸⁹ Aleksandr Lebedenko also drew on his trans-Eurasian experiences in the Great Flight to publish *Four Winds*, a rollicking adventure tale in which two Soviet students sneak across the Gobi and charge around China by car, plane and hot air balloon, foiling imperialist plots and tutoring their Chinese comrades in correct revolutionary organization.⁵⁹⁰

The Great Flight belongs also to this strain of solidarity adventures, combining objective knowledge about distant places with the heroic excitement and danger of exotic travel. The heroes of this adventure are the six pilots, six mechanics, and their leader, Shmidt. These are the men who were to fly into the unknown, single-minded, self-sacrificing: a reporter for *Sovetskii ekran* recalls meeting one of the pilots on a Moscow tram *en route* to the aerodrome, and reports with awe that he had no suitcase, just a few shirts wrapped up in brown paper.⁵⁹¹ The newspaper coverage of the flight contained interviews with the crew members along the route, which emphasized such heroic, superhuman qualities as inexhaustibility and fearlessness. "You feel no tiredness at all while actually flying," declares

⁵⁸⁸ Widdis, *Visions*, 98.

⁵⁸⁹ Nikolai Karintsev, *Vokrug sveta na aeroplanе* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1926).

⁵⁹⁰ Aleksandr Lebedenko, *Chetyre vetra* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1929).

⁵⁹¹ E. Vilenskii, "Na Vostok," *Sovetskii ekran* 14 (1925): 3.

pilot M. M. Gromov, admitting only to a slight sleepiness a few hours after landing.⁵⁹²

Weather is constantly emphasized as a major potential obstacle, yet fails to be a source of fear: “We are not accustomed to fear bad weather and storms,” says I. I. Polianov, pilot of *Pravda*.⁵⁹³ Likewise their ignorance of the territory they are crossing does not worry our heroes. “In a few hours we are flying off into the taiga, which none of us has ever seen before, and about which we have only heard terrifying stories,” explains pilot V. F. Naidenov, before adding nonchalantly: “But there’s no need to be afraid. We shall prevail.”⁵⁹⁴

The film *The Great Flight* opens with a series of portrait shots of these heroic individuals as they prepare to depart for the unknown; Mikhel’s book devotes an entire chapter to profiles and photographs of these men, “the best of the best, the bravest of the brave, most daring of the daring.”⁵⁹⁵ We can sense here the origins of the heroic aviator’s symbolic role in Stalinist culture, “a cult of heroism in which the pilot was increasingly pictured as conqueror, mastering the skies.”⁵⁹⁶ This elevation of the aviator above the masses is only embryonic in 1925, however. As the anecdote about the shirts in brown paper suggests, the pilots of the Great Flight are presented as simple men closely attached to the masses. The near-equal importance of the mechanics is constantly emphasized in the reports

⁵⁹² “Perelet Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai: Letchiki o perelete,” *Pravda*, June 21, 1925. “Усталости во время самого полета абсолютно не чувствуется.”

⁵⁹³ Ibid. “Мы не привыкли бояться непогоды и бури.”

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid. “Через несколько часов мы вылетаем в тайгу, которую никто из нас до сих пор не видел и о которой слышали только страшные рассказы. Но ничего—не страшно. Одолеем.”

⁵⁹⁵ Mikhel’s, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 26.

⁵⁹⁶ Widdis, *Visions*, 130. See also Scott W. Palmer, “Aviation Cinema in Stalin’s Russia: Conformity, Collectivity, and the Conflict with Fascism,” in *Russian and Soviet History: From the Time of Troubles to the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, ed. Steven A. Usitalo and William Benton Whisenhunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 200–214.

and books, as is the key role of factory workers in supplying the planes and parts for the expedition.

Under the set significations of the heroic flight narrative, the conquest of space through technology meant also the conquest of backwardness. This was already the aeroplane's symbolic function within the borders of the USSR, where exhibition flights were used to display the power and progress of industrial civilization to the inhabitants of traditional, rural society. As Palmer notes, the summer of 1925 saw "agit-flights" (*agit-polety*) cover more than 16,000 miles across northern and southern Russia, displaying the planes to secluded rural settlements, distributing literature, and taking peasants up into the sky. The Great Flight's progress east through Soviet territory thus followed an established scenario for such agit-flights, and the accompanying newspaper reports present an almost indistinguishable series of triumphant receptions, crowds gathered from miles around, celebratory meetings, and "flaming greetings" sent to the people of China. Rosenblat's prose in *Pravda* becomes almost self-conscious about repeating these formulae, as when he admits: "In Krasnoyarsk the air expedition was met by just as triumphant, just as joyous a reception as in other Siberian towns."⁵⁹⁷ This repetition enables the Flight, the envoy of central power, to symbolically impose a technologized homogeneity on this vast traversed territory: as one pilot comments, while the landscape below is constantly changing, the sound of the plane's motor remains exactly the same.⁵⁹⁸ The Flight's connective act thus performs something of the function ascribed by Widdis, in her discussion of spatial conceptions in the 1920s, to the grid. According to Widdis, perceptions of Soviet space as a grid system at this time

⁵⁹⁷ "Perelet Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai," *Pravda*, June 24, 1925. "В Красноярске воздушную эскадрилью ждала такая же торжественная, такая же радушная встреча, как и в других городах Сибири."

⁵⁹⁸ Gromov, "Perelet Moskva—Mongoliia—Kitai: Letchiki o perelete," *Pravda*, June 21, 1925.

envisioned a development of the nation's territory wherein "[t]he integration of the periphery would suppress local difference and establish a single, unified Soviet space."⁵⁹⁹

Crossing the border into Mongolia represents to some extent an extension of this project of unifying Soviet space through the reach of the aeroplane and camera, visible and all-seeing signs of Soviet power and technological progress. And indeed, at this time Soviet political influence was strong in the People's Republic of Mongolia, which had been established under Soviet sponsorship (and in defiance of China's claims to a sphere of influence in Mongolia) the previous year.⁶⁰⁰ Nonetheless, once the expedition enters the non-Soviet East, the degree of backwardness highlighted in accounts of the Flight sharply increases. The film establishes this change with a pair of contrasting shots of "the Soviet and Mongolian border posts": the Soviet post is regimented and ordered, with soldiers marching in straight lines, while the Mongolian post has one man standing undynamically beside a small building, while another man wearing a hat sits on a carpet in the shade nearby.

We have reached the indolent Orient, and henceforth the ethnographic search for curious exotica is greatly expanded. "Mongolia perhaps made an even greater impression on us than China," muses Rikhter. "More primordial exoticism."⁶⁰¹ Lebedenko describes Mongolia as "a curious, semi-savage country."⁶⁰² While Blum's camera did gather a few ethnographic shots of rural Russian families earlier in the film, the section on Mongolia is almost exclusively ethnographic, capturing men on horseback, Buddhist lamas, temples, and

⁵⁹⁹ Widdis, *Visions*, 52.

⁶⁰⁰ On the struggle between Soviet Russia and China for influence in Mongolia, see Baabar, *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, translated by D. Sühjargalmaa, S. Burenbayar, H. Hulan and N. Tuya, edited by C. Kaplonski (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999), esp. 248–271. This Soviet influence is a visible presence in *The Great Flight*: signs in Russian constantly appear in the background, and the Soviet envoy Aleksei Vasil'ev is shown in close interaction with the Mongolian government. *Velikii perelet*, reel 3.

⁶⁰¹ Rikhter, *7,000 kilometrov*, 69. "Монголия поразила нас, пожалуй, более, чем Китай. Больше первобытной экзотики."

⁶⁰² Lebedenko, *Kak ia letal v Kitai*, 99. "Любопытная, полудикая страна[.]"

corpses being eaten by dogs. Unlike the heroic portraits of individual aviators that began the film, individuals are now transformed by the intertitles into types: “Street horse traders, people without specific occupations and travelling monks and their clothing.”⁶⁰³ A similar swerve towards ethnography can be observed in the photographs that accompany Mikhel’s text. For most of the journey across Soviet space, these photographs document specific people and specific events. Once the planes cross Lake Baikal, however, they take on the typifying function of ethnographic portraiture, enforced by such explanatory captions as “Types of Mongolian women.”⁶⁰⁴

Mongolia is presented, in sum, as the epitome of backwardness, still partially enslaved by religious tradition, and entirely in need of Soviet salvation. This was the default mode for presenting the Soviet East and the Bolshevik’s salvational mission there. Matthew Payne finds it in Viktor Turin’s 1929 documentary *Turksib*, which depicts the building of the Turksib railway through the Kazakh steppe as an act of “conquering time and history through technology,” in which “technologically advanced representatives of the new civilization quite literally shake the backward Kazakhs out of their somnolence.”⁶⁰⁵ Michael Smith identifies a style he calls “national realism” in early films about the Muslim Soviet republics, which reduce national identity to a tradition-mired backwardness that socialist modernity has come to redeem. “Moscow,” writes Smith, “could not look upon the borderlands of the east except from its own European center, its own forward position in the moving drama and progress of Marxist history.”⁶⁰⁶ In Mongolia, the very presence of the airplane and the camera, those twin technological symbols of modernity, testifies to the great developmental gulf that these

⁶⁰³ *Velikii perelet*, pt 3. ‘Уличные торговцы лошадьми — лица без определенных занятий и странствующие монахи и их одеяния.’

⁶⁰⁴ Mikhel’s, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 133.

⁶⁰⁵ Matthew J. Payne, “Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* (1929) and Soviet Orientalism,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2001: 40–41.

⁶⁰⁶ Michael G. Smith, “Cinema for the ‘Soviet East’,” 677.

Soviet adventure-liberators seek to resolve. “We visited a famous temple, in which the leg of a tripod had never before set foot,” muses cameraman Blium in his account of the Mongolia stage of the journey.⁶⁰⁷ The arrival of the camera and the plane promises liberation from the temple.

But this spatial map of technologized modernity spreading out from Moscow to capture and redeem increasingly backward hinterlands breaks down once the planes reach China. Not because of the antiquity of Chinese civilization—this can be safely dismissed as feudalism, covered by a few touristy shots of Beijing’s pagodas, temples and stone lions. But as the expedition moves south from the capital, it becomes clear that semi-colonial China opposes the Soviet centre as the site of a rival techno-modernity. Lim finds some precedent for this dynamic in nineteenth century Russian culture’s binary attitude towards east Asia, whereby China and Japan “alternated, paradoxically, between signifying backwardness and a stagnant past on the one hand and a threatening, uncertain modernity on the other.”⁶⁰⁸ In *The Great Flight*, this alternation is played out across Eurasian space: the plane and camera travel through the desert of backwardness to arrive at the front line in the global war, the enemy’s lair, in Shanghai.

Rikhter can barely conceal her wonder at first encountering this rival modernity in Shanghai, before eventually rediscovering her sense of moral outrage:

I was astonished by the European luxury of this Chinese city: the magnificent embankment and banks like palaces, the imposing Hindu policemen in their red turbans, the bustle on Nanjing Road, the fashionable hotels, the skyscrapers glistening above the city at night... the pruned trees and lawns of the French and English parks, which Chinese and dogs are forbidden to enter.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁷ “Посетили знаменитый храм, в который еще не ступала ножка штатива.” Vladimir Shneiderov, Georgii Blum, “Kak snimalsia ‘Velikii perelet’,” *Kinozhurnal ARK 1* (1926): 29.

⁶⁰⁸ Lim, “Between Spiritual Self and Other,” 322–3.

⁶⁰⁹ Rikhter, *7,000 kilometrov*, 117. “Меня удивила европейская роскошь этого китайского города: превосходная набережная и банки–дворцы, величественные полицейские–индусы в красных чалмах, оживление на Нанкин-род, фешенебельные отели, сияющие по вечерам над городом

Here there is order, energy, and illumination: everything the plane and camera promise to the past-bound lands they cross. Mikhel's reports with a kind of awe that Shanghai contains more cars—some 14,000—than the entire USSR.⁶¹⁰ Blium's camera, echoing the attraction to moving, mechanized vehicles found in 1920s city symphonies like *Berlin* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, sets off by tram through the busy city streets.

The Shanghai section of *The Great Flight*, anticipating the fuller treatment of the theme in *Shanghai Document*, seeks to present a city defined by contradictions. Cars and trams are contrasted to coolies, “human horses,” pulling huge loads along the same streets, or collapsing old and exhausted in the sun.⁶¹¹ On the river, great hulking foreign cargo ships are juxtaposed to Chinese junks and skiffs, old and battered but legion. The camera fixes the worn materiality of massed masts and decks, tracking along one boat to reveal a string of human heads between sail and wood, trapped in an older age of technology. These two sides are effectively at war: the titles announce to us that the cargo ships are sitting unloaded, because the Chinese labour force, old-fashioned but multitudinous like these boats, has gone on strike. But there is also a war in the realm of experience, which is being transformed in this semi-colonial city. The shots in Shanghai's Chinese quarter have the ethnographic quality of the footage from Beijing, all dusty back streets, half-naked children, and agricultural labour. But the most striking shots from Shanghai dramatize the encounter between China and western technology, expressing the violent juxtaposition of historical epochs that, according to Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development, could produce a revolutionary dynamic in less developed countries. Perhaps the most arresting shot

небоскребы... подстриженные деревья и газоны французских и английских парков, куда запрещается вход китайцам и собакам.”

⁶¹⁰ Mikhel's, *Ot kremlevskoi do kitaiskoi steny*, 226.

⁶¹¹ A wide shot of some young coolies chatting is followed by a medium shot of an older man asleep on his hat, and a close-up on his face, with a fly on his sleeve. *Velikii perelet*, Pt 5.

in the film beautifully illustrates the notion of uneven development: two coolies, naked to the waist, stand beneath a clock on a traffic island in the middle of the road, as trams and automobiles pass by on either side. Other pedestrians cross with determination, but these two men stand still, as if stunned by the passage of time.

The Soviet symbols, the plane and the camera, introduce themselves into this binary of Chinese backwardness versus Western technology as a destabilizing third term, materially related to the latter but politically attached to the former. The Western imperialists come by sea from the east, with gunships; the Soviet liberators come by air from the north, with an on-board camera. The presence of the camera is a kind of salvational promise, at least to the audience back home: with our technological achievements, our cameras and planes, we can help these people throw off the foreign technology that at present oppresses them.

This liberational potential is promised by the sequences in the film that show the workers of Shanghai and the Guomindang in its base at Canton. The Great Flight arrived in Shanghai in the summer after the May 30 Incident, amidst intensified anti-foreigner protests and organization. Shneiderov makes much of the fact that their filming in Shanghai was assisted by Chinese workers. While Western spies followed them everywhere, workers and union members helped them film strikes, pickets, and demonstrations.⁶¹² The Shanghai sequence of the film ends with this footage, a series of shots showing workers organizing strikes and holding demonstrations. These sequences are bathed with light and filled with energetic, ordered activity—a strong visual contrast to the slow, lazy pace of life and work shown earlier in the Chinese quarter. Proletarian organization offers a resolution of the opposition between foreign technology and native ignorance. Further south, in Canton, we find the Guomindang portrayed as a native revolutionary force, in charge of its own destiny,

⁶¹² Shneiderov, Blum, “Kak snimalsia ‘Velikii perelet’,” 28–9; Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, Xing Zuwen, eds, *Zhongguo dian ying fa zhan shi*, (Beijing : Zhongguo dian ying chu ban she, 1963), 143–4.

unafraid of taking action. We see a court trying some strike breakers, energetic young strike leaders, a village committee. And finally, the traveling plane-camera finds actual war, the front line, and Blium's apparatus can collect adoring shots of its spiritual cousin, the machine gun. These final sequences, which give us a machine-gun crew, artillery explosions, and the detailed operations of a field hospital, promise that the Guomintang are mastering modern military technology and techniques. The imbalance found in Shanghai is here offered a potential resolution.

The implication throughout these later sequences is that the progressive elements in Chinese society have welcomed the Soviet envoys and their camera. The film does not mention that these Guomintang soldiers were probably being trained by Soviet advisors—the work of Borodin and Bliukher is nowhere mentioned in coverage of the Flight. But a large number of the shots from the China segment of the film show Chinese subjects staring directly into the camera. As Widdis notes, the presence of the camera was frequently an internal feature of these early expedition films: “The ethnographic documentary films of the late 1920s often focused on the *experience* of travel and exploration, positioning the camera explicitly as part of an adventure.”⁶¹³ Blium and Shneiderov do not seek Vertov's ideal of life caught “unawares”: instead, a stock component of their film language is the staged portrait shot, the subject or subjects standing still and looking into the camera, as if posing for a photograph. These shots are deliberately and openly staged; their subjects agree to be filmed, to be captured as a sample, to submit to observation. They stare straight at the Soviet audience through their prosthetic eye, the travelling camera. But this visual relation is one-sided: the Chinese see only the camera, not the society that stands behind it and sees through it.

⁶¹³ Widdis, *Visions*, 115.

The Great Flight seeks to convince us that the Chinese also conflate camera, plane and Soviet society as a single message of solidarity and progress. At the beginning of Part Four, as titles announce “Miaotian. First landing in China,” we see people on the ground watching the skies through binoculars, expectantly. A woman holding the binoculars to her eyes turns, trains them on the camera, and then smiles: an equation of camera with plane, and a welcome to both. Next we cut to a shot of a plane landing, running in from a distance towards the camera and past it to the right. From here Shneiderov cuts to a series of group shots, old and young people, all looking directly and attentively into the camera. The sequence suggests that they, too, are looking at the plane in welcome and expectation as it lands.

But there are less positive reactions to the camera’s presence in China. In one street sequence, in Shanghai’s “Chinese Commercial District,” an old man amidst the bustle stands still and faces the camera, but covers his face with something flat and white. The film cuts to a shot of a man in uniform raising a stick up and backwards, seemingly in threat. Then another cut returns us to the old man standing still in this busy street shot, still holding the flat object in front of his face, but now also pointing directly at the camera.

What are we supposed to make of this sequence? The interjection of the violent figure of authority encourages us to think that the man in the street is hiding from and pointing at this uniformed oppressor and the illegitimate power he represents. But the film and its accompanying newspaper coverage all work constantly to remind us that this expedition is about the presence of Blium’s camera in China, the adventures it has undergone to get there, the risks it takes to gather its material. Its subjects standing in awkward stillness before it testify constantly to its presence. So it is hard not to think that this man is reacting to the camera, hiding from it, refusing to be seen, which for Virilio is to be destroyed. In this brief moment, the Soviet camera and the uniformed figure of imperial rule are fused. The Chinese

man in the street, meanwhile, declines to become a part of the Soviet world picture. To use the terms employed by Xinyu Dong in her study of early Chinese film comedy, this anonymous figure rejects the Soviet project to produce “China on display” by realizing the rights of “China at play.” Playfully hiding behind his small white screen, he asserts his agency, his capacity to be more than simply passive exhibition material for the Soviet cinematic gaze.⁶¹⁴

II:

Filming China, Films to China: From *The Great Flight* to *Shanghai Document*

We are drawn to this China, even though we still do not know China. But we must get to know China, we must get to know it well, and we must get to know it quickly, because the tempo of history has quickened to an unusual degree.

And so the screen must come promptly, quickly, urgently to the help of the newspaper and the book, so that the USSR can not only hear about its revolutionary brother, but also see him face to face.

(Sergei Tret'iakov, “Cinema and China,” 1925.)⁶¹⁵

The Great Flight was hailed in the press as an unprecedented opportunity to see and thus know China, a step forward in global perception. “We must admit,” *Kino*’s front-page review began, “that not every citizen of our republic, even the most educated, knows what is going on there, behind the Gobi desert.” Dry telegraph dispatches about revolutionary China were not always easy to understand. But the visual element rendered China comprehensible: “The expedition has dispersed the newspaper fog. We have seen with our own eyes Feng

⁶¹⁴ Xinyu Dong, “China at Play: Republican Film Comedies and Chinese Cinematic Modernity,” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2009. Dong uses the opposition of “China on display” and “China at play” in her discussion of *Shanghai Document* and *Shanghai 24 Hours* (Dong, “China at Play,” 168–179). I shall return to her analysis of *Shanghai Document* later in this chapter.

⁶¹⁵ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Kino i Kitai,” *Kino* 28 (1925): 3. “Мы тянемся к этому Китаю, хотя еще и не знаем его. Но мы должны его узнать и узнать крепко, и в то же время срочно, ибо темп истории необычайно учащен. И в помощь газете и книге, говорящей о Китае, срочно, спешно, неотложно должен притти экран, чтобы СССР могла не только услышать о своем революционном брате, но и увидеть его лицом к лицу.”

Yuxiang and the Canton revolutionaries. Shanghai on strike has gazed out at us from the screen[.]”⁶¹⁶

Viktor Shklovskii agreed that *The Great Flight* had great epistemological value, dubbing the film an “avalanche of China” for the huge quantity of information about China to the viewer in a sudden, even violent manner:

This is simply an avalanche of China.
You will understand a lot about the world when you see this film. Its shots are filled with their own Chinese life. All directors will learn from this film.
And the spectator who sees it will understand who Zhang Zuolin is, and who the Chinese workers are. He will learn that there is more than one China. And that China is angry. With a new kind of rage. A rage directed against the foreign merchant.⁶¹⁷

But Shklovskii had serious formal criticisms of the film. Above all, he saw a contradiction between the images in the film, which communicated the specificity of China as described above, and the film’s titles, which constantly insisted on the similarity between the Russian and Chinese revolutions. “We have no need for naive parallelism,” Shklovskii declared. “Science and art think in differences, not similarities. We know and should know about the specific character of the Chinese revolution.”⁶¹⁸ Shklovskii’s solution was that the film should be recut and re-edited, and the titles redone by “an Orientalist and a good writer.”⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁶ S. Gekht, “Velikii perelet,” *Kino* 36 (1925): 1. “Надо признаться, что не каждый, даже культурный, гражданин нашей республики знает, что делается там, за пустыней Гоби. [...] Экспедиция рассеяла газетный туман. Мы увидели воочию Фын-Юй-Сяна и кантонских революционеров. С экрана глядел на нас бастующий Шанхай[.]”

⁶¹⁷ Viktor Shklovskii, “‘Velikii perelet’ i kinematografiia,” *Kino* 38 (1925): 3. “Это прямо обвал Китая. Вы много поймете в мире, когда увидите эту картину. Ее кадры полны своей китайской жизни. Все режиссеры будут учиться у этой картины. А зритель поймет после нее, кто такой Чжан-Цзо-Лин и кто такие китайские рабочие. Узнает о том, что Китай разный. Что Китай сердит. Новой злобой. Злобой против иностранного купца.”

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. “Нам не нужен наивный параллелизм. Наука и искусство мыслят различиями, а не сходствами. Мы знаем и должны знать о специфическом характере китайской революции.”

⁶¹⁹ Ibid. “Подрежьте, подмонтируйте ее, дайте сделать надписи востоковеду и хорошему писателю.”

As 1925 gave way to 1926, Sergei Tret'iakov was seeking to assert himself in a combination of these two roles: a writer with specialist knowledge of the contemporary Chinese situation, gleaned from his time teaching at Beijing University, and a firm understanding of the necessary way to represent China to a Soviet audience. His assessment of *The Great Flight*, as already noted, greeted the film as a step on the right road, but also voiced several criticisms. Although the film as a whole presented “living, authentic, contemporary China,” some elements of the footage struck him as retaining the dreaded tint of exoticism, such as the lions’ heads at temple gates that occur in the touristic shots of old Beijing, or the landscape shots with bananas and lotuses that are interspersed with episodes from the civil war during the Guangzhou sequences towards the film’s end.

Tret'iakov’s main criticism, however, was formal and structural. The imagined Soviet audience in whose name he spoke wanted, Tret'iakov claimed, to see China “from all angles—spatial, temporal, causal” (во всех разрезах—пространственном, временном, причинном). Instead, the film’s image of China appeared rushed and unsystematic, an impression Tret'iakov memorably, and perhaps revealingly, compares to a bunch of flowers stolen from someone else’s garden: “But they see a film in which China is “cobbled together” hurriedly, feverishly and unsystematically. As if climbing over a fence and tearing up bouquets from forbidden flower-beds.”⁶²⁰ We will encounter the idea of documentary film as theft again in the discussion of *Shanghai Document* below. But for now, what are we to make of Tret'iakov’s categories: space, time, and causality? It is fairly clear that *The Great Flight* arranges China’s spatio-temporal aspect through the exploratory chronotope of the expedition film. Shneiderov edits together Blium’s footage as a series of images linked by succession in space over time, a parade of landscape and portrait shots that record primarily the fact of

⁶²⁰ Tret'iakov, “Nedoleto-perelet-popadanie.” “Но видят они фильму, в которую «надергано» Китая, надергано поспешно, лихорадочно и бессистемно. Так перелезши через забор, рвут букеты на запретных клумбах.”

Blium's camera moving across Eurasian territory. But what about causality? The only causality in the film is spatial, not social: its organizing principle, its *siuzhet*, is provided by the movement of the Flight itself. And even this drops away: as S. V. Drobashenko notes, once the film enters the non-Soviet East, "the flight as such moves into the background and is henceforth turned into a functional outline that binds together disparate travel film-sketches."⁶²¹

This lack of system can be sensed in particular in the film's final sequence, shot in and around Guangzhou (Canton). Here ethnographic and newsreel footage succeed one another without any sense of necessity or intention. Street scenes are followed by shots of the Shamin foreign concession and a title describing a boycott; but then the film reverts to displaying the life of people living on river boats. The film drifts out into the countryside, showing us fishermen, rice fields, buffalo, only to interrupt these tranquil rural scenes with a workers' demonstration marching through the streets of the city. When war footage finally arrives, at the very end of the film, it is entirely unclear how the fighting between Guomindang troops and the army of Chen-Tziu-Lin is related to or caused by anything that has gone before. Civil war is just another thing, like fishermen or protests, that Blium's camera has encountered on its travels through China.

These sequences come closer to the notion of cinema put forward in Siegfried Kracauer's later, realist film theory: cinema as a form of photography that captures material reality beyond any human intention.⁶²² Such a perspective is inimical to Tret'iakov's demand that everything in film's rendition of reality has a defined social and political meaning.

⁶²¹ S. V. Drobashenko, *Istoriia sovetskogo dokumental'nogo kino* (Moscow: Izdanie Moskovskogo universiteta, 1980), 21. "полет, как таковой, отходит на второй план и в дальнейшем превращается в служебную канву, скрепляющую разрозненные путевые кинозарисовки."

⁶²² In his notes towards a book on film aesthetics from 1940, Kracauer asserts that film "does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in the refuse, in what is just there—both in and outside the human being." Quoted by Miriam Bratu Hansen in her "Introduction" to Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii.

Tret'iakov wants film to assert a causality that explains why things in China are they way they are. To adopt the terms Widdis uses in her study of early Soviet film, we might say he wants the expedition film's "exploration" (разведка) to be replaced with "domination" (освоение), in the form of China's coherent incorporation into the Soviet discourse of class struggle and world revolution.⁶²³ *The Great Flight* fails as internationalist aesthetics, according to Tret'iakov's critique, because it does not express the superiority of the Marxist analytical perspective: it enables its audience to see China, but not necessarily to understand China.

Tret'iakov's proposed solution, the way to hit the cinematic target of China (a metaphor for human intention if ever there was one), is to shoot a combination of culture films (*kul'turfil'my*) and a plot-based film shot on location in China, thereby combining the organizing power of the script with the authenticity of the Chinese location. Narrative, according to Tret'iakov's argument here, is needed to fully express causality. This was in fact precisely the program of the film expedition to China that Tret'iakov, then deputy President of the Artistic Council of Goskino's 1st Film Factory, was already proposing to Goskino in late 1925.⁶²⁴ The expedition was necessary, Tret'iakov argued, not just because of the importance of current events in China for the world revolution, but also because popular notions about China were dependent on Western art, which represented China as exotic and

⁶²³ Widdis, *Visions*, 7–12.

⁶²⁴ RGALI f. 1923, op. 1, ed. khr. 133: "Dokladnaia zapiska zamestitelia predsedatelia khudozhestvennogo soveta 1-oi Goskinofabriki v Goskino ob organizatsii ekspeditsii v Kitai dlia s'iemok fil'ma 'Dzhungo'. Mash. 1925–1926." Tret'iakov's report is not dated; however, he suggests therein that the expedition could depart in January 1926 in order to begin work by late March 1926, and offers a range of preparatory activities that could be carried out between the time of the report and January 1926. These details suggest that the report was delivered in late 1925. (Имея ввиду общую неустойчивость политической карты Китая надлежало бы экспедицию форсировать: обследовательская группа могла бы выехать примерно в Январе 1926 года, с тем, чтобы в конце Марта уже можно было приступить к работе. Время же остающееся до Января уйдет на подготовительную по экспедиции работу, на обеспечение по линии НКВД наиболее выгодных условий работы экспедиции в Китае, на установление связей с Китайскими Кино-предприятиями, окончательную разработку сценариев. RGALI f. 1923, op. 1, ed. khr. 133, l. 4.)

incommensurable. China in film, Tret'iakov argued, had hitherto served only as “an exotic spice” added to a film to enhance its flavor. He called upon Soviet film to right this wrong by focusing on social life to reveal the “stormy processes of [China’s] transformation from medieval autocracy towards industrialism and socialism.” This was a task, the writer declared, that could not be accomplished by literature alone.

Tret'iakov's proposed project was immense. An expedition of nine to ten months was to produce: three long feature films (*boeviki*) under the general title *Dzhungo* (i.e. *zhōngguó*, China); a short feature in the style of a Chinese slapstick comedy (*buffoonada*); a continuous film chronicle (*kino-khronika*) shot throughout the duration of the expedition; and up to ten lecture films on such topics as the Chinese countryside, the Chinese factory, crafts, trade, China at war, family life, theatre, foreigners in China, the revolutionary movement, religion and superstition, science, etc. This list of topics suggests these short films were envisioned as filmic companions to Tret'iakov's printed China sketches. The lecture films were not to be shot separately, but would be assembled from the footage shot for the feature films and the chronicle. Tret'iakov insisted that the expedition must produce multiple films, because a single film would not justify the expense, and furthermore “could not even get close to exhausting the fundamental aspects of contemporary Chinese life that require disclosure.”⁶²⁵ A team of no more than 15-16 people, including two directors and two cameramen, was to be dispatched from the Soviet Union; actors and additional crew were to be recruited within China itself. Tret'iakov estimated that the expedition would cost some 500,000 roubles, perhaps less in view of the cheapness of Chinese labour and the willingness of worker and youth groups to help.⁶²⁶

⁶²⁵ Ibid., l. 2.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., l. 3.

Tret'iakov's proposal was initially accepted, and *Dzhungo* was on course to become one of the film events of the 1920s. Sergei Eisenstein and Eduard Tisse, fresh from their work on *Battleship Potemkin* (the intertitles for which were written by Tret'iakov), were recruited as director and cameraman. Tret'iakov drew up librettos for the three films, entitled *The Yellow Peril* (*Zheltaia opasnost'*), *The Blue Express* (*Goluboi ekspress*), and *The Pearl River* (*Zhemchuzhnaia reka*—also titled *China Roars* [*Kitai rychit*] in an earlier version). A set of documents from a later stage in planning sometime in early 1926 suggest that the number of feature films was subsequently cut from three to two: *The Blue Express*, which was supposed to be filmed in rural China, was dropped, limiting the sites for filming to Beijing and Guangzhou. The film-chronicle and lecture films were still to be made, though the buffoonade seems to have been discarded. Thus the size and cost of the expedition were somewhat reduced: Eisenstein, Tisse and Tret'iakov were to head up a ten-man team, with funding of 250,000 roubles to be provided jointly by Goskino and Sovkino.⁶²⁷ In March 1926, anticipatory announcements about the project began to appear in the press.⁶²⁸

This expedition and the resulting films were to be the grandest achievement of the accelerating drive to represent contemporary China as the front line in the final global war. On his return from Beijing to Moscow in the autumn of 1925, Tret'iakov noted that the film studios had already commissioned numerous film scripts dealing with China.⁶²⁹ *The Great Flight* was released in January 1926, and reviewed extensively in the press; that same month, Tret'iakov's play *Roar, China!* premiered at the Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow, triggering

⁶²⁷ Ibid., l. 5, "Dopolnitel'nye spravki k soobrazheniiu po voprosu ob otpravke kino-ekspeditsii v KITAI." Projected budgets for *Zheltaia opasnost'* and *Zhemchuzhnaia reka* are attached to this report, totalling around 250,000 roubles. The report is anonymous and also undated, though a reference to the premiere of Tret'iakov's play *Rychi, Kitai!* tells us it was composed after 23 January 1926, and the acknowledgement of the Guominjun's defeat may date the report to as late as April (see below).

⁶²⁸ See for example *Kino* 11 (March 16, 1926), 1. This article also mentions Karakhan's supportive telegram in the wake of *Rychi, Kitai!*

⁶²⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Kitai na ekran," 16.

even more extensive press reaction. The following month, the directorate of the Bolshoi Theatre scrapped their plans for a ballet set in revolutionary France and switched locations to China, setting in motion the production of *The Red Poppy* (see Chapter Four). On 20 February, Boris Pil'niak, then President of the Moscow branch of the Union of All-Russia Writers, left Moscow in a train bound for Japan, a trip which would also take him to China for three months and result in *Chinese Story*.⁶³⁰

With film, however, we see an extra dimension added to this project: the desire to represent China to the new Soviet audience is compounded by the desire to represent China to China. Film, communicating chiefly in images, held out the possibility of overcoming the complexities of translation and inter-cultural understanding that attended both the dissemination of knowledge about internationalism and the dissemination of knowledge internationally. Cinema is a spatial system of both representation and distribution: in the words of Mark Shiel, we must consider both “space in films” and “films in space.”⁶³¹ Besides educating the Soviet populace about contemporary reality, film could extend the reach of Soviet internationalist images to other areas of the globe.

The mid-1920s saw a particularly active campaign to promote the making of films about, and distribution of films to, “the East”: understood as both the southern and eastern republics of the USSR, and the colonized and semi-colonized populations of Asia beyond the Soviet borders. The front page of *Kino* on 1 September 1925, for example, was occupied entirely by articles exploring this theme, under such titles as “Film for the East,” “About the East and for the East,” “What is in the East?” and “What to Give to the East?”⁶³² In the latter,

⁶³⁰ Dany Savelli, “Shest' neizdannyykh pisem Borisa Pil'niaka,” 139.

⁶³¹ Mark Shiel, “Cinema and the City in History and Theory,” in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds, *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 5.

⁶³² “Filmu na Vostok,” “O Vostoke i dlia Vostoka,” “Chto na Vostoke?,” “Chto dat' Vostoku?,” *Kino*, 24 (September 1, 1925): 1. For other instances of the press campaign, see e.g. An. Skachko,

Mikhail Pavlovich argued that, given widespread illiteracy, film was the optimal medium for penetrating the East with Soviet culture, dispelling religious illusions, and combating American influence.⁶³³ The simple translation of intertitles could, moreover, render these films suitable for international consumption.⁶³⁴ Mikhail Pavlovich was apparently involved in the foundation of a joint-stock company, “Vostochnoe kino” (Eastern Cinema) or “Vostkino,” mandated to produce suitable films both about and for the East.⁶³⁵ Vostkino’s first major production, *Turksib*, is read by Payne as a paradigmatic expression of the Soviet centre’s mission to civilize the backwards periphery.⁶³⁶ Likewise, Smith summarizes the Soviet “Orientalist” films of the 1920s as primarily concerned to express the benighted backwardness of the Eastern spaces that the socialist future was to save: “Cinematic socialist realism would show these peoples the way to the future, but not without first revealing to them the horrors of their own past and present.”⁶³⁷ Both scholars focus on cinematic images

“Organizatsiia vostochnogo kino,” *Sovetskoe kino* 2–3 (1925): 16–18 (Skachko here quotes Nariman Narimanov’s argument that film is the only way to reach the peoples of the East, since they have learnt to think in images, rather than logically); An. Skachko, “Vostochnaia kino-fil’ma,” *Sovetskoe kino* 6 (1925): 24–27; Armen Gasparian, “Put’ na Vostok,” *Kino* 11 (1925): 7; “Prodvizhenie kino na Vostok (Beseda s t. Pavlovich-Vel’tman),” *Kino* 13 (June 16, 1925): 1; An. Skachko, “Kino dlia Vostoka,” *Kinozhurnal ARK* 10 (1925): 3.

⁶³³ “Chto dat’ Vostoku?,” *Kino* 24 (September 1, 1925): 1.

⁶³⁴ G. Levkoev, “Kino-ekspeditsiia na Vostok,” *Kinozhurnal ARK* 6–7 (1925): 28.

⁶³⁵ Mikhail Pavlovich’s involvement is mentioned by An. Skachko, “Kino dlia Vostoka,” *Kinozhurnal ARK*, 1925, 10, 3. The journal *Sovetskoe kino* described Vostkino’s missions as follows: “Vostkino is established with the aim, on the one hand, of serving the cultural needs of the workers and peasants of the East through cinema, taking into account the particular nature of Eastern psychology and daily life, and, on the other, of familiarizing the western nationalities of the USSR with the cultural values and achievements of the East. Simultaneously one of the tasks will be the release of special films designated for export to foreign eastern countries.” (Восткино учреждено с целью обслуживания культурных запросов рабочих и крестьян Востока через кино, учитывая своеобразие быта и психологии Востока, с одной стороны, и, с другой стороны—для ознакомления западных народностей СССР с культурными ценностями и достижениями Востока. Одновременно одной из задач будет выпуск специальных фильм, предназначенных для вывоза в зарубежные восточные страны.) *Sovetskoe kino* 1 (1926): 24.

⁶³⁶ Payne, “Viktor Turin’s *Turksib*,” *passim*.

⁶³⁷ Smith, “Cinema for the ‘Soviet East’,” 646.

of the internal East; but a glance at the contemporary articles quoted above will show that the East was taken to signify an amorphous swathe of oppressed and backward space from Turkey through Persia to Mongolia and China, with the internal East ambiguously included within this broader East.

China became a focal point in this struggle for a broadly defined East, despite lying outside Soviet borders and, as we saw in *The Great Flight*, offering a more complex temporal relation to the Soviet center than the progress-backwardness axis that Smith identifies in images of the internal East. Thus in 1925, calls for more films *about* China were joined by calls for more films to be sold *to* China. Soviet films were reportedly on display at the Sino-Soviet Exhibition in Harbin in the summer of 1925.⁶³⁸ A host of articles appeared about film production and consumption in China, generally lamenting the dominance of the American model in both spheres.⁶³⁹ Shneiderov shared his own experiences of cinema-going in Shanghai, where he watched an American film set during the Russian Civil War that saw Rudolf Valentino as the American hero saving a princess from both the Whites and the Reds. The availability of such quasi-historical “trash” clearly showed the need for Soviet films to enter the Chinese market and replace fiction with truth; Shneiderov ends his article with the collective voice of some important members of the Chinese film industry that he met, asking: “Why don’t you send your films to China? They would play here with great success.”⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ “Kino na vystavke v Kharbine,” *Kino* 12 (March 17, 1925): 1; G. B., “Kino na Vostoke,” *Kino* 11 (1925): 7.

⁶³⁹ L. P., “Kino v Kitae,” *Kino* 10 (March 3, 1925), 2; Sovetskii, “Kino v Kitae,” *Sovetskoe kino* 6 (1925): 52–55; A. Grinfel’d, “Kinematografiia Kitaia (Issledovatel’skii ocherk),” *Kino-Front* 9–10 (1926): 37–8. G. Boltianskii, in “Kitai o sebe samom,” *Sovetskoe kino* 8 (1926): 26, notes that the growth of the national liberation movement has moved some film production towards more revolutionary themes. One such film, *Doch’ terrora*, had reached the Leningrad division of Sovkino. Boltianskii approvingly describes a revenge plot in which the daughter of an executed revolutionary avenges herself on the general that caused his death, by becoming his concubine and then murdering him. Boltianskii found in the film a “range of adventures and escapades that illustrate the particularities of Chinese life.”

⁶⁴⁰ Shneiderov, “Kitaiskii kinematograf,” *Sovetskii ekran* 5 (1926): 14–15.

Contributing to this theme in *Kino*, Tret'iakov concurred that “the Chinese largely swallow American produce,” and that Chinese film production likewise followed the example of Hollywood. But there were pressing reasons why this need not be the case. The use of China in American film as exotic decoration or racialized negative had led to some scenes, such as the end of *Thief of Baghdad*, being edited out for Chinese audiences. Film production, meanwhile, was in the hands of people largely sympathetic to the Guomindang.⁶⁴¹ The Chinese masses were assumed to be in need of cinematic awakening: they needed to be shown themselves through the mediation of film in order to achieve self-recognition and self-consciousness. This process was neatly described in a story, “A film screening in Guanghu” (“Kino-seans v Guan’-Khu”), published in *Vokrug sveta* in February 1927. Two Westerners running a travelling cinema in the Chinese provinces accidentally interrupt their standard fare of European romances to show newsreel footage of “Events in Shanghai.” The audience are awoken from lethargy to rage: identifying themselves with the onscreen oppressed and the cinema owners with the oppressors, they bounce these cine-entrepreneurs up and down on the sheet that served as a screen and then throw them into the river. Cinema that reflects reality awakens the masses to action; the cinema screen becomes a weapon of revenge.⁶⁴²

The assumed existence of such a Chinese audience implied that Soviet productions, if they could only reach Chinese screens, would enjoy considerable success. This orientation of production towards a Chinese audience can be sensed in *China on Fire*, which contains text in both Russian and Chinese, suggesting it was made with one eye towards playing in China. A report from April 1926, revealingly entitled “Cinema-Diplomacy-Power,” claims that *The Great Flight* was in the possession of the Soviet trade mission to China, alongside such films

⁶⁴¹ Treti'akov, “Kino i Kitai.”

⁶⁴² Mikhail Zuev-Ordynets, “Kino-seans v Guan’-Khu,” *Vokrug sveta* 2 (1927): 3–5. Also published in Mikhail Zuev-Ordynets, *Zheltyi taifun* (1928).

as *Battleship Potemkin*.⁶⁴³ As we saw in Chapter One, the playwright Tian Han recalls watching *Battleship Potemkin* through the assistance of the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Shanghai in 1926, an opportunity he claims was facilitated by Boris Pil'niak. But Tian Han makes no mention of *The Great Flight*. Likewise, Chinese film historian Cheng Jihua lists *Battleship Potemkin* as the second Soviet film to be screened in China, after a small-scale screening by the CCP of the short newsreel film *The Funeral of Lenin (Pokhorony Lenina)* in 1924 (Cheng excludes here Soviet films that reached Harbin via railway workers on the Chinese Eastern Railway). But Cheng, who describes *The Great Flight* and its production background in detail, finds no evidence that the film ever reached Chinese audiences in 1926.⁶⁴⁴

Given this heightened interest in China as both material and market, it is perhaps no surprise that Tret'iakov was invited to join Goskino's First Factory, as deputy President of the Artistic Council, on his return from Beijing in the summer of 1925.⁶⁴⁵ Tret'iakov's knowledge of China was hot property: in fact, Goskino had contacted him while he was still in Beijing, asking him to investigate shooting possibilities for a film about Kublai Khan. Such a historical topic jarred, of course, with Tret'iakov's own aesthetic intentions: he spent his time in Beijing snapping with his Kodak and longing for a film camera, while catching up on events in Guangzhou by watching newsreels made by Pathé-Orient and Shanghai tobacco companies. Back in Moscow and working at Goskino, Tret'iakov found himself reading scripts that showed a clear ignorance of Chinese politics, culture and geography. Bamboo growing in Manchuria, kidnappers nipping on horseback from Hankou to Tibet via Mongolia, British emissaries issuing threatening speeches at Guomindang conferences: such

⁶⁴³ "Kino-diplomatiia-vlast'," *Kino* 15 (April 13, 1926).

⁶⁴⁴ Cheng et al, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi*, 144.

⁶⁴⁵ "Khronika," *Kino* 20 (August 4, 1925): 2.

inaccuracies, Tret'iakov insisted, would make these films useless as knowledge for a Soviet audience, but also laughable as images of China to be exported back to the Chinese themselves.⁶⁴⁶ The need for such films was clear to Tret'iakov from a double perspective:

The task to inform, acquaint and forge a friendship between the average Soviet activist and this young, fraternal revolutionary country was not within the power of journalists and belletrists alone. Only film footage, with its all-encompassing method of fixation, was capable of showing China as it truly is. And, finally, arising China itself needed a form of film production capable of satisfying the demands of revolutionary agitation. At this moment cinema is already penetrating into the remote corners of China, the Chinese love to watch films, and our job is to end the further influence of American apoliticism, sentimentalism and the propagation of "Efficiency" (individual initiative leading to enrichment). For at present Americans appear to be the only teachers of the Chinese in the realm of cinema.⁶⁴⁷

Soviet films about China that could reach China would teach the Chinese both about themselves, and about cinema; they would learn to understand themselves and to represent the world through a Soviet lens.

The *Dzhungo* expedition was oriented towards a reworking of raw Chinese material into a product that could be consumed domestically and also sold back to China—an economic relationship with markedly imperialist overtones. (Indeed, Rey Chow argues in her book *Primitive Passions* that post-colonial national identity in China and elsewhere was born out of a reaction to the visual power of such images and the cumulative imperialist world picture that they formed, though a moment of alienated self-seeing, such as that experienced by the writer Lu Xun in a lecture hall in Japan.)⁶⁴⁸ Such overtones were deflected by the

⁶⁴⁶ Tret'iakov, "Kitai na ekran," 16–17.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 16–18. "Задача информировать, ознакомить, подружить широкого советского активиста с молодой революционной братской страной была не под силу одним только газетчикам и беллетристам. Только кино-съемка, с ее всеохватывающим методом фиксации, была способна показать Китай таким, как он есть. И, наконец, поднимающийся Китай сам нуждался в кино-производстве, способном удовлетворить требованиям революционной агитации. Уже и сейчас кино проникает в захолустные уголки Китая, китайцы любят смотреть фильмы, и наше дело—прекратить дальнейшее влияние американского аполитизма, sentimentalizma и проповеди "Эффишенси" (личной инициативы, ведущей к обогащению). А ведь американцы пока что являются единственными учителями китайцев в области кино."

⁶⁴⁸ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 7–8.

revolutionary rhetoric of film as liberatory weapon. As Eisenstein described the project, the need to enlighten Soviet audiences as to the true situation in China was even a secondary motivation: “What was needed, first of all, was concrete agitational material as a real weapon of war for China itself. For the first time, perhaps, cinema must become just as fearsome a weapon [*orudie*] as a flamethrower.”⁶⁴⁹ Film is a weapon in this erupting war, and Eisenstein’s sentences reduce to bullet points as he describes his targets: “For us. About China. In parallel. For China.”⁶⁵⁰ This doubly directed logic of production sought to make Soviet film into truly internationalist cinema, representing the world to the world through the mediation of Soviet film technique and ideological perspective.

And yet the expedition did not happen. According to Eisenstein, budgets, screenplays, and directorial sketches were all prepared, but Goskino’s indecisiveness scuppered the project: “The myopia and spinelessness of Goskino with its indecisiveness overturned all the deadlines. The advantageous political situation in the Far East passed. We entered into a phase of restrictions on the export of currency.”⁶⁵¹ The change in political circumstance to which Eisenstein refers was the Anti-Fengtian War, which ended in defeat for the Soviet-backed National Army (Guominjun) of Feng Yuxiang at the hands of the combined forces of Wu Peifu and Zhang Zuolin. By mid-April 1926, Beijing and the northern government were under the control of Zhang Zuolin, a significant enemy to the USSR over the issues of the China Eastern Railway and Japan’s influence in Manchuria. Under this new political situation in the capital, “relations between Peking and Moscow became highly strained and were in

⁶⁴⁹ “General'naiia liniia (Beseda s S. M. Eizenshteinom),” *Kino* 32 (August 10, 1926), 1. “Был в первую очередь необходим конкретный агитационный материал, как реальное боевое оружие для самого Китая. Впервые, быть может, кино должно стать столь же страшным орудием, как огнемёты.”

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.* “Для нас. О Китае. Параллельно. Для Китая.”

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.* “Близорукость и бесхребетность Госкино своей нерешительностью перетянули все сроки. Прошла благоприятная политическая конъюнктура на дальнем Востоке. Мы вступили в полосу ограничений вывоза валюты.”

process of rapid deterioration”); Zhang even asked that ambassador Karakhan be withdrawn, though this demand was later retracted.⁶⁵² Tret’iakov’s original report had argued that the present moment was auspicious precisely because the Soviet-friendly National Armies of Feng and the GMD controlled both Beijing and Guangzhou.⁶⁵³ Subsequently, the anonymous Goskino report from 1926 acknowledges that the Guominjun’s defeat might seem to suggest that the expedition should be postponed or abandoned. This argument is rejected, however, in favour of even greater urgency. The only thing the expedition is waiting for, in this second report, is the opening of a line of credit at the Beijing branch of Dal’bank. As Eisenstein suggests, it seems that the failure to acquire a working credit line, linked very probably to the worsening in diplomatic relations, sank the China film expedition.

Despite the failure of the expedition to materialize, Tret’iakov’s extant scenarios for *Dzhungo* remain an interesting document in the ongoing evolution of strategies to represent China.⁶⁵⁴ For all that his written sketches based their validity on real, eyewitnessed experience, and the docu-drama *Roar, China!* claimed to reproduce an actual historical event on the stage, Tret’iakov has not quite abandoned literary invention. Instead, *Dzhungo* interweaves invented typical heroes with actual historical figures to re-imagine the major events of 1923–5, many of which Tret’iakov witnessed while in Beijing. This is recent

⁶⁵² Henry Wei, *China and Soviet Russia* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1956), 60.

⁶⁵³ RGALI f. 1923, op. 1, ed. khr. 133, l. 3.

⁶⁵⁴ Librettos for all three parts of *Dzhungo* are preserved in Tret’iakov’s archive (RGALI f. 2886, op. 2, ed. khr. 8) as well as Eisenstein’s (RGALI f. 1923 op. 1. ed. khr. 131). The Eisenstein copies, which include librettos for *Zhel’taia opasnost’*, *Golubaia ekspress* and *Kitai rychnit*, plus an alternative, longer libretto for *Zhel’taia opasnost’*, have recently been published in Sergei Mikhailovich Tret’iakov, *Kinematograficheskoe nasledie: stat’i, ocherki, stenogrammy vystuplenii, doklady*, ed. I. I. Ratiani (Sankt-Peterburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2010), 212–220. The copies in Tret’iakov’s archive, however, contain a second, additional version of the third film, here renamed *Zhemchuzhnaia reka*, which is not included in the 2010 publication. Since *Zhel’taia opasnost’* and *Zhemchuzhnaia reka* (with that title) are the two films which are budgeted into the later Goskino report on the expedition, it is possible that these additional versions are second drafts, perhaps closer to what might actually have been shot. Eisenstein also refers to the third film as *Zhemchuzhnaia reka* in his discussion of the expedition. See *Kino* 32 (1926).

Chinese history through the Soviet lens: the soldier beaten for walking on Beijing's city wall; the deposed Emperor Pu Yi evicted from his palace by Feng Yuxiang; the kidnapping of European train passengers by bandits at Lincheng; and the anti-foreigner strikes that erupted in Guangzhou after the May 30 Massacre. The approach to history is, in fact, not far from that displayed in the last Tret'iakov-Eisenstein-Tisse collaboration, *Battleship Potemkin*. At this point Tret'iakov, determined to demonstrate causality above all, and to provide a comprehensive panorama of the forces at work in China that are driving social change, cannot do without the fictional *siuzhet*. But the need to claim authenticity requires that these fictional, typical characters be embedded in real historical events, and that filming take place in actual China with real Chinese actors.⁶⁵⁵ Indeed, this claim to present the real China, as never seen before, is reflected in the choice of title, *Dzhungo*. Using the same device as he would for the publication of his collected sketches in 1927, but opting for a different spelling, Tret'iakov Cyrillicizes the Chinese name for China, *zhōngguó*, a word largely unknown to his potential audience. The choice of title expresses the message of the film in microcosm: you think you know about China, but you do not even know its real name.

Neatly illustrating this pull from factual material towards fictional *siuzhet* and fictional heroes, the first film, *The Yellow Peril* (*Zheltaia opasnost'*), serves as a kind of fictional sequel to the supposedly factual events of *Roar, China!* The film opens after the events of the play, and continues the story of Chi, renamed Li, the boatman whose passive resistance led to the death of the American businessman Hawley (already a departure from the reported facts of the incident — see Chapter Four). In the play, Chi/Li was forced by poverty to sell his daughter; the film follows their narrative arcs through separation to tragic, belated reunification. Li becomes a bandit, then is conscripted into a general's army, where

⁶⁵⁵ A section from the plan on the composition of the expedition insists: “The emphasis must be on local resources, in terms of both acting and directing.” (упор должен быть на местные силы, как актерские, так и режиссерские.) Muzei kino, f. 57, op. 2, ed. khr. 13, l. 3.

he leads a riot over pay. Moving back from the typical to the historical, Li next metamorphoses into a Chinese soldier who was reportedly arrested and beaten for walking on the Beijing city walls, and sought to avenge himself by beating a foreigner for every blow he had himself received.⁶⁵⁶ His stints in prison before and after this act of elemental anger introduce Li to a student, who begins his political enlightenment.

Parallel to this typical narrative of developing proletarianization and self-consciousness, Li's daughter, Tsaian' Tsan Lin', is sold into prostitution and embarks on a humiliating but successful career as a courtesan. In a convoluted and unlikely climax to the film, the Western powers and their Chinese government stooges seek to disrupt the recently concluded Sino-Soviet Treaty by gifting Tsaian' to the President as a concubine. The President, plotting to restore the monarchy, passes Tsaian' on to the deposed Emperor, Pu Yi, to join his palace harem. The plan to restore the Emperor to his throne is interrupted by the National Army of Feng Yuxiang (characterized here as a "fat general" resembling a "Chinese Taras Bulba"), which marches into Beijing with Li in its ranks. Li enters the palace, but the Emperor has fled, leaving behind orders to slaughter his harem. His dying daughter tells Li where to find the emperor. At the film's close, Li foils a Japanese plot to undermine Feng.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁶ This event was reported in April 1924, and subsequently became the centrepiece in Trotsky's May Day speech on internationalist solidarity: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/04/mayday.htm>, accessed 01.23.14. John Fitzgerald reports that the Chinese soldier was named Li, which may explain Tret'iakov decision to change his hero's name. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 143–4.

⁶⁵⁷ I follow here chiefly the second, longer summary of *Zheltaia opasnost'*, which I take to be later and thus closer to the final vision of the unmade film (see note 73, above). The earlier version contains some interesting variations: notably, the captain of the Cockchafer, a historical personage carried over from *Rychi, Kitai!*, is found hiding in the Emperor's palace at the end, a foreign agent in league with the President. Once more, fact is stretched into melodrama in the interests of displaying a full picture of the forces at work in China. The film also ends with the image of the hammer and sickle flying in the dawn gloom above the Soviet embassy. In its combination of the biographical road to consciousness with the inevitability of violent sacrifice, *Zheltaia opasnost'* fits perfectly with the Chinese-themed fiction for younger readers, constructed on the socialist-realist master plot as described by Katerina Clark, that was published on a large scale in the late 1920s. By that time, Tret'iakov was promoting *Den Shi-khua* as a factual account superior to these fictionalized semi-historical sacrifice narratives. (See Chapter Five.)

Already we can sense in this synopsis the urge to overload, to cram in every aspect of contemporary China that Tret'iakov considers essential for understanding. The next film script is, if anything, even more convoluted in its admixture of historical fact and revolutionary message. *The Blue Express (Goluboi ekspress)* takes its name from a luxury train running on the Tianjin—Pukou railway, which was held up in the most famous Chinese bandit attack of the 1920s. On May 6, 1923, this train was attacked and derailed by some 1,000 bandits at Lincheng, in Shandong. Around 300 passengers, including thirty or so Westerners, were captured and taken into the mountains. Two months of negotiations secured the release of the captives for a considerable sum of money and other concessions to the bandits.⁶⁵⁸

Tret'iakov's libretto seeks to show banditry, a rampant phenomenon in Republican China, as a socio-economic problem with a potentially revolutionary resolution. The libretto begins with the Blue Express travelling through provinces devastated by flooding. This destruction of the rural economy forces peasants into the town, where we see them begging on the streets and exploited by foreign capital. This set of circumstances drives many into bandit gangs. The hero of the piece is Sun'-Mei-Yao (Sun Meiyao in pinyin), the historical leader of the Lincheng bandits. Continuing the overlaying of the historical and the typical, however, in Tret'iakov's version he is partnered by a clearly invented character called simply Tu-Fei (tufei 土匪 means "bandit" in Chinese). While Sun's path to banditry is directed by economic necessity—he is one of seven brothers, but the family only owns enough land to support one—Tu-Fei is more of a professional villain, with agents in town and bank accounts. Thus banditry as a social phenomenon is split between genuine social protest and self-interested pursuit of profit, to be neatly aligned with socialism and capitalism respectively. A more explicitly proletarian element is introduced in the fictional figure of U

⁶⁵⁸ Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 13.

(Wu), the leader of a group of workers driven from American-owned mines by a violent response to protests. Wu supplants and eventually liquidates Tu-Fei.

Simultaneously, the niece of the mines' billionaire American owner—surely a stand-in for John D. Rockefeller's sister-in-law, Lucy Aldrich, who was captured in the historical Lincheng Incident—arrives in Shanghai and boards the Blue Express.⁶⁵⁹ A representative of false American philanthropy, a shot at the station has her throwing coins for amusement to Chinese children, who can only reach them by crawling through barbed wire. The train is captured; among the passengers, Wu recognizes his former commander from the Soviet Red Guard. This prompts a speech from Wu about his time fighting in the “great state of the poor in the north,” and the Russian becomes a kind of political advisor. Various other stock characters flit through the libretto, including a treacherous fortune-teller, a giant Annamite bodyguard, and a tough old female bandit leader. In the finale, Sun is double-crossed and killed. Wu seeks instant revenge, but the Russian advises him to direct his energies towards organization and the revolution.

Tret'iakov had discussed writing a play based on the Lincheng Incident with Eisenstein as early as 1923, and took the idea with him to Beijing. The play was superseded by subsequent historical events, which inspired instead the composition of *Roar, China!*⁶⁶⁰ The idea was revived for the Eisenstein-Tret'iakov film trilogy, yet abandoned, it seems, even before the project as a whole was cancelled. However, the broad concept was later taken up again and filmed in 1929 under the direction of Ili'a Trauberg, Eisenstein's assistant during the filming of *October (Oktiabr'*, 1927), with a screenplay by Leonid Ierokhonov.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 141.

⁶⁶⁰ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo*, 2nd ed. (1930), 342–347.

⁶⁶¹ Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 272. *The Blue Express* was made by Sovkino's Leningrad factory. It seems feasible that Trauberg came to the story through his work with Eisenstein, whom he seems to have regarded as a mentor. In a letter to Eisenstein from 1929, Trauberg declares: “When I recall all these past days and

Trauberg and Ierokhonov's film departs even further from the historical base on which Tret'iakov built his agit-plot, making no explicit reference to historical figures or place names: a subtitle simply dubs the film "an episode from the revolutionary movement in the East." Instead, the characters are entirely typical, representatives of a basic class antagonism between Europeans and Chinese: a set of such antagonisms is played out and reduced to "just a bourgeois" (просто буржуа) and "just beggars and peasants" (просто нищие и рабочие). The Chinese heroes, played as Tret'iakov intended by Chinese actors (except it seems for the "coolie," who is played by one Vardul'), lament the failure of their crops and the sale of a sister to the textile factory. The train, a well-worn dynamic allegory for dramatic social change on the path into modernity, here provides a space in which the social contradictions of China are brought to the point of explosion. Class is reduced to train class. The element of sexual violence is reversed: in Tret'iakov's libretto, the American billionaire's niece fears she is to be raped, but is not, while in Trauberg's film the uprising is provoked by the attempted rape of a Chinese woman by drunk European soldiers. Trauberg effectively builds tension and excitement towards a heady climax, as the speeding train narrowly avoids a crash and zooms off in an unknown direction, covered in cheering, armed men. But the specificity of

events, and take stock, I understand impartially that I am indebted to you alone for practically everything I currently have." (Когда я вспоминаю о всех прошлых днях и событиях подвожу итог — я беспристрастно понимаю, что почти всем, что я сейчас имею я обязан только Вам.) Later in the same letter, Trauberg teasingly berates Eisenstein for not answering his messages, referencing the subject of *The Blue Express*: "I'm personally thinking about taking a risk, and if you forget me for good, I'll throw myself under the 'Nanjing-Suzhou Express.'" (Я лично думаю рисковать и если Вы меня окончательно забудете, броситься под 'Экспресс Нанкин-Сужоу'.) RGALI f. 1923, op. 1, ed. khr. 2151, l. 10–11.

Screenwriter Leonid Ierokhonov, for his part, seems to have had some first-hand experience of China. In 1927 he had published a volume of stories and sketches, *A Mistake in a Beijing Prison* (*Oshibka pekinskoii tiurny*), cataloguing such typical moments from contemporary China as the rape of a female activist in prison, the beheading of an illiterate rickshaw driver for examining political literature, and a miserable visit in authorial first person to a Chinese theatre. Ierokhonov's book ends with a truth claim based on presence and eye-witnessing: "In publishing the present collection, I have tried to give only a truthful representation of what I myself saw and lived through." (Выпускаю настоящий сборник, я старался дать только правдивое изображение того, что видел и пережил сам.) Leonid Ierokhonov, *Oshibka pekinskoii tiurny*, 127.

the Chinese situation and its socio-economic motive forces is lost in this generic, elemental image of uprising and energy.

Indeed, Lev Shatov's review in *Kino* complained that the film-makers had gotten carried away with the "abstract cinematographic possibilities" of movement. Instead of functioning in the service of social allegory, movement had become the film's "self-sufficient goal": "Movement—in shots, in tempo, in montage—movement of the express train, of the people in the express train, and so on, supplants the political essence and conceptual foundation of the picture: the revolutionary struggle, which alone could give meaning to this symbol."⁶⁶² Speaking in what Katerina Clark has identified as the essential binary of socialist realism's chronological model of education, Shatov here accuses *The Blue Express* of remaining at the level of *stikhiinost'*, elemental anger, but lacking the sober assessment of underlying socio-political forces necessary to progress towards *soznatel'nost'* (consciousness). By comparison with Tret'iakov's stated ambitions for *Dzhungo*, the specificity of China and the complexity of the historical situation are here reduced to a fast-paced yet abstractly symbolic tale about revolutionary energy.

Tret'iakov's third film libretto, by contrast, is over-loaded with specificity. *The Pearl River* (*Zhemchuzhnaia reka*, entitled *China Roars* [*Kitai rychit*] in a different, possibly earlier version) sets out to capture the dramatic political events of 1925 in Guangzhou, which was gripped by strikes in the wake of the May 30 shootings in Shanghai. The strikes began in June 1925 in the British colony of Hong Kong, at the mouth of the Pearl River, before spreading to the foreign concession on the island of Shamian. On June 23 British and French soldiers opened fire on a demonstration heading from Guangzhou towards the island, killing

⁶⁶² Lev Shatov, "Oдна oshibka dvukh fil'm: 'Flag natsii' i 'Goluboi ekspress'," *Kino* 52 (December 31, 1929): 2. "Движение—в кадрах, в темпах, в монтаже,—движение экспресса, людей в экспрессе и пр. подменяет политическую суть, смысловую основу картины — революционную борьбу, которая единственно могла этот символ осмыслить."

fifty-two people. This massacre led to a complete embargo on trade with Hong Kong and a boycott of British firms across south China.⁶⁶³ These events, which seemed to represent a serious and sustained protest against foreign power in China (the strikes went on for some sixteen months), appeared fleetingly and without clear explanation in the final part of *The Great Flight*. Tret'iakov set out to explain them by exploring the class dynamic within Chinese society, in particular the ambiguous role of the Chinese bourgeoisie. It is, of course, unreasonable to judge Tret'iakov's rough sketch as if it were a finished artistic whole; nonetheless, the jumbled, overloaded quality of the libretto can tell us something about his ambitions, his drive to include all of "China" in these three films.

The plot was to be organized around two juxtaposed families: the family of a Canton comprador, and a poor boat-dwelling family on the Pearl River, the daughter of which works in the comprador's textile (silk-spinning) factory. A strike at the factory is led by the comprador's radicalized student son. The striking women are estranged from the rural community that increasingly depends on them, the comprador conspiring with the village elder to punish his disobedient workers by excluding them from a temple festival. Compounding his evils, the elder attempts to buy the boat family's daughter as a wife: she is rescued by a band of women formed to fight enforced marriages. Meanwhile, a complex series of negotiations occur between the comprador, his foreign investors, and the Guomindang. The strike is lifted, the owners concede.

Events accelerate. The poor family's father, driven from the land, is recruited into the "paper tigers," Canton's Merchant Corps, based in the western district of Xiguan (Sai-guan in Cantonese). Their instructors are White Russian soldiers. The Tigers seize a boatload of

⁶⁶³ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 247–9. Perhaps oddly, this paradigmatic moment of imperialist violence, with its echoes of the famous Odessa Steps massacre from Eisenstein and Tret'iakov's last collaboration, does not feature in the libretto.

weapons and attack a peaceful demonstration.⁶⁶⁴ Tempers rise. Workers find themselves locked out of factories. The Chinese servants in the European compound of Shamin stage a mass walkout, offended by new terms of registration. At a demonstration, a student cuts off a finger and writes in blood.

A showdown between the Tigers and the GMD seems imminent. British and Soviet cruisers arrive in the delta. Anticipating the opening act of *The Red Poppy*, Tret'iakov stages a scene in a bar where Soviet and British sailors are fraternizing peacefully, until a fight flares up between a British sailor and the comprador's son. The Soviet sailors intervene, victoriously, on the side of the Chinese. This confrontation seems to be about to be played out on the city scale: the comprador's daughter hears that the British are on the point of opening fire on the GMD. At the last minute, a telegram arrives from the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, ordering that neutrality be maintained. Meanwhile, the student blows up the gates of Saiguan, killing the White Russian instructor. The Tigers are defeated, the workers' and servants' demands are met. The daughter rejects her comprador father, telling him his son is no longer his son. The film ends with a shot of the hammer and sickle alongside the five-pointed star of the Guomindang.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶⁴ This seems to refer to a sequence of events in mid-1924, when Guangzhou's merchants went on strike in response to the GMD government's confiscation of a shipment of arms intended for their militia (the "paper tigers"). The militia attempted to seize the confiscated shipment, and later opened fire on a demonstration. The resolution of the incident demonstrated the rising efficacy of the first graduates of the GMD's Whampoa academy, trained by Comintern advisers, who routed the merchant militia and razed their section of the city. (Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 321; Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 287.) Tret'iakov's libretto does not mention Whampoa, while the presence of Comintern advisers in Guangzhou is merely hinted at (in *China Roars*) through a conversation between the "President" of the GMD and his "Russian friend": "The President at his Russian friend's house. 'The gun barrels are directed at us. Is it worth risking the city' How would you proceed?' 'The gun barrels of the whole world were directed at us, but we risked it and won.'" (Председатель у своего русского друга. — «Дула наведены на нас, стоит ли рисковать городом. Как бы поступили вы?» — «Дула всего мира были наведены на нас, но мы рискнули и победили.») Tret'iakov, *Kinematograficheskoe nasledie*, 217.

⁶⁶⁵ This is the final image in *China Roars*, the more detailed of the two surviving librettos. Tret'iakov, *Kinematograficheskoe nasledie*, 218.

How did Tret'iakov expect his audience to understand all this? Surely they could only have done so if they really were following the newspaper reports on China with as much enthusiasm as people like Tret'iakov constantly claimed they were. And yet at the same time, the compelling argument for making these films about China was that said newspaper articles, with their strange names and distant details, made no sense without cinematic illumination. Tret'iakov's project thus ran into a circular problem. He wanted to show China "as it really is," in its specificity. Yet without some degree of simplification, how could audiences understand, on the basis of what was widely acknowledged to be their limited knowledge of China? How can lack of knowledge be converted into knowledge when historical knowledge is required to make sense of a quasi-historical storyline? How would these films have avoided being simply confusing? We cannot know. But the complex netting of these librettos allows us to see the extent of Tret'iakov's grandiose desire to represent all of contemporary China, to conclusively present *zhōngguó* on screen in its true guise. Perhaps these grandiose ambitions, as much as diplomatic-financial entanglements, contributed to the project's downfall?

A year after the Tret'iakov-Eisenstein expedition foundered, however, another Soviet film crew did make it into China. Their film, *Shanghai Document* (*Shankhaiskii dokument*), captured Shanghai in the pivotal year of 1927. Returning to documentary, *Shanghai Document* jettisons the invented script and the totalizing, typifying ambitions of *Dzhungo*. At the same time, the spatial contiguity of *The Great Flight* is replaced with a spatial concentration that allows rhetorical argument to emerge. Instead of representing "China," Iakov Bliokh and V. L. Stepanov's film seeks to present Shanghai as both a single geographical space and as a point wherein the class contradictions of a global struggle are concentrated and exemplified. The chronological complexity of actual historical events and

the spatial multiplicity of a journey through Eurasian space are hereby reduced to a clear and comprehensible argument about social structure.

III: *Shanghai Document*: China as microcosm

After the failure of the *Dzhungo* project, Tret'iakov notes that widespread interest in filming China flared up once more in the winter of 1926, in reaction to the early successes of the GMD's Northern Expedition.⁶⁶⁶ Sensing the appetite for films about China, but aware of the complexities of sending expeditions there, some companies began to consider filming Chinese-themed projects using “internal resources”: domestic locations and studios. This approach produced such films as *The Blue Express* (see above) and *400 Million (Dzhou-de-shen)*, a 1928 joint production between Vostok-kino and the Leningrad company Belgoskino set during the Canton uprising of December 1927.⁶⁶⁷ Exteriors were shot on the banks of the Moika canal and in Leningrad's parks, with Chinese members of the Institute of Oriental Languages reportedly playing the Chinese roles.⁶⁶⁸

Even after the catastrophe of 1927, China remained a convenient shorthand for internationalism and the obligations of global revolution. *Five Minutes (Piat' minut, 1928)* presents the workers of the world ceasing their labor for five minutes on January 21, 1924, after hearing of Lenin's death. The film cuts between mourning Moscow and China, where a Chinese chauffeur's five minutes of tributary inactivity make his passenger, an English

⁶⁶⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov, “Kitai na ekran,” 18.

⁶⁶⁷ *400 millionov (Dzhou-de-shen)*, written and directed by V. R. Gardin, cinematography by D. Shliugleit and K. Naumov-Strazh. Premiered April 16, 1929. A.V. Macheret, ed., *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my: annotirovannyi katalog*, vol. 1, *Nemye fil'my, 1918–1935* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1961), 303.

⁶⁶⁸ *Kino 26* (June 26, 1928): 1. The film told the story of Communist leader Dzhou De-shen and his Russian wife Elena Nikolaevna, who is captured during the suppression of the Canton uprising. Recognizing in one of her captors the White Russian officer who fathered her son through rape, Elena refuses to betray the revolutionaries, and her son is killed. The film does not survive, but contemporary reviews were not kind. One reviewer lambasted the film for moulding such historically significant material into “a shining example of the most low-grade trash.” (*Rabochii*, Minsk, 8 June 1929. “яркий образ самой низкопробной халтуры[.]”)

banker, late for a crucial meeting with some villainous Chinese generals. The global network of worker solidarity emanating from Moscow disrupts the oppressive plans of imperialist capital, and China remains the most recognizable metonymic location for this universal struggle, even if that location is simulated.⁶⁶⁹

The idea of the film expedition was not abandoned, however: Tret'iakov reports that a whole range of film expeditions, both documentary and staged, were slated for dispatch to China in 1926–7.⁶⁷⁰ Only one, however, seems to have been successfully carried out. In July 1927 a two-man Sovkino team consisting of director Yakov Bliokh, who had worked as a producer on *Battleship Potemkin*, and cameraman V. L. Stepanov, set off for China. Like Tret'iakov and Eisenstein, they had planned a trilogy of films that would portray the Chinese revolution within three contexts: the city (originally to be Beijing), the countryside, and the army. The political turmoil of China in 1927, however, restricted their activity to Shanghai. Even there, Bliokh and Stepanov could only get permission to film with the assistance of Western film companies, and only if they concealed the true intentions of their work.⁶⁷¹ Surviving the loss of five suitcases of negatives at the border, the film they produced was released on May 1, 1928 as *Shanghai Document*.⁶⁷² Film on China had reverted to the documentary, but in a style very different from *The Great Flight*.

As detailed analyses of the film by Nicholas Cull and Arthur Waldron and, more recently, Xinyu Dong demonstrate, *Shanghai Document* is a remarkable exercise in visual

⁶⁶⁹ *Piat' minut*, produced by Goskinprom of Georgia, 1928, written and directed by A. Balagin and G. Zelondzhev-Shipov, cinematography by N. Anoshchenko and G. Kabalov. (Macheret, ed., *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my*, 1:289.) The titles from the film were printed in *Kino* 2 (1929): 2.

⁶⁷⁰ Tret'iakov, "Kitai na ekran," 18.

⁶⁷¹ L. Vaks, "'Shankhaiskii dokument' (prosmotr v ODSK)," *Kino* 17 (April 24, 1928): 5. See also G. Prozhiko, D. Firsova, eds., *Letopistsy nashego vremeni: rezhissery dokumental'nogo kino* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), 103–4.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 104–5.

parallelism and juxtaposition.⁶⁷³ The life of this city is presented as the contradictory yet inter-related experiences of two classes: the exploiting bourgeoisie (both foreign and Chinese), and the exploited Chinese workers. An opening sequence in the docks establishes the juxtapositional structure that dominates the film. A dizzying array of shots shows us, from every angle, Chinese workers loading and unloading cargo ships. These constantly shifting, multiple lines of movement recall such contemporary celebrations of vigorous Soviet labor as Vertov's *The Eleventh (Odinnadtsatyi)*—except here our attention is drawn to the workers' poverty, their ragged clothes, their meager wages.⁶⁷⁴ Bliokh and Shneiderov build this impression of frenetic Chinese labor, until a shot of a Chinese man intently pulling crane levers is intercut with a shot of two steering wheels standing idle, and a European officer in gleaming white uniform walks towards the camera and calmly smokes his pipe as he surveys the port. "Not everyone in the port passes the time in the same manner," the titles announce, and the busy world of work lines, cranes and cargo gives way to scenes of gentle leisure on European yachts.⁶⁷⁵ An old woman and her family row a junk through the port; on a different vessel, a portly European man reclines in a wicker chair on deck, with a cigarette in his mouth.

This sequence initiates a juxtaposition of Chinese labor and European leisure that runs through the film. As the Chinese pull cables and ropes for work, the Europeans manipulate the same shapes for relaxation, on their yachts. The same point is repeated in several striking

⁶⁷³ Nicholas Cull and Arthur Waldron, "*Shanghai Document — Shangkhaiskii dokument (1928): Soviet Film Propaganda and the Shanghai Uprising of 1927*," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 3 (1996): 309–331; Xinyu Dong, "From *Shanghai Document* to *Shanghai 24 Hours*: the City, the 'Sovkino Expedition,' and Montage Complex," in *The Collegium Papers VI*, edited by Luca Giuliani and David Robinson (Sacile: Le Gironate Del Cinema Muto, 2005), 80–90. See also Xinyu Dong, "China at Play: Republican Film Comedies and Chinese Cinematic Modernity," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2009, 168–179.

⁶⁷⁴ On the representation of energy in Vertov's *Odinnadtsatyi*, see John MacKay, "Film Energy: Process and Metanarrative in Dziga Vertov's 'The Eleventh Year' (1928)," *October* 121 (Summer 2007): 41–78.

⁶⁷⁵ "He все в порту проводят время одинаково."

later sequences. The rushing feet of a rickshaw driver, the “human horse,” are intercut with shots of horses racing in the hippodrome for the pleasure of the assembled European and Chinese bourgeoisie. In perhaps the film’s most famous sequence, a group of boys pull a cart along the street, sweating in the sun. When they pause to drink water from a trough, one boy peeks through a fence, and the film cuts to a scene of Europeans drinking cocktails beside a private pool. Cross-cutting back and forth between the two groups, the film’s montage juxtaposes dancing European legs to the toiling limbs of the boys as they drag their load; the cart’s spinning wheel is intercut with the spinning record of the poolside gramophone.

The cumulative effect of this repetitive parallelism is to suggest a causality that never needs to be expressed in words: the labor of the Chinese workers, the surplus value they produce, enables the leisure of the Europeans and the Chinese bourgeoisie. Staking a claim for film as the superior medium for international aesthetics, with its desired combination of analytical understanding and sympathetic connection, *Shanghai Document* deploys parallel montage and cross-cutting to express visually, as a “documentary” reality, the Marxist understanding of labor exploitation under capitalism and the human suffering it causes. (Praising the film on its release in 1928, Emil’ian Iaroslavskii reportedly called it “Volume One of Marx’s *Capital* on film.”)⁶⁷⁶ This constant juxtaposition of labor and leisure allows the film cumulatively to imply a second causality: the inevitability that these conditions of production will lead to revolution.

Soviet and Western film historians largely concur that *Shanghai Document* was an improvement over *The Great Flight* precisely because it used images to make a consistent rhetorical argument about social conditions. Responding to Tret’iakov’s demands in his review of *The Great Flight*, *Shanghai Document* replaced the purely spatial sequentiality of the expedition film with an analytical accumulation of contrasts that produced a sense of

⁶⁷⁶ Quoted by the director Donskoi in “‘Shankhaiskii dokument’ (prosmotr v ODSK),” *Kino* 17 (1928): 5.

causality. Drobashenko acclaims Bliokh's film for replacing "the primitive registration of real-life facts, which characterized many chronicle films from the mid-20s," with "associative thinking in images [...] If in V. Shneiderov's film the revolutionary situation was, essentially, merely proclaimed, in *Shanghai Document* not only is the nature of the social conflict analyzed, but the direction of its development is also traced."⁶⁷⁷ Cull and Waldron describe in detail how *Shanghai Document* applies the dialectical theory of montage to depict "a dialectical clash of classes: the Shanghai proletariat and the European and Chinese bourgeoisie. [...] They clash in the juxtaposition of shots; in the juxtaposition of sequences; in the rapid montage sequence and even within a single frame, all preparing the way for the consummation of that clash in Bliokh's account of the rising and the promise of the revolution yet to come."⁶⁷⁸ Writing in the Pordenone Silent Film Festival catalogue from 2004, Thomas Tode likewise finds the film's significance in its "'discovery' of parallel montage as a political tool" and a successful "break with the postcard idyll previously conventional in travelogues."⁶⁷⁹

Building on these analyses of the film's rhetorical structure, I want to focus on the comparison with *The Great Flight* in order to illustrate the claims for the analytical power of the Soviet perspective on China that *Shanghai Document* puts forward. What does the transformation in film structure outlined above mean for the positioning of China within the Soviet geospatial imagination—the "cognitive map" of global totality postulated by Jameson as necessary to any socio-political project, and invoked by Widdis as a primarily cinematic

⁶⁷⁷ Drobashenko, *Istoriia*, 24. "На смену примитивной регистрации жизненного факта, характерной для многих хроникальных лент середины 20-х гг., пришло ассоциативное образное мышление [...] Если в фильме В. Шнейдерова революционная ситуация была, по существу, только декларирована, то в картине 'Шанхайский документ' анализируется не только природа социального конфликта, но и прослеживается направление его развития."

⁶⁷⁸ Cull and Waldron, "*Shanghai Document*," 313.

⁶⁷⁹ Thomas Tode, "Shankhaiskii dokument," *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* 23 (2004): 65.

product?⁶⁸⁰ *Shanghai Document* responds to the imperative to imagine revolutionary China through a conception, and perception, of space that is fundamentally different to the notions of heroic trans-continental connectivity found in *The Great Flight*. While *The Great Flight* links Russia and China across a natural space conceived as an obstacle to be crossed by a combination of technology and daring, *Shanghai Document* focuses on Shanghai as an urban space, a complex totality that contains multiple social spaces inhabited by conflicting groups. As such, it bears consideration within the 1920s film genre of the city symphony, alongside such exemplary city films as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927), Mikhail Kaufman's *Moscow* (*Moskva*, 1927), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929).

The specific dynamics of city representation in *Shanghai Document*, however, distinguish it from these other city symphonies as a specifically internationalist film about class struggle and the unique power of the Soviet perspective on the global situation. Moving between these social groups and their spaces with the aid of montage, the Sovkino camera becomes the only actor in the film that can traverse the entire space of the city, that sees every facet of the revolutionary situation contained therein. The specific revolutionary energies the film discovers in this city come to encompass "China" as a whole, and, as the film's ending tends necessarily towards abstraction, to sketch the contours of a global situation. In truth, *The Great Flight* and *Shanghai Document* both celebrate the unique perceptual power of the Soviet point of view, but in different ways. *The Great Flight* enables privileged vision through a heroic act of spatial connectivity; *Shanghai Document* uncovers the City as a microcosm of global forces through the cognitive power of Marxist-Leninist class analysis, enacted through the tool of montage.

⁶⁸⁰ Widdis, *Visions*, 2, 197n1.

To understand this difference, let us begin by considering how the two films establish their claims to represent an objectively true reality.⁶⁸¹ The Soviet film press in the 1920s was filled with debates over the correct way to represent contemporary reality, often centred around the relative merits of “played” (игровая) or fiction film versus “unplayed” (неигровая) or documentary film.⁶⁸² For example, in 1927 *Novyi Lef* printed the record of a roundtable debate on cinema, at which Tret’iakov appeared once more as a prominent voice on the issue of representing contemporary reality in film. Tret’iakov sought to replace the binary opposition of “played” and “unplayed” with a tripartite system based on increasing degrees of “falsification” (фальсификация), produced through various forms of “subjective distortion” (произвольное искажение).⁶⁸³ Such subjective or voluntary distortions could include choice of material, choice of vantage point and lighting, and choices made during the editing process. These subjective distortions, in other words, were available to documentary film as well as fiction, even if the former claimed to base itself upon “authentic” material.

Tret’iakov’s first category is material captured “in flagrante” (флагрантный материал), seized “at the scene of the crime.”⁶⁸⁴ This is Vertov’s “life caught unawares” (жизнь врасплох). Even within “in flagrante” material, however, there are degrees of distortion. For example, if the presence and action of the camera is noticed, a human subject may respond in a distorted manner: “he presents himself as if to an icon, and not how you

⁶⁸¹ Much has been written on how documentary films construct their rhetorical claims to objectivity. I have found particularly helpful the work of Bill Nichols: see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); idem, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

⁶⁸² I use *игровая* and *неигровая* here to reflect the fact that, in the 1920s, the noun “film,” *фильма*, was feminine in Russian.

⁶⁸³ “LEF I KINO: Stenogramma soveshchaniia,” *Novyi Lef* 11–12 (1927): 52.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.* “Флагрантный - схваченный на месте преступления.”

would wish to see him.”⁶⁸⁵ We have already seen this in *The Great Flight*, where the film’s subjects stare at, point at, and freeze before the camera.

The second category of material Tret’iakov defines as “staged” (инсценированный), but not yet fully “played” (игровой). This consists of staging an event, but having the event performed by the type of person who would have performed it in real life. Tret’iakov’s example is asking a wood-cutter to chop wood for the camera. This produces a much lower level of distortion, for Tret’iakov, than getting an actor to perform the same task, since the camera captures habits and automatized movements that are identical when enacted in real life. This approach is exemplified for Tret’iakov in Eisenstein’s use of non-actors performing staged versions of historical events. This practice was called “typeage” (типаж): defended by Eisenstein as capable of delivering a greater emotional impact than “in flagrante” material, it was aggressively criticized by Vertov, who considered it a devious falsification of historical reality.⁶⁸⁶ Typeage, presumably, was the form of authenticity that would have been used in *Dzhungo*, which was to be shot on location in China, with Chinese actors recreating historical events for the camera.⁶⁸⁷

Where does *Shanghai Document* fit in Tret’iakov’s taxonomy of authenticity? The film gives the appearance of showing material captured “in flagrante”: in contrast to *The*

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 53. “Он искажается, он преподносит себя как икону, а не так, как вы хотели бы его видеть.”

⁶⁸⁶ Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918–1935* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 25, 81. The border between documentary and fiction film was notably permeable in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Graham Roberts cites as a prominent example *Salt for Svanetia* (*Sol’ Svanetii*), scripted by Tret’iakov and directed by Mikhail Kalatozov: a highly stylized depiction of Svan life in the Caucasus mountains compiled largely from staged material. See Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet! History and Non-fiction Film in the USSR* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 114–115. Indeed, Tret’iakov mentions filming the Svan during the *Novyi Lef* discussion, suggesting that it is precisely this film that he has in mind. (“LEF I KINO,” 53.) Not everyone accepted the film’s free mixing of staged and unstaged material: according to Jay Leyda, a group of “twenty-five leading citizens of Svanetia” reportedly protested against the film for its unrealistic representations of their lives. (Leyda, *Kino*, 293.)

⁶⁸⁷ Tret’iakov’s position was critiqued by V. Pertsov, who wrote the intertitles for *Shanghai Document*. Pertsov insisted that an actor could be trained to do the same job as an actual worker, thus muddying the question of authenticity. “LEF i kino,” 60.

Great Flight, the camera and the act of filming appear largely to be invisible, unnoticed by their documentary subjects. There are moments when subjects do seem to notice or acknowledge that they are being filmed: a coolie in the early docks sequence looks into the camera as he passes, and representatives of the Chinese bourgeoisie glance at the recording apparatus as they somewhat awkwardly perform their “scenes of leisure” before it. Nonetheless, the camera’s presence is not openly proclaimed as it was in *The Great Flight*, which goes so far as to include shots of the shooting process: at the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, we see a group portrait shot of Karakhan and the embassy staff, and then cut to a wider shot which includes a cameraman (apparently Blium, to judge by his pipe) capturing the group image.

At an early screening of *Shanghai Document*, Bliokh echoed Tret’iakov’s use of the language of crime, describing how he and Stepanov were obliged to “steal” footage of factories and foreigners by claiming that their filmic intentions were other than they really were.⁶⁸⁸ Bliokh also acknowledged, however, that the foreigners knew they were being filmed, introducing an extra level of distortion on Tret’iakov’s scale: “If we had to film foreigners, then we would promise them that they would be able to see themselves in the next newsreel at the cinema in a few days.”⁶⁸⁹ Furthermore, Bliokh described his filming approach in terms which strongly suggest that many sequences were staged: “speaking of his approach (orientation) to filming the picture, comrade Bliokh indicates that all his material was organized in advance, and that the film contains no ‘life caught unawares.’”⁶⁹⁰ It seems unlikely, indeed, that several of the film’s more striking images could have been captured off the cuff, without some degree of staging: the boys pulling the cart along the street in slow

⁶⁸⁸ Vaks, “‘Shankhaiskii dokument’,” 4–5.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid. “Если приходилось снимать иностранцев, то обещали им, что они увидят себя на-днях в кинотеатре в ближайшей хронике[.]”

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid. “Говоря о своем подходе (установке) к съемке картины, т. Блюх указывает, что весь материал у него заранее был организован, и «жизни врасплох» в картине нет.”

symmetry, heads bowed, as the camera moves simultaneously away, or the cross-cut shot from above of bathers merrily lining up to slide down into the swimming pool.

Both *The Great Flight* and *Shanghai Document*, then, employ staging to some degree, but the staging is only acknowledged openly in the first film. In a similar vein, *The Great Flight* is much more open than *Shanghai Document* about its status as an expedition film. The expedition-film genre is acknowledged at the start of *Shanghai Document*: “This film was shot by a Sovkino expedition in Shanghai in 1927,” announces the film’s first title, and the first image we see is an arrival shot moving down the Huangpu River by boat towards the city. However, once we arrive at the Shanghai docks, the journey of the camera and its two-man crew is no longer part of the film’s internal narrative as it was for *The Great Flight*. Stepanov’s camera, relative to Blium’s, is invisible from the audience’s perspective. Nor was the Sovkino expedition reported simultaneously in the newspapers as its Proletkino predecessor had been—no doubt in part because the triumphant narrative of China moving towards the Soviet embrace was in pieces by the summer of 1927.

This means that the form of connection between Soviet and Chinese spaces asserted by the two films is completely different. *The Great Flight* connects China to Soviet Russia by means of what we might call an expedition chronotope, with echoes of the narrative of adventure: setting off from the domestic centre, the planes and the camera battle to cross the wilderness before arriving at the goal of their ambitions, and reaping the treasure of lavish footage of contemporary China. This chronotope creates a very specific form of spatial connection, one that is altered by the expedition itself, through the introduction of a new temporal dimension shaped by the speed of the aeroplane. *The Great Flight* is in this sense akin to Tret’iakov’s “Moscow—Beijing”: an account of a technologically enabled traversal of space that brings the Soviet Russian as an envoy to China, ending with some scattered ethnographic snapshots of the Chinese world through the frame of the train window.

These “journey films” echo Mikhail Bakhtin’s novelistic chronotope of the road, which cuts through everyday space in such a way that “[p]eople who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet[.]”⁶⁹¹ The expedition’s collapsing of space enables such a series of random encounters, memorialized in *The Great Flight* by the accumulated portrait shots of locals along the route. But it was this apparent randomness that the film’s critics disliked, arguing that it expressed simple spatial succession rather than a more complex causality. “When we say that one should film a reflection of reality,” opined Osip Brik at the 1927 Novyi Lef roundtable on fiction and documentary film, “that doesn’t mean leaving a camera on the street and walking away, it means reflecting reality under a specific angle of vision.”⁶⁹² The camera’s physical access to a perspective on Chinese reality is not enough, on Brik’s terms; the images it records must be organized in accordance with a clear ideological perspective, an interpretation of reality.

Shanghai Document seeks to offer this perspective, the “specific angle of vision” that Brik demands. For much of *Shanghai Document*, there is no “narrative” in the sense of a causal sequence of temporal events—until the late interruption of “History” in the form of Chiang Kai-shek’s suppression of the Communists, which significantly disrupts the film’s style and structure. This means that the connection between China and the USSR is not asserted spatially by the represented fact of the journey, as it is in *The Great Flight*. And yet that connection remains explicitly the message and motive of the film. “475 million people live in China,” announce Pertsov’s opening titles, beginning with this most crucial fact about China. “These millions, dwelling in age-old slavery, have been *soldered* to our Soviet land by

⁶⁹¹ Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope,” 243.

⁶⁹² “ЛЕФ I КИНО,” 67. “когда мы говорим, что надо снимать отображение действительности, это не значит поставить аппарат на улице и уйти, а отображать действительность под определенным углом зрения.”

the Chinese Revolution.”⁶⁹³ This intense, industrialized connection, this soldering, is presented here as an accomplished fact. In practice, its creation, as a mental experience produced by imagistic argument, is the purpose of the film. Beneath the super-structure of cultural difference, *Shanghai Document* encourages its audience to discern the underlying shape of class struggle, a shape that is repeated structurally across the world. Cull and Waldron summarize the film’s rhetorical argument thus: “As revolution had swept Russia, so it was building in China. Evidence establishing this as a product of a universal historical process both affirmed the Bolsheviks’ wider claim to ideological authority and provided psychological boost for the citizens of the pariah state.”⁶⁹⁴ It is not culture or technological power that “solders” Russia and China together, according to this iteration of internationalist aesthetics. Rather, it is the social logic of capitalist modernity that produces this form of class conflict. *Shanghai Document* was intended as a global statement: the Soviet press reported gleefully that the film had caused quite a stir when screened in Germany, provoking whistles, shouts of condemnation, and outbursts of the *Internationale*.⁶⁹⁵

Shanghai’s significance is ultimately global; but it is also offered to us here as a microcosm of the nation. The film’s opening titles effectively collapse China into Shanghai. After the opening statement about the soldered connection between the Chinese population and the Soviet audience, China is reduced to the cities most closely connected with the national revolution: “Canton, Shanghai, Hankou: the names of these Chinese cities will live in our memory.”⁶⁹⁶ From here we zoom in on Shanghai itself, with the film’s opening shot of

⁶⁹³ “В Китае живёт 475 миллионов людей / Миллионы, находившиеся в вековом рабстве, спаяла с советской страной Китайская революция.” (My emphases.)

⁶⁹⁴ Cull and Waldron, “*Shanghai Document*,” 312.

⁶⁹⁵ Kh., “Revoliutsionnyi dokument na zapade,” *Kino 2* (Jan 8, 1929): 4.

⁶⁹⁶ “Кантон, Шанхай, Ханькоу – имена китайских городов, памятных каждому из нас...”

“Ocean steamers travelling up the Huangpu River towards Shanghai.”⁶⁹⁷ In terms of chronotope, *Shanghai Document* is closer to Tret’iakov’s “Beijing” sketch than his “Moscow—Beijing”: an extended period of urban observation is condensed into the structure of a single, stereotypical day, as the Soviet eyewitness arrives in and explores the social complexity of the Chinese city. The observations he accumulates in the city—on the conflict between tradition and modernity, on the presence of foreign power at the heart of the social order—acquire implied resonance for the Soviet analysis of “China” as a whole. Both “Beijing” and *Shanghai Document* found their authority on the notion of the city as metonymic microcosm.

In replacing the chronotope of the road with the metonymic city, *Shanghai Document* announces its relation to the significant genre of city films in the 1920s, a group that might be said to include Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand’s *Manhatta* (1921), Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Nothing but the Hours* (*Rien que les heures*, 1926), Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), and such prominent Soviet examples as Kaufman’s *Moscow* (1927) and Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). In these films, a common concern with capturing and meditating on contemporary urban life coincides with the exploration of cinema’s technical capacities, through cross-cutting and parallel montage, to represent a complex socio-spatial totality as an accumulation of discrete spatial elements in simultaneous movement. This urban chronotope replaces the road’s series of extraordinary encounters along a single movement through space with a multiplicity of typical events, all happening simultaneously at coexisting sites within a greater spatial totality—usually explored within the temporal structure of a single typical day. Filmic montage allows this complex socio-spatial totality to be witnessed as a single temporal sequence, offering a perspective on the city that could not be achieved through direct experience by any individual inhabitant.

⁶⁹⁷ “К Шанхаю по реке Ван-пу идут океанские пароходы.”

For most of its duration, *Shanghai Document* roughly adheres to this temporal structure of the “day in the life of a city.” In fact, *Shanghai Document* gives us two days: opening with labor and leisure at the docks, the film moves on to juxtapose the lives of the Chinese and European districts, and takes this comparison into the evening, when the bourgeoisie visit the theatre and dance the foxtrot while workers trudge home to the outskirts of town. Next a new day dawns, opening with shots of the foreign banks and trade houses on the Bund, before cutting to the factories they control and the workers who work there. Thus the two days actually represent a sort of temporal progression. While the first day is full of ethnographic footage of what might loosely be termed traditional life in the Chinese quarter—street craftsmen, sword jugglers, funeral processions, puppet theater—the second introduces us to the lives and working conditions of the Chinese proletariat, the class proclaimed by the film as leader of the revolution. This paves the way for the confrontation of the final ten minutes of the film, when the workers’ uprisings of March 1927 and their suppression in April interrupt the narrative of typicality. In this manner *Shanghai Document* seeks to address Tret’iakov’s third category, causality, alongside space and time: the juxtaposition of the film’s various spaces and actions builds a sociological argument that attempts to explain how the events of spring 1927 occurred.

This rupture of typical time by historical events distinguishes *Shanghai Document* from the other city-symphony films of the period. In terms of spatial representation, *Shanghai Document* echoes its peers in representing the city as a multiplicity of juxtaposed social spaces inhabited by opposing classes. In Ruttmann’s *Berlin* film, for Wolfgang Natter, “Berlin as a place proves in fact to be many places and as such is a permutational vessel differentiated by all the divisions characteristic of Weimar Germany more generally,

particularly divisions of class.”⁶⁹⁸ Vlada Petric finds *Man with a Movie Camera* to be filled with Vertov’s visual critiques of abiding class antagonisms in NEP-era Soviet society: representative in this regard is a shot in which elegant ladies arriving home in a carriage are juxtaposed to their shabbily-dressed maid waiting in the street to carry their bags. The film affirms its allegiance with the maid by paralleling her movements with those of the cameraman, Kaufman, as he hauls his apparatus along the street.⁶⁹⁹

Both these films, however, draw their spectator away from a sense of the city as a specific historical place, and towards a more abstract experience of urban space as movement and circulation.⁷⁰⁰ *Berlin*, for Rutter, emphasises speed and fragmentation, stripping the city of the historical associations of place and produce instead an abstract (but still social) space of productivity and exchange: “speed effects and incarnates the spatialization of place.”⁷⁰¹ *Man with a Movie Camera*, famously, does not even locate itself in a specific city, combining footage of Moscow, Odessa and Kiev to explore the speed and complexity of modern urban life and to celebrate film’s privileged capacity to capture and represent that life. Social comment and situated reality ultimately takes a back seat to an exposition of the process of

⁶⁹⁸ Wolfgang Natter, “The City as Cinematic Space: Modernism and Place in *Berlin, Symphony of a City*,” in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* ed. Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 218.

⁶⁹⁹ Vlada Petric, “Cinematic Abstraction as a Means of Conveying Ideological Messages in *The Man with the Movie Camera*,” in Anna Lawson, ed., *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), 91–2.

⁷⁰⁰ I follow broadly here the distinction between space and place outlined by Yi-Fu Tuan, who sees space as characterized by movement and freedom, while place suggests pause, dwelling and security, and thus tends towards a sense of historical continuity. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 3.

⁷⁰¹ Natter, “City as Cinematic Space,” 219.

film-making itself: as Yuri Tsivian pithily concludes, “*Man with a Movie Camera* puts the making above the made.”⁷⁰²

Shanghai Document certainly conveys a stronger sense of place than either of these films. The expedition’s presence in Shanghai is announced at the start, and the titles give extensive facts and figures about this particular city. There are more than 2 million people in Shanghai; in 1926 more than 200 million poods of freight passed through the port; Chinese children from the age of 6 work 12 hours for 8 kopecks.⁷⁰³ The events of spring 1927 are historically situated in this specific location. At the same time, Shanghai is positioned as a place of national and global significance: “Shanghai,” an early title tells us, “is a global port and China’s largest labor center.”⁷⁰⁴ Shanghai is thus presented in the film as a specific place where a specific set of social relations lead to a specific historical event; but the spectator is constantly encouraged to make the metonymic move from the specific to the microcosmic. This tendency is encouraged most forcefully at the film’s end, which pushes towards mythical symbolism as historical reality disappoints.

A closer comparison, a city film with a stronger sense of place that also asserts a metonymic significance, might be Mikhail Kaufman’s *Moscow* (1927). This film, like *Shanghai Document*, follows a two-day structure. The first presents a typical working day, from the journey to work through various productive activities to afternoon leisure and evening entertainments. The second shows the political life of the Soviet capital, its government offices and its embassies. The city in *Moscow* is presented as a multiplicity of sites and processes that interlock to form a complex yet smoothly functioning machine.

⁷⁰² Yuri Tsivian, “*Man with a Movie Camera*—Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties,” in *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 93.

⁷⁰³ Cull and Waldron reproduce all the titles from the film, translated by Arch Tate: Cull and Waldron, “*Shanghai Document*,” 329–331. A *pood* is roughly equivalent to 16 kilograms or 36 pounds.

⁷⁰⁴ “Шанхай – мировой порт и крупнейший рабочий центр Китая.”

Constant shots of human and vehicular traffic in motion give the impression of a flowing, efficient circuit of productive activity. Yet place endures in *Moscow* as it did not in *Berlin* and would not in *Man with a Movie Camera*. The camera moves freely around the city, offering travelling shots of named, specific places: Myasnitskaya Street, Tverskaya Street, Lubyanka Square, the Moscow River. What's more, a humanized and comfortable image of authority anchors the second half of the film, which shows, and names, government figures and diplomats as they meet, work, and administrate. The fragmented multiplicity of the city is thus anchored round a sense of stable, personified order.

Moscow also acknowledges the simultaneous existence of different developmental stages in the Soviet capital, the presence of the countryside within the town that struck Walter Benjamin on his visit in 1926.⁷⁰⁵ An elevated shot early on shows a tram moving along tram tracks, and then a horse-and-cart crossing those same tracks in the opposite direction: this alternation is repeated several times. Such temporal contradictions were, in other words, an observed part of contemporary urban life. But in *Moscow* they point to an ongoing process of development: images of bast shoes and singing gypsies at the marketplace give way to the regimented, productive movements of the telephone exchange and the cigarette factory. Contradictions persist, as in the evening sequence that juxtaposes carousing bourgeois remnants to homeless children on the streets. But these drunken bourgeois are harmless and comic, not a threat: there follows an energetic display of recreational evening activities in a workers' club. Likewise, labor and leisure are juxtaposed with visual rhymes, but performed by the same people: the same workers that rode the trams to work ride bicycles to relax in the countryside, or take a break from the horse-drawn carriages in the streets to watch horse-and- buggy races at the hippodrome.

⁷⁰⁵ "There is one curious thing about the streets: the Russian village plays hide-and-seek in them." Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October* 35 (Winter 1985): 67.

In *Shanghai Document*, these same contradictions announce the imminence of a crisis. The hippodrome recurs in *Shanghai Document*, but here the running of the horses under the cheerful eye of well-dressed bourgeois spectators is juxtaposed to the speeding feet of a rickshaw puller, the “human horse.” Likewise, the image of the carousel appears in both films: but whereas in *Moscow* it serves as a simple sign of children’s recreation, in *Shanghai Document* we note that a single Chinese man is pushing this ride full of smiling European children, and cannot help but recall the recent shots of Chinese children of the same age working in the factories.⁷⁰⁶ *Shanghai Document*, like *Moscow*, offers a composite impression of multiple processes taking place within the same social space. These processes are complementary, in the sense that they amount to the functioning of a single social system. However, in *Shanghai Document* they are also contradictory, in that they are performed by opposed classes whose interests do not coincide and whose activities are often concealed from one another. This difference between the films concisely expresses the distinction drawn by Soviet anti-imperial rhetoric between social life under socialism and under capitalism.

In its exploration of the contradictions of real social space, *Shanghai Document* exploits what Michael Chanan calls the “heterotopic” character of Soviet montage theory, which conceives film space as “a space capable of juxtaposing several different spaces belonging to different orders which are in themselves incommensurate or incompatible.”⁷⁰⁷ This coexistence of the incompatible, which corresponds so neatly to the Marxist model of class society, characterizes for Chanan the “documentary chronotope,” which differs from the

⁷⁰⁶ Cull and Waldron note that the Chinese man pushing the European children round on their roundabout constitutes a rare example of what Eisenstein called “intra-shot montage”: “Here, the two sides of life in Shanghai—the exploiting European and the exploited Chinese—clash in a single frame.” Cull and Waldron, “*Shanghai Document*,” 318.

⁷⁰⁷ Michael Chanan, “The Documentary Chronotope,” *Jump Cut* 43 (July 2000): 56–61. Accessed online July 24, 2013 at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC43folder/DocyChronotope.html>.

fictional chronotope in its emphasis on discontinuities, not continuities: “Where the space of the fictional narrative produces continuity, documentary space is composed of discontinuities, both spatial and temporal, produced by dialectical (and dialogical) associations across time and space.”⁷⁰⁸ Instead of narrating continuous movement through space over time, in the manner of fictional film or indeed the expedition film, *Shanghai Document* uses the juxtaposition between discontinuities to produce meaning. Narrative is replaced by rhetoric; the illusion of spatial continuity is replaced by an argument about causal or structural relationship. As Yuri Tsivian has commented of Vertov’s work, the Soviet documentary film is “driven by the urge to transform the physical space-time of the film into the open space of thought.”⁷⁰⁹

Shanghai Document, we might say, seeks to enact this movement from actual place, “physical space-time,” towards the disembodied realm of thought. Although clearly located in a specific place at a precise historical moment, *Shanghai Document* is socially more abstract than *Moscow*. As Cull and Waldron note, Bliokh’s film (unlike *The Great Flight*) contains no specific historical actors, besides the villainous Chiang Kai-shek. The Chinese Communist Party is not mentioned, and no Soviet advisors or specific Chinese workers appear. Cull and Waldron trace this evasion of specificity to the delicacy of the China issue in 1928, following its role in the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky: “Recriminations might be flying in Moscow over who ‘lost China,’ but there are no policies or individuals in Bliokh’s version of the Chinese Revolution: only clashing social classes: workers, imperialists and militarists. Furthermore, their actions and fates are determined not by their own actions or wills, but by History.”⁷¹⁰ A specific place inhabited by generalized social

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹ Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Sacile, Italy: Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 11.

⁷¹⁰ Cull and Waldron, “*Shanghai Document*,” 324.

forces in opposition: this is how *Shanghai Document* enacts its movement towards metonymy. In this sense, the self-censorship of historical circumstance that Cull and Waldron identify in fact intersects with the demand for greater analytical rigour that we find in critics such as Tret'iakov and Brik. *Shanghai Document* replaces the power of Soviet technology to reach and record distant places with the power of Soviet conceptual thought to penetrate and understand all facets of the global situation. The absence of the camera as an embodied actor in the film means that it is Soviet analytical subjectivity itself that appears to move freely around the city, crossing the borders between conflicting social spaces. The camera as representative traveler-adventurer becomes the disembodied "internationalist gaze" of the Soviet spectator, empowered by the film to observe all facets of this Chinese reality and to draw their own connection to this distant place through conceptual thought.

This internationalist connection is not to be achieved by simply denying the existence of cultural difference. After an opening reel that introduces the port of Shanghai as a place of frenetic Chinese load-bearing labor in contrast to European leisure, the film's second reel presents life in the city's Chinese quarter as a wealth of ethnographic material. We see images of street theatre, craftsmen, funerals, and other instances of cultural exotica. But as with Tret'iakov's "Beijing" sketch, this exotica is not simply presented for the sake of curiosity, or to satisfy a thirst for pre-modern authenticity (though this is not to say that the film may not have catered to those desires in audience members). Instead, the ethnographic interest in *Shanghai Document* is Marxist in its focus on productive activity and class contradiction. The exotic sight of a funeral procession is subjected to class critique: this is a rich man's funeral, and beggars are recruited as attendants to bolster its splendour. The camera picks out productive labor processes of the traditional, pre-capitalist economy. We see blacksmiths making knives, cobblers, wood-carving, and a visually rich transition from two men weaving chairs to young boys on scaffolding plaiting the covering for a roof. Even

in the exotic scenes of dancers, costumed monkeys, and other street performers, the camera lingers on the crowd of gawping spectators, casting them in the role of a passive mass, seeking relief from work, awaiting an awakening. (The cramped poverty of these scenes will be offset by the light and space of the later scenes of European leisure, at the race course or by the swimming pool.) In one neat sequence, a Chinese crowd surrounds a sword-spinner who whirls his blades in a rhythm that is matched by cuts from mid-shot to close-up and back, three times: this hypnotic display is broken, however, by the sight of a tram moving past behind the crowd in the background. As Tret'iakov rejoiced to find stencils of motor-cars and aeroplanes among the traditional craftworks of Beijing, here Stepanov and Bliokh suggest that a mechanized modernity is interrupting the traditional world they portray in this "ethnographic" sequence.

Next, however, the film leaves this Chinese world that it has explored so freely, extracting the exotic pleasures of traditional life, and journeys past some barbed wire into the international settlement. The Chinese, we are told, cannot gain access here; but the Soviet cinematic gaze can cross the spatial divide that separates the city's residents. We go up on a roof, where, as Dong notes, the Soviet camera assumes the vantage point of the detached, elevated Chinese bourgeoisie that it seems to want to condemn.⁷¹¹ We might add that this elevated position was also taken up by Tret'iakov in Beijing, standing on the second floor of his modern hotel to look with sympathy into the city's old one-story *hutong* dwellings. Like Tret'iakov, the Sovkino camera goes everywhere: it leaves these rich Chinese in their rooftop isolation to descend into the factories and slums where the workers labour and live. It penetrates the old Chinese city, where no European faces are to be seen. However, unlike Tret'iakov, *The Great Flight*, or for that matter *Man with a Movie Camera, Shanghai Document* conceals the embodied travellers who crossed the city to create the film that we

⁷¹¹ Dong, "From *Shanghai Document* to *Shanghai 24 Hours*," 85.

see. The free access of the Soviet camera thus comes to express the free access of Soviet analytical subjectivity itself.

To illustrate this idea in detail, let us return to that most iconic scene in the film, where the cart-pulling boy peeks through the fence to see the Europeans at play. This sequence, Dong notes, employs a device more commonly found in fiction film, the point-glance: a shot of the boy peeking through the fence is followed by a shot of what lies beyond the fence, such that we are encouraged to view the second shot as the boy's perspective. Dong argues that the insertion of this device into the documentary disrupts the structure of arbitrary, conceptual spatial oppositions that has defined *Shanghai Document*. At this moment, for Dong, the boy achieves an agency otherwise denied to the passive, observed Chinese subjects in the film: "the Chinese boy peeping through the fence clearly stands for a moment for not only the rising class and colonial consciousness, but also where a Chinese viewing subject claims his sight."⁷¹² The boy, for Dong, anticipates a future Chinese cinematic practice that will be able to represent China for itself, without the mediation of foreign film-makers.

This shift in the film's spatial order is undeniably striking, but I cannot entirely agree with Dong's conclusion. The boy is granted a partial fulfillment of his scopic desire, but the fence remains between him and European bourgeois space, a barrier that affords him only one, partial perspective on this opposing world. By contrast, the Sovkino camera invisibly enters the European world on the other side of the fence, and films it from every angle: portrait shots of laughing girls, close-ups of cocktails, gramophones, and dancing legs. This mobile internationalist perspective even climbs onto a slide to capture a group of happy swimmers cascading down into the water. The static position of the boy by the fence, by contrast, ultimately serves to re-accentuate his limited agency within the crucial realm of

⁷¹² Ibid., 88.

visual access, relative to the all-seeing Soviet internationalist gaze. It is this Soviet gaze, not the boy's static viewpoint, that makes the parallel connections between the stirred cocktail and the water the labourers drink from a trough, or between the spinning wheel of their cart and the spinning record on the poolside gramophone. At work here is not Chinese voyeurism, but the critical activity of Soviet analytical subjectivity.

The internationalist gaze enabled by the invisible Sovkino camera essentially occupies the same positionality that Tret'iakov claimed in his reportage: that third term between European and Chinese, technologically aligned with the former but politically with the latter. As Tret'iakov could be within Beijing's Diplomatic Quarter one moment and at the center of a student protest at its gates the next, so Shanghai, a filmed city of divided spaces, is traversed freely only by the Soviet gaze. This freedom to traverse social space is only matched in the film's final sequence, when first protestors and then troops march violently across the spatial divides that have defined the city, rupturing its precarious, unsustainable order.

For most of its running, as noted, *Shanghai Document* juxtaposes contradictory social spaces within the same urban totality, in the course of abstract or typical time. In the last eight minutes of the film, however, the clash of these contradictions causes historical time violently to interrupt the typical time of the city symphony, and disrupt the ordered separation of spaces we have so far seen. Over some vague shots of people milling down a street, the titles tell us that strikes have been more and more common in recent years. Then suddenly we are given our first specific date: "in MARCH 1927" the city finally falls into the hands of the proletariat. Shortly afterwards, the proletariat is betrayed by General Chiang Kai-shek, the first historical individual to appear in the film. The parallelism of labor and leisure is replaced by a new parallelism of marching groups, as swarming, banner-waving protestors are intercut

with mechanically marching soldiers carrying ominous rifles: this increase in directional motion builds the spectators' expectation of a violent collision between these groups.

This growing sense of dynamic tension culminates in a sequence that combines montage and titles to assert a direct causality between Chiang Kai-shek and the mass slaughter of workers. We see Chiang, the "betrayor of the Chinese revolution," shouting at a podium. Next we see a machine gun, which the titles tell us is being prepared "against the uprisen workers." Next, searches in workers' districts, and pedestrians patted down by soldiers: a growing sense of repression after the internationalist optimism of the earlier protest scenes. We cut back to Chiang, still shouting at his podium: the titles tell us that he has demanded "immediate reprisals" (немедленной расправы). The next shots are more walking crowd scenes, of the type we have seen earlier in this history-on-the-move section: but now the titles insist that what we are seeing is "Unarmed workers led to execution" (Обезоруженных рабочих ведут / На казнь). Multiple moving crowd sequences now culminate in sudden, shocking violence, as figures on their knees in a field are shot by soldiers before our eyes. These execution shots are intercut with more shots of crowds moving down streets: the impression is given that people are being led to these execution sites in their hundreds. One last cut back to Chiang shouting, followed by a cut back again to yet more executions, cements the chain of causality: Chiang has massacred the working class of Shanghai.

This climactic disruption of the city's spatial order by massed, mobile crowds does not lead to the institution of a new, revolutionary socio-spatial practice; rather, it culminates in repressive violence in an eccentric space on the edge of the city. The rupturing of the film's established order, however, disorients the viewer, who has become acquainted to the steady narrative of typicality and parallelism. This sense of shock peaks at the scenes of execution. In newsreel footage of markedly different quality, we watch from a mid-range

wide angle as prisoners kneeling in a line are shot in the back of the head. The roughness of these shots, which make no attempt at compositional complexity or ingenious montage, gives them a frightening blankness in the context of this highly stylized film. At these moments, the assertion of cognitive authority cedes priority to the other essential element of internationalist aesthetics: the generation of emotional sympathy as a concrete, affective experience. The shocks and jolts generated by this sequence of the film are directed at the body of the spectator.

Next we cut to the foreign concession, where all is calm and order, marked by military parades: once again, the procession, a determined movement of a mass of people in a certain direction, has become the dominant visual motif of this last part of the film. By now, however, the rigid, mechanical military march has entirely overwhelmed the more disorderly, rambling march of protest (as in an earlier sequence where a protest walks towards the camera and folds around it). Bodily states, however, are still juxtaposed: a parade of foreign tanks driving past calm spectators is intercut with two shots of bodies lying on the ground, the first raising his arms over his head as if to protect himself from the onrushing tanks, the second a corpse. The montage sequence encourages the spectator to see here a single Chinese body crushed by the tanks, and perhaps even to insert their own body by identification in its place. A title after this corpse shot confirms we have moved locations again: back “In the workers’ quarters...” we see nothing but corpses littering the ground.

In the film’s final sequence, we see foreign warships gathering in the harbor, and foreign soldiers bolstering their defences; and lastly we return to the industrial images of the Shanghai proletariat in its factories. The separation of the rival classes into exclusive spaces has been reinstated. But now the images of labour are revalorized, infused what Cull and Waldron call “industrial vigour.”⁷¹³ The energy of these workers’ movements, the spinning

⁷¹³ Cull and Waldron, “*Shanghai Document*,” 323.

wheels of their machines, and the pace of the montage between these shots, which constantly changes the direction of movement: all this suggests industrial work is not simply oppression but also generates the potential for resistance. Dynamism and movement in these final sequences are on the side of the workers and their spaces, not the imperialists, who remain immobile beside their sandbags in anxious expectation of further uprisings.

In a final series of shots, a worker draws a piece of glowing iron from a furnace, and three men beat the white-hot metal rhythmically with hammers, allowing an apt title to insist that the “heroic” Shanghai proletariat has retained its “iron will for victory” (сохранившего железную волю к победе). With this conclusion, *Shanghai Document* moves away from situated specificity in recourse to a more abstract symbolism. The image of workers beating hot metal with hammers is in fact foreshadowed in the knife-making scene in the second reel, when the camera is exploring the traditional productive processes of the Chinese part of the city (see above). But its repetition at the end, performed now not in broad daylight but in an enveloping darkness that brings out the bright glow of the beaten steel, offers a generalized motif of socialist revolution that recalls the soldering metaphor of the opening titles.

Of course, there is an important historical context here. As Cull and Waldron point out, the irony of *Shanghai Document* is that it sets out to produce this connection between Soviet Russia and China at the very moment that Soviet policy in China was experiencing comprehensive defeat. Indeed, even when the Communist victory did eventually come in China, it came through the peasant-based revolutionary model that Mao Zedong was beginning to develop around the time Bliokh and Stepanov were filming, rather than the Soviet emphasis on the industrial proletariat that their film clearly endorses.⁷¹⁴ The film’s tension between Shanghai as specific place and as metonymic microcosm collapses at the end in favour of the latter. In the face of the historically real victory of Chiang and defeat of

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 310–11.

Soviet policy, the filmmakers resort to mythopoetic imagery. The final image of workers hammering away presents a rousing symbolic figure of proletarian revolution, divorced from the concrete social surroundings in which it was recorded. Thus a defeat for Soviet policy was transformed into a victory for Soviet internationalist aesthetics. Shanghai, the focal point of Chinese politics, becomes an emotionally charged microcosm of the global class struggle, while the power of montage to connect heterogeneous social spaces expresses the power of Soviet analytical subjectivity to perceive and interpret social reality across the world.

Chapter Four Authenticity and Sacrifice: China Onstage

While the young medium of film was asserting its right to know and show China in the mid-1920s, China could also be found at the centre of debates over the post-revolutionary development of an older spectacular medium, stage theatre. Since “China” had become the symbolic testing ground for an internationalist aesthetics that sought to bring distant places into the immediate cognitive and emotional experience of its audience, theatrical images of China were connected with the vital question of how to represent authentic social reality on the Soviet stage. The documentary aesthetic we have encountered in the two preceding chapters based its legitimacy on an indexical relation to observed, experienced China. The images of China thus produced, claimed the advocates of this aesthetic, presented a more authentically real China than the false *chinoiserie* of the imperialist exotic.

But how can such “authentic reality” be produced in the theatre, where the artificial, staged nature of the performance is so much in evidence? This chapter addresses two productions that sought to address this question of producing an authentic China onstage, but in very different ways. The staging of Sergei Tret’iakov’s play *Roar, China! (Rychi, Kitai!)* at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1926 used Chinese costumes, objects and music to assert the presence of an ethnographically “authentic” China on its stage. This aesthetic of ethnographic authenticity endorsed the play’s political message about the awakening of national revolutionary consciousness, the necessary first step on the road to an internationalist future. A year later, the decision to set the first successful “revolutionary” ballet, *The Red Poppy (Krasnyi mak)*, in China, was motivated by the desire to introduce a theme from contemporary reality into the repertoire of an art form suspected of obsolescence. Here the question of authenticity rests less on ethnographic naturalism, and more on the conflict between two aesthetic modes for representing China. The contemporary setting and collective

male dances of the first act suggested a new ballet form inspired by working class struggle and informed by the physicality of biomechanics. The ornamental, fantastic visual motifs of the second act, however, re-centred the delicate femininity of the lead ballerina, and suggested a return to both a Chinese aesthetic and a ballet aesthetic rooted in the past. Beneath these very different conflicts over theatricality and authenticity, however, we find both productions shaped by a strikingly similar mythical narrative, one that demands individual self-sacrifice as a necessary precursor to collective awakening.

I. China on the Soviet Stage

In November 1927, as the Soviet Union celebrated the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, the stages of the capitals were packed with images of China. *The Red Poppy*, which had debuted at the end of the previous season in June, returned to the Bolshoi Theatre on 9 November, two days after the anniversary itself and one day after the Bolshoi's "Triumphant Spectacle" to mark the event. Vsevolod Ivanov's stage adaptation of his *Armored Train 14-69* opened on 7 November in both Moscow and Leningrad, its pared-down action centred around the heroic sacrifice of the Chinese partisan Sin-Bin-U. Sergei Tret'iakov's *Roar, China! (Rychi, Kitai!)*, which had premiered in 1926, was still on the repertoire of the Meyerhold Theatre, playing there at the end of the month. Likewise, *Princess Turandot (Printsesssa Turandot)*, the flagship production of the Vakhtangov Theatre since its premiere in 1922, was also still playing in late November. Chinese themes could also be enjoyed by attending a performance of Georgii Pavlov's melodrama *The Bronze Idol (Bronzovyi idol)* on November 12, or by catching a production of Franz Lehar's 1923 operetta *The Yellow Jacket (Zheltaia Kofta—Die gelbe Jacke)* the following evening.⁷¹⁵

At this crucial juncture in the symbolic life of the Soviet state, China was highly visible on the stage. This trend had been going for a while: during the theatrical season of

⁷¹⁵ All listings information taken from the "Teatry i zrelishcha" supplement to *Zhizn' iskusstva* 45 (1927).

1925–26, at least five plays set in China premiered in Moscow, with some of them playing also in Leningrad. Their diversity provides an insight into the conflicts over correct post-revolutionary repertoire that consumed theatrical life in this period. Rustem Galiat's *A Cheap Amusement for the Crowd* (*Deshevaia zabava dlia liudei*), a production of the Semperante theatre, shared many common elements with *Roar, China!* A summary written for Gosizdat by the theatre critic V. Blium describes “a typical *agitka* on the theme of English violence in China, not lacking in melodramatic elements.” Focusing on the lives of Chinese street actors, the play also featured opium smugglers and incidents of excessive, unjust punishment, such as the arrest of a Chinese character for “breaking an Englishman’s walking-stick with his back.”⁷¹⁶ Another agit-play set in China, *Locusts* (*Sarancha*), played at MGSPS (Teatr imeni Moskovskogo gubernskogo soveta professional’nykh soiuzov) from late March 1926. Blium reviewed this one too, stating that “the action unfolds in some synthetic, abstract Eastern country,” where the dominance of an imperialist “clique of violators” (the titular locusts) drives the people to revolution.⁷¹⁷

These agit-prop productions, pushing the basic formula of global revolution spreading through the colonized East on Soviet example, shared stage and column space with a series of translations and adaptations from German-language originals. We have already mentioned Franz Lehár’s *The Yellow Jacket*, an operetta centred around a marriage between a Viennese Countess and a Chinese Prince that is undermined by homesickness and difficulties in trans-

⁷¹⁶ RGALI f. 611, op. 2, ed. khr. 81, l. 6. Blium concludes by proposing that “A rewrite in the spirit of these suggestions could produce a decent and useful agit-play after the manner of *Roar, China!*”

⁷¹⁷ V. Blium, “‘Sarancha’ v teatre imeni MGSPS,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 1926, 27 (23–30 March), 6. According to this review, the play was written by Evsei Osipovich Liubimov-Lanskoi, the artistic director of the MGSPS theatre. See <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc3p/184198>, accessed March 12, 2013. Elizabeth Souritz, however, suggests that this was actually a play by French writer Émile Fabre, *Les Sauterelles*, from 1911. Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 238.

cultural communication.⁷¹⁸ There was also *Chang-Gai-Tang*, a translation of the German poet Klabund's version of Li Qianfu's Yuan-dynasty play *The Chalk Circle* (*Hui lan ji*), which debuted at Leningrad's Komediia theatre in January and opened at Moscow's Dramaticheskii teatr in March.⁷¹⁹ This production featured music by Reinhold Glière, the future composer of *The Red Poppy*.⁷²⁰ The basic plot, through its various redactions, tells of a poor girl, Chang Gaitang, who becomes a rich man's second wife, and bears him a son; the jealous first wife poisons her husband, frames Chang for the murder, and claims the child as her own. Justice is served when the child is placed in the centre of a chalk circle and the two claimants instructed to pull the child out of the circle; his true mother, Chang, does not want to hurt him and so refuses to pull. Also playing in both Leningrad and Moscow, *Chu-Iun-Vai* was a translation of Julius Berstl's *The Lascivious Mr Chu* (*Der lasterhafte Herr Tschu*), a "Chinese fairy-tale in 3 acts" in which the Court of Hell re-incarnates an imperial judge in the body of Chu, a poor and morally dubious tailor.⁷²¹

What can be said about this proliferation of theatrical images of China? First of all, quite simply, China was news. After the Sino-Soviet agreement and the opening of the Soviet

⁷¹⁸ *Die gelbe Jacke* premiered in Vienna, 9 February 1923, with a libretto by Victor Léon. It was significantly revised as *Das Land des Lächelns* (libretto by Ludwig Herzer and Fritz Löhner, premiere in Berlin, 10 October 1929).

⁷¹⁹ Klabund (pen name of Alfred Henschke) liberally adapted Stanislas Julien's French translation of *Hui lan ji* from 1832, adding such characters as the Emperor and Tong the eunuch, and introducing a love plot absent from the original. See James Laver's foreword to *The Circle of Chalk: A Play in Five Acts*, adapted from the Chinese by Klabund (a.k.a A. Henschke), English version by James Laver (London: W. Heinemann, 1929). The same story later served as the basis for Bertold Brecht's story *Der Augsburger Kreidekreis* (*The Augsburg Chalk Circle*, 1940) and play *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1944). See Renata Berg-Pan, "Mixing Old and New Wisdom: The 'Chinese' Sources of Brecht's Kaukasischer Kreidekries and Other Work," *The German Quarterly*, 1975, Vol. 48, no. 2.

⁷²⁰ According to K. Sezhenskii, Glière wrote the music to this melodrama in 1924 [*sic*]. K. Sezhenskii, *R. M. Glier* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal'noe izdatel'stvo, 1940), 30.

⁷²¹ *Chu-Iun-Vai* was produced by the 4th Studio of the Moscow State Theater, premiering during their summer tour to Leningrad. Berstl's text was translated by P. A. Markov, and the production was directed by N. K. Markov. See "Teatr i zrelishcha," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 16 (April 20, 1926): 17–18. Plot summary taken from review by "A.," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 21 (1926): 14.

embassy in Beijing, and then the protests and growing unrest that succeeded the May 30 Massacre of 1925, China was probably *the* front-page story in the Soviet press in this period, as a glance at issues of Soviet newspapers from mid-1925 through 1927 quickly shows. The sustained media campaign around the Great Flight in the summer of 1925 sought to heighten this sense of connection to China and events unfolding there, as did frequent articles in the newspaper from experts and observers, foremost among them Tret'iakov. When Tret'iakov returned to Moscow in autumn 1925, he continued to press for greater attention towards China in Soviet culture, penning the play *Roar, China!*, and advocating in his role as Chairman of Goskino's first factory that a film expedition be sent to China to make a series of films about current events there. As of January 1926, while the glut of China-themed stage plays was building, *The Great Flight* was playing in cinemas in the capital, and Eisenstein, feted in the press for the achievement of *Battleship Potemkin*, was publicly announcing his intention to collaborate with Tret'iakov on a triptych of China films. China was at the centre of attention, in terms of media coverage at least: how much this attention translated into genuine public interest must remain speculation.

Given this topicality, we might not be surprised to find a series of contemporary theatrical productions presenting images of China onstage. When we look at the evidence, however, we notice that not all these China images are the same. The simplest division would seem to be between productions set in the past and adapted from foreign-language originals (*Princess Turandot*, *Chang-Gai-Tang*, *Chu-Iun-Vai*) and productions set in the immediate, revolutionary present, mostly penned by Soviet authors (*Roar, China!*, *The Red Poppy*, *A Cheap Amusement for the Crowd*, *Locusts*). The promotion of the latter implied a critique of the former as exotic, imperialist and outdated. As the documentary aesthetic of Soviet reportage claimed to sweep away the false impression of China fostered by the colonial novel, so the question of representing China onstage became a question about the nature of

theatrical authenticity. Tret'iakov and the group that staged *The Red Poppy* both proclaimed that they were presenting an authentic and contemporary China quite different from the irresponsible *chinoiserie* of their competitors. Criticism of these Soviet productions, in turn, often focused on their failure to overcome such exoticist tendencies.⁷²²

There was a third option, however: instead of being presented as mysterious and exotic or revolutionary and contemporary, China could be presented onstage as openly theatrical, in a manner that revealed the artifice of pretending that the space of the stage was somehow transformed through performance into a place called “China.” This approach was deployed to great acclaim in *Princess Turandot* (*Printsessa Turandot*), which debuted in 1922 as the final production of the director Evgenii Vakhtangov. The China presented on the stage of the Vakhtangov Theatre was entirely and openly artificial: the production bared the device of its own artistic construction, and made no attempt at producing a convincing mimetic illusion of a supposedly historical reality. In Vakhtangov's theatre, Carlo Gozzi's fable about the cruel Chinese princess who eliminates her suitors by asking them impossible riddles was staged as a spectacle of theatre coming into being. Its authenticity was theatrical, a self-aware embrace of the artificiality of theatrical conventions.

This conflict over the correct, “authentic” way to represent China thus taps into the antagonism between mimetic naturalism and self-aware theatricality that, metonymized in the names of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold, shapes the standard narrative on Russian theatrical culture in the early twentieth century. Vakhtangov, a student of Stanislavsky, moved away from the naturalist aesthetic of the Moscow Art Theatre in search

⁷²² The most obvious example of this is the critical reaction to *The Red Poppy*, which will be discussed below. Another example would be the melodrama *The Bronze Idol*, written by Georgii Pavlov, and staged by the Studiia Malogo teatra from 1926 (director N. F. Kostromskii, music S. L. Germanov). A less than ecstatic contemporary review describes a love triangle, served in a “spicy, exotic sauce,” between Lieutenant Ravenshtein, a Chinese woman named Oa-shen, and a sadistic novelist called Zoia Rants. Ingredients in this exotic sauce included an opium den, a gang of pirates, the skulls of executees being cleft by an elephant leg, and “the mysterious bronze idol, which begins to speak at the moment of the foreign intruder’s death.” Viktor Ermans, “Bronzovyi idol v Studii Malogo teatra,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 64 (1926): 14.

of a specifically “theatrical realism,” wherein the spectator could admire the actor’s skill as emotionally convincing whilst never forgetting that they are watching a theatrical performance.⁷²³ The actors in *Princess Turandot* did not even try to convincingly inhabit a fantastic, fairy-tale Beijing; instead, they were instructed to portray Italian actors attempting to improvise their way through Gozzi’s text.⁷²⁴ Naturalist empathy was forestalled: “Who cares,” Vakhtangov remarked, “whether Turandot will fall in love with Calaf or not?”⁷²⁵ The actors emerged from the audience to don their costumes onstage, used seemingly random objects for props, and signified “China” as their location by simply holding up a sign that read “Peking.”⁷²⁶ The attitudes of the Soviet audience towards China or the Chinese as historical or contemporary realities were simply irrelevant to such ironic, playful investigations of theatricality.

By the mid-1920s, however, the topicality of China could no longer be ignored. Both *Roar, China!* and *The Red Poppy* proclaim their purpose to be the representation of China as a contemporary, commensurable revolutionary space. In this they oppose Vakhtangov’s openly artificial China, still playing through the decade, whose verisimilitude was not at issue.⁷²⁷ Tret’iakov described writing *Roar, China!* as a conscious response to the falseness of the other theatrical images of China circulating at mid-decade, an abundance perhaps caused by the great success of Vakhtangov’s production as well as the topicality of events in China:

⁷²³ Boris Zakhava, *Vakhtangov i ego studii*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Teakinopechat’, 1930), 130–132.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143–4.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 142. “Кому интересно, полюбит Турандот Калафа или нет?”

⁷²⁶ Nikolai A. Gorchakov, *The Theater in Soviet Russia*, trans. Edgar Lehrman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 254.

⁷²⁷ Zakhava estimates that *Printsessa Turandot* played over 600 times between 1922 and 1929. Zakhava, *Vakhtangov*, 155.

“Reality is more grey than fantastic exoticism,” cry the devotees of a particular China, the one that has now crawled out onto the stages of our theatres in all these plays with princesses, courtesans, and kings’ sons (*The Bronze Idol*, *Chu-Iun-Vai*, *The Chalk Circle*, *The Yellow Jacket*), which I tried to counter with *Roar, China!*, the only play-article on our stage.⁷²⁸

This quite disparate selection of China-themed productions is grouped together as the “fantastic exoticism” that Tret’iakov sought to oppose. Their respective foci on elite marital relations (*The Yellow Jacket*), melodramatic love triangles (*The Bronze Idol*), super-natural intervention (*Chu-Iun-Vai*), and tales from the past (*The Chalk Circle/Chang Gaitang*) run contrary to Tret’iakov’s insistence on representing contemporary, popular China.

It seems, however, that these productions were often conscious of the need to prove their contemporary relevance. A contemporary plot summary of *The Yellow Jacket* suggests that the Soviet production made the Chinese prince into a revolutionary, which he is not in the original.⁷²⁹ Likewise, a review of *Chang Gaitang* notes that an “ideological rationale” was “sewn onto” the play with the appearance of a member of a secret brotherhood.⁷³⁰ Critics were not convinced, however. *The Yellow Jacket*’s reviewer notes that Soviet “tailors” have attempted to update the piece, but adds that you would only know this from reading the poster, not from watching the play.⁷³¹ Likewise, a review of *Chang Gaitang* dismisses the play as “melodramatic *chinoiserie*” that is “weak and unnecessary for our days” and “adds nothing to the renewal of the repertoire.”⁷³² A review of the State Academic Theatre’s 1927

⁷²⁸ Tret’iakov, *Chzhungo* (1930), 8. “— Действительность серее фантастической экзотики, — кричат поклонники особенного Китая, того самого, который ныне вылез на сцены театров во всех этих пьесах с царевнами, куртизанками, царскими сынками («Бронзовый идол», «Чу-Юн-Вай», «Меловой круг», «Желтая кофта»), которому я попытался противопоставить одинокую на наших подмостках пьесу-статью «Рычи, Китай!»”

⁷²⁹ *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 45 (1927), “Teatry i zrelishcha” supplement: 9.

⁷³⁰ Viktor Ermans, “‘Chan-Gai-Tang’ v Moskovskom Dramaticheskome teatre,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 28 (March 30–April 6, 1926): 9.

⁷³¹ *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 2 (1926): 9.

⁷³² Gaik Adonts, “Chang Gai-tang,” *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 4 (1927): 17.

production of a Japanese play, *Oda Nobunago*, lauds this attempt to introduce “real Eastern theatre” to Soviet audiences, after the “absurd Eastern masquerade recently seen in *Chang Gaitang* and *Chu-Iun-Vai*.”⁷³³

Nevertheless, the existence of these productions, and Tret’iakov’s sense of them as rivals, do suggest a certain appetite among theatrical audiences for Oriental, exotic entertainments. Nor should this be limited to China. The biggest film hit in the 1920s USSR was Douglass Fairbanks’ *The Thief of Baghdad*, which earned enthusiastic reviews, full-page advertisements and even a laudatory poem in *Zhizn’ iskusstva* (*The Life of Art*), a Leningrad journal considered one of the cultural barometers of the time.⁷³⁴ This taste for the exotica of early Hollywood, alongside the stage-*chinoiserie* imports mentioned above, remind us that 1920s Soviet culture was connected to a wider international circuit of cultural products. Soviet cultural producers of the time were challenged to counter this dominance of the bourgeois exotic. It is essentially foreign competition that Tret’iakov is writing against with *Roar, China!*, just as his sketch collection *Chzhungo* was written to counter the false picture of China found in French exoticists like Pierre Loti and Claude Mirbeau.

China became the obvious site to confront the bourgeois exotic in the mid-1920s, because China was a prominent source of exotic images that was also newly visible as front-page news. We see this pattern emerging even before Tret’iakov’s play. In 1925, the Moscow Theatre of Satire unveiled the second Soviet attempt at a political operetta, or “politoperetta,” entitled *Forty Canes or Love in China* (*Sorok palok ili liubov’ v Kitae*).⁷³⁵ This production,

⁷³³ *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 11–12 (1927): 11.

⁷³⁴ On the popularity of *The Thief of Baghdad*, see Kepley and Kepley, “Foreign Films on Soviet Screens,” 437. For advertisements, see *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 10 (1925): 1–2. For the poem, see *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 11 (1925): 1. For a very positive review of *The Thief of Baghdad*, which even credits the film as a historically accurate representation of Baghdad, see *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 12 (1925): 17.

with a libretto by Glob and music by Matvei Blanter, told the story of a Chinese coolie who administered a beating to the representatives of the great powers.⁷³⁶ Though dubbed “ludicrous” by the *Zhizn’ iskusstva* reviewer, this plot was apparently based on the same historical event that Tret’iakov drew on for the first film of his *Dzhungo* trilogy. In April 1924, it was reported that a Chinese soldier in Beijing had received forty blows from a bamboo cane for walking on a section of wall designated for foreigners only. The soldier reportedly determined to take revenge by beating up forty foreigners; he managed only three, however, before he was again arrested. This “newspaper fact” came to the attention of Trotsky, who highlighted it as an example of imperialist injustice in his 1924 May Day speech, “May Day in the West and the East.”⁷³⁷ The vengeful Chinese soldier also made an appearance in the illustrated journal *Prozhektor* that month.⁷³⁸ *Forty Canes* does not seem to have made much of an impression on the theatre-going public. Nonetheless, its use of a reported fact from contemporary China as the basis for a theatrical enactment of oppressed Chinese throwing off foreign power anticipates both *Roar, China!* and *The Red Poppy*, both of which achieved much greater success.⁷³⁹

Tret’iakov called *Roar, China!* a “play-article”: a “documentary” reproduction of a real historical event in the theatre, for the sake of communicating a political message about the contemporary world. Tret’iakov based this play-article on a “newspaper fact”: in June

⁷³⁵ V. Fedorov, “‘Sorok palok’ (Moskovskii teatr satiry),” *Zhizn’ iskusstva* 11 (1925): 15. According to Fedorov, the first “politoperetta” was *Atlantida*, an attack on White Guardists staged by the Moskovskii teatr operetty.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

⁷³⁷ Trotsky, “May Day in the West and the East,” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/04/mayday.htm> accessed January 20, 2013.

⁷³⁸ “Proletariat Moskvy s toboi!” *Prozhektor* 10 (1925): 25.

⁷³⁹ Indeed, *Roar, China!* also seems to contain a reference to the incident, when the French merchant, Monsieur de Bruxelles, mentions that “in Beijing a soldier beats a European in the face” because “they wouldn’t let these yellow swine into a European park.” Sergei Tret’iakov, “Rychi, Kitai! Sobytie v 9 zven’iakh,” in *Slyshish’, Moskva?! Protivogazy. Rychi, Kitai!* (Moscow: Izd-vo Iskusstvo, 1966), 111.

1924, in Wanxiang, Sichuan, an American businessman, Edwin C. Hawley, was killed during a dispute with Chinese boatmen.⁷⁴⁰ In response, the captain of the *Cockchafer*, a British battleship moored at Wanxiang, demanded that the city's officials follow Hawley's funeral procession, and that the leaders of the boatmen be executed. Failure to comply was to result in the bombardment of the city.⁷⁴¹

The Red Poppy also, it seems, owed its germination to a "newspaper fact." According to ballet historian Elizabeth Souritz, Glière was working in early 1926 on music for a libretto by Mikhail Gal'perin, *The Daughter of the Port (Doch' Porta)*, set in revolutionary France and due to be staged at the Bolshoi. At a meeting of the Bolshoi's directorate in February 1926, however, *The Daughter of the Port* was rejected for its tedious content and insufficient dynamism.⁷⁴² Here Mikhail Ivanovich Kurilko, theatre artist and future librettist for *The Red Poppy*, stepped into the fray, as he was to recall years later:

I also spoke heatedly against it. And in answer to the question of where to look for a theme, I picked up the latest copy of *Pravda* and read out a report on the detention of the Soviet steamer *Lenin* in a Chinese port. There and then, in the midst of an intense debate, I sketched the contours of the plot for the future ballet. It was recorded by the stenographer. The next day I recounted this plot to E. V. Gel'tser. She liked it, and at her request I worked out the script in greater detail. Thus work began on the creation of the ballet *The Red Poppy*, for which I acted as librettist.⁷⁴³

⁷⁴⁰ For newspaper reports of the incident, see *New York Times*, July 1, 1924; *The Times*, July 7, 1924.

⁷⁴¹ See for example *New York Times*, July 6, 1924; *New York Times*, August 16, 1924. An excellent summary of the event as reported in Western media is provided in Walter J. Meserve and Ruth I. Meserve, "The Stage History of *Roar China!*: Documentary Drama as Propaganda," *Theatre Survey* 21 (1980): 1–2.

⁷⁴² Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 231–2. Gal'perin later had his chance to write a China-in-revolt piece, penning the libretto for the 1929 opera *Syn solntsa*, with music by S. N. Vasilenko. Here too a trans-national romance, between a Chinese monk and an American general's daughter, plays out against the background of a Chinese uprising, in this case the Boxer rebellion of 1900. *Syn solntsa* set out to be the first properly Soviet opera in much the same way that *The Red Poppy* had been acclaimed as the first properly Soviet ballet, and was subjected to very similar criticisms for failing to overcome the aesthetic hangovers of the form, particularly the centrality of the love plot. See for example the review by M. Grinberg, "Syn solntsa," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, May 28, 1929. Grinberg concludes that the opera's greatest flaw lies in the fact that "in essence it is not the whites and the Chinese that are opposed to one another, but the pair of lovers and the rest of the world." He also objected that the Chinese were reduced to a "savage horde," by contrast with the more sympathetic American characters.

Out of this single scene-setting detail—a Soviet ship causing tension in a Chinese port—Kurilko spun the story of Tao Hua, a Chinese dancer forced to choose between loyalty to her corrupt Chinese fiancé and her newfound attraction to the Captain of the Soviet ship. Glière agreed to transfer his arrangements from the aborted ballet to *The Red Poppy*. Ekaterina Gel'tser, who had danced in the Imperial Ballet of Maurice Petipa and remained one of Russian ballet's major stars in the 1920s, was to dance the central role of Tao Hua. *The Red Poppy* debuted shortly after Gel'tser's 50th birthday.⁷⁴⁴

Though we may question the precise historical accuracy of these accounts—Glière, for example, claimed that the plot and setting were suggested by “the directorate of the theater”—it can be seen that both *Roar, China!* and *The Red Poppy* were presented by their creators as responding to a crisis in repertoire, and responding to it by introducing contemporary, reported reality onto the stage.⁷⁴⁵ Tret'iakov set out to sweep away the false Chinese exotica that was crowding the Soviet stage; Kurilko sought to introduce a theme of contemporary relevance and interest into the ballet repertoire, to reverse a perceived lack of interest in ballet among workers.⁷⁴⁶ *The Great Flight* had played to sizeable media coverage in the capitals in January 1926, and by March announcements were appearing of Eisenstein,

⁷⁴³ M. I. Kurilko, “Rozhdenie baleta,” in Glière, *stat'i, vospominaniia, materialy*, 1:106.

⁷⁴⁴ Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “Dance as Metaphor: The Russian Ballerina and the Imperial Imagination,” in *Mapping the Feminine: Russian Women and Cultural Difference*, ed. Hilde Hoogenboom, Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Irina Reyfman (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2008), 203.

⁷⁴⁵ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 233.

⁷⁴⁶ Though the class composition of ballet audiences was a matter of concern, performances remained well attended in the 1920s: the critic A. A. Gvozdev notes in an article in January 1925 that a third day of ballet has been added to the existing two per week in both Leningrad and Moscow. A. Gvozdev, “Balet i sovremennost',” *Zhizn' iskusstva* 2 (1925): 8. L. S. Leontev, ballet master at the Ballet Academy, argued in 1925 that ballet's popularity was clear from packed auditoriums, but that theatrical administrators were failing to accommodate this popular demand by renewing the repertoire. See “Chto delat' s baletom?” *Zhizn' iskusstva* 7 (1925): 30.

Tret'iakov, and Tissé's planned kino-expedition.⁷⁴⁷ The drive to re-imagine China was gathering pace, and it seems rational that the Bolshoi's Artistic Council, seeking to assert the relevance of their institution, would latch onto a theme of such topicality.

The idea of a crisis in repertoire was a constant theme in the Soviet theatre world of the 1920s. Ballet in particular was viewed as an anachronistic hangover of the Imperial past, tainted by the trappings of court culture, mired in fantasy and exotica. Ballet's narrative focus on private love intrigue and choreographical hierarchy in favour of individual dances were anathema to the collectivist principles advocated for the new art. At mid-decade, the Leningrad journal *Zhizn' iskusstva* was filled with articles bearing such titles as "Ballet and Contemporaneity" and "What is to be Done with Ballet?" This statement from the latter could summarize the sense of crisis: "We need a decisive shift out of the deadlock of the repertoire, otherwise our ballet theatre, being nothing but a depository for various fossils, will lose any right to existence and will be closed down."⁷⁴⁸

Roar, China! and *The Red Poppy* both sought to improve on their competition by making a claim to greater realism: they ask their audience to believe that the China performed onstage corresponds somehow to an objective social reality out in the world beyond the theatre's walls. In this sense both reject Vakhtangov's purely theatrical, artificial China, whose verisimilitude was an absurd idea. China was to be shown to the Soviet audience "as it really was," in a manner concordant with the Soviet internationalist image of the world. The Vakhtangov Theatre's acknowledgement of the falsity and constructedness of theatrical representation could not achieve the desired effect of internationalist aesthetics, an emotional connection with China as a commensurable revolutionary reality.

⁷⁴⁷ *Kino* 11 (March 16, 1926): 1.

⁷⁴⁸ E. M. Liukom, ballerina at the Academic Ballet, in "Chto delat' s baletom?" *Zhizn' iskusstva* 7 (1925): 31.

These aspirations towards realism, however, encountered a range of complex problems. In each case, these problems can be seen to relate to the question of authenticity, though the word means rather different things in the context of each production. *Roar, China!* used Chinese props, costumes and music to assert an atmosphere of ethnographic authenticity, thereby seeking to evoke sympathy for the plight of the Chinese characters as representatives of their nation. Contemporary critics, however, reacted uncomfortably to these attempts at ethnographic authenticity, which they saw as naively naturalist and in contradiction with theatre's necessary artificiality. The creative team that staged *The Red Poppy*, meanwhile, was riven by different ideas over what an aesthetically authentic ballet experience of China might be. While the first act offered a collectivist vision for ballet set in a struggling contemporary China recognizably close to Tret'iakov's text, the second reverted to an aesthetic based on pre-modern Chinese art and the heritage of pre-revolutionary ballet, which foregrounded the individual dances of the ballerina. *The Red Poppy* ultimately retained many of the established conventions of the ballet form, most prominently its exoticism and its emphasis on the love intrigue, just as it sought through its narrative to transcend and reject the values embedded in those forms.

I shall proceed with a detailed comparative reading of these two high-profile China spectacles as realized in their initial productions: the Moscow production of *Roar, China!* at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1926, and the productions of *The Red Poppy* in Moscow and Leningrad in 1927 and 1929. Both struggled to overcome the perceived inadequacies of their repertoire by projecting themselves as authentic representations of contemporary reality. In this sense, they aligned themselves with the wider Soviet project of de-exoticizing the image of China. An important question remains in both cases, though it may remain unanswerable: to what extent were these presentist, de-exotifying intentions on the part of their creators replicated in their reception by audiences? Did the spectators of *Roar, China!* not experience,

in the production's deliberately ethnographic, "Chinese" atmosphere, something of the "sensation of exoticism" that Victor Segalen discovered in the "notion of difference, the perception of Diversity" itself?⁷⁴⁹ Did the audiences that flocked to *The Red Poppy* see class struggle transcending the *chinoiserie* that filled Tao Hua's opiated dream dance, or did they just enjoy watching dancing poppies and acrobats with swords?

Beneath this ambiguous drive to replace the exotic with the authentic, moreover, both productions show striking similarities at the basic level of plot structure, what we might call their mythical form. A comparison of the two will show that both employ a familiar ritual narrative whereby individual self-sacrifice is required for the sake of the social, in order to bring the Chinese masses to consciousness. Thus the project to provide a more authentic, contemporary vision of China finds itself imposing a new Soviet master plot onto that Chinese reality.⁷⁵⁰ In both spectacles, moreover, the element of ritual sacrifice is organized around the category of gender, testifying in both cases to the "masculine" nature of revolution as imagined in early Soviet culture.⁷⁵¹ *Roar, China!* presents a male, homosocial act of mutual self-sacrifice as the necessary rite that bonds the Chinese mass together as a self-aware community. *The Red Poppy*, by contrast, revalorizes the romantic ballet figure of the exotic sacrificial heroine in order to show female self-sacrifice facilitating the reproduction of the patriarchal Soviet message of revolution.

II. *Roar, China!* and the Ethnographic Mask

Tret'iakov, with an ambiguity that we will find also in *Den Shi-khua* (see Chapter Five), both asserted the documentary validity of his play and acknowledged he had changed a few things. "These are the facts," he declares in his introduction to the text of *Roar, China!* "I

⁷⁴⁹ Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*, ed. and trans. Yaël Rachel Schlick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 19.

⁷⁵⁰ The notion of the Soviet master plot is developed in Clark, *Soviet Novel*, passim.

⁷⁵¹ On the masculine character of early Soviet culture, see Eliot Borenstein, *Men Without Women: Masculinity & Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

barely had to change them at all.”⁷⁵² He does admit to shortening the action of the play, reducing the Captain’s two-day ultimatum to a single day.⁷⁵³ He also, by his own admission, altered the scene of Hawley’s death. Hawley, Tret’iakov explains, was an agent for the American company Robert Dollar, engaged in exporting various goods such as wood oil down the Yangzi from Sichuan.⁷⁵⁴ “Hundreds, possibly thousands of coolies, porters and boatmen” depended on his export business for their livelihood.⁷⁵⁵ This situation led to a confrontation: “The fact is that a conflict occurred between Hawley and the boatmen, the conflict escalated into a fight, and consequently the corpse of the Robert Dollar & Co. agent was fished out of the Yangzi.”⁷⁵⁶ This phrasing strongly suggests that Hawley was drowned in a fight with multiple boatmen. In *Roar, China!*, however, Hawley drowns after a fight with a single boatman, Chi, who is ferrying him across the river.

Western newspaper sources corroborate Tret’iakov’s original account to an extent. *The Times* of London reported that “Mr. Hawley was murdered as the result of a dispute with junk men, who declared that steamers were taking away their living.”⁷⁵⁷ A later article on the same incident states that Hawley was killed “by the junkmen of Wanhsien” because he violated the junks’ agreed monopoly on wood oil transportation. According to *The Times’*

⁷⁵² Tret’iakov, *Slyshish’, Moskva?*, 67. Original text: “Таков факт. Мне почти не пришлось изменять его.”

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁵⁴ Mark Gamsa notes that Tret’iakov deliberately altered the name of the company Hawley worked for. According to Walter and Ruth Meserve, Hawley was employed by a British firm, Messrs Arnold and Co. of Shanghai. (See Meserve and Meserve, “Stage History of *Roar China!*,” 1.) “By identifying his protagonist’s employer as Robert Dollar & Co.,” Gamsa writes, “Tret’iakov (who in another play, *Moscow, Do You Copy?! in 1923*, called an agent of an American bank “Mr Pound”) appropriated the suggestive name of a US shipping company, which had extensive dealings with China but no connection to Wanhsien, while changing Hawley’s line of trade allowed him some play with the idea of “skinning” the Chinese.” Mark Gamsa, “Sergei Tret’iakov’s *Roar, China!* between Moscow and China,” *Itinerario* 36, no. 2 (August 2012): 93.

⁷⁵⁵ Tret’iakov, *Slyshish’, Moskva?*, 65.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 66.

⁷⁵⁷ *The Times*, July 7, 1924.

Shanghai correspondent, “[a]s he was beginning to move the wood oil, Mr Hawley was set upon by rowdies, hit over the head, and knocked into the river.”⁷⁵⁸ *The Times* account, in other words, grants greater independent agency to the boatmen, who kill Hawley because he is encroaching on their business. The *New York Times* agreed that the junk men had “threatened death to any one attempting to load the wood oil on a steamer,” and describes Hawley kicking one of the junk men before the others turned on him. “The American ran towards the river, expecting to swim to safety, but was clubbed over the head and fell into the water. His own boatmen rescued him and took him aboard the gunboat, where he died.”⁷⁵⁹

In Tret'iakov's version, by contrast, the Chinese junk men have no independent business, and are entirely dependent on Hawley. In fact, they are transformed at the start of the play into load-bearing coolies, the standard Soviet symbol of exploited Chinese labour. The 1926 production opened with a sequence, reportedly ten to fifteen minutes long, in which the boatmen dragged chests of tea off the stage, “to the sounds of a Chinese work song and the rhythmic shouts of the overseer.”⁷⁶⁰ (The opening of *The Red Poppy*, seventeen months later, was to be strikingly similar.) When Hawley lowers the pay he is giving his porters, they protest, but when he throws the money into the crowd, they fight one another to get their hands on it. A riot breaks out, quelled by police, and Chi, one of the most vocal protestors, is fired. Later Hawley visits the *Cockchafer* and is ferried back across the river by Chi, now reverting to his other job as a boatman. (In their role as boatmen the Chinese characters also have no steady work; they are reduced to sitting on the quay, hoping to snare foreigners as fares.) Hawley's death, in the play's version of events, occurs when he will not pay the fare

⁷⁵⁸ *The Times*, Aug. 15, 1924.

⁷⁵⁹ *New York Times*, July 1, 1924.

⁷⁶⁰ A. Gvozdev, “Tragediia massy (‘Roar, China!’ v teatre im. Vs. Meierkhol'da),” *Krasnaia gazeta*, January 29, 1926. Reprinted in T. V. Lanina, ed., *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritiki* (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 2000), 197. The figure of ten to fifteen minutes comes from Zagorskii, who thought the opening failed to move the action along with the pace necessary for agitational theatre. Mikhail Zagorskii, “Rychi Kitai v teatre imeni Meierkhol'da,” *Zhizn' iskusstva* 6 (1926): 11.

Chi asks. Chi refuses to row any further; Hawley punches him in the face, but misses with the second swing and falls into the river. It has been established in an earlier scene that Hawley cannot swim.

Tret'iakov's reworking of the facts forces him to invent and repeat this convenient detail. Nonetheless, it allowed for a dramatic staging: the single boat floating in the stream of water that ran across the Meyerhold Theatre's stage, the dramatic confrontation between Western power and Chinese suffering occurring in this mediating zone between the two enemy camps. But such a reformulation also maximizes Western aggression and Chinese passivity, the dynamic already established in their economic relationship. It is Hawley who strikes, rather than being struck. Chi only tries to avoid the blows aimed at him, and is barely responsible for the death. It seems Tret'iakov found it necessary to alter the facts to suit the purposes of dramatic exposition; in order to sharpen his appeal for Chinese uprising, the imperative to "roar," he has to present his representative Chinese in an even greater state of debasement and passive servitude than is suggested by other reports.

It may be countered, of course, that Western news sources might serve their own bias by reporting the event in a manner that highlighted Chinese aggression and deviousness.⁷⁶¹ But Tret'iakov's most significant innovation comes in the manner in which the victims for execution are to be chosen. According to the *New York Times*, the captain demanded that the leaders of the junkmen be executed if the actual responsible parties could not be found.⁷⁶² In

⁷⁶¹ An article by the Shanghai correspondent for the London *Times*, for example, describes Hawley as being "set upon by rowdies, hit over the head, and knocked into the river," while "[t]he better-class junkmen kept out of the row." This correspondent also argues that the death must have occurred with "officials' connivance," since a junk monopoly on wood oil would mean more revenue as junks could be taxed more easily than foreign ships. The article concludes with a ringing endorsement of the Captain's actions: "Lawlessness, insecurity of foreign life and property away from the treaty ports, and official disregard of responsibility have come to such a pass in China that a few sharp lessons are indispensable if foreign trade is to survive. One such lesson H.M.S. Cockchafer has given, and it has had good effect." (*The Times*, August 15, 1924.) Tret'iakov's play, of course, argues that the lesson had precisely the opposite effect.

Tret'iakov's version, the captain simply proposes that "two members of the boatmen's union" be executed if Chi cannot be located.⁷⁶³ The boatmen do not at first accept this notion of collective responsibility. One shouts that the Daoin' (the head of the city) should die; another that Chi is the guilty one, and if he can't be found, his family should be punished in his place. The Second Boatmen, in particular, is inconsolable, repeatedly insisting "We're not guilty" and "I didn't kill anyone."⁷⁶⁴ By contrast, the only proletarian in the group, the Stoker, tells tales of the Russian Civil War, presenting the Russian sacrifice for the first revolution as the model on which these Chinese boatmen should base their future action. His principle is simple, and class-based: coolie must die for coolie.⁷⁶⁵

The notion of collective responsibility, in other words, is actually introduced into the play by the Captain's excessive reparatory demands. It is gradually taken on and revalorized by the coolies as the basis for their own, newly conscious class solidarity, an ideological victory that makes their apparent defeat in the play acceptable. This new notion of solidarity requires that hierarchical concepts of leadership and responsibility be annulled. After an old boatman who believes in resurrection offers to be the first victim, Fei proposes himself as the second. But both are struck down by the First Boatman, who insists "we are all equal" and proposes instead that they draw lots.⁷⁶⁶ The lots fall to the old boatman and the Second

⁷⁶² See for example *New York Times*, July 6, 1924; *New York Times*, August 16, 1924. When the play came to New York City, the *New York Herald Tribune* repeated the assertion that the British captain called for the execution of identifiable leaders: "Failing the apprehension of the guilty ones, he demanded, the leaders of the agitation which had resulted in the crime, two *known* heads of the junkmen's guild, were to be executed in their stead." *New York Herald Tribune*, November 9, 1930. An excellent summary of the event as reported in Western media is provided by Meserve and Meserve, "Stage History of *Roar China!*," 1–2.

⁷⁶³ Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?*, 118.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁶⁵ "poor coolies, just like us, drove out their masters. [...] They starved and died for you, Wanxiang coolie. Learn from them. Learn to die for all the boatmen who are beaten by the English in towns everywhere." *Ibid.*, 129–30.

Boatman, who most protested his innocence. Thus the pivotal element of sacrifice is revalorized by Tret'iakov's reworking of the "facts": instead of the leader being responsible for the led, here all are responsible for all.

Roar, China! exemplifies the confluence, outlined in the Introduction, of the documentary and mythopoetic impulses in Soviet internationalist aesthetics. Tret'iakov reworks the "newspaper facts" to provide an exemplary tale of the individual sacrificing himself for the masses. (And it is male self-sacrifice we are dealing with here, though the gender complexities of the "Boy's" suicide will be discussed below.) The documentary skeleton of raw material is fleshed out as a carefully structured narrative based around three instances of death: the death of Hawley, the suicide of the Boy, and the execution of the two representatives of the boatmen.⁷⁶⁷ The first is the spark that drives the action, as well as satisfying the audience's sense of justice; the second and third are essentially self-sacrifices, individual deaths embraced for the benefit of the community.

The "Boy" is the Chinese servant on the English ship, who commits suicide in protest at the injustice of the Captain's demands: a traditional gesture, the play notes, made by subordinates against illegitimate officials. This Boy is not a "documentary" figure; he functions as a symbolic crosser of the border between the play's two hostile groups. Moreover, the effectiveness of the role was widely attributed to Maria Babanova's transvestite performance; according to one reviewer, she "created an exceptionally expressive and tender artistic miniature out of the lyrical role of the Chinese boy-servant."⁷⁶⁸ Feminized

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁶⁷ Tret'iakov throws in a fifth death for good measure right at the end: the Hoshen, or Buddhist priest, is shot dead while chanting his superstitious lies about cloth that can stop bullets. Thus the representative of mendacious tradition is cleared out of the awakened mass's way just in time for the future.

⁷⁶⁸ K. Famarin, "Rychi, Kitai (Teatr imeni Meierkhol'da)," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, January 28, 1926. This was Babanova's first role *en travesti*, according to Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet*

by Babanova's transvestite performance, the Boy is also the object of the play's only flicker of trans-ethnic romance, that narrative staple that was to play a key role in *The Red Poppy* the following year. Here, however, East-West attraction is reduced to a purely physiological basis, the spoilt French daughter Cordelia fixating on the Boy's "charming lips" and "exquisite head shape."⁷⁶⁹

Thus it is the Boy, played in fact by a woman, who fills what we might call the Madame Butterfly role in the play: an object of Western lust who ultimately commits suicide in self-sacrificial defence of offended native honour, thus reasserting the absolute division of East and West threatened by this trans-ethnic relationship.⁷⁷⁰ The dedication of this self-sacrifice to the national group is sealed by the ethnographic detail of the song. Most commentators agreed that the Boy's suicide was the most touching moment in the production, greatly enriched by this "ethnographic" death song. Nikolai Bukharin found the scene "devastating": as he wrote in *Pravda*, "this pitiful song, sung by a mortally offended boy, and this quiet and uncomplaining preparation for death, are unforgettable."⁷⁷¹ P. Novitskii, who retrospectively appraised this as one of the peak moments in Soviet theatre, had no doubts as to the national significance of the Boy's suicide, which he "experienced as

Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde, trans. Roxane Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 198.

⁷⁶⁹ Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?*, 89.

⁷⁷⁰ I am invoking here Puccini's operatic, tragic redaction of the story; in Pierre Loti's original, *Madame Chrysanthemum*, there is no suicide, his Oriental lover remaining passive to the end. For an overview of the Madame Butterfly story in its various permutations, see Jonathan Wisenthal, ed., *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). Roy Chan, borrowing Gina Marchetti's reading of the "Butterfly myth" in Hollywood film as "a longstanding narrative by which the subordinate Asian is granted acceptance by White society, but only through sacrifice," suggests we read Sin-Bin-U's suicide as another instance of dying for love, in this case trans-national solidarity. In this case, the Butterfly sacrifice performs not separation, but communion. Chan, "Broken Tongues," 47.

⁷⁷¹ Nikolai Bukharin, "'Roar, China!' v teatre Meierkol'da," *Pravda*, 2 February 1926, 3. "эта жалобная песенка, которую поет насмерть оскорбленный мальчик, эта тихая и безропотная подготовка к смерти—не забываются."

the terrible and profound tragedy of a people [*narod*]. The song lingers in the memory for life.”⁷⁷²

Nancy Jay argues that the logic of sacrifice is expressed through two aspects, joining and separating, that function as the inverse of each other: communal sacrifices serve to bond a community, while expiatory sacrifices seek to separate that bonded community from pollutions and dangers.⁷⁷³ If we accept Jay’s model, the Boy’s act of self-sacrifice clearly performs an expiatory function: it condemns the Captain and the Westerners as a group, and affirms their separation from the Boy’s own ethnicity, a separation his mediatory role briefly violated. The same sacrifice simultaneously performs a communal function, reaffirming the unity of the nation for whose sake and in whose name the Boy dies. As the liminal character who crosses the divide between the two worlds of the play, the Boy has to die to assert the total separation of those two worlds. This sense of transgression was doubled, in the Meyerhold Theatre’s production, by Babanova’s transvestite performance, which violated gender boundaries as well. His/her death puts an end to this confusion, asserting the clarity of group membership that is, for Jay, the essential function of sacrifice.

The climactic self-sacrifice of the two chosen boatmen also enacts what Jay would call a communion: it conclusively binds together the boatmen, whose ethnographic markers make them representatives of the Chinese working masses more broadly. Their disunity is asserted at the play’s opening in the scene where Hawley throws money into the crowd, and a fight breaks out as individuals scramble for personal gain. For the rest of the play, however, the boatmen act and speak more or less as a group. Myong Jung-Baek argues that dialogue in *Roar, China!* serves primarily to bind the two opposing sides together internally, as

⁷⁷² Quoted in Konstantin Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol’d* (Moscow: Izd-vo Nauka, 1969), 345.

⁷⁷³ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 17–19.

utterances in intra-group conversations tend to reinforce rather than contradict one another.⁷⁷⁴ This unconscious unity becomes conscious through the process of drawing lots, making explicit the mechanism of self-sacrifice for the community, the individual sacrificed for the social. This process of awakening to consciousness through communion enables the climactic image of the play, where Western imperialists, guns levelled, face off with a Chinese crowd chanting in unison: “Away! Away! Away!” (Вон! Вон! Вон!). The audial injunction of the title is achieved: China, the crowd, which began the play chanting its passive labour songs to the rhythm of authority, ends in unanimous, purposeful voice. A newspaper report of an atrocity is transformed into a mythical narrative about the power of revolutionary consciousness to prosper and grow from apparent defeats.

Faced with the charge of altering the “facts” to suit his propagandistic purposes, Tret’iakov might well reply that what matters is not the precise detail, which is open to conflicting and biased reports, but rather the *typicality* of the incident. Indeed, Tret’iakov pointed for confirmation of *Roar, China’s* typicality to the shelling of Wanxian by a foreign gunboat in 1926, which occurred after the play was written. This event led some, Tret’iakov commented, to regard the play as “prophetic”; to which he replied that all it did was accurately convey “the remarkable monotony and consistency of the imperialists’ methods in colonial policy, especially those of the English.”⁷⁷⁵ This suggests that the documentary aesthetic, as applied to the theatre, must typify: it must convince the audience that what they see is metonymically representative of an existing social reality called China. In order to produce this conviction, both Tret’iakov’s script and the Meyerhold Theatre’s 1926 staging chose to accentuate a high degree of what I call “ethnographic authenticity,” in costumes, props, music and (sometimes) language. However, this demand for ethnographic authenticity

⁷⁷⁴ Myong Jung-Baek, “S. Tret’jakov und China,” Ph.D. dissertation, Göttingen, 1987, 40.

⁷⁷⁵ Tret’iakov, *Slyshish’, Moskva*, 67.

creates special problems in a theatrical setting. How is an “authentic” contemporary China to be represented on the stage, a conventional, artificial space? How are Russian actors, speaking for the most part in standard Russian, to represent the authentic historical experiences of the Chinese people?

It may seem incongruous that these assertions of realism and authenticity appeared on the stage of the Meyerhold Theatre. Vsevolod Meyerhold is commonly viewed as the great champion of theatricality and open artifice in early twentieth century Russian theatre, forming a convenient diptych with Stanislavsky and his naturalist aspirations to mimic real life. In his programmatic early essays, Meyerhold advocated for the creation of a “conventionalized” or “stylized” theatre (*uslovnyi teatr*), a theatre in which the spectator would not be allowed to forget the circumstances and conventions of theatrical performance.⁷⁷⁶ *Roar, China!*, however, displays a politically motivated investment in the possibility of convincing its audience that it represents actually existing real life. In fact, if we look more closely at the career of the Meyerhold Theater, we may sense that this return to the real represents not so much a retreat to the positions of an earlier naturalism as a movement away from the hyper-aesthetic tendency of “baring the device” (*otkrytie priema*) towards a new form of avant-garde realism. As Roman Jakobson has argued, “realism” is not a fixed, singular mode; rather, realism constitutes a set of representational conventions that are accepted at some time as producing a verisimilar image of reality. All realisms, for Jakobson, are open to challenge and replacement by new conventions.⁷⁷⁷ Meyerhold’s laying bare of theatrical artifice in his famous early productions represented a concerted attack on the conventions of naturalism and their claims to verisimilitude. For *Roar, China!*, however, a

⁷⁷⁶ For Meyerhold’s programmatic early statements on theatricality, see the essays “The Stylized Theatre” and “The Fairground Booth,” in Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. Edward Braun (Bury St Edmunds: Methuen, 1991), 58–63, 119–142.

⁷⁷⁷ Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 19–27.

full exposure of the artificiality of the theatrical spectacle would fail to generate the correct levels of sympathy and solidarity. Vakhtangov's openly false, theatrical China will not do; internationalist aesthetics must create a new realism onstage, in order to assert that the China the audience sees corresponds to an authentic reality.

These movements towards a new realism chimed, in fact, with preceding developments at the Meyerhold Theatre. James Symons, for example, argues that the extreme theatrical abstraction of 1922's *The Magnificent Cuckold* (*Velikodushnyi rogonosets*) was tempered in subsequent productions of the 1920s. For 1923's *Earth Upturned* (*Zemlia dybom*—an earlier collaboration with Tret'iakov), Meyerhold combined the biomechanics, scenic constructivism, and bare stage of *The Magnificent Cuckold* with objects inserted into stage space from the world outside the theater: “real objects—guns, motorcycles, lorries, field telephones, stretchers, a harvester, a mobile kitchen—and costumes appropriate to the real apparel of the characters[.]”⁷⁷⁸ A similar juxtaposition characterized 1925's *The Warrant* (*Mandat*), in which “realistic props, costumes and makeup were placed on a frankly nonillusionistic stage” consisting of a rotating circular platform enclosed within rotating concentric rings.⁷⁷⁹

Roar, China!, however, was not officially directed by Meyerhold. For the first time at the theatre that bore his name, Meyerhold delegated directorial responsibility to a student and protégé, Vasiliï F. Fedorov.⁷⁸⁰ This does not seem, however, to have resulted in a great

⁷⁷⁸ James M. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: the Post-Revolutionary Productions, 1920–1932* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 97.

⁷⁷⁹ Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 140.

⁷⁸⁰ Fedorov had studied with Meyerhold at the State Advanced Directors' Workshop (Gosudarstvennye vysshie rezhisserskie masterskie—GVYRM), and had worked on Meyerhold's productions of *Nora* (1922), *Smert' Tarelkina* (1922), *Les* (1924), and *Mandat* (1925). D. I. Zolotnitsky claims that this was the first and also the last time that Meyerhold handed over the directing reins to someone else for a production at the Meyerhold Theatre. D. I. Zolotinskii, *Budni i prazdniki teatral'nogo Oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1978), 43. Symons, however, argues that

deviation from the production style of the theatre as it had developed up to that time. For one thing, according to Aleksei Gvozdev, Fedorov clearly borrowed his production's slow tempo and symphonic use of music, speech, voice and gesture from *Bubus the Teacher* (*Uchitel' Bubus*), staged by Meyerhold the previous year.⁷⁸¹ Fedorov himself concurred that he had used the technique of the "acting of pre-acting" (*igra pred'igry*), developed for *Bubus the Teacher*, in directing *Roar, China!*

Furthermore, Meyerhold's role as "artistic supervisor" may have had a major shaping effect on the production. Indeed, a conflict emerged over this very issue.⁷⁸² Whatever the division of inspiration, the combination of realistic and openly artificial elements that Symons identifies in *Earth Upturned* and *The Warrant* seems also to have characterized the production of *Roar, China!* The stage was split into three areas. The Chinese quayside occupied the proscenium, nearest the audience, while the mechanized construction of the battleship *Cockchafer* loomed at the back. Separating them was a channel of real water across the stage, the means of transference between the two worlds, and the scene of the pivotal

Meyerhold performed a similar delegation of directorial responsibility for 1927's *Window Into a Village* and 1929's *The Shot*. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 183.

⁷⁸¹ A. A. Gvozdev, *Teatr imeni Vs. Meierkhol'da (1920–1926)* (Leningrad: Academia, 1927), 41–2, 46–7.

⁷⁸² Meyerhold's contribution was apparently noted on the production's poster, but its extent was contested by Fedorov. (The detail on the poster is mentioned in Lanina, ed., *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, 568 n220.) Then, in August 1926 several members of the Meyerhold Theatre wrote to the editors of *Kharkovskii proletarii* and *Pravda*, claiming that Fedorov's production had been greatly transformed by Meyerhold's intervention during final rehearsals. In general, they credited Meyerhold with making cuts that reduced the amount of "feeriiia" (*f erie*—pantomime, extravaganza) and increased the emphasis on the Chinese struggle for independence. They also claimed Meyerhold completely remade the European scenes, and improved the Chinese group scenes by suggesting that Fedorov use certain paintings by Giotto di Bondone as models. Lastly, Meyerhold was credited with shaping the popular role of the "Boy," as played by Babanova. (See letter to *Kharkovskii Proletarii*, August 13, 1926, signed by 56 members of the Meyerhold Theatre, and letter to *Pravda*, August 24, 1926, signed by 82 members of the Meyerhold Theatre.) Fedorov wrote an open reply to *Zhizn' iskusstva* refuting these claims point by point, and left the theatre. (See Vasilii Fedorov, "Otveta na 'privet!' — pis'mo v redaktsiiu," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 34 (1926): 12–13.

death of Hawley.⁷⁸³ During the climactic confrontation at the end of the play, the battleship moved forward to threaten the quayside.

The Chinese side of this visually realized antagonism was characterized through the use of props, costumes and music that claimed varying degrees of ethnographic authenticity. Surviving cast lists suggest that the stage was filled with typical figures from Chinese reality, familiar already from Tret'iakov's other works: a fan vendor, a barber, a chiropodist, a puppeteer, and a knife grinder appeared alongside the larger groups of porters, boatmen and police.⁷⁸⁴ Costumes and musical instruments were imported from China, and gramophone recordings of Peking opera were acquired to assist in putting music to the play.⁷⁸⁵ Some instruments were reported as making the journey across the Gobi by car, since "they cannot be brought by rail, in view of the revolutionary events in China": the presence of their authenticity, such reports emphasised, had not been achieved without a degree of heroic struggle.⁷⁸⁶ Chinese students studying in Moscow were also, it seems, invited to rehearsals to confirm the authenticity of the "China" presented on the Meyerhold Theatre's stage.⁷⁸⁷

The Europeans, by contrast, were painted in the exaggerated style of Soviet satire: fox-trotting, cocktail-swilling psychopaths. These too were types, but types presented in such a way as to emphasise their theatrical artificiality. As Meyerhold himself acknowledged,

⁷⁸³ "'Roar, China!' v Teatre Meierkhol'da: Beseda s rezhisserom V. Fedorovym," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, November 12, 1925.

⁷⁸⁴ RGALI f. 963, op. 1, ed. khr. 467, l. 12–13.

⁷⁸⁵ "'Roar, China!' Instrumenty i kostiumy pribyli iz Kitaia." *Vecherniaia Moskva*, December 10, 1925.

⁷⁸⁶ "'Rychi, Kitai!' Muzykal'nye instrumenty iz Kitaia. Na avtomobiliakh cherez pustyniu Gobi," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, Dec 4, 1925. This crossing of the Gobi echoes the Great Flight, the film of which was playing in Moscow at the time, as well as Tret'iakov's exit from China at the end of *Chzhungo* and Borodin's retreat as described by Erdberg in the last of his *Chinese Novellas*, *The Red Scarf* (*Krasnyi sharf*).

⁷⁸⁷ Rudnitskii, *Russian and Soviet Theater*, 197.

Fedorov chose “to render the European scenes in the style of masked theatre; in their relation to the events of the play the Europeans speak and act automatically, in accordance with well-worn stereotypes[.]”⁷⁸⁸ The artificiality of the Europeans was intended to alienate the audience. The realism used to depict the Chinese, by contrast, was a deliberate device intended to render them the play’s only feasible objects of sympathy: “Genuine human feeling, which [the Europeans] lack, belongs entirely to the Chinese, which is why the Chinese scenes were staged within the framework of everyday life.”⁷⁸⁹ Even Chinese theatrical techniques, which interested many Soviet theatre practitioners of the period precisely for their open acknowledgement of theatrical artifice, were turned to realist ends in *Roar, China!*⁷⁹⁰ Chinese theatricality in *Roar, China!*, according to Meyerhold, was used to convey the atmosphere of what these Soviet theatre practitioners considered to be authentic Chinese social life: “Chinese theatrical methods, therefore, were only used for their specific realism and ‘ceremoniality’.”⁷⁹¹ The open artificiality of Chinese theatrical technique was employed critically, to express a false ceremoniality operating in authentic Chinese social life.

⁷⁸⁸ V. E. Meierkhol’d, “‘Rychi, Kitai!’ Beseda s korrespondentom ‘Vechernei Moskvy’ (1926 god),” in V. E. Meierkhol’d, *Stat’i, pis’ma, rechi, besedy* (Moskva: Izd-vo Iskusstvo, 1968), 2:99.

“трактовать европейские сцены в характере театра масок; европейцы в своем отношении к происходящему разговаривают и действуют автоматически, согласно выработанным шаблонам[.]”

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid. “Настоящее человеческое чувство, которого им недостает, всецело принадлежит китайцам, поэтому китайские сцены разрабатывались в бытовом и жизненном плане.”

⁷⁹⁰ On the interest in Chinese theatre in the 1920s, see Vera Iureneva, *Moi zapiski o kitaiskom teatre* (Moscow: Tea-kino-pechat’, 1928). Iureneva argues that Chinese theatre allows contemporary Europeans to see that the essence of theatre is play or performance (*igra*). In her advocacy of theatre as play and rejection of naturalist theatre as a degradation into “literature in images,” Iureneva’s analysis of Chinese theatre echoes many of Meyerhold’s earlier positions on the nature of theatricality, and anticipates the more famous interpretations of Chinese theatre made in the mid-1930s by Brecht, to which we shall return in the Epilogue. Ibid., 36–8.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid. “Методы китайского театра, таким образом, применялись только в меру своего специфического реализма и «церемониальности».”

Critical reactions to the play coalesced around these issues of realism versus open artifice, and their implications for the correct way to represent China and internationalism as political issues. The most hostile review of all came from A. Tsenovskii in *Trud*, who lambasted the play as fundamentally false, despite its pretensions to authenticity: “There is real water, boats, a metallic tower on a gunship. There are real Chinese tombs, musical instruments, acrobats, even real Chinese people among the participants. There is no real play.”⁷⁹² In particular, Tsenovskii violently rejected the production’s mixture of modes. Ethnography is all very well, he wrote, especially the “very interesting Chinese music” featured in the production; but ethnography should be shown separately.⁷⁹³ Likewise, acrobatics, for Tsenovskii, belonged in a circus, not on a theatrical stage. This confusion of modes led Tsenovskii into a kind of categorical crisis, unsure even what to call the spectacle in front of him: “And ultimately it is unclear what, exactly, this is supposed to be: an agitational play, ethnography, everyday life, an illustration to the newspaper reports, or simply a spectacle from the Theatre of Horrors? Whatever you like, just not a literary play.”⁷⁹⁴

Tsenovskii was reviewing the general rehearsal; by his own admission, many of the elements he found distasteful and cheaply shocking, including exploding rockets and a painfully slow pace, were removed by the time the play opened to the public. But Tsenovskii remained steadfast in his assertion that the play was fundamentally false because it lacked

⁷⁹² A. Tsenovskii, “Roar, China,” *Trud*, Jan 24, 1926. “Есть настоящая вода, лодки, металлическая башня на канонерке. Есть настоящие китайские гробы, музыкальные инструменты, акробаты, даже настоящие китайцы в числе участвующих. Но нет настоящей пьесы.” This is the only suggestion I have found that Chinese actors, or possibly musicians, participated in the production.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.* “И, в конце концов, нельзя понять: что же это, собственно, такое? Агитационный спектакль, этнография, быт, иллюстрация к газетным сообщением или просто зрелище с кабинетном театра ужасов? Все, что угондо, только не литературная пьеса.”

“artistic value,” it was not “literary.” It failed in its obligation to “seize the spectator with the inner essence and artistic elaboration of events, confrontations, and heightened class conflict.”⁷⁹⁵ Tret’iakov’s approach, which Tsenovskii dismisses as “a pale photographing, copying of reality,” produces not authenticity, but falseness: “Everything is pale, torpid, dry. Everything is artificial, contrived, with a certain note of falsehood, with certain gestures and poses—from the beginning to the end of the play.”⁷⁹⁶ Tsenovskii agreed that a play about contemporary China was needed for the Soviet stage; but he insisted that this was not the play.

Tsenovskii’s negative review provoked a response from the Bolshevik Party itself, in the person of Nikolai Bukharin. Bukharin wrote in *Pravda* that *Roar, China!* was, on the contrary, very much the play about China that was needed. Tsenovskii claimed that the play was false because it was bad art. Bukharin insisted in reply that the play was an accurate representation of what he considered to be a genuine historical process: “the transformation of a herd of workers into a revolutionary proletariat.”⁷⁹⁷ The realism of Tret’iakov’s play was guaranteed for Bukharin by its correspondence with what he declared to be an objective historical truth: imperialist oppression in the colonized world must lead inevitably to revolutionary consciousness.

Another official voice supporting the play was that of Hu Hanmin, a prominent Guomindang leader who was then mid-way through a six-month stay in Moscow. Hu also rejected the Tsenovskii position by acclaiming *Roar, China!* as successful realism, insisting that the play “has a profound feel for Chinese reality,” and should be viewed “not as

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid. “Должен охватить зрителя внутренней сущностью, художественной разработкой явлений, сопоставлений, напряженной классовой борьбы.”

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid. “И не может писатель заниматься бледным фотографированием, копированием действительности... Все бледно, вяло, сухо. Все искусственно, надумано, с какой-то фальшивой ноткой, с какими-то жестами и позами—от начала до конца спектакля.”

⁷⁹⁷ Nikolai Bukharin, “Rychi Kitai!” v teatre Meierkhol’da,” *Pravda*, February 2, 1926.

something invented and distanced from life, but as a living, vivid reflection of our Chinese reality.”⁷⁹⁸ As proof, Hu insisted that Chinese audience would respond positively to the production.

Other critical reactions returned constantly to questions of realism, artifice, and the role of ethnography. These reviews tended to view *Roar, China!* through a critical prism that separated naturalism, the attempt to produce a sealed mimetic representation of reality, from the open acknowledgement of theatrical artifice. The Meyerhold Theatre, for them, was largely connected with the second trend. *Roar, China's* admixture of these principles, and introduction of “authentic” ethnographic elements, seems to have confused these critic’s notions of the theatrical. For example, Mikhail Borisovich Zagorskii, writing in *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, found a jarring contrast between the “constructivist” shape of the battleship, which exposed the principles of its composition, and the “naturalist” detail of a real stream of water running across the stage. The water’s naturalism was not honoured, however: in the scene of Hawley’s death, according to Zagorskii, he fell not into the river but into a space behind it, and his corpse was brought back onstage completely dry. Zagorskii also considered the ethnographic detail in the production excessive: it could not be reduced to exoticist *chinoiserie*, but still, why, in the Meyerhold Theatre of all places, was such weight given to things? Zagorskii condemned this attempt at ethnographic validation as a “sham naturalism,”

⁷⁹⁸ “Hu-Han-Min—о ‘Rychi, Kitai!’ (Stat’ia chlena politbiuro Gomindana),” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, February 5, 1926. “На мой взгляд она очень глубоко прощупывает китайскую действительность. [...] Еще раз нужно сказать, что постановку эту следует рассматривать не как надуманную, оторванную от жизни, а как живое красочное отражение нашей китайской действительности.” Hu Hanmin was one of the prime contenders for leadership of the GMD after the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925. He spent several months in Moscow over the winter of 1925–6, ostensibly to recover from illness and investigate conditions there, but in fact as a form of political exile following suspicions of complicity in the murder of Liao Zhongkai. Hu was greeted with great fanfare, and published a series of articles in *Pravda* on his impressions of Soviet Russia. This sojourn did not enhance his support for the alliance with Moscow, however; on his return to China, Hu called for the GMD to end its alliance with the USSR and the CCP. See David P. Barrett, “The Role of Hu Hanmin in the ‘First United Front’: 1922–27,” *The China Quarterly* 89 (March 1982), 51–62.

a cheap grasp for “authenticity.” On the other hand, the European figures were too conventionalized, simple clichés of “foxtrot Europeanism.”⁷⁹⁹

The reviewer for *Vecherniaia Moskva*, K. Famarin, also objected to the production’s “stylistic contradictoriness.” This was exemplified once more in the opposition of naturalist water and constructivist ship, but also in the juxtaposition of scenes done in the style of “artistic physical-culture,” such as the unloading sequence that opened the play, with scenes constructed “in accordance with all the laws of naturalist theatre.”⁸⁰⁰ Famarin also rejected the production’s use of ethnographic details, which he dubbed “haphazard” and “fragmented,” with individual elements either reduced to an ornamental trinket, or threatening to swell to a disruptive size.⁸⁰¹ Clearly, Famarin quips, the theatre could not resist the lure of authenticity: “the theatre had the opportunity to display individual, authentically Chinese objects, and did not want to turn it down. Though perhaps different ways could have been found to achieve this. An exhibition in the foyer, for example.”⁸⁰² These symbols of authenticity, for Famarin, have no place on the theatrical stage; like Tsenovskii, he finds that they violate or disrupt the artistic unity of the play.

In a similar vein, the poet and critic Sergei Gorodetskii also attacked *Roar, China!* for succumbing too much to “naturalist” solutions in set and props.⁸⁰³ The set’s gunboat failed as

⁷⁹⁹ Zagorskii, “Rychi Kitai,” 11.

⁸⁰⁰ Famarin, “Rychi, Kitai.” “После прекрасных картин в плане художественной физкультуры (хотя бы великолепное начало спектакля — разгрузка корабля), следуют сцены, построенные по всем правилам натуралистического театра[.]”

⁸⁰¹ Ibid. “случайны и совершенно разрознены отдельные этнографические подробности.”

⁸⁰² Ibid. “театр имел возможность показать отдельные подлинно китайские вещи, и не хотел отказаться от этого. Правда, для этого могут быть и другие средства. Ну, хотя бы устройства выставки в фойе.”

⁸⁰³ Sergei Mitrofanivich Gorodetskii was a Symbolist poet close to Meyerhold in his pre-revolutionary years. Gorodetskii worked with the *LEFists* Tret’iakov and Nikolai Aseev on *Verturnaf* (“Versal’skie turisty, na fugas naporovshiesia”), which was due to be staged by Meyerhold at the Theatre of the

constructivism, for Gorodetskii, because it was chiefly a decoration lacking functionality: it did nothing except move slightly forward in the middle of the play and move slightly away at the end. Moreover, its tower displayed a displeasing “lacquered naturalism.”⁸⁰⁴ Gorodetskii had the same problem as Zagorskii and Famarin with the “real” water running across the stage, asking, if this naturalist detail is so important, why is Hawley brought back onstage dry? Gorodetskii found a “photographic naturalism” everywhere, in costumes, props and make-up. This “excursion into ethnography” through the use of real, culturally authentic objects violated for Gorodetskii the principle of theatricality, based on a strict division between the theatrical and real worlds. “[T]he use of ethnography on the stage does not achieve its effect,” he claimed, “for this simple reason: real, everyday things are simply not visible, they are anti-theatrical.”⁸⁰⁵ The lingering ghosts of theatrical convention, meanwhile, returned at times to sabotage naturalism’s goals. When a policeman beat one of the condemned Chinese on the head with a stick, complete with accompanying sound, the laughter from the audience suggested to Gorodetskii that they saw not an event from Chinese reality but rather an echo of the Russian puppet show “Petrushka.”⁸⁰⁶

These naturalistic elements in props and stage set aroused heated reactions from critics like Gorodestki and Famarin, whose ideas about theatricality did not permit such interventions of “the real.” But their presence in fact followed the trend noted by Symons in

Revolution in 1922, but never took place. Gorodetskii also authored the translation of Marcel Martinet’s *The Night* that was subsequently reworked by Tret’iakov to form the basis of *The Easrth Upturned* (*Zemlia dybom*). Symons, *Meyerhold’s Theatre of the Grotesque*, 95.

⁸⁰⁴ Sergei Gorodetskii, “Teatr im. Meierkhol’ da. ‘Rychi, Kitai!’” *Iskusstvo trudiashchimsia* 5 (1926). Reprinted in Lanina, ed., *Meierkhol’d v russkoi teatral’noi kritike*, 199. “Неприятна эта башня и своим лакированным натурализмом.”

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.* “Этот же фотографический натурализм проводится и во всем остальном — в костюмах, в бутафории, в гриме. Но применение этнографии на сцене не достигает эффекта по простой причине: реальные, бытовые вещи просто не видны, они антитеатральны.”

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 200. “Местами получается обратный эффект: когда полисмен бьет палкой (со звуком!) по голове приговоренного, в публике смех, потому что здесь пахнет Петрушкой.”

the Meyerhold Theatre's trajectory through the 1920s. In a 1931 study Boris Alpers divided Meyerhold's post-revolutionary career into a "Sturm und Drang" period of convention-baring theatricality, up until about 1925, and a later period, beginning with *Bubus the Teacher* and peaking with *The Government Inspector (Revizor, 1926)*, in which Meyerhold became preoccupied with creating images of the doomed and vanished past. The transition between these two periods was marked, for Alpers, by a transformation in the meaning of scenery and objects on Meyerhold's stage. In the early period, the stage set and the objects within it were given meaning by the actor's interaction with them, revealing their purely theatrical nature. The wooden bench in *The Magnificent Cuckold* became a house; the sloping bridge in *The Forest (Les, 1924)* could be a road, a bridge, or a hill.⁸⁰⁷ Even the abundance of things from real social life in *D. E. (Daesh' Evropu, 1924)*, for Alpers, "confirmed the triumph of the actor over the authentic things of his epoch."⁸⁰⁸ In the later period, by contrast, the actor's role is no longer active but rather "acquires a decorative, pictorial character."⁸⁰⁹ The actor becomes just "one of the pictorial resources at the director-artist's disposal," integrated into a stage design that is newly expressive on its own terms, not just in reaction to the actors' actions. Things, by contrast, have acquired newly independent power: "Now things fill the stage with a significance that is self-sufficient and independent of the actor."⁸¹⁰ Things now "act" on the stage no less than the actor himself, moving to the fore of the spectacle's system of signification; the "play with things" (*igra s veshchami*) that characterized the earlier period is replaced by the "play of things" (*igra veshchei*).⁸¹¹

⁸⁰⁷ Boris Alpers, *Teatr sotsial'noi maski* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, Sektor iskusstv, 1931), 30–31.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*

Alpers in fact excludes *Roar, China!* from his scheme, on the grounds that its topicality conflicts with the later period's preoccupation with images of the doomed past.⁸¹² This might seem hasty, as the representation of the European group in *Roar, China!* fits quite well Alpers' definition of the "social mask" that underpins the later Meyerhold: a "petrified social type" that the play portrays at the moment of its redundant disappearance from history.⁸¹³ (The canonical example, again, would be the personages in *The Government Inspector* as staged by Meyerhold later in 1926.) On the Chinese side, however, we can see that the objects onstage do have a power independent of or prior to their interaction with the actors, but in a somewhat different way. Their significance is overwhelmingly ethnographic; what they signify, metonymically, is "China." The purported connection of these material objects to some kind of externally existing Chinese cultural reality, affirmed by reports of their arduous journey from China itself, performs a vital role in *Roar, China!*'s rhetorical assertion of authenticity. They are there to tell the audience that this is China, and that the actors they surround, who inhabit their world, are the Chinese.

Within the political context of 1926, when Soviet newspapers were declaring the nationalist Guomindang a legitimate revolutionary force and ally, the ethnographic details in *Roar, China!* serve to bestow a definite *national* identity on these Chinese coolies and boatmen as they move towards collective consciousness. The Comintern's alliance with the Guomindang was justified by the theory, announced by Lenin at the Second Comintern Congress in 1920, that national revolution was a necessary stage in the overthrowing of imperial power in colonized and semi-colonized countries. Tret'iakov even admitted that he deliberately underplayed the elements of class division within Chinese society in the play, in

⁸¹² Ibid., 64.

⁸¹³ Ibid., 78.

order to focus attention on the key conflict of China versus the imperialists.⁸¹⁴ The nation must be brought to liberated self-consciousness before a further movement can be made towards socialist internationalism. Accordingly, in *Roar, China!*, the Chinese mass's journey towards collective consciousness in response to imperialist violence is imbued with an aesthetic assertion of their specifically national identity. The ethnographic authenticity of props, costumes and music asserts the sort of authenticity that formed around the concept of nationhood in the modern era, on the analogy of nation-as-organism: the Herderian idea that a nation, much like a modern individual, has a unique way of being that is unlike any other, and a distinct path of development congruent with its unique cultural history.⁸¹⁵

This point can be glimpsed in the reaction of another contemporary reviewer, P. Markov. Writing in *Pechat' i revoliutsiia (Print and the Revolution)*, Markov argued that the play produced sympathy most effectively through its use of ethnographic detail. The production's primary significance did not lie, for Markov, in its flirtations with naturalism (be it the "real" water, visible only from elevated parts of the theatre, or the executions, conducted in uncomfortably naturalist detail). Rather Markov considered the centre of the play to be its "internal justification of ethnography."⁸¹⁶ While other critics, such as Famarin in *Vecherniaia Moskva*, found the use of ethnography jarring and inconsistent, Markov seems to argue that ethnography did not just provide a surface decoration in the play. Rather its cultural authenticity produced a corresponding sense of internal, psychological authenticity in the individual Chinese characters, thus enabling the audience to develop a convincing empathetic connection with them:

⁸¹⁴ Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?!*, 229–30.

⁸¹⁵ For an overview of Herder's conception of national identity, see F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought: from Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), esp. ch. 3, "Organic Politics."

⁸¹⁶ P. Markov, "Teatral'nyi sezon 1925/26 goda," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 3 (1926). Reprinted in Lanina, ed., *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, 202. "основным методом спектакля было внутреннее оправдание этнографии."

Let me explain: it is diverting and interesting to observe Chinese life as it is presented in the Meyerhold Theatre, without luscious decorations or exotic prettiness. We hear Chinese chants, we watch the street scenes of a Chinese port—such is the ethnographic picture. But for all this, how much more interesting and indeed genuinely affecting it is to watch the individual images and their combination. The Boy, who is played by Babanova, and whose lyrical suicide scene is staged with directorial perfection, explains more than any poster-style agitationism. [...] Ethnography [in the production] was not taken for theatrical decoration; instead, through it, and sometimes thanks to it, the psychological kernel of the various images made its way to the spectator. Hence the Boy, singing a melancholy song as he hangs himself, or the leader of the Chinese town, down on one knee before a foreign sailor, linger so long in the memory.⁸¹⁷

The production's use of ethnography, for Markov, does not estrange or distance in the manner of exotica, but neither does it collapse the audience's relationship with these Chinese figures into one of identity. What it does, it seems, is create a sense of Chinese culture that is sufficiently authentic to enable the audience to empathize with the offence done to members of that culture by such exercises of foreign power.

This empathy is enabled not by similarity, but by a sense of difference that nevertheless enables the other culture to be perceived as authentic. (The term Herder used for this process was *Einfühlungsvermögen*, rendered by F. M. Barnard as “‘the capacity to feel oneself into’ the minds, motives, moods, purposes, aspirations, habits, and customs of those different from ourselves.”)⁸¹⁸ Hence the examples Markov gives are moments at which these individual characters stand as representatives of a specifically national humiliation: the

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., 203. “Поясню: занимательно и любопытно следить за китайским бытом так, как он показан в Театре имени Мейерхольда, без сладеньких украшений и экзотических красот: слушать китайские напевы, смотреть на уличные сценки китайского порта — такова этнографическая картина. Но за всем этим еще интереснее и уже по-настоящему волнующе следить за отдельными образами и их сочетанием. Тот Бой, которого играет Бабанова и лирическая сцена самоубийства которого поставлена с режиссерским совершенством, объясняет больше, чем плакатная агитационность. [...] Этнография воспринималась не как театральное украшение, а сквозь нее, а иногда и благодаря ей доходило до зрителя психологическое зерно разноликих образов. Поэтому так останутся в памяти повесившийся с унылой песенкой Бой, опустившийся на колени перед иноземным моряком начальник китайского города.”

⁸¹⁸ F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) 5–6.

Daoin's abasement, or the Boy's suicide song, which Novitskii experienced as "the terrible and profound tragedy of a people [*narod*]." ⁸¹⁹ To take another musical example, working scripts from the production indicate that a *huqin*, accurately described as a "Chinese two-stringed instrument," sounded at moments connected to the boatmen's crucial act of solidarity: their drawing of lots to decide who will submit to be executed. ⁸²⁰ Their sense of collective solidarity at this moment is thus marked by the production's aesthetic choices as not simply class-based but also intrinsically national. This connection between individual and nation is repeatedly asserted by the production's use of an ethnographic-naturalist aesthetic: it guarantees the authenticity of such nationalist self-consciousness.

Following Markov, we might say that *Roar, China!* used a distinctive form of ethnographic naturalism to bind the fate of the individual onstage characters, not simply to each other, but to an authentic and credibly existing entity conceivable as the Chinese nation. In theatrical terms, however, as Zagorskii and Gorodetskii have already indicated, this striving for authenticity through naturalism poses some peculiar problems. The theatrical space remains a conventional, artificial representation of purported Chinese reality; the figures onstage remain, at one level of perception, Russian actors in "ethnographic" Chinese masks. The attempt to embrace total ethnographic naturalism runs the risk of pushing illusion to breaking point, forcing the masks to crack, and turning the simulation of Chinese reality into a grotesque parody.

One crucial area where the cracks in this ethnographic naturalism began to show was language. Gorodetskii found inconsistencies in the speech of the Chinese characters, which alternated between "unbearable mutilation of language" and pure Moscow dialect. ⁸²¹ While

⁸¹⁹ Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, 345.

⁸²⁰ RGALI f. 963, op. 1, ed. khr. 461, l. 2.

we cannot know how the actors delivered these lines onstage, it is possible Gorodetskii reveals his ignorance here of Chinese pidgin Russian—as Mark Gamsa shows, the Chinese characters in Tret'iakov's script deliver several lines in accurate pidgin.⁸²² Nonetheless, the point remains that the Chinese characters in Tret'iakov's script use three forms of language: pure Chinese, heard in several utterances at the play's beginning; Chinese pidgin Russian, used in interactions with the European characters; and conversations between themselves in clear, correct Russian.⁸²³

Sergei Radlov, like Zagorskii and Gorodetskii, accused *Roar, China!* of succumbing to the “temptation to overload the production with naturalistic details from Chinese life.”⁸²⁴

For Radlov, the dangers of this approach became especially clear in the case of language:

It has also been tempting to convey the sound of Chinese speech. For a few seconds it seems that you are hearing authentic Chinese, but here is the dead-end of naturalism: the very next words, spoken in Russian, sound somehow especially greasy and Muscovite, and for a split second these Chinese recall Ostrovskii's merchants. There is something unsettling in this: right after mangling his speech (“You pay, me row”) with the American, the same boatman expresses himself with perfect grammatical correctness to his comrades, while the coolie-stoker, as supposedly the most conscious, talks and moves throughout like the purest Russian, without the slightest connection to the other Chinese.⁸²⁵

⁸²¹ Gorodetskii, “Rychi, Kitai!,” 199. “несносное коверканье речи у одних, чистый московский говор у других китайцев.”

⁸²² Gamsa, “Sergei Tret'iakov's *Roar, China!*,” 95, 106n17.

⁸²³ For utterances in Chinese, mixed in with Chinese pidgin Russian, see Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?!*, 81–3.

⁸²⁴ Sergei Radlov, “Rychi, Kitai!” *Krasnaia gazeta*, August 28, 1927. Reprinted in Lanina, ed., *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral'noi kritike*, 203. “не хватило мужества удержаться от соблазнов перегрузить спектакль натуралистическими деталями китайского быта.”

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.* “Соблазнительно было и передать звучание китайской речи — секундами кажется, что слышишь подлинный китайский язык, но здесь-то и тупик натурализма; следующие же слова, сказанные по-русски, звучат как-то особенно по-московски жирно, и китайцы мгновенно напоминают купцов Островского. В этом что-то неладное — только что, ломая язык («Твоя плати, моя вози») с американцем, тот же лодочник отлично и грамматически правильно объясняется со своими товарищами, а кули-истопник, должно быть как самый сознательный, все время и говорит и движется как чистейший россиянин без малейшей связи с остальными китайцами.”

Radlov identifies, albeit fails to delineate clearly, the three forms of language used in the play: “authentic” Chinese, authentic pidgin (the “mangled” utterance Radlov cites is, as Gamsa insists, a valid piece of Chinese pidgin Russian) and colloquial Russian. But there is something “unsettling” for Radlov in this slippage between ethno-naturalism (“authentic” Chinese speech) and theatrical convention (the audience accepts that the actors playing Chinese characters will speak in Russian, so that they can be understood). At these moments, it seems, the “ethnographic mask” slips to reveal all too clearly, not only that these are ethnic Russians playing ethnic Chinese, but also that symbolic Soviet Russians are hiding behind the masks of symbolic Chinese.

The sense of sympathy at a distance generated by ethnographic naturalism’s aura of authenticity is thus complicated by a parallel sense of identification through language that situates the connection much closer to home. In return, the Stoker—characterized by Radlov as the most “Russian” of the Chinese characters, even in his movements—Sinifies Soviet Russia within the play, describing the Russian Civil War as a conflict in which “poor coolies, just like us, drove out their masters.”⁸²⁶ On the one hand, the pronounced and genuine cultural difference between the Chinese characters represented onstage and the Moscow audience watching them is accentuated through a range of devices; on the other hand, there is a gesture towards a kind of similarity beneath this “ethnographic mask,” a similarity that is structured around the primacy of Soviet revolutionary precedent.

Indeed, we might consider this the basic dynamic of Soviet internationalist aesthetics: the simultaneous acknowledgement of national/ethnic distinctiveness and its implied overcoming through the force of Soviet revolutionary example. This echoes the dynamic of Stalinist policy in the East, and of Soviet nationalities policy more generally: national identity and uniqueness were affirmed as a necessary stage in the chain of development that would

⁸²⁶ “Бедные кули, такие же как мы, прогнали господ.” Tret’iakov, *Slyshish’*, *Moskva?*, 129.

lead ultimately to a utopian sublation into a higher socialist unity.⁸²⁷ As Emma Widdis writes, “knowledge was consistently articulated as the means of liberating the [other] nation from repressive Imperial structures and building an equal [global] society... ‘Authentic’ ethnographic detail was presented as a prerequisite for the genuine equality of the peoples.”⁸²⁸ Herderian incommensurability of nations is both acknowledged and transcended by the imagined universalism of the future. And the Russian proletariat, as the vanguard of revolutionary progress, serves as the ethnically marked bearer of this post-ethnic potential.

Thus *Roar, China!* presents a strange mix of authenticity and ventriloquism: the Chinese boatmen are imagined and presented as ethnographically authentic while also being shown in the process of acquiring the speech and behavioral patterns of the Russian proletariat. This transformative drive within the documentary aesthetic was asserted forcefully at a performance of *Roar, China!* on 21 March 1926, three days after the March 18 Massacre of student protestors by police in Beijing. At this performance, the actor playing the student interpreter read out a telegram announcing the massacre to the assembled boatmen, and also read them some excerpts from an article by Karl Radek, rector of Sun Yat-sen University in Moscow.⁸²⁹ Meyerhold’s theatre had used the telegram trick before, to integrate theatrical performance into the newly documentable immediacy of life: an early performance of 1920’s *The Dawns (Zori)* was interrupted by the reading of a telegram announcing the Red

⁸²⁷ On Soviet nationalities policy, see Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2. (Summer 1994): 414–452; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁸²⁸ Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*, 114.

⁸²⁹ “V teatre im. V. S. Meierkhol’da,” *Pravda*, March 26, 1926. A glance at this issue confirms the topicality of the Chinese theme: the front page reports on protests in Beijing and round the world against the shootings of March 18; page two features an article by Radek on the military situation in China.

Army's seizure of Perekop in Crimea.⁸³⁰ But the addition of excerpts from Radek announces the transition from documentary/recording to fantasy/prescription, a transition of key importance to our understanding of the play itself. By presenting Chinese boatmen finding consolation for domestic acts of horror and outrage in the words of Soviet intellectuals, this tiny device conjures up the desired image of an internationalism driven by information networks that connect ultimately to a centre in Moscow. The ethnographic mask, symbol of national authenticity, becomes, at certain moments, a mirror. The Moscow audience of 1926 saw characters with all the ethnic signs of Chineseness, listening to an article by Radek, in Russian; tangible Others behaving just as they themselves were supposed to behave.

III. *The Red Poppy* – the soloist sacrificed for the masses

On first glance, we find several basic elements in *The Red Poppy* that are strikingly reminiscent of *Roar, China!* Indeed, Souritz speculates that the Bolshoi's decision, in February 1926, to jettison Gal'perin's libretto on the French revolution in favour of Kurilko's on the Chinese may have had something to do with the success of *Roar, China!*, which had premiered on 23 January.⁸³¹ The ballet presents China as a place where the two opposing sides in the global class struggle are pitted against one another across a single stage, their opposition driven towards confrontation by an act of violence committed in the shadow of a huge steel ship.⁸³² The spectacle opens with an extended sequence in which this ship is

⁸³⁰ Alpers, *Teatr sotsial'noi maski*, 24. Symons claims that a messenger read out news from the front at every performance. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, 42.

⁸³¹ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 243.

⁸³² The sense of repetition was not lost on contemporaries. One of a series of comic sketches published in *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* to mark *The Red Poppy*'s debut reads as follows:

“Когда в зале стало темно и на сцене вырисовалась громада советского корабля, кто-то тихо сказал:

— Совсем "Рычи, Китай!"

— Только немножко наоборот, сказал другой голос.

unloaded by Chinese coolies. At the conclusion of the drama, a climactic act of self-sacrifice seemingly completes the movement of the Chinese masses towards self-consciousness, and gestures towards their future revolution.

The first major difference is that the ship towering over the back of the stage is a Soviet merchant vessel, moored in a Chinese port. The ballet's first act takes place in the shadow of this ship, and sets the narrative in motion through a Soviet intervention in the oppositional status quo.⁸³³ The two sides are juxtaposed in the opening sequence as labour and leisure: as coolies unload the ship, under the commands and whips of their overseers, Europeans and bourgeois Chinese are entertained by dancers in an adjacent bar. When one of the coolies falls under the overseers' whips, tension mounts between the two sides. The Soviet Captain reacts to this situation by sending his sailors to help the coolies with their unloading. In the process, he rejects the offer of the British director of the port, Sir Hips, that

В пьесе Третьякова корабль был английский—символ угнетения и порабощения китайского народа. В "Красном маке"—корабль советский!"

[When the lights went down and the giant Soviet ship appeared on the stage, someone said quietly:

“Just like *Roar, China!*”

“Only the other way around,” said another voice.

In Tret'iakov's play the ship was English, a symbol of the oppression and enslavement of the Chinese people. In *The Red Poppy* the boat is Soviet!] *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 25 (1927): 7.

⁸³³ In offering plot synopses of *The Red Poppy*, it must first be acknowledged that the Moscow production of 1927 was altered and expanded for the Leningrad production of 1929, and changed again for a revival in 1949, following the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Even more far-reaching alterations were made in 1957, when the ballet was renamed *The Red Flower* (*Krasnyi tsvetok*), in reaction to protests from the PRC Government against the associations of the poppy with opium and British colonial aggression (see below). I am concerned here, however, with the two productions from the 1920s. For the 1927 Moscow production, I have used the excellently researched synopsis of Souritz (*Soviet Choreographers*, 238–40), supplemented by contemporary reviews and participant accounts. For the Leningrad production of 1929, I have relied mainly on the reviews in *Zhizn' iskusstva*, as well as the summaries of A. A. Gvozdev, *Krasnyi mak: v pomoshch' zriteliu* (Moscow/Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literaturoi, 1931) and V. Bogdanov-Berezovskii, *Krasnyi mak* (Leningrad: Biuro obsluzhivaniia rabocheho zritel'ia pri Upr. lenigr. teatrov, 1933). I have also used L. Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto* (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1971), which contains details not found in other accounts, but is unclear on which precise production is being summarized and which sources have been used. Running orders for the numbers in the ballet can be found in RGALI f. 2085 op. 1, and also in *Le pavot rouge (The red poppy): ballet en 3 actes et 8 tableaux avec apotheose* (Moscow: Edition de musique de l'etat R.S.F.S.R., 1933).

they collaborate to restore order by force.⁸³⁴ These two opposing sides—Chinese coolies and Soviet sailors vs European imperialists and Chinese bourgeoisie—are characterized by their own dances and musical motifs. The coolies work to a heavy, slow tune, reminiscent once more of a Russian *dubinushka*, while the Europeans are entertained by “exotic” dances in the bar. The Captain’s appearance, which disrupts this static opposition of labour and leisure and places the two sides on a path to confrontation, is announced by the first few bars of the *Internationale*.

The dancer Tao Hua (variously spelt Tai-Khua, Tai-Khoa, Taia-Khoa, or Taia-Khua—I will return to the issue of her name and its contested meanings below), the focal point of both dance and narrative, begins the ballet caught, like Babanova’s Boy, between these two opposing camps. She dances for the pleasure of the Europeans and Chinese bourgeoisie in the bar, her “fan dance” forming part of their exotic entertainment alongside such diversions as “dance of the Malaysian women.” The poet Emi Xiao protested that Tao Hua’s status as a dancer implied, from a Chinese perspective, that she was a prostitute; and indeed, an early summary of the libretto published in March 1926 refers to the central character as a “hetaera.”⁸³⁵ Such an association between dancers and prostitution was not uncommon in the social history of ballet.⁸³⁶ Even if this implication is not made explicit, it is important to note that Tao Hua begins the ballet as the servant of the imperialist camp, paid to provide them pleasure. She is also, it seems, engaged to the “adventurist” Li Shan-Fu, a

⁸³⁴ This detail is mentioned in Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto*, 83.

⁸³⁵ Emi Xiao, “Zapiska predsedatelia Vneshnepoliticheskoi komissii TsK VKP(b) V. G. Grigor’iana V. M. Molotovu k zapisi besedy sotrudnika VOKS Erofeeva s Emi Siao o balete R. M. Gliera ‘Krasnyi mak.’ 16 marta 1951g.” Document held in RGASPI, accessed online April 9, 2014 at <http://www.rusarchives.ru/evants/exhibitions/prc60-f/89.shtml>; “Balet *Krasnyi mak* v Bol’shom teatre,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 2–8 March 1926, 24, 12. Quoted in Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 232.

⁸³⁶ On the association of ballet dancers with prostitutes, see Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), 7, 64.

close Chinese friend of Sir Hips. Tao Hua is so moved by the Captain's gesture of solidarity with the coolies, however, that she showers him with flowers, and places a single red poppy in his hand. According to some summaries, the Captain then hands the red poppy in turn to a Chinese coolie, transforming the poppy into a symbol of the union of the Soviet state and Chinese working masses, rather than the private token of romantic affection that it might remain if the exchange happened only between Tao Hua and the Captain.⁸³⁷ A series of dances by sailors of various nationalities ensues, culminating in the famous and wildly popular "Yablochko," danced by the Soviet sailors.

In this microcosm of global conflict, Tao Hua is drawn out of subservience to one side and towards solidarity with the other. In the second act, she witnesses an assassination attempt on the Captain, planned by her fiancé and Sir Hips. Traumatized by this attack on the object of her growing affections, she smokes opium, initiating a dream sequence of exotic and fantastical dances that supposedly embody her internal conflict between the forces of tradition and the lure of the new. The third act opens with a party at the home of Sir Hips. Li Shan-Fu and Sir Hips try to co-opt Tao Hua into assisting their second attempt on the Captain's life by delivering a poisoned cup to him. Sir Hips seeks to seal the deal by gifting her a precious ring.⁸³⁸ Tao Hua runs to the Captain, confesses her love, and begs him to leave the party. He is obliged by his duties to reject her love, but returns to her the red poppy. Seemingly fulfilling the conspiracy, Tao Hua dances for the Captain, and is to complete her routine by giving him the poisoned cup. After dancing tantalizingly closer and further away,

⁸³⁷ Both Gvozdev and Bogdanov-Berezovskii, summarizing the Leningrad production, describe the Captain taking the red poppy out of the bouquet given to him by Tao Hua in Act One, and then giving it in turn to a Chinese coolie. It is possible that this sequence was introduced for the Leningrad production in 1929; accounts of the Moscow production do not seem to mention it. It also raises a continuity issue: if the poppy is given to a coolie in Act 1, how by Act 3 has it made it back into the hands of the Captain, who then returns it to Tao Hua? See Gvozdev, *Krasnyi mak*, 11; Bogdanov-Berezovskii, *Krasnyi mak*, 16–17.

⁸³⁸ Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto*, 85.

she gives him the cup, but knocks it away as he raises it to his lips. In the ensuing confusion, Li shoots at the Captain, but misses. In the final scene, Tao Hua is standing on the quayside, bidding goodbye to the Soviet ship. As she stands watching the departing ship, Li approaches and stabs Tao Hua with a dagger. Dying, Tao Hua is surrounded by children, to whom she gives the red poppy whose symbolism was set earlier by the Captain. Tao Hua's death is succeeded by the sounds of uprising, as a group of "red pikes," Chinese peasant-revolutionaries, storms the port.⁸³⁹

Despite its canonization as the first truly Soviet ballet, Soviet critical reaction from the 1920s on has tended to acknowledge *The Red Poppy* as a flawed piece, an incomplete but necessary step away from the negative traditions of classical ballet and towards something acceptably revolutionary. This judgement of N. Volkov, published in *Izvestiia* shortly after the ballet premiered in June 1927, typifies the assessment of *The Red Poppy* as a halfway house:

The Red Poppy seemingly embodies all the contradictions of ballet as an art form: one moment it surges forward, raising the battle-cry of realism, the next it retreats to classical positions; one moment it triumphs, demonstrating that a theme from reality can still engender vivid form, the next, frightened by its own boldness, it turns instead to a reverential review of the ballet archive.⁸⁴⁰

⁸³⁹ At least, this is how the ending is described in the musical score from 1933 (*Le Pavot Rouge*), and in Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto*, 86. V. Iving, reviewing the changes that were made between the premiere of *The Red Poppy* in June and its return to open the Bolshoi's new season in September, laments the fact that the final scene was not cut, with its "concluding procession of fussing figures, who are supposed to represent Chinese revolutionaries, and yet fashionable women's stockings peek out treacherously from under their formless grey overalls, which recall masquerade dominos, and we glimpse the European suits of male and female artists who are clearly hurrying to get home and have thrown the domino over their everyday clothes[.]" V. Iving, "Krasnyi mak v novoi redaktsii," *Izvestiia*, September 6, 1927. Gvozdev (*Krasnyi mak*, 1931) does not mention the red pikes, who perhaps did not appear in the 1929 Leningrad production, which is the one Gvozdev is summarizing.

⁸⁴⁰ N. Volkov, "The Red Poppy," *Izvestiia*, June 22, 1927. "«Красный мак» является как бы воплощением всех противоречий балетного искусства: он то рвется вперед, провозглашая лозунг реализма, то отступает на классические позиции, то достигает победы, показывая, что и реальная тема может породить яркую форму, то, наоборот, пугаясь своей смелости, занимается благоговейным пересмотром балетного архива."

The key term here, for Volkov, is realism: *The Red Poppy* opens but does not quite fulfil the possibility that a “realistic” theme, taken from actually existing reality, can provide the content for ballet. Like many subsequent reviewers, Volkov found the ballet’s positive achievements in the direction of realism to be concentrated in the first act. The juxtaposition of labour and leisure in music, the introduction of labour itself as a theme for balletic representation, and the rousing image of mass solidarity between Chinese workers and Soviet sailors, suggested to Volkov that “a ballet of this kind, realistic in theme and movement, could be theatre for the masses, accessible, relevant and emotionally exciting.”⁸⁴¹ A. A. Gvozdev likewise applauded the first act’s “mass pantomime” as “socially meaningful and dramatically stimulating.”⁸⁴² If this trend had continued, for Gvozdev, the production would have been a triumph.

Most critics concurred, however, that this advance was squandered in the second act, which amounted to a series of divertissements without the thematically justified narrative drive of Act One. In dramaturgical terms, this constituted a return to the structure of ballets by such composers as Cesare Pugni and Ludwig Minkus, which had dominated the Russian Imperial Ballet under Marius Petipa in the later nineteenth century.⁸⁴³ The contemporary, realistic theme of uniting the trans-national laboring masses was likewise replaced by typical narrative devices from the store-house of ballet: the love intrigue, the jealous lover’s conspiracy, the symbolic dream.⁸⁴⁴ From a dance perspective, E. Beskin in *Vecherniaia Moskva* lamented that the first act’s introduction of simple everyday clothes and the energetic

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² Gvozdev, *Krasnyi mak*, 4.

⁸⁴³ S. Levin, “Dva baleta Gliera,” in *Muzyka sovetskogo baleta* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal’noe izdatel’stvo, 1962), 130–1.

⁸⁴⁴ The device of a ballet dream had firm roots in the balletic past – pertinent local predecessors include the dream sequences in *Don Quixote* and *La Bayadère*, both composed by Minkus and staged by Petipa at the Imperial Ballet. See Levin, “Dva baleta Gliera,” 128.

movements of *fizkul'tura* (physical education) was squandered by the second act's return to classical dances. Indeed, the contrast between the two only served, for Beskin, to show the redundancy of the latter.⁸⁴⁵

This jarring contrast between the first two acts, noted by almost all reviewers, can only have been enhanced by the fact that they were choreographed by different ballet masters. For the 1927 Bolshoi production, L. A. Lashchilin choreographed the first and third acts, while the second was choreographed by V. D. Tikhomorov. It was Tikhomirov, supported by his wife Gel'tser, who insisted that there be a traditional *divertissement* of this form in the production, the dream sequence being absent from earlier versions of the libretto.⁸⁴⁶ Souritz also attributes the differences between Acts One and Two to the involvement of the theatre director Aleksei Dikii, who outlined the first act but grew frustrated with the project and ultimately refused to direct the later scenes.⁸⁴⁷ (The 1929 production in Leningrad repeated this stylistic rift: Act One was choreographed by F. B. Lopukhov; choreography of the second and third acts was shared between L. S. Leont'ev and V. I. Ponomarev.)⁸⁴⁸

The conflict between the first and second acts was not just a conflict between different styles of choreography, however, but also between differing conceptions of authenticity. For those who saw authenticity in the first act's attempt at realism, with its representation of contemporary China as a contested site of exploited labour, the dancing poppies, lotuses, phoenixes, and swordsmen of Tao Hua's opium trance were a shameful retreat to the distancing, anti-realistic exoticism of the ballet past. These scenes, lamented

⁸⁴⁵ Em. Beskin, "Novye puti v baletе ('The Red Poppy' v Bol'shom teatre)," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, June 17, 1927.

⁸⁴⁶ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 235.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 234–5.

⁸⁴⁸ Gvozdev, *Krasnyi mak*, 10–16.

Gvozdev, succumbed to theatrical *chinoiserie*, failing to overcome “the traditional interpretation of China on western stages as an outlandish, fantastical country, full of exotic ‘wonders’[.]”⁸⁴⁹ By contrast, for Tikhomirov and Geltser, who sought with Tao Hua’s dream to reassert the relevance of classical ballet to revolutionary thematics, the second act represented an attempt to combine the techniques of authentic classical ballet with an aesthetic sensibility drawn from pre-modern Chinese art.

Writing retrospectively twenty-five years later, Tikhomirov defended the staging of the second act as an approximation of what he considered to be authentic Chinese aesthetics:

For the fantastical scenes of Tao Hua’s dream I began from the stories of the Chinese writer Liao Chzhao, and tried to reconstruct on the stage, through the language of choreographical dance, everything I knew about China and her centuries-old culture. A series of movements close to the Chinese plastic arts were used in staging the dances. We also introduced acrobatic movements into the ballet that are found in Chinese folk dances.⁸⁵⁰

“Liao Chzhao” most likely refers here to *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, an early Qing collection of stories by Pu Songling, in which everyday life is constantly interrupted by various encounters with the supernatural. (A Russian translation by prominent Sinologist V. M. Alekseev had been published in Petrograd in 1922.)⁸⁵¹ Tikhomirov’s aesthetic authenticity is oriented towards the past, to China’s cultural history: the evocation of “folk” [*narodnye*] dances seeks validation in forms that stretch deep into the national past. Likewise, Gel’tser stressed that she had “long loved Chinese art,” collecting some artefacts on a tour to Harbin.⁸⁵² For

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁸⁵⁰ Writing in the 25-year anniversary issue of *Sovetskii artist* dedicated to *The Red Poppy*, *Sovetskii artist* 23 (11 June 1952): 3. “В фантастических картинах сна Тао-Хоа я шел от рассказов китайского писателя Ляо Чжао, пытаюсь языком хореографического танца воссоздать на сцене все, что я знал о Китае и его многовековой культуре. В постановке танцев был использован ряд движений, близких к пластике китайского искусства. Мы ввели в балет и акробатические движения, свойственные китайским народным танцам.”

⁸⁵¹ Pu Songling, *Lis’i chary: iz sbornika strannykh rasskazov Pu Sunlina (Liao chzhai Chzhi i)*, trans. V. M. Alekseev (Petrograd: Gos. izd-vo, 1922).

Gel'tser, the fundamental features of Chinese art were “ornateness, patterning, decorativeness, precisely crafted details.”⁸⁵³ Rehearsing *The Red Poppy*, she said, she came definitively to understand how the rococo style and “affected gestures” of 18th-century Europe had flowed there from China.⁸⁵⁴ It is this image of China—aestheticized, refined, exquisitely detailed—that Tikhomirov and Gel'tser sought to express, the very opposite of the harsh, brutal, ugly China of toiling coolies and colonial violence that took shape in *Roar, China!* and the first act of *The Red Poppy*. The ballet was thus internally riven by competing aesthetic approaches to representing China.

Tikhomirov and Gel'tser consciously intended the second act to show that classical ballet was capable of representing contemporary, revolutionary themes—in this case, Tao Hua's internal struggle with the weight of tradition and superstition, as she sought to make the transition to the new men and their new truth.⁸⁵⁵ After being caught up in a procession to a Buddhist temple, signifying the hold of religion, Tao Hua ascended to a kind of “Chinese heaven” in the shape of a magical garden. The fantastical, dancing inhabitants of this garden retained definite ideological significations, according to Tikhomirov and Gel'tser: butterflies, lotuses and dandelions stood for old China, while the red poppies represented the revolutionary future. Tao Hua fled from a group of phoenixes, which had pursued her from the temple: at these moments, the poppies bowed their heads. At the climax of the act,

⁸⁵² V. V. Nosova states that Gel'tser toured in Harbin in 1923, and also visited Beijing, gaining impressions there that were used in the construction of the character of Tao Hua. See V. V. Nosova, *Baleriny*, accessed online April 16, 2013 at http://bungalos.ru/b/nosova_baleriny/27, http://bungalos.ru/b/nosova_baleriny/29.

⁸⁵³ “‘Красныи мак’: k postanovke v Bol'shom teatre. Beseda s E. V. Gel'tser,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 23 (1927): 8. “Я давно любила китайское искусство, изучала его, собирала его произведения, когда жила в Харбине, продолжаю собирать и сейчас. Его основные черты: витиеватость, узорчатость, украшенность, тончайшая отделка деталей.”

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁵ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 241–2.

however, a boat appeared bearing the Guomindang flag.⁸⁵⁶ The other inhabitants of the garden drooped, but the poppies stretched upwards, and turned towards the boat, following Tao Hua's gaze towards the future.⁸⁵⁷

Elaborating this interpretation of the dream in the contemporary press, Gel'tser acknowledged that the depiction of the heroine's inner life was "extremely unrealistic," with her "psychology hidden behind symbols," but insisted that inner psychological experience in ballet simply "cannot be transmitted realistically. The means at ballet's disposal are necessarily limited. Gesture and mime can only express generally comprehensible feelings and emotions. Abstract thought cannot be communicated."⁸⁵⁸ The only recourse was to symbolism. This symbolic interpretation of the dream sequence was communicated in the copy of the libretto distributed to audiences of the first Bolshoi production. Even so, wrote "Sadko" (the critic V. I. Blum) in *Zhizn' iskusstva*, none of this symbolic meaning was actually communicated by the second act's parade of exotic divertissements.⁸⁵⁹ Likewise a critic in *Pravda*, while accurately summarizing the authors' intention to represent the battle between progress and tradition within Tao-Hua's psyche, pointed out simply that "for a spectator who is not familiar with the libretto it says nothing at all."⁸⁶⁰

⁸⁵⁶ According to Sadko, "Krasnyi mak v bol'shom teatre," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 26 (1927): 4. Sadko is reacting to the premiere in June 1927, when the alliance between the Comintern and the Left Guomindang in Wuhan was still intact.

⁸⁵⁷ I follow here the interpretation of the dream sequence given by Gel'tser, in "Krasnyi mak': k postanovke v Bol'shom teatre. Beseda s E. V. Gel'tser," *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 23 (1927): 8.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid. "Правда, форма, в которой показана эта внутренняя жизнь героини, крайне нереальна, правда, психология скрыта за символами. Но всего этого и нельзя передать реалистически. Средства балета поневоле ограничены. Жестом и мимикой можно выразить лишь общепонятные чувства и страсти. Отвлеченная мысль не поддается передаче."

⁸⁵⁹ Sadko, "Krasnyi mak v bol'shom teatre," *Zhizn' iskusstva* 26 (1927): 4.

⁸⁶⁰ Vik., "Krasnyi mak," *Pravda*, 21 June 1927.

It is of course difficult to know if audiences saw the dream sequence as a struggle between liberation and oppression, or if they just enjoyed watching dancing poppies and leaping swordsmen. Suspicions certainly abounded that the latter was closer to the truth. Even Gorodetskii, one of the few critics who praised the ballet as a victory for classicism in the revolutionary present, saw dancing flowers as a step too far:

But animated flowers do not please the eye. In 1927! In Moscow! In the first revolutionary ballet! There is a real danger that, at a time when contemporary tastes have not yet settled, all this marmalade might appeal. What a shame that this ballet, which transmits to the masses the elevated ideas of worker solidarity and the struggle against slavery, carries for one minute (and alas, that minute is an hour!) the whiff of the previous century's effete prettiness.⁸⁶¹

Others suspected that the “marmalade” did indeed appeal to a certain kind of spectator. In Mayakovsky's play *The Bathhouse (Bania)*, staged by the Meyerhold Theatre in 1930, *The Red Poppy* became satirical shorthand for philistine bad taste, the play's boorish hero praising the ballet's dancing “syphilids” as a slip for “sylphs.”⁸⁶² Another Meyerhold production, Vsevolod Vishnevskii's *Last and Decisive (Poslednii i reshitel'nyi)*, 1931, also took a parodic swipe at *The Red Poppy*'s idealized image of navy life.⁸⁶³

Satirize the leftists might, but *The Red Poppy*'s popularity was undeniable. In the 1927–28 season it played over 60 times; by December 1928 it had reached its 100th performance. (Typically, ballets on the Bolshoi's repertoire were performed 15–20 times a

⁸⁶¹ Sergei Gorodetskii, “Pobeda klassiki,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 25 (1927): 5. “А на живые цветочки не хотелось смотреть. В 1927 году! В Москве! В первом революционном балете! Самое опасное то, что при неустановившихся современных вкусах, весь этот мармелад может понравиться. Как досадно, что из того же самого балета, из которого пойдут в массы высокие идеи солидарности трудящихся, борьбы против рабства, на минуту пахнет (увы! Минута эта — час!) и расслабленной красотью прошлого века.”

⁸⁶² Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Bania,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh* (Moscow: izd-vo Pravda, 1968), 7: 98. I am indebted to Daria Khitrova and her paper “Two Worlds in Two Words: Stal'noi skok (1927) on Diaghilev's Stage,” delivered at the January 2013 AATSEEL Convention in Boston, for drawing my attention to this reference.

⁸⁶³ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 251.

season, which would comprise around 80 shows in total.)⁸⁶⁴ In all, the original production played over 300 times on the Bolshoi's stage between 1927 and 1937.⁸⁶⁵ Red-Poppy themed perfume, soap and confectionary appeared in the autumn of 1927, to capitalize on the show's popular success.⁸⁶⁶

How much can really be said to account for the show's popularity? It seems impossible to determine objectively whether audiences were drawn to *The Red Poppy* because of internationalist sympathy with the oppressed Chinese, or because they wanted to see dancing lotuses—or, indeed, foxtrots and Boston waltzes, the stock dance signifiers of the decadent Imperialist West. Besides internationalist sympathy and voyeurism, there is also the possible motive of national identification and pride: it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that audience members who accepted some measure of Soviet identity were pleased to identify with the vision of the USSR's place in the world that *The Red Poppy* presented. In particular, Souritz argues that the ballet's success could be linked to public sentiment over the recent assassination of Soviet consuls in Guangzhou and Poland.⁸⁶⁷ Such sentiments can perhaps be detected in the unanimously acknowledged popularity of the Soviet sailors' "Yablochko" dance, which brought the first act to a climax.

This dance on a Russian folk theme came at the triumphant conclusion to a series of dances by representatives of various nationalities, which followed on from the scene of the Captain's transfer of the red poppy. First the Malay women, freed from dancing for paid entertainment in the bar, dance with the coolies. Next a series of sailors, each representing a

⁸⁶⁴ E. Surits, "Nachalo puti: balet Moskvyy i Leningrada v 1917–1927 godakh," in *Sovetskii baletnyi teatr 1917–1967* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976), 70.

⁸⁶⁵ Katonova, *Balety R. M. Gliera*, 7.

⁸⁶⁶ Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 250.

⁸⁶⁷ Surits, "Nachalo puti," 71.

different nation, perform a series of individual dances.⁸⁶⁸ Finally the “Yablochko” dance closes this display of internationalist diversity with a celebration of Soviet strength and aptitude. National dances had played a central role in ballet during the Romantic era; in the time of Petipa, they had been used chiefly as divertissements.⁸⁶⁹ Here national dances are placed in sequence to visualize internationalism as a unified celebration of diversity that culminates with “Yablochko,” a Russian folk dance expressing the primacy of Soviet Russia in this new order. That the highlight of the show would be a group male dance is also a significant departure from the days of Petipa, when the ballerina ruled supreme. It fits well, however, the context of the Soviet 1920s, with its cult of *fizkul'tura* and Meyerhold's biomechanics (a similar sequence with dancing sailors graced Meyerhold's 1924 production *D.E. [Daesh' Evropu]*).⁸⁷⁰ Reintegrating the national dance into a new, internationalist world order, “Yablochko” brought the first act to a close with a vision of internationalism firmly led by collective, male Soviet example.

Where does China fit into this vision of internationalism? In the first act we have a clear image of China as a place where labouring masses, oppressed by British imperialism and the treachery of Chinese compradores, are awoken under the direct inspiration of the Soviet Union. This element is far more explicit than it was in *Roar, China!*, where Soviet example was filtered through the Stoker. The Captain's decision to send his sailors to help

⁸⁶⁸ Lashchilin asserts that the group of international sailors for the Moscow production comprised a Malaysian, an Indian, a Japanese, an Australian and an American. (“Beseda s L. A. Lashchilinym,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov*, 1926, 58 [2–8 November], 9.) In Leningrad the line-up seems to have been an awkward German, a well-trained Englishman, a black woman from one of the junks, a Chinese pirate and an Indian. (Bogdanov-Berezovskii, *Krasnyi mak*, 10.)

⁸⁶⁹ See Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith, “National Dance in the Romantic Ballet,” in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet*, ed. Lynn Garafola (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 11–68.

⁸⁷⁰ Surits, “Nachalo puti,” 69.

the coolies unload breaks the racist paradigm of the imperialist status quo; but it also transforms the nature of labour itself, from miserable oppression to joyous collaboration.

As S. Levin demonstrates, this transformation is reflected at the level of Glière's score. The first "Dance of the Coolies" is a slow, dragging work song, "a kind of Chinese *dubinushka*" in the assessment of S. Katonova.⁸⁷¹ As Boris Gasparov notes, the Russian barge-haulers' song "Dubinushka" was revalorized in the revolutionary period as a symbol of the awakening mass element: "in the context of Russian revolutions—first in 1905, then in and after 1917—this labour song, with its ominously pushing rhythm, was interpreted as an emblem of the awakening masses whose thrust is aimed at the edifice of the old order."⁸⁷² This sonic association of the labouring coolies with the Russian *dubinushka*, conjuring the image of toiling Volga barge haulers made iconic by Il'ia Repin, could only have increased the audience's sense that this oppressive situation must point towards radical change. The motif builds in intensity, punctuated by wind and percussion striking the bass line like the whips of the overseers.⁸⁷³ Later, when the sailors intervene to assist, and exploited labour becomes collaborative labour, this same bass motif is repeated yet transformed, its sense of "unbearable tension" and "strenuous exertion" replaced by "a single, precise, deliberate movement."⁸⁷⁴ The motif of the work song returns a third time in the triumphant "Coolies' Victory Dance," cementing the transition from oppression to joy.⁸⁷⁵ The Russian folk motif of *dubinushka*, hidden within the Coolies' Dance, opened Act One with an equation of

⁸⁷¹ S. Katonova, *Balety R. M. Gliera* (Moscow, 1960) 10. Full quote: "Танец кули — это своего рода китайская «Дубинушка.» Ярко выраженный национальный колорит, тяжелые октавные ходы, настойчивое повторение выразительного мелодического оборота, звучащего как сдавленный стон, ритм подневольного, натруженного шага придают танцу сурово-мужетсвенный характер."

⁸⁷² Gasparov, *Five Operas and a Symphony*, 190–1.

⁸⁷³ Levin, "Dva baleta," 131–2.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

contemporary Chinese and pre-revolutionary Russian oppression. The open, triumphant folk motif of “Yablochko,” revalorized as an expression of the manly vigour of the young Soviet nation, closes the act, expressing the Chinese coolies’ potential future.

If this joyous conjunction of Chinese coolies and Soviet sailors suggests a new internationalist dynamic expressed through dance, the lead character of Tao Hua and her romantic narrative seem to return to the paradigms of the ballet past. Combining an Oriental love affair with a fantastical dream sequence, Tao Hua’s story tapped into two of the strongest thematic traditions of nineteenth century ballet: the Oriental and the supernatural, both of them erotic.⁸⁷⁶ Indeed, it is striking how much of *The Red Poppy* is covered by Deborah Jowitt’s description of the generic nineteenth century Oriental ballet:

For almost a century, the stages of opera houses and popular theatres—in America as well as Europe—teemed with enslaved heroines, treacherous rivals, disguises, fateful talismans, lovers offering to sacrifice their lives of their purity for each other, intrigues, threats of hideous punishment, opium dreams, spectacular scenic effects, and, of course, dances galore.⁸⁷⁷

A glance at the iconic nineteenth century ballet productions that characterized the Imperial Ballet under Marius Petipa offers several narrative parallels with *The Red Poppy*. Compare, for example, the plot to *La Bayadère* (in Russian, *Baiaderka*), first performed in St Petersburg in 1877 and restaged in Russia in 1900, 1904 and 1932. In *La Bayadère*, the titular temple dancer’s love for a young warrior is blocked by the jealous High Brahmin of the temple; a pivotal plot function is played by a basket of flowers given to the dancer, which contains a poisoned snake that bites her during her dance; after her death, her depressed lover falls into a trance, wherein he meets the *Bayadère* again in an enchanted kingdom.⁸⁷⁸ Or take

⁸⁷⁶ The two themes, clearly related as transplantations of erotic issues into other worlds, are contrasted as “In Pursuit of the Sylph” and “Heroism in the Harem,” in Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1988), ch. 1.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁷⁸ Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto*, 143–46.

the plot of *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, staged iconically by Petipa in 1862, and revived in Leningrad in 1925 under the direction of Lopukhov (who was subsequently to choreograph the first act of Leningrad's *The Red Poppy* in 1929). An English noble travelling in Egypt falls asleep under the influence of opium, and dreams that he is an ancient Egyptian in love with the pharaoh's daughter. Their love is hindered, however, by the scheming of the King of Nubia, a jealous rival for her affections. The pharaoh's daughter drowns trying to escape the king's clutches, but is magically revived for a happy resolution.⁸⁷⁹

An exotic Oriental location, a love affair hindered by a jealous rival, opium... Here we sense *The Red Poppy's* conundrum: it seeks to invoke enough of the tropes from ballet tradition to be recognizably ballet, and yet clearly there is something problematic in perpetuating the forms of a performance art so closely intertwined with pre-revolutionary Imperial culture. As Lynn Garafola points out, Petipa's ballets combined a strict hierarchy of dancers, headed by the solo ballerina, with a thematic preoccupation with marriage as a source of continuity. Such concerns, for Garafola, suggest that "what is really at stake in these ballets is the idea of autocracy itself."⁸⁸⁰ *The Red Poppy* sought to both inherit and transform this tradition by pushing the issue of marriage into the background, and replacing it with the soloist's duty towards the masses.

This is the ethical thrust of Tao Hua's story, which dominates the rest of the ballet after the mass scenes of Act One. If the coolies' quasi-*dubinushka* brings them close to Volga barge-haulers in disguise, Tao Hua has the most recognizably "Chinese" theme in the score: a high, elegant pentatonic melody that introduces her in Act One and recurs throughout the

⁸⁷⁹ Cyril W. Beaumont, *Complete Book of Ballets: A Guide to the Principal Ballets of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Putnam, 1951), 485–496.

⁸⁸⁰ Lynn Garafola, "Russian ballet in the Age of Petipa," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 158.

ballet.⁸⁸¹ This theme combined with her “refined, conventional gestures” and “small, coquettish movements” to give Tao Hua, for one reviewer, the air of a “porcelain Chinese doll.”⁸⁸² We sense here an established stereotype of East Asian femininity: delicate, pretty, polite. But Tao Hua also has a second theme, a lyrical melody for violins, close in spirit to Tchaikovsky. Levin parses the relationship between these two melodies as the juxtaposition of outer and inner experience. Tao Hua’s Chinese theme becomes her own form of ethnographic mask, the stereotypical mask of *chinoiserie* that she wears for the benefit of foreigners, expressing “polite courtesy, ‘doll-ness,’ affectation.”⁸⁸³ The Tchaikovskian, romantic theme then becomes the expression of her true, inner world of “authentic emotions and experiences.”⁸⁸⁴ On this reading, romantic ballet positions itself as a necessary stage in the movement from the falseness of *chinoiserie* towards the truth of revolution.

For all the satirical swipes aimed at *The Red Poppy* from the stage of Meyerhold’s theatre, symbolically speaking the figure of Tao Hua has much in common with Babanova’s Boy in *Roar, China!* Both are feminized representatives of China, their ethnic character expressed in part through music, who find themselves torn between the opposing camps in the global struggle, and must sacrifice themselves in order to prove their correct loyalties. Tao Hua also, of course, invokes a whole range of heroines from the Oriental ballet spectacles of the nineteenth century. As Jowitt points out, these Orientally enslaved or

⁸⁸¹ Levin rejects the authenticity of the Chinese motifs in *The Red Poppy*, claiming that they represent “the conceptions of Chinese music that existed among listeners and musicians in the 1920s.” (Levin 137.) Nevertheless, the writer and Esperantist Hu Yuzhi, who saw *The Red Poppy* during a visit to Moscow in 1931, was convinced that Tao Hua’s theme was based on “Three Variations on the Plum Blossom Theme” (梅花三弄), one of the ten great classical tunes of China (十大古曲)—though Hu also admitted that he was not an expert on music. Hu Yuzhi, *Mosike yinxiang ji*, 131.

⁸⁸² V. Iving, “V baleta,” 28 December 1927, 6. Bei Wenli reports that the dancer playing Tao Hua had special sticking pads applied to her temples, to hoist up the skin and make her eyes “long and thin like those of an oriental person.” Bei Wenli, “E-Su yishu zhong de Zhongguo qingdiao,” *Eluosi wenyi* 4 (October 1999): 58.

⁸⁸³ Levin, “Dva baleta,” 138.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

somehow compelled women appealed to audiences “not only because of the aura of glamour and intimations of promiscuity that surrounded them, but because of the extra piquancy the characters’ status as chattels gave to their bravery and resourcefulness.”⁸⁸⁵ And indeed Tao Hua’s disobedience against her prospective owner, her fiancé Li Shan-fu, leads directly to her death at his hands. This is precisely the Eastern oppression from which Soviet internationalism, the latest incarnation of Western progress, sought to liberate Chinese women. The freedom that the nineteenth century Oriental ballerina fights for, however, is primarily the private freedom to choose her own mate. Ultimately, Jowitt argues, she fights for the freedom to submit to the man of her choosing.⁸⁸⁶ *The Red Poppy* takes this one step further: Tao Hua fights and dies ultimately not for a new male master but for a new ideology, albeit one represented throughout in staunchly masculine terms. This revalorization of the exotic heroine can be sensed in the scene where Tao Hua dances for the captain in Act Three. What appears to be a dance of flirtation and titillation, as she dances repeatedly closer and then further away, is in fact a dance of indecision, as she wrestles with the competing demands of patriarchal obedience and awakening romantic-revolutionary sentiment.⁸⁸⁷ Dying for private love and freedom is transformed into the liminal heroine’s self-sacrifice for the correct social group.

This motif of tragic sacrifice certainly echoes other images of revolutionary China in the 1920s. But the issue of gender seems crucial here. The paradigm of self-sacrifice that we see at work among the boatmen in *Roar, China!* or the partisans of *Bronepoezd 14-92* are

⁸⁸⁵ Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, 55.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–8.

⁸⁸⁷ Compare this description of the typical exotic heroine in French Romantic ballet: “As an available yet unattainable character, repeatedly flitting just out of the male protagonist’s reach, the dancer titillated the ogling males’ desires. As the object of the gaze, whether portraying a fantastic, Spanish, Oriental, Amerindian being, or one of African descent, the female corporeal display created a voyeuristic sexualised and racialised image.” Sarah Davis Cordova, “Romantic Ballet in France: 1830–1850,” in Marion Kent, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124.

militaristic and even explicitly homosocial. Women seem excluded from these brotherhoods of comrades, a pattern that Eliot Borenstein has identified running through 1920s Russian fiction.⁸⁸⁸ Tao Hua's explicitly female sacrifice more closely echoes established narratives of doomed trans-cultural love. Besides the Oriental exotica of nineteenth century ballet, there are clear echoes of the *Madame Butterfly* story: an Oriental woman falls in love with a Western naval officer, whose departure hastens her death. (A Soviet production of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* from 1922 was revived in 1925 at Leningrad's Akademicheskii teatr maloi opery.)⁸⁸⁹ But the Pilkington figure leaves for private reasons, because of his other family; the departure of the Captain, by contrast, is parsed by Bogdanov-Berezovskii as his deliberate choice of public duty over private happiness.⁸⁹⁰ Thus we might sense instead the outline of the story of Dido and Aeneas: the European man leaves his Asiatic bride to pursue his duty to the future, his departure followed swiftly by her death. A third paradigm would be the American legend of Pocahontas: the native woman in love with the newly arrived white male offers herself in sacrifice to spare his life, thereby rejecting the authority of her native culture and legitimizing the rise of a new form of political domination led by the group to which her lover belongs. Indeed, Philip Young notes that the outlines of the allegedly historical Pocahontas story—an adventurer captured by a foreign king is saved by his beautiful daughter, who renounces her culture for his—constitute “one of the oldest stories known to man,” citing such examples as Aeneas, Odysseus, and the medieval trope of the “enamoured Moslem princess.”⁸⁹¹

⁸⁸⁸ Borenstein, *Men without Women*, esp. Introduction, “Brothers and Comrades,” 1–41.

⁸⁸⁹ See review in *Zhizn' iskusstva* 7 (1925): 30. The production is listed in the listings for that year as *Chio-chio-san*.

⁸⁹⁰ Bogdanov-Berezovskii, *Krasnyi mak*, 16.

Yet *The Red Poppy*'s invocation of these narrative tropes serves also to highlight the innovations in the Soviet version of trans-cultural romance. If Gina Marchetti is correct is her assessment that the Butterfly myth, as replayed in classical Hollywood cinema, represents "the necessary sacrifice of all people of color to assure Western domination," then we might add that its Soviet redaction seemingly asserts the need for people of color to be sacrificed in order to ensure the triumph of Soviet-led internationalism.⁸⁹² Tao Hua does not kill herself because she is spurned by her lover, but ensures her death because she protects him: her death represents not a return to native patriarchal authority, as it does in Puccini's opera, but rather ensues from her final switch of allegiance from Chinese patriarchy to Soviet-led (though still resolutely masculine) internationalism. This switch of allegiance to assist the foreign interloper brings her closer to Pocahontas; but the introduction of class as an element means that Tao Hua does not simply betray her "people," as Pocahontas does. Rather she betrays the class she serves at the ballet's beginning—the Western imperialists and their Chinese compradors—in order to further the new alliance of the Chinese and Soviet masses. And whereas Dido's death prefigured Carthage and Rome's future rivalry, the death of Tao Hua points towards a future in which China and the Soviet Union will stand as allies in global revolution.

Thus *The Red Poppy* takes up the traditional trans-cultural love plot in order to assert its transcendence by new forms of attachment. As Catharine Nepomnyashchy notes, *The Red Poppy* exploits the gender dynamics of its spectacle to assert the Soviet mission in the East: "[t]he hallucinatory, potentially lethal passion of the feminized East is vanquished on all fronts by the civilizing mission of Bolshevism."⁸⁹³ This vanquishing includes a

⁸⁹¹ Philip Young, "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered," *The Kenyon Review* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1962): 409. The "enamoured Moslem princess" makes an appearance in, for example, *Don Quixote*: Part I, Chapters XL-XLI.

⁸⁹² Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* 79.

transformation in the character of the Oriental heroine herself. Kurilko and Glière could not discard the tragic lyrical heroine, but they do attempt to transform her significance in the course of the ballet, by staging the victory of internationalist sentiment over romantic love. If the Madame Butterfly myth suggests, as it does for Marchetti, the replacement of native religion with the Western cult of love, *The Red Poppy* represents a triangulation of that relationship.⁸⁹⁴ Tao Hua's love is set in motion by the Captain's gesture of solidarity with the Chinese coolies. While it seems clear that her feelings remain romantic in nature, they combine attachment to the man with attachment to the cause he represents. Her death in the third act results from a confluence of romantic and political impulses: she is shot by Li Shan-Fu for betraying their engagement, but also for betraying his side of the internationalist class divide.

This revalorization of love from romance to revolution is completed by the death scene, a variation on the trope of female sacrifice. The gendered element in Tao Hua's self-sacrifice—the female who sacrifices herself to preserve the male—differentiates it from the homosocial, mutual self-sacrifice that brings *Roar, China!* to a climax, and invites us to look more closely at the issue of gender and sacrifice. Here a comparative move may prove helpful. Analysing this question from a religious perspective, Nancy Jay has argued that “[i]n no other major religious institution is gender dichotomy more consistently important, across unrelated traditions, than it is in sacrifice.”⁸⁹⁵ For Jay, sacrificial rites play especially prominent roles in patrilinear societies keen to preserve a clear line of father-son succession and property inheritance. These societies continue to rely, however, on women's reproductive powers in order to perpetuate themselves; but a matrilinear system introduces uncontrollable

⁸⁹³ Nepomnyashchy, “Dance as Metaphor,” 205.

⁸⁹⁴ Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril,”* 85.

⁸⁹⁵ Jay, *Throughout your Generations*, xxiii.

complications into the system of property inheritance. Thus sacrificial rites are employed to replace actual childbirth, often stigmatized as unclean, with a ritual birth that links its male participants in patrilinear relations: “sacrificing produces and reproduces forms of intergenerational continuity generated by males, transmitted through males, and transcending continuity through women.”⁸⁹⁶

With 1920s Soviet internationalism we are of course a long way from the pre-industrial societies that form the basis of Jay’s argument. Yet her insights on the gender dynamics of sacrifice may still help to shed light on the symbolism of Tao Hua’s death, by allowing us to see *The Red Poppy* as dramatizing the reproduction and dissemination of revolution in terms that both suggest and circumvent biological reproduction. The revolution’s reproduction is initiated by the paternal figure of the Captain. It is he who invests the red poppy—given to him by Tao Hua as a symbol of sexual affection—with the symbolism of revolutionary solidarity, a sacred property that it is in his power to bestow. This symbol is then passed in a masculine line, more paternally than fraternally, to a Chinese coolie. It only returns to Tao Hua after the Captain has told her he must leave, dashing her sexual ambitions permanently and leaving only the revolutionary side of her dual romantic-revolutionary motivation intact. At her death, children appear and surround Tao Hua. This Red Butterfly has conceived no biological child for her European lover; instead, she passes on the symbol that is the red poppy, a symbolically invested “seed” launched on its path by the Captain, to a group of Chinese children gathered around her as she dies. These children receive their inheritance from the Captain-father, transmitted through Tao Hua’s agency, but without any need for her biological reproductive capacities.

But why the urge to overcome or evade biological reproduction? Perhaps because it summons implications of fidelity to the family and, more widely, to the tribe, the ethnic

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid., 32.

group—all ties that must ultimately be transcended by the trans-national class affiliations of Soviet internationalism. These ties are overwhelmingly represented in the ballet by men: the Captain, the coolies, the triumphant display of joyous masculine power that is the “Yablochko” dance. As Borenstein has noted in the context of 1920s fiction, revolutionary culture sought to establish new forms of filiation that could bypass the biologically related family and its necessary dependence on women.⁸⁹⁷ In passing her lover’s seed on to children that are not biologically her own, Tao Hua affirms the primacy of ideological over biological reproduction, and sanctifies this inheritance of the father’s property with her sacrificial death. (It is perhaps interesting to note that, in earlier versions of the libretto, Tao Hua gives the red poppy to assembled *women* and children; the women were removed from the final product.)⁸⁹⁸ The fact that she is a ballet heroine only adds to the magnitude of her sacrifice; Tao Hua’s drama essentially enacts the self-overcoming of the romantic, ethereal, elusive ballet heroine, called to abandon love and fantasy and devote her reproductive energies—without the complications of sex—to the real present.

By thus overcoming the very paradigm of the ballet heroine that it invokes, Tao Hua’s death also resolves the division within the ballet between the two ways of representing China. Tao Hua as realized by Gel’tser, with her refined gestures, doll-like elegance, and symbolic dreams, represents the old image of China, the eighteenth-century paradigm of refined, restrained beauty. She dies in the service of the new image of China, shot by a Europeanized compradore as chaotic crowds of angry partisans storm the stage. The battle for authenticity, it seems, is won by the side of the new.

⁸⁹⁷ Borenstein, *Men Without Women*, 1–41.

⁸⁹⁸ See for example *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 58 (1926): 8.

On this question of authenticity, a concluding note needs to be made about the choice of the red poppy itself as the symbolic seed of revolution. Once Communist rule in China was established in 1949, voices connected with the CCP began to object that the poppy was not a suitable symbol for Chinese national liberation. In 1949, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were offered the opportunity to see a production of *The Red Poppy* during a visit to Moscow. They declined, but sent Mao's secretary, Chen Boda, who was reportedly offended by the "bright yellow paint" worn by the dancers portraying Chinese characters, which made them look like "monsters and bogeymen." Chen also objected to the ballet's title, arguing that the poppy was offensive to the Chinese as a notorious symbol of national oppression, standing for the British importation of opium into China, the social damage done by the narcotic, and the two humiliating wars that ensued from Chinese attempts to restrict the trade.⁸⁹⁹ The poet Emi Xiao, conversing with a VOKS representative in March 1951, insisted that the name be changed, in view of the "hatred of the Chinese for the poppy, as the raw material from which opium is made."⁹⁰⁰

Effectively, these CCP spokesmen were asserting their newly empowered authority to determine the authenticity of such images of China. In October 1953, a meeting was held between Leonid Lavrovskii, artistic director of the Bolshoi ballet and director of the 1949 revival, and Tszen Siu-Fu (pinyin: Jian Xiufu), a graduate student at the Academy of Social Sciences who had watched the revived ballet some weeks previously. Jian, after praising the production's artistic qualities, launched his critiques from the perspective of authenticity. By staging a ballet about actual history, he argued, you are making a transition from lyrical ballet to historical ballet; thus it is important to make sure that the details are faithful to reality.

⁸⁹⁹ Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China, 1945–1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 363–4. Referenced in Gamsa, "Sergei Tret'iakov's *Roar, China!*," 105.

⁹⁰⁰ Emi Xiao, "Zapiska," held in RGASPI, accessed online April 9, 2014 at <http://www.rusarchives.ru/evants/exhibitions/prc60-f/89.shtml>

From history we learn that the struggle of the Chinese people against what Jian, speaking in the context of the early Cold War, calls “American imperialism,” began with opium. And the red poppy is one of the plants from which opium is made. For a spectator with an awareness of this historical signification, the symbolism of the red poppy in the ballet becomes dangerously confused: “Opium is a social evil, a source of oppression, yet in the ballet the Soviet captain gives Tao-Hua a red poppy. Of course he gives her the flower as a sign of friendship, but here you have to understand the mentality of the Chinese people.”⁹⁰¹ Note that, for all the complex iterations made by the poppy, which seem to have changed in different production, here it is the transfer of the poppy from the Captain to Tao Hua that Jian emphasises. In so doing, Jian hints at the taboo at the heart of internationalist poetics, the same paradox identified by Malraux in *The Conquerors*: the possibility that the Soviets, who position themselves as anti-imperialist liberators, are in fact engaged in a new form of imperialism. Jian’s identification of the “true,” Chinese symbolism of the poppy opens up a new, troubling interpretation of *The Red Poppy*: a European captain sails into port and symbolically gives the Chinese people opium, just as his British predecessors, the despised imperialists, had done for over a hundred years.

These Chinese objections hit their mark. When a new production of the ballet appeared in 1957, the title was changed to *The Red Flower* (*Krasnyi tsvetok*), and Tao Hua’s romantic interest in the captain, with its echoes of prostitution, were replaced by a love affair with a male Chinese revolutionary hero, Wang Licheng. (After the Sino-Soviet split, offending Chinese sensibilities apparently became less of a priority, and the name was changed back.)⁹⁰² But how could such a trans-culturally insensitive choice of symbol have

⁹⁰¹ RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1170, l. 37. “Опиум является социальным злом, началом угнетения, а в балете советский капитан дарит Тао-Хуа красный мак, правда он дарит ей этот цветок в знак дружбы, но вы здесь должны понять психику китайского народа.”

⁹⁰² For a summary of *Krasnyi tsvetok*, see M. Frangopulo, L. Entelis, *75 baletnykh libretto* (Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1960), 79–84. By the time an expanded version was published—L.

been made in the first place? In the interview, Lavrovskii replied that the poppy had been chosen for its colour, for the symbolism of red, insisting: “we simply did not think about the national significance of this flower.”⁹⁰³ But Lavrovskii was not involved in the original production of *The Red Poppy* in 1927. It seems incredible that nobody involved in staging a ballet about imperialism in China, featuring an extended opium dream in which huge red poppies dance across the stage, made the connection between poppies and opium, and between opium and imperialist incursions into China. Could a production seeking to display an “authentic” China really have missed such a key aspect of the modern Chinese historical experience?

There were plenty of people the Bolshoi team could have consulted: just before the opening of the Leningrad production in 1929, the Sinologist Boris Vasil’ev gave a talk on the current situation in China at an event dedicated to the ballet. Surely Vasil’ev could have mentioned this unfortunate association?⁹⁰⁴ Furthermore, contemporary Soviet media were not silent on the connections between opium and British imperialism in China: in a *Vecherniaia Moskva* article from July 1925, S. M. Glan describes the history of the opium trade in China as a deliberate imperialist policy to pacify the population.⁹⁰⁵ Tret’iakov, writing in *Rabochaia Moskva* on May 21, 1927, lays into the colonial exotic novel’s glamorization of opium dens, pointing out that “the feted delights of opium smoking represent one of the most terrible crimes of the British against the Chinese people.”⁹⁰⁶ Neither of these articles explicitly

Entelis, *100 baletnykh libretto* (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1971)—the name had been changed back to *The Red Poppy* and the male Chinese hero had disappeared, presumably in response to the Sino-Soviet split.

⁹⁰³ RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1170, l. 37.

⁹⁰⁴ Programme preserved in RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1285, l. 25.

⁹⁰⁵ See for example S. M. Glan, “Deti velikogo Suna,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, July 16, 1925.

connects opium production with poppies: but surely it can't be possible that no one on the Bolshoi team was aware that opium is made from poppies?

Indeed, opium smoking is negatively marked in *The Red Poppy*: Tao Hua is driven to it out of despair and fear, and the dream it induces is intended as a frightening evocation of the oppression she experiences in a patriarchal society ruled by tradition. The poppies within the dream, however, play a markedly positive role, as Gel'tser herself explained: bowing their heads while the phoenixes of tradition run rampant, they look upward when the vision of the ship, symbol of the internationalist future, appears. This coincides with the symbolic function of the poppy in the ballet as a whole, a positive symbol of trans-national friendship. Perhaps the makers of *The Red Poppy* wanted to show that the Soviet message of solidarity was sufficiently powerful to revalorize the symbolic meaning of the poppy, removing it from the tainted sphere of opium production and attaching it instead to the positive message of revolution? Perhaps we should read the ballet as an affirmation of the power of internationalist aesthetics to appropriate and invert imperialist images?

Such a reading suggests the *The Red Poppy* claimed the right to transcend the "national significance" of the poppy that Jian and Lavrovskii discussed. This move was perhaps made easier, furthermore, by the original context of Russian language and culture. The Russian word "мак" (mak) holds none of the historical associations with the opium trade that have encrusted themselves around the English word "poppy." "Mak" to a native Russian speaker has benign, festive connotations. A "makovka" can be a church's onion dome or a pastry treat studded with poppy seeds. The colour of the red "mak" suggests a healthy glow closer to the English rose: "Лицо твое как маков цвет" (Your face is poppy-coloured), says the Nurse to Tati'iana in Chapter Three of *Evgenii Onegin*, taking her blush at being

⁹⁰⁶ Tret'iakov, "Zhelt' i sin'." Tret'iakov also depicts poppy-growing for opium production in his "bio-interview," *Den Shi-khua*, which he was writing in 1927 but would not publish until 1929. Sergei Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua: bio-interv'iu* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1930), 365–6.

discovered finishing her letter to Onegin for the flush of returned health after a good night's sleep.⁹⁰⁷ A red “mak,” healthy and festive, would make an entirely suitable gift of friendship, the symbolism of red for socialist revolution dovetailing with older associations of the word. The word's celebratory connotations in Russian, it appears, were allowed to override any negative associations that might have accrued from different cultural contexts.

Once again internationalist aesthetics stumble on encountering issues of translation. Take the heroine's name. “Táo huā,” in Chinese, means “peach blossom” (桃花)—a thoroughly appropriate name for a figure closely associated with feminine softness and traditional Chinese aesthetics. Except that this is apparently not what the group behind *The Red Poppy* thought it meant. Instead, they seem to have been convinced that this name, spelt variously Tai-Khua, Tai-Khoa, Taia-Khoa, or Taia-Khua, in fact translated as “red poppy.”⁹⁰⁸ Gel'tser stated explicitly in an interview that her character's “name is Taia-Khoa (the Red Poppy).”⁹⁰⁹ In an early version of the libretto, Tikhomirov refers to the heroine as “Khun-

⁹⁰⁷ Aleksandr Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, Chapter Three, Stanza XXXIII, in A. S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh*, volume four (Moscow: izd-vo Pravda, 1969), 63. I am grateful to Boris Gasparov for this reference, and for the suggestion that the misunderstanding of the poppy's symbolism may have its roots in such cultural connotations.

⁹⁰⁸ In *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 58 (2–8 November 1926): 8, Gel'tser's character is referred to as “Tai-Khua” (Тай-Хуа). By issue 23 (7—13 June 1927): 8, her name is “Taia-Khoa” (Тая-Хоа). Thus is she named on the front page of issue 25 (21–27 June 1927), and throughout that issue. By the time of the 100th Bolshoi performance in December 1928, the character's name is given in the programme as “Taia-Khua, an actress” (Тая-Хуа, актриса—RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1229, l. 62). In 1949, for a production at the Kirov theatre in Leningrad, she is “Tao-khoa” (ТАО-ХОА—RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1229, l. 189ob); in Saratov, “Taia-Khoa” (Тая-Хоа—RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1229, l. 217ob). In his 1953 interview with Lavrovskii and Glière, Tszen suggests changing the name from Tao-Khoa to Tao-Khua: “Затем имя Тао-Хоа. Трудно произносится, вы сами наверное это чувствуете. Гораздо лучше Хуа – это цветок, и это будет нормальнее и легче произносится” (Then there is the name Тао-Хоа. It's hard to pronounce, you probably sense that yourselves. Much better would be Кхуа: it means flower, and it will be more correct and easier to pronounce.) RGALI f. 2085, op. 1, ed. khr. 1170, l. 41.

⁹⁰⁹ “‘The Red Poppy’: k postanovke v bol'shom teatre; Beseda s E V Gel'tser,” *Programmy gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov* 23 (7—13 June 1926): 8. “Ее имя Тая-Хоа (Красный мак).”

Taia-Khoa / The Red Poppy” (“khun,” or “hóng / 红,” being the Chinese word for “red”).⁹¹⁰

As late as 1952, we find Kurilko speaking of “Tao-Khoa, which in translation means ‘Red Poppy’[...]”⁹¹¹

Where this idea originated, we cannot say. (“Poppy” in Chinese, to the best of my knowledge, is “yīngsù / 罂粟” or “yīngsù huā / 罂粟花.” The name of the ballet in Chinese is “Hóng Yīngsù / 红罂粟.”)⁹¹² If we accept, however, that the ballet’s authors thought Tao Hua meant not “red poppy,” but “red *mak*,” with all its benign connotations and none of the accumulated legacy of the opium war, the translation makes more sense. This persistent mistranslation speaks volumes about what the ballet’s creators wanted to believe their spectacle meant, and which potential meanings they did not address or sought to transcend. The group seems to have fixated on this neat equation:

Tao Hua = red “mak” = benign symbol of liberation,

to the extent of simply blocking out the possibility that:

Tao Hua ≠ red poppy = malicious symbol of foreign oppression.

Leaving aside accusations of laziness or bad research, these complications remind us that claims to authentic transmission of foreign realities are always compromised by necessary acts of translation. In *The Red Poppy*, moreover, the desire for the correct mythical content proved stronger than the drive towards representing an authentic China on Chinese terms. In this prominent expression of internationalist aesthetics, the accurate representation of a foreign reality proves less important than the assertion of Soviet culture’s right to shape the image of the world on its own terms.

⁹¹⁰ RGALI f. 2729, op. 1, ed. khr. 18, l. 1.

⁹¹¹ *Sovetskii artist* 23 (11 June 1952), 2.

⁹¹² This is the title as rendered by Bei Wenli, who also calls the heroine 桃花 (Táo huā). Bei, “E-Su yishu,” 57–8.

The red poppy/red *mak* incident suggests that even the most generalizable symbols are caught up within webs of linguistic and cultural signification, and cannot simply cross between cultural systems without loss or gain. This poses serious problems for an “internationalist aesthetics” that might truly seek to be international: as the example of *The Red Poppy* shows, an artistic statement intended as an expression of solidarity may have very different connotations when it confronts an audience outside its original culture. (*Roar, China!* translated more successfully: as both Xiaobing Tang and Mark Gamsa have shown, Chinese translations of the play were among the many international productions to reach enthusiastic audiences in the two decades after its Moscow debut.)⁹¹³ The Bolshoi collective’s indifference to this dynamic of trans-cultural interpretation may be taken as a form of ethnocentrism, a chauvinistic sense of Soviet entitlement to dictate the meaning of international symbols on the basis of national culture. But this culturally conditioned blindness on the part of the Bolshoi’s creative team may also intimate the blind spot of Soviet internationalism as a whole, the dark side that it simply could not acknowledge: the possibility that it was only a recast, innovative form of the imperialism that it denounced, bringing its own red narcotic to subdue the Chinese.

⁹¹³ See Tang, “Echoes of Roar, China!,” 484–88; Gamsa, “Sergei Tret’iakov’s *Roar, China!*,” 94–99.

Chapter Five Chinese Confessions: *Den Shi-khua* and Biographical Allegory

One genre has so far remained conspicuously absent from this survey of China in the media system of 1920s China: the novel. Despite its commanding position in European literature and the Russian realism of the previous century, in the 1920s, according to the Formalist critic Iurii Tynianov, “[t]he novel finds itself in an impasse: what is needed today is a sense of a new genre, i.e., a sense of decisive novelty in literature.”⁹¹⁴ Other prose forms, including the diary, the memoir and autobiography, challenged for a space in the system of genres. Sure enough, those novels on China that did appear, as we shall see, were peripheral, minor works, often written for children, teenaged readers, or the newly literate. These texts nonetheless display the narrative shape that, according to Katerina Clark, was to define the novel upon its return to dominance after the promulgation of Socialist Realism in the early 1930s: the master plot of a revolutionary road to consciousness.⁹¹⁵

This outline can also be sensed, however, in another long prose text that was presented as very much not a novel: Sergei Tret’iakov’s “bio-interview” *Den Shi-khua*, offered to its readers as the mediated autobiography of a Chinese student.⁹¹⁶ As both the longest text produced under the short-lived banner of the “literature of fact,” and the longest

⁹¹⁴ Iurii Tynianov, “Literaturnoe segodnia,” *Russkii sovremennik* 1 (1924): 292. Quoted in Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010), 7.

⁹¹⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, passim.

⁹¹⁶ Tret’iakov’s book provides a vivid example of the dilemma encountered when trying to decide how to render Chinese names given originally in Cyrillic. Should we transcribe what seems to be the original Chinese name into pinyin romanization, or transliterate the Cyrillic rendering of the Chinese name directly into a Library-of-Congress romanization? For example, the title and subject of Tret’iakov’s book is, in Russian, “Дэн Ши-хуа.” A transliteration of the Cyrillic would give “Den Shi-khua.” However, if we transliterate between the Palladiia system (for transcribing Chinese into Russian) and the pinyin Romanization system, we get “Deng Shi-hua” in pinyin, which fits the rendering given by Chinese sources in Chinese characters (“邓世华”). I have decided, however, to transliterate directly from Cyrillic, chiefly to indicate that these names are, in the main, transliterations that lack originals: it is not usually clear what their respective Chinese characters might be, and their rendering in Cyrillic does not always accord with the Palladiia system. This coincides with the translational dynamic in *Den Shi-khua* itself, which claims to be an authoritative Russian rendering of a Chinese account that cannot be accessed on its own terms.

and most complex Soviet text about China from the 1920s, *Den Shi-khua* demands serious consideration as part of any attempt to define an internationalist aesthetics that coalesced around the image of China. What we find, in *Den Shi-khua*, is that the terms of internationalist aesthetics are stretched to the point of collapse. The Soviet power of observation is largely abandoned, and the need for dialogue with a knowledgeable Chinese intermediary, a “native informant,” is acknowledged. That informant’s true life story, it is promised, will provide both the objective knowledge and the affective sympathy necessary for internationalist solidarity. Nonetheless, the Soviet interviewer retains the authority to shape and mould—to translate, effectively—his student’s life-narrative, and does so in close accordance with a vision of history embedded in the Marxist-Leninist analytical perspective. This authority is challenged, however, by the book’s ending, which shows the Chinese student escaping from his Soviet teacher’s representational control.

Tret’iakov began the first published extract of *Den Shi-khua* with another call for new knowledge of China. His language here imagines knowledge as fully corporeal, an effect of physical force on the social body:

We, who are suckling the incalculable Chinese revolution on the black soil of our October, feverishly and legitimately force into ourselves any knowledge about China, as an anaemic forces syringes of arsenic under his skin.

Our previous knowledge of China is like a crippled arm. It must first be broken, and then re-set correctly.⁹¹⁷

Vivid biological, physiological metaphors express the Sino-Soviet relationship in this formulation. The Russian revolution feeds and nurtures the Chinese, at once a mother feeding a child and the earth nourishing crops; but it can only do so through constant injections of information about the object of its nurture and nourishment. Correct knowledge of China is

⁹¹⁷ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Neskol’ko slov,” introduction to “Den Sy-Khua. (Bio-interv’iu.),” *Novyi lef 7* (1927): 14. “Мы, на черноземе нашего Октября, вскармливающие непомерную китайскую революцию, лихорадочно и законно вгоняем в себя любое знание о Китае, как малокровный вгоняет под кожу шприцы мышьяка. Наше прежнее знание Китая похоже на изуродованную руку. Ее надо сперва сломать, а потом снова срастить правильно.”

something that needs to be forced into the body politic to ensure its proper functioning. Such knowledge is not an external tool, to be picked up and put down again as needed, but an arm, an incorporated element of the body, and one that must be violently corrected if that body is to function healthily. These corporeal metaphors pave the way for a text whose genesis and production is supposedly based on contact, on a close human link between the Soviet representer of China and the Chinese people themselves.

Subtitled a “bio-interview,” *Den Shi-khua* is presented as the product of an extended series of interviews between Sergei Tret'iakov and a former pupil from his Russian class at Beijing University. This avowedly factual biography chronicles Den's life as a “road-to-consciousness” narrative, from rural childhood in Sichuan through progressive political awakening as a student in Beijing and, later, Moscow. In the process, *Den Shi-khua* provides extensive ethnographic portrayals of traditional Chinese life, and accounts of crucial political events of the early twentieth century, including the 1911 Revolution and the May 4 Movement of 1917. Tret'iakov claims that this authentic testimony of a Chinese subject will provide the true knowledge necessary to heal the USSR's crippled knowledge of China. His erstwhile pupil is unable, however, to formulate his life-story himself. The expert mediation of his former teacher, Tret'iakov, is required to turn Den's life into useful knowledge. Thus another allegory is introduced for the Sino-Soviet relationship: the pupil and the teacher. If Soviet Russia needs improved knowledge of China in order to play its nurturing role, it seems young, revolutionary China needs the guidance and supervision of its predecessor in order to attain self-awareness and enter political adulthood.

Faced with the demand for necessary and useful knowledge about China, Tret'iakov presented his readers with a collaborative autobiography. This choice of genre was very much of its time. From its inception, the Soviet state used confessional autobiographies as a hermeneutic technique to assess individuals' internal dispositions towards the revolution. As

Peter Holquist notes, class origin alone was insufficient to determine an individual's purity; background had to be combined with an interpretative reading of the individual's life trajectory, the course of which could redeem a negative origin or enact a fall from favourable beginnings.⁹¹⁸ In the words of Maksim Gorky, biography became "etched into one's skin and muscles," an identifying feature on the same order as physical appearance.⁹¹⁹

Autobiographies were collected for the state's human archive in various forms, from the ubiquitous questionnaires that Soviet citizens were obliged to fill out, to the obligatory autobiography demanded from subjects of police investigation. For Igal Halfin, the Bolsheviks' use of autobiography amounted to a "Communist hermeneutics of the soul": individuals' accounts of themselves provided access to their "inner moral disposition," thus enabling the Party to distinguish true revolutionaries from imposters.⁹²⁰ At the same time, individual autobiographies took on the form of conversion narratives, recounting the individual soul's passage from darkness to light.⁹²¹

This centrality of individual biography to the state's ethical and administrative system permeated the sphere of cultural production. Thus Katerina Clark reads the nascent forms of Socialist Realism as coalescing around the basic paradigm of allegorical biography. In early exemplars of Socialist Realism such as Gorky's *Mother (Mat')* and Dmitri Furmanov's *Chapaev*, Clark senses "the informing scheme of human biography that underlies each work and has its roots in Marxist-Leninist historiography and revolutionary lore."⁹²² This biographical pattern, Clark concludes, structures a "road to consciousness" master plot that

⁹¹⁸ Peter Holquist, "State Violence as Technique," 41–2.

⁹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹²⁰ Igal Halfin, *Terror in my Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7.

⁹²¹ On the eschatological shape of Marxism-Leninism, see Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁹²² Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 44.

uses biographical form to enact allegorically the historical progress envisioned by Marxist-Leninist theory.⁹²³ Cristina Vatulescu, in turn, finds the negative mirror image to Clark's positive heroes and their exemplary lives in the biographical form of individual secret police files, which gravitate towards standardized trajectories of corruption and betrayal.⁹²⁴

Tret'iakov's mediated autobiography of his Chinese student must, I argue, be read within this cultural context of biography as a hermeneutic system of political and ethical judgement. Tret'iakov claims that his "literature of fact" seeks to explore material processes, not interiority: he presents his bio-interview as primarily an ethnographic and historical document, whose purpose is to introduce detailed and accurate factual knowledge about China into Soviet Russia. But can a text in this form escape the burgeoning political pressure on the shape of an individual's life trajectory? Does Tret'iakov unwittingly, or wittingly, become his student's interrogator? And if the salvational shape of the exemplary biography is, as Clark suggests, an allegory for the Marxist-Leninist model of history, can the ethnographic and historical elements perhaps be taken as an ethical judgement on the revolutionary trajectory of China itself? These are the questions this chapter sets out to explore, by examining how Tret'iakov's claims to the referential truth of his narrative stand up against the complexities of the collaborative situation and the shaping pressures of the salvational biographical master plot.

I. The Chinese Road to Consciousness

What would Clark's master plot look like, if transposed to China? In fact, Tret'iakov's bio-interview was not the only text from this time that attempted to map out the road to consciousness on Chinese territory. A multitude of revolutionary adventure tales published in the USSR in the late 1920s and early 1930s, aimed predominantly at younger

⁹²³ Ibid., 10.

⁹²⁴ Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics*, 33.

readers and the newly literate, use biographical narratives as educational allegories to represent China's progress into revolutionary modernity. Unlike *Den Shi-khua*, these other texts are fictional. Broadly following Clark's "road to consciousness" master plot, these Chinese tales consistently describe a movement out of the ignorance of tradition towards a revolutionary awakening into modernity, focused around the life and, usually, death of a young male protagonist.

This pattern can be found, with slight variations, in such titles as *A Coolie's Revenge*, *Some Remarkable Episodes from the Life of Li-Siao*, *A Head in a Cage*, *The Boy from Nan-fu*, *The Death of Li-Chan*, *Lu Sin's Fourth Bullet*, and *Rickshaw Driver*, all published between 1927 and 1931.⁹²⁵ Their "master plot" goes roughly as follows: a male child from the country, raised in the limited world of Chinese tradition, is forced by poverty or rebellion to enter the world of the town. Typically he is betrayed, either in the village or in the town, and sold into industrial or servile labour. In this process of proletarianization, our hero encounters a revolutionary who explains to him the true nature of things in China and the world. Before 1927 this is often a member of the Nationalist Guomintang; after 1927 it is typically a Communist, though this function can also be performed by a newspaper article or a slogan on a banner.⁹²⁶ Free at last to concentrate on what really matters, our hero almost inevitably dies in the process of fulfilling the work of the revolution, finding himself and his place in the class struggle at the moment of death. The "coolie's revenge" is the organization

⁹²⁵ A. Golyshevskii, *Mest' kuli* (Moscow: Literaturno-khudozhestvennaia biblioteka "Doloi negramatnost'," 1927); Sergei Auslender, *Nekotorye zamechatel'nye sluchai iz zhizni Li-Siao* (Moscow: Gos. Izd-vo, 1927); Vladimir Vladimirskii, *Golova v kletke: rasskazy iz zhizni Zapadnogo Kitaia* (M: Gos. Izd-vo, 1929); Leonid Ierokhonov, *Mal'chik iz Nan-fu* (Moscow: Krasnaia gazeta, 1930); A. Kartsev, *Smert' Li-Chana* (1930); A. Lebedenko, *Chetvertaia pulia Li Sina* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1931); Galina Serebriakova, *Riksha* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1931). For chronological comparison, *Den Shi-khua* was serialized in various periodicals between 1927 and 1929, and then published in separate editions in 1930 (reprinted 1931), 1933, and 1935. See Tolochinskaia, *Russkie sovetskie pisateli*, 349, 389.

⁹²⁶ See for example A. A. Isbakh's poem *Ballada o Lenine i Li-Chane* [The Ballad of Lenin and Li-Chan] (Moscow: 1928), wherein the coolie Li-Chan, working in the fields after losing his wife and son, learns about Lenin and the Soviet Union from a newspaper page dropped by a passer-by.

of a strike, for which the hero is executed by police; “Li-Siao” is shot carrying news of the 1911 revolution against the Manchus; the “Rickshaw Driver” is mown down by police bullets when he finally joins a protest; “Lu Sin” uses his fourth and final bullet to shoot down an enemy plane and protect his Red partisan comrades, thus ensuring his own death.

These narratives of Chinese enlightenment were supposed in turn to enlighten their Soviet audience about China. Most were aimed at younger readers, though some appeared under the “Doloi negramotnost” imprint, intended to help the newly literate with language acquisition. Soviet culture’s educational drive sought to form a correct revolutionary consciousness in its audience. These two groups, the young and the newly literate, were prime targets for consciousness formation, which proceeded together with and through the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Literacy campaigns, like education in general, were “explicitly aimed at inculcating a revolutionary consciousness.”⁹²⁷

Accordingly, these texts are presented as reliable sources of authentic knowledge about contemporary China. Most contain extensive footnotes and are frequently accompanied by a glossary of Chinese terms in the back, to aid the reader’s acquaintance with this foreign reality. The abundance of cultural detail present in these stories thus acquires a scientific gloss: Chinese village life, religious practices, bandit culture and urban semi-coloniality can all be presented as objects of knowledge rather than simply an exotic appeal to the reader. The need to generate reader engagement can be sensed, however, at the level of genre: these Chinese life-narratives mainly take the form of adventure novels, which Evgeny Dobrenko identifies as one of the most popular genres among children aged 12–15 in the mid-1920s.⁹²⁸ Dobrenko adds that the adventure genre’s popularity was much higher among boys than

⁹²⁷ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 23.

⁹²⁸ Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 72.

girls.⁹²⁹ And indeed, these texts display a pronounced masculine bias in thematics and characterization, continuing the early Soviet cultural trend noted also in *The Red Poppy*: what Eliot Borenstein calls “the triumph of affiliation over family ties.”⁹³⁰ The male Chinese hero must leave the familial embrace of the village, the seat of traditional culture, in order to enter the adventurous, violent, masculine world of revolutionary modernity. Thus beneath the exotic surface of Chinese cultural difference, the Soviet reader could sense the familiar shape of the master plot: China was superficially different yet fundamentally organized according to the same historical principles. Reading these narratives thus affirmed through fiction the commensurable nature of the socio-economic bases beneath varying cultural superstructures, the very principle that underpinned the Marxist-Leninist theory of international revolution.

The ubiquity of violent self-sacrifice in these texts can be traced to the secular appropriation of the religious trope of martyrdom by the radical Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century. Clark notes the importance of martyrdom as a mode of vindicating the revolutionary narrative, in which “[d]eath as the supreme sacrifice acts as the ultimate sanction.”⁹³¹ In the production novel of developed socialist realism, however, it is usually a subordinate or substitute who dies, while the hero endures, symbolizing the endurance of the Soviet state.⁹³² The death of the main character at the moment of political enlightenment in these Chinese tales echoes more closely the plot of Gorky’s *Mother*, a key early text in the socialist realist canon. *Mother* describes the failed revolution of 1905, just as these Chinese texts centre around what were, from a Soviet perspective, the failed Chinese revolutions of 1911 and 1925–7. As with Gorky’s *Mother*, then, such fictional martyrdoms endowed these

⁹²⁹ Ibid.

⁹³⁰ Borenstein, *Men Without Women*, 17.

⁹³¹ Clark, *Soviet Novel*, 179.

⁹³² Ibid., 178–182.

historical defeats with a sacred aura that necessitated further struggle and a belief in final victory.

Besides violent sacrifice, the second necessary component is correct guidance. First, the false teachers of Chinese tradition must be rejected. Li-Siao's first step towards social rebellion comes when, taking the blame for a classmate's error but refusing to submit to corporal punishment, he bites his vindictive, opium-addicted teacher on the leg.⁹³³ The teacher of Galina Serebriakova's "Rickshaw Driver" instructs the protagonist to empty himself of thought, like a horse, in order to pull his rickshaw more efficiently—the inverse of the revolutionary call to awakened consciousness.⁹³⁴ Tret'iakov's own poem for young readers, "Li-Yan is Stubborn" ("Li-Ian upriam"), drags its young protagonist through the seven typical misfortunes of contemporary China: drought, famine, pitiless landlordism, bandit attack, corrupt justice, conscription into a warlord's army, and wage slavery to foreign capital. Each setback is accompanied by a pithy statement from a "teacher," Wu-chan, urging Li Yan to accept misfortune as the natural way of things.⁹³⁵

In place of these charlatans, new teachers must be found who impart revolutionary truth. In several instances, this comes directly from a Soviet source. In Aleksandr Drozdov's *Executioner's Son* (*Syn palacha*), the titular hero, Li, is freed from a life of lonely social exclusion by the return of his older brother, Hong Fangseng, who has been fighting with the Red Army in Russia. Though Hong is brutally tortured and later executed for his revolutionary activity, the novel's conclusion makes it clear that Li hopes to travel to Russia

⁹³³ Auslender, *Li-Siao*, 22.

⁹³⁴ Serebriakova, *Riksha*, 7.

⁹³⁵ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Li-ian upriam* (Moscow: Gos. Izd-vo, 1927). It seems that this poem was staged at some point: Ol'ga Tret'iakova mentions this in a letter to Ge Yihong from the 1950s (RGALI f. 2886, op. 1, ed. khr. 70, l. 1 ob.), and the text with instructions for staging was printed in *Pioner* 24 (1926): 10–13.

and study there, thus extending the USSR's educational role.⁹³⁶ The soldier hero of "The Death of Li-Chan," convinced by a Soviet border guard that war with the USSR is unnecessary, instead incites a rebellion in his own camp. In Aleksandr Lebedenko's *Four Winds* (1929), two Soviet students travel across the Gobi to China, where they foil an imperialist plot while educating their new Chinese comrades in the virtues of organization.⁹³⁷ Lebedenko's rollicking adventure yarn reverses the defeat of Soviet policy in China, which culminated in Borodin's flight with other Soviet advisers across the Gobi.

These embodied apostles of the Soviet revolution can guide their Chinese counterparts; but it is the Chinese who must provide the life-sacrifices necessary to enable their revolution's birth, the birth of the Chinese revolution from the Russian. Tret'iakov introduces his "bio-interview" with metaphors of the Chinese revolution nurtured to life on Soviet soil, and steps himself into the role of the positive, Soviet teacher. And indeed, *Den Shi-khua* echoes many features of the revolutionary sacrifice master-plot described above. True to the model, an individual's "road to consciousness" is used to represent the historical transformations of the first decades of China's twentieth century. These similarities are offset, however, by a very different claim to referential truth. Ostensibly the product of an extended series of interviews, *Den Shi-khua* is presented to the reader as the authentic life story of a historical individual as recorded and "shaped" by his former teacher, Tret'iakov. As opposed to the epic story-telling past tense of the fictional texts, *Den Shi-khua* offers the reader a first-person autobiographical narrative told largely in the present tense. The climax of revolutionary conversion, sanctified by self-sacrifice, is also notably withheld.

A brief summary of the plot nonetheless reveals the distinct outlines of a revolutionary *Bildungsroman*. The book's early chapters, which describe Den's childhood in

⁹³⁶ Aleksandr Drozdov, *Syn palacha* (Moscow: Zemlia i fabrika, 1926).

⁹³⁷ Lebedenko, *Chetyre vetra*.

a scholarly family in rural Sichuan, are enveloped in traditional culture, expressed through an abundance of ethnographic detail. Den's home and family, their work in the fields, festival rituals, and the young boy's early experiences of traditional education are all described at length. Such non-narrative material as farming techniques, folk songs, and Tang poems make their way into the text. Modernity is introduced into this rural world by Den's own father, who returns from his studies in Japan to startle the assembled villagers with his European clothes and the gramophone he produces from his luggage. Den senior is also politically modern. A nationalist revolutionary and member of the *Tongmenghui* (同盟会), the revolutionary alliance founded by Sun Yat-sen in Tokyo in 1905, Den's father participates in the revolution of 1911, described here from a provincial perspective. The death of Den's mother, meanwhile, severs a key emotional link with the traditional world of childhood.

After his father is arrested and later goes into hiding, Den is sent for his own protection to a monastery. As it did for Auslander's Li-Siao, living with the monks exposes their Buddhism to Den as a lazy and mendacious charade.⁹³⁸ But the monastery also becomes his "first lesson in socialism."⁹³⁹ Put to work by the monks, he comes to appreciate the hardships of peasant life and understands for the first time that the food he has always enjoyed without thinking is produced by human labour. Removal from his own class environment thus produces in Den a crucial advance in consciousness.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is not over, however. Out of the monastery and his father out of hiding, Den submits to a traditional wedding. Alienated now from the forms of traditional life, he narrates the wedding ceremony as a physical ordeal and personal humiliation. His political awakening is instead further galvanized by the student and

⁹³⁸ Auslander, *Li-Siao*, 215.

⁹³⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua: bio-interv'iu* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1930), 170. All references are to this edition unless otherwise specified. "Монастырь Бань-Пен в горном Сычуане, моя первая школа социализма."

worker protests initiated on May 4, 1919.⁹⁴⁰ Next Den heads to Beijing University, determined to study literature despite his father's insistence that he choose engineering. Widespread student enthusiasm for anarchism, in particular the writings of Kropotkin and Tolstoy, encourages Den to enrol in the Russian section. There his teachers include A. A. Ivin and Tret'iakov. Through them, and through professor Li Dazhao, Den is turned away from anarchism and towards Marxism. After the violent suppression of demonstrations in Shanghai (May 1925) and Beijing (March 1926), Den travels to Moscow to study at Sun Yat-sen University, but returns to China on hearing of Chiang Kai-shek's Shanghai coup in April 1927. The narrative ends mid-flow: Tret'iakov admits that he does not know where Den is or what has become of him.

The biographical "road to consciousness" narrative can clearly be discerned in the shape and direction of this allegorical Chinese life, drawn through education out of the childhood of traditional rural innocence, China's past, into the dynamic, transforming present of China's semi-colonial modernity. Although Den's first days at school are marked by shocked exposure to brutal corporal punishment, it is really his older uncle who fills the role of bad teacher, a traditional scholar who writes verses, drinks, smokes opium and despises his brother for supporting the nationalist revolution that abolished the system of scholarly ranks. The role of positive teacher is meanwhile split among several characters. His father plays a key early role, but Den's own political path takes him ahead of his father's political focus on overthrowing the Manchu Qing dynasty and on to the key issue of ending foreign economic domination. (In this, Den typifies a generational change in the priorities of Chinese revolutionaries.) Later, his stint in the monastery provides an important series of insights. But Den's education is given crucial new direction at Beijing University when he encounters

⁹⁴⁰ These protests took place in reaction to the rejection of China's claims at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, and the Conference's consequent transferral of Germany's territorial holdings in Shandong province to Japan.

Marxist professors, including Tret'iakov, and finally makes the connection with Moscow, a connection consummated by a pilgrimage.

Despite being a self-professed experiment in generic form, *Den Shi-khua* clearly uses narrative and thematic elements that overlap with the youth-oriented literary accounts of China discussed above. One particularly reminiscent example is Nikolai Zhurakovskii's *Wings of Fire* (*Krylia ognia*, 1928), a "novel from the life of Chinese youth" that interweaves its characters' individual biographies with the key historical events in China in the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁹⁴¹ Two cousins, Hu Shi and Hong Ming, begin the novel growing up in a scholarly family surrounded by the simplicity and timelessness of village life, described in lengthy ethnographic detail. As the plot progresses and history accelerates, they are drawn to the city, the university, and the revolution. Hu Shi's revolutionary consciousness is awakened through his love for Mary Wang, the radical daughter of a rich Shanghai family, but he succumbs to tradition in returning to the village for his arranged marriage. Hong Ming meanwhile joins the reactionary wing of the Guomindang and masterminds their anti-leftist purge, in the course of which Hu Shi is killed. Mary Wang marries a coolie, Dzuiu, but is killed during the May 30 massacre of 1925; it is left to Dzuiu to pursue the path of consciousness and join the Chinese Communist Party at the novel's end.

As with *Den Shi-khua*, *Wings of Fire* is packed with ethnographic information on various aspects of Chinese culture, and represents major historical events in detail: the May Fourth movement, the gain and loss of Beijing by Wu Peifu, the May 30 massacre. Zhurakovskii does not shy away from inserting historical characters into his fictional narrative; most notably, Dr Sun Yat-sen cures Dzuiu of fever early in the novel and returns on his deathbed to give his final testimony, a written letter to the Soviet Union praising Lenin as the greatest and truest of thinkers. The reformist Kang Youwei and the military dictator

⁹⁴¹ Nikolai Zhurakovskii, *Kryl'ia ognia: roman iz zhizni kitaiskoi molodezhi* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo, 1928).

Yuan Shikai both appear, and General Wu Peifu makes a villainous cameo, tempting Hong Ming over to the side of reaction.

Den Shi-khua replaces these somewhat improbable encounters of fictional characters and historical personages with what it claims to be factual encounters between historical figures, including that of its protagonist and Tret'iakov himself. Thus the two texts, while employing the same biographical-educational structure and containing similar ethnographic and historical information, make very different claims about their authenticity and authority as representations. Indeed, these claims represent the two sides in a crucial and heated debate over the literary representation of reality taking place in the Soviet Union at the time. Zhurakovskii's book stands close to the "proletarian realism" promoted by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP, before 1928 VAPP). RAPP's theorists argued that contemporary literature should represent the "living man": the contemporary human individual represented through realism in his psychological development. This portrayal of psychological development would in turn illustrate the development of history, since inner and outer were assumed to coincide in their dialectical development: in the words of Aleksandr Fadeev, "To portray the 'living man' means in the last analysis to show the whole historical process of movement and development."⁹⁴² Tret'iakov, by contrast, was one of the foremost advocates of the "literature of fact" position championed by LEF, which demanded that facts drawn from real life should replace the invented stories that had previously formed the principle material for literature. As Tret'iakov declares in his introduction to *Den Shi-khua*, "The invented tale and composed novel are hateful."⁹⁴³ Any invented character was from this perspective an abstraction and dangerous illusion: Tret'iakov insisted that the only

⁹⁴² Quoted in E. J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928–1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 79.

⁹⁴³ Tret'iakov, "Den Sy-khua," 14. "Ненавистна выдуманная повесть и сочиненный роман."

acceptable material for literature was attested facts about real people, or as he put it, “the living ‘living’ man.”⁹⁴⁴

Both these positions based their authority on the claim to be representing authentic historical truth. Both *Den Shi-khua* and *Wings of Fire* encourage their audience to read these individual life-stories as allegories of Chinese society and its real historical development. But Zhurakovskii’s characters claim authenticity on the grounds of plausibility, as the kind of people who would have lived and acted in those historical circumstances. Tret’iakov presents his text as Den’s account of his own life, “formed” by Tret’iakov’s authorial control. This produces a tension, however, between that account and its framing: the “documentary” nature of the text is asserted in the introduction, then falls largely from view, to be replaced by a first-person, present-tense narrative that reads at times much like an autobiographical novel.

Some critics have suspected Tret’iakov of failing to uphold his documentary obligations, slipping at times into the imaginative territory of the novel. Myong Jung-Baek, in a 1987 dissertation on “S. Tret’iakov and China,” considers *Den Shi-khua* a “reportage novel,” founded upon a combination of “factual reality as an object and the novel form as an external structure,” while the “confessions of the living person Den Shi-khua” provide its “content.”⁹⁴⁵ But Myong also identifies scenes and dialogues that Den could not possibly have experienced or recalled in such detail from others’ accounts. These sequences are, notably, those closest in pace and content to the historical adventure novels of Tret’iakov’s competitors: the revolutionary battles fought by his father and his father’s series of escapes from imprisonment.⁹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Papazian, noting in particular a long and vivid sequence where Den’s stepmother contrives a complex plot to spring the father from jail, argues that

⁹⁴⁴ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Zhivoi ‘zhivoi’ chelovek,” *Novyi Lef* 7 (1928): 44–5.

⁹⁴⁵ Myong Jung-Baek, “S. Tret’jakov und China,” 93.

⁹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 98–9.

Den's eyewitness viewpoint is completely abandoned at such moments, producing "highly novelistic moments" organized by a seemingly omniscient narrator.⁹⁴⁷ And once we have accepted the intrusion of authorial imagination into the shaping of these scenes, what is to prevent us from suspecting its presence everywhere else? Why should we continue to accept the text's claims to documentary authenticity?

Perhaps a radically dubious reader, noting these novelistic flights from Den's eyewitness perspective, will begin to question whether Tret'iakov has not simply made the whole thing up—including Den himself? In fact, Den's existence is corroborated by other historical sources. Another of Tret'iakov's Beijing students, mentioned in the book, was Cao Jinghua, who also studied in Moscow and went on to become a prominent translator and professor of Russian literature.⁹⁴⁸ The Soviet scholar Roman Belousov quotes a letter he received from Cao in 1959 that recalls Tret'iakov's time in Beijing. According to Belousov's account of this letter, Cao claims that Den was indeed a student from Tret'iakov's class who went on to study in Moscow in 1926, but adds that his real name was Gao Shihua. In 1927, after Gao had returned to China, another former student arrived in Moscow and advised Tret'iakov to change the name, to protect Gao from repercussions in Chiang Kai-shek's anti-Bolshevik campaigns.⁹⁴⁹

Sure enough, the name "Gao Shihua" appears (alongside Cao Jinghua) in a typed list of Tret'iakov's Beijing students preserved in his archive.⁹⁵⁰ Also present in Tret'iakov's archive

⁹⁴⁷ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 50.

⁹⁴⁸ For details on Cao's life and involvement with Russian literature, see Gamsa, *Russian Literature in China*, 76–9.

⁹⁴⁹ Roman Belousov, "Sergei Tret'iakov o Kitae," 567.

⁹⁵⁰ RGALI f. 2886, op. 1, ed. khr. 14. Furthermore, in the extract "Den Shi-khua's wedding," published separately in 1928, Tret'iakov appears not to have completed his edit: he has the narrator lament the fact that his wife has been introduced into his bed merely "so that the squeak of a successor to the line of Gao may be heard in the house" (чтобы в доме запищал продолжатель рода

is a photograph that seems to show, through the overlay of three images, three stages in the life of a Chinese man: a teenager stands in the centre, with the image of a young child overlaid in the top left corner, and the image of an older man's face overlaid bottom right. On the back of this photo-biography is written, in pencilled Cyrillic script, "Den Shi-khua."⁹⁵¹ The photograph of the teenager also appears, without the overlaid child and man's face, at the head of Agnes Smedley's review for the *New York Herald Tribune* of *A Chinese Testament*, the English-language translation of *Den Shi-khua* published in the USA in 1934. In this review Smedley, a left-wing American journalist who spent several years in China and also visited Russia, claims to know of Den and indeed vouches for his continued existence after the end of Tret'iakov's narrative.⁹⁵²

It seems reasonable, taking Cao and Smedley's testimonies alongside Tret'iakov's own, to accept that a series of interviews really did take place over six months in 1926 between Tret'iakov and a Chinese student whom he had taught in Beijing.⁹⁵³ But Tret'iakov's contemporary readers would not have had access to any of this information. Nor would that have any way of verifying the degree of authorial manipulation that Tret'iakov exerted on the materials gleaned from Den during those meetings. Tret'iakov's own statements about his work would have been their only authority for the authenticity of the information it

Gao). Sergei Tret'iakov, *Svad'ba Den Shi-khua* (Moscow: izd-vo Rabochaia Moskva, 1928), 56. In the full edition of 1930, the name in this passage is changed to Den.

⁹⁵¹ RGALI f. 2886 op. 2 ed. khr. 89 l. 1. The image of the child is reproduced in Tret'iakov's collection of China sketches, *Chzhungo*, where it appears in the chapter "Отцы и дети" ("Fathers and Sons") with the caption: "Богатый китайчонок" ("a rich Chinese child"). Tret'iakov, *Chzhungo* (1927), 64. If the photograph really does represent Den/Gao at three different stages in his life, it is possible that it is in Tret'iakov's archive because it was intended for publication as part of *Den Shi-khua*, but was removed for the same reason the protagonist's name was changed.

⁹⁵² Agnes Smedley, "The Coming-of-Age of a Chinese Intellectual: An Epoch of Oriental History Reflected in an Autobiography," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1934, Section VII (Books).

⁹⁵³ In the unpublished note "Kak ia pival Dena," dated 24 June 1934, Tret'iakov states that "Den Shi-khua and I worked together for half a year, meeting almost every day." (Мы работали с Дэн Ши-хуа полгода, сходясь почти ежедневно.) RGALI f. 2886, op. 1, ed. khr. 22, l. 2.

contained. *Den Shi-khua* is a translation without an original. We can only get at Den through Tret'iakov: he has no independent voice outside of the Russian text of *Den Shi-khua*, no opportunity to challenge Tret'iakov's rendering of his account of himself. Since writing (unlike photography or film) is not indexical but symbolic, there is nothing in the substance of the text itself to suggest a material connection to an external, historical reality. We must take that connection on trust, which is another way of saying that we must be convinced of it, convinced of the author's authority.

Tret'iakov is thus obliged to conclude with his readers what Philippe Lejeune calls a "referential pact." For Lejeune, any text that claims to refer to an external reality—be it scientific, historical, biographical, or autobiographical—concludes, implicitly or explicitly, a referential pact with its readers. This pact, on the basis of which the reader assents to accept the text's claims to referential truth, includes "a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim."⁹⁵⁴ In the case of historical, scientific, and journalistic texts, these claims can be verified by competing external evidence. In the case of autobiography, Lejeune argues that the "autobiographical pact" occurs when the reader consents to assume the identity of author, narrator and protagonist. But this identity cannot be deduced from or affirmed by anything within the text. It is produced by the literary institution of autobiography itself, at the level of publication—for example, through the identity of the author's proper name on the cover and the narrator-protagonist's name in the text.⁹⁵⁵

Den Shi-khua does indeed feature its narrator-protagonist's name on the cover. But its status as autobiography is complicated by Tret'iakov's mediation and the additional questions about transmission, translation and authenticity that it raises. Is Den the "real" author, or is

⁹⁵⁴ Phillippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 22.

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

Tret'iakov? What's more, Tret'iakov's "bio-interview" has no literary institutions behind it that might determine the reader's mode of reading the text as referential. Thus Tret'iakov is obliged to conclude what we might term his own "bio-interview pact" with the reader. Like Lejeune's autobiographical pact, this referential pact with the reader is concluded outside the limits of the main body of the text, in an introduction, which formulates and asserts the truth claims of *Den Shi-khua*.

II. Confession and the Production of Truth

The first thing to say about the introduction is that it is not single but multiple. *Den Shi-khua* was first published as a series of extracts in various periodicals from 1927–9, and then appeared in complete book form in three different editions in 1930, 1933 and 1935.⁹⁵⁶ The first published extract and all subsequent complete editions are preceded by introductions. The introduction to the 1930 edition, dated November 1928, slightly alters and expands the original preface to the first extract, printed in *Novyi Lef* in 1927. Whereas in 1927 Tret'iakov pointedly calls Den a "revolutionary," by 1928 a passage has been added admitting Den's failure to overcome his class background and convert to Communism from the "Guomintangism" of his father—a change clearly necessitated by the GMD's betrayal of the Communists in the spring of 1927. At the same time, a new paragraph insists on the typicality of Den's biography for his generation of Chinese intellectuals, including the Communists.⁹⁵⁷ The 1933 introduction (dated 1932) offers more historical detail—about events that are by now receding into history—and removes the arresting rhetoric about the crippled hand and the primacy of the literature of fact. The 1935 introduction (dated to November 1934) keeps

⁹⁵⁶ Besides the first extract, which appeared in *Novyi Lef*, extracts from *Den Shi-khua* were serialized in a range of periodicals including *Pioner*, *Rabochaia Moskva*, *Pionerskaia pravda*, *Chitatel' i pisatel'*, *Molodaia gvardiia* and *Krasnoe studenchestvo*. Full editions then appeared in 1930 (reprinted 1931), 1933, and 1935. In addition, extracts from the book were published as separate volumes: *Svad'ba Den Shi-khua* (1928) and *Detstvo Den Shi-khua* (1931, reprinted 1933). For the full publication history, see Tolochinskaia, ed., *Russkie sovetskie pisateli*, 349, 389.

⁹⁵⁷ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 4.

these changes, adding some observations about the empathetic similarities between Den's childhood and Tret'iakov's own, and seems deliberately to consign the literature of fact argument to the same past as the events of 1927.⁹⁵⁸

In other words, there is not one “bio-interview pact,” but several, and they take the reader progressively away from the radical literature of fact position proclaimed in 1927. (For the 1933 and 1935 editions, the subtitle “bio-interview” was removed from the title page, though the term survives as a description of the project within the introductions.) In 1927 the writer is hailed as a materialist craftsman, a “discoverer of new material,’ who moulds it carefully and without distortion.”⁹⁵⁹ By 1934 he is composing the image of Den through psychological empathy, remarking: “The structure of our thoughts and feelings turned out to be similar.”⁹⁶⁰ Papazian interprets these shifts as Tret'iakov's accommodation with the seismic changes in Party literary policy in the early 1930s, namely the institution of Socialist Realism and its novelistic hero as the dominant literary form. By 1934, she argues, “Tret'iakov practically acknowledges that the hero of *Den Shi-khua* is a complex, subjective creation of an individual author—essentially the hero of a novel.”⁹⁶¹

Despite these changes in emphasis, certain elements of the introduction remain the same throughout the various editions from 1927 to 1935. Notably, these consistent elements already contain this tension between materialist-productivist and psychological approaches that Papazian identifies as the difference between the earlier and later editions. The unchanging core of Tret'iakov's introduction is the description of the division of labour

⁹⁵⁸ Henceforth I will refer to the introductions by the dates affixed to them in the text, rather than by the date of edition publication.

⁹⁵⁹ Tret'iakov, “Den Sy-khua,” 14. “Настоящий сегодняшний ремесленник — ‘открыватель нового материала,’ бережный, не искажающий формовщик его.”

⁹⁶⁰ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua* (Moscow: Sovetskaia literatura, 1935), 3. “Строй мыслей и чувств оказался схожим.”

⁹⁶¹ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 46.

between Den and Tret'iakov. First, Den is presented as the “source of raw factual material” (сырьевщик фактов), to which Tret'iakov applies his constructive expertise. In 1927 he is the “moulder” (формовщик) of this material, while in the 1930s he proclaims “I constructed the book out of this raw material” (Я строил книгу из этого сырья).⁹⁶² This metaphor of Den as a reserve of material that his former teacher exploits is later developed more fully: “He nobly offered to me the immense depths of his memory. I burrowed into it like a miner, sounding, blasting, chipping, sifting, precipitating.”⁹⁶³ Tret'iakov has already described his work as “deep drilling” (глубокое бурение), supplementing the surface overview of articles and sketches.⁹⁶⁴ Now he uses this mining metaphor to starkly define the active and passive roles in the relationship. Den is figured here as rich but inert material, whose only action is to “nobly” open himself to Tret'iakov's busy, expert penetration. Such industrial analogies are to be expected from an advocate of “production art.”⁹⁶⁵ But there is also a power dynamic at work in this metaphor of authorial authority that uncomfortably recalls imperialist models of economic domination, of the very kind whose application to China Tret'iakov is ostensibly keen to protest. Tret'iakov, the European expert, is needed to transform Den's rich Chinese resources, sadly under-developed, into a product that his Soviet audience can use.

Abandoning industrial metaphor, Tret'iakov next analogizes the productive relationship between himself and Den as a series of discourse situations: “I was by turns investigator,

⁹⁶² Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua* (1935), 3.

⁹⁶³ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 3. “Он благородно предоставил мне великолепные недра своей памяти. Я рылся в ней, как шахтер, зондируя, взрывая, скальвая, отсеивая, отмучивая.”

⁹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶⁵ In the 1923 article “Whence and Whither,” Tret'iakov asserts that Futurism's goal had always been, “not the creation of new pictures, poems and stories, but the production of the new man, using art as one of the instruments in this productive process[.]” Sergei Tret'iakov “Otkuda i kuda? Perspektivy futurizma,” *Lef* 1 (1923): 195. “Итак, не создание новых картин, стихов и повестей, а производство нового человека с использованием искусства, как одного из орудий этого производства, было компасом футуризма от дней его младенчества.”

priest, form-filler, interviewer, interlocutor, psychoanalyst.” (Я был попеременно следователем, духовником, анкетщиком, интервьюером, собеседником, психоаналитиком.)⁹⁶⁶ With the exception of “interlocuter” (собеседник), which suggests a dialogic situation where both sides have equal authority and involvement, all these roles imply a balance of power weighted institutionally towards the listener. In a series of social scenarios including criminal justice (investigator/следователь), religious confession (priest/духовник), state monitoring (form-filler/анкетщик), and psychoanalytic treatment (psychoanalyst/психоаналитик), Tret’iakov stands in the position of the listener invested with power, who demands that the speaker produce the truth about himself. At the same time, in these discourse situations, the speaker has to externalize his internal truth himself; in contrast to the preceding mining analogy, the listener, for all his superior power, cannot simply go in and get it.

The dynamic Tret’iakov describes here is strikingly reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s analysis of the confession as a “technology of the self,” a fundamental mechanism of power for the production of truth in Western culture.⁹⁶⁷ From its origins in Christian practice, Foucault sees the confession form spreading into such diverse areas of social life as “justice, medicine, education, family relations, and love relations,” playing a fundamental role in the “procedures of individualization by power.”⁹⁶⁸ In all these variant spheres of activity, the confession as a discursive act retains a distinctive distribution of power: it is “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive,

⁹⁶⁶ Tret’iakov, “Den Sy-khua,” 14.

⁹⁶⁷ The phrase “technology of the self” is from Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (May 1993): 203.

⁹⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol 1 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 59.

console, and reconcile[.]” This power dynamic is complicated beyond mere domination, however, by the fact that the agency for confession nonetheless lies with the speaker, who must enact this technology on himself in correlation with the demands of power—indeed, it is in this confluence between techniques of coercion and self-fashioning that Foucault locates the operation of government.⁹⁶⁹ The ultimate goal of confession is a transformation of the self into alignment with external demands: “the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.”⁹⁷⁰

Igal Halfin has recently applied Foucault’s model of the confession as a hermeneutical technology of the self to the autobiographies that prospective Party members were obliged to compose in the 1920s and 1930s. Halfin argues that Soviet Marxism shares with Christianity an eschatological model of history, in which the original Fall from classless existence into a exploitative class society was to be redeemed by the final achievement of Communism, a task assigned to the messianic class of the proletariat. Within this eschatological model, the salvation of the individual depended on their aligning their internal self, or soul, with the external truth of History, on attaining a trajectory wherein “the human soul moves through time from the darkness of capitalism to the light of communism.”⁹⁷¹ But salvation, as noted previously, did not depend purely on class origin, as the individual was granted free will to approach or abandon the revolution: hence the central significance of biography. For Halfin, interiority remains a crucial element in Soviet ethics, and confession

⁹⁶⁹ Foucault, “Hermeneutics of the Self,” 203–4.

⁹⁷⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 61–2.

⁹⁷¹ Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 11.

remains the technique that ascertains the degree to which the individual's inner self corresponds to the objective external narrative of eschatological history.

Salvation in the Soviet context could only be attained through membership of the Bolshevik Party, which as the representative of the proletariat played the messianic role in history. Thus prospective Party members were expected to recount their own autobiographies in order to show the extent to which their internal biographies matched up with or diverged from the salvational master narrative:

The hermeneutics of the soul emerged as a manifest, objectively verifiable way of distinguishing true revolutionaries from imposters. The Party had to take the stories comrades told about themselves as evidence of their otherwise hidden moral character. Because self-introspection was ineluctably linked with self-narration, autobiographies, their syntax, their meaning, and the ways in which they were publicly interrogated became a crucial component of the Communist hermeneutics of the soul. Composing their own detailed life stories, each comrade had to understand where he came from, what had brought him into the Party, and what his duties were towards the movement.⁹⁷²

The utopian horizon of this narrative is the completely transparent individual, the full alignment of inner self and outer world. But for now, individuals remain opaque. Their internal souls can only be revealed through the ritual of discourse that is autobiographical confession.

This technology of confessional autobiography extended beyond Party membership applications to permeate Soviet society, including institutions of higher education. As Hellbeck notes, "Every Soviet citizen who applied to become a university student [...] had to compose an autobiography."⁹⁷³ Indeed, Halfin sees students as prime targets for the hermeneutic technology of confession, since they were regarded as "undecided souls," divorced from the healthy influence of concrete labour, prone to the corruptions of

⁹⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁹⁷³ Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind*, 26.

abstraction.⁹⁷⁴ The archive of the Sun Yat-Sen University for the Workers of China, where Den was studying when the interviews with Tret'iakov took place, is filled with such autobiographies. Sadly, I was unable to find Gao Shihua among them, or among the lists of students for 1926 and 1927, the years in which, according to *Den Shi-khua*, Gao attended the university.⁹⁷⁵ But their form recalls the narrative shape of *Den Shi-khua*, as well as the autobiographies analysed by Halfin.

These files include two forms of biographical information. There are self-composed autobiographies, in Chinese or in English, and there are biographical forms that seem to have been filled out in collaboration with an official. The students composing their autobiographies in 1926 and 1927 were encouraged to include such information as: family's economic status; personal experiences and changes in thought; experience of joining organizations and service; reasons for coming to Moscow to study; theoretical attitudes towards the revolution; any critical comments; relations with Russian comrades; and history of arrest.⁹⁷⁶ A form (*anketa*) from 1926 demands similar information: name, gender, date of birth, nationality; languages spoken, read and written; place of birth, social status, and social origin (i.e. social status of parents); profession and occupation before entering the university; marital status and number of children; education, general and political; history of military service; social and political organizations joined and dates; experiences of repression; union

⁹⁷⁴ Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 29.

⁹⁷⁵ This task is complicated by the fact that the Chinese students at the university took Russian names, and are often listed simply under those names. Clearly a practical measure to aid language acquisition and evade the difficulties native Russian speakers might face with pronouncing Chinese names, this practice also invokes religious practices of conversion, the assumption of a new name signifying the assumption of a new identity, a transformed or alternative self. This notion of renaming as part of the process of conversion into Bolshevik culture finds support in some of the choices of name, which include Lunacharskii, Karakhan, Liuksemburg, Pisarev, and Frunze. Others, however, chose less staunchly Bolshevik aliases, including Dostoevskii and Zamiatin. (RGASPI f. 530, op. 1, ed. khr. 3; RGASPI f. 530, op. 1, ed. khr. 13.) *Den Shi-khua* never mentions an assumed Russian name for its protagonist.

⁹⁷⁶ RGASPI f. 530, op. 2, ed. khr. 6; RGASPI f. 530, op. 2, ed. khr. 23, l. 5.

membership and activity; places known in China and abroad; and history of literary publications.⁹⁷⁷ Appended to each form is a characterization (*kharakteristika*) of the student, written by the official who filled out the form. This gives an assessment of the individual's degree of "Marxist preparation" and offers one of a limited range of character assessments: "disciplined and self-possessed" (дисциплинированный и выдержанный), "active" (активный), "has a strong character" (обладает сильным характером).⁹⁷⁸

We can sense in these lists of essential biographical information the outline of the narrative trajectory that shapes *Den Shi-khua*. As Halfin notes, the key elements in a student's autobiography were origin, childhood experiences and socio-political stance of parents, and then the experiences that had drawn that individual away from this family origin: studies, employment, and political activity.⁹⁷⁹ This is precisely what Den's story gives us: his childhood and family life, his father's political activity, his formative experiences in the monastery and during the May Fourth movement, and his politicization at Beijing University. Furthermore, Tret'iakov's introduction shows a clear awareness of this autobiographical tradition. One of the roles Tret'iakov ascribes to himself is "form-filler" (*anketshchik*), which seems that it could only refer to the official who helps an individual fill out a form, as described above. This places Tret'iakov in the position of the official who not only gathers biographical information, but also passes judgement on the interviewee's level of Marxist preparation and strength of character. Another designation, "investigator" (*sledovatel'*), carries the darker echo of the police investigator, extracting the confession of a fallen soul. Vatelescu argues that the Soviet "secret" police were never interested in secrecy per se, seeking instead to produce a "spectacle of secrecy" that enabled awareness of the secret file

⁹⁷⁷ RGASPI f. 530, op. 1, ed. khr. 6, l. 41.

⁹⁷⁸ RGASPI f. 530, op. 1, ed. khr. 6, l. 42, 60, 61.

⁹⁷⁹ See the list of topics guiding the autobiographies of students at Sverdlov University, Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 44.

and the processes of its formation to permeate Soviet society.⁹⁸⁰ Tret'iakov openly acknowledges the police investigation as a model for his activity; if Vatalescu is right, then his contemporary readers, alert to the not-so-hidden presence of the secret police, would surely have picked up on such a parallel.

But what is the purpose of this distinctly confessional situation? For Foucault, the confession is about the production of *interiority*, one of the “procedures of individualization by power” that produce subjectivities separated by selfhood from a social world to which they are nevertheless bound.⁹⁸¹ Halfin in turn claims that the Soviet system’s ideology was effectively internalized in its subjects through this imperative to consider and express the state and movements of the soul. Interiority, however, is precisely what Tret'iakov declared himself to be fighting against. As he argued in his article “Biografiia veshchi, 1928), Tret'iakov saw the novel’s focus on the subjective experience of a single individual as a bourgeois, idealist obfuscation of the material and social nature of human reality. “In the novel, the lead character consumes and subjectivizes all of reality,” he claims, enabling irrational emotion to triumph “over human intellect, knowledge, and technical-organizational experience.”⁹⁸² Tret'iakov claimed that he was seeking to overturn this primacy of the internal and emotional over the social and rationally organized by shifting attention away from the “world of emotions and experiences” and onto the “world of things and processes.”⁹⁸³

This reorientation towards the material and social reveals what we might call the ethnographic purpose of *Den Shi-khua*. Tret'iakov is constantly pushing Den to look, not

⁹⁸⁰ Vatalescu, *Police Aesthetics*, 2.

⁹⁸¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 59.

⁹⁸² Sergei Tret'iakov, “Biografiia veshchi,” in Chuzhak, ed., *Literatura fakta*, 67–8.

⁹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

within, but without, to see what surrounds him with fresh eyes as an objective social mechanism. Indeed, precisely this lack of attention to internal psychology drew criticism from factography's literary rivals. A review in the RAPP journal *Oktiabr'* lambasted Tret'iakov for "paying completely insignificant attention to the intellectual and emotional life of his hero," thereby continuing "the typical LEFist tendency of not seeing the person behind the things."⁹⁸⁴ Here we can sense once more the model of interiority as the seat of truth that Halfin borrows from Foucault, and that Tret'iakov seeks to overturn. Tret'iakov's truth is located externally, in objective social relations and processes. In this materialist conception of the confession, Den is not an interiority in need of expression, but rather a kind of recording device, whose memory-impressions of social life are the raw material from which Tret'iakov's editing produces "truth", i.e. useful knowledge. Confession and material production sit side by side in Tret'iakov's description of the book's genesis. He asks his reader to believe that he is using the forms of the first to achieve the second, moving biography away from the soul and towards the social, away from the novel and towards ethnography.

III. Ethnographic Authority

Tret'iakov's ethnographic purpose requires that Den's life story begin from the fact of his cultural difference and specificity. As Tret'iakov describes the beginning of their collaboration in his introduction, Den failed at first to understand the ethnographic nature of the material he was required to produce: "He greeted my suggestion to write an accurate biography of a Chinese student with enthusiasm. But alas, the first words that he uttered were: 'Our family is intelligentsia and petty-bourgeois.'"⁹⁸⁵ Den/Gao would most likely have

⁹⁸⁴ "Bibliografiia: Den Shi-khua," *Oktiabr'* 5–6 (1930): 279.

⁹⁸⁵ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 3. "Он с энтузиазмом встретил мое предложение написать точную биографию китайского студента. Но увь первыми словами, которые он произнес, были: 'Семья наша интеллигентная и мелкобуржуазная'."

filled out a biographical form like the one described above on his arrival at UTK. Such a ready answer certainly suggests that he has his form-filling responses prepared, that he has formed an understanding of the Soviet system's autobiographical imperative and is treating this bio-interview as an extension of the information collation he has already experienced since applying to Sun Yat-sen University and arriving in Moscow. But Tret'iakov's response to this first statement suggests that he has a different conception of what he is doing. He rejects it with a despairing "alas" (увы); in the later introductions he explains that such a beginning is "lacking in detail and specificity" (неподробно и неконкретно).⁹⁸⁶ These abstract class categories will not do as a beginning; they are insufficiently accurate, and insufficiently Chinese.

Instead, Den's own narrative begins with a translation and analysis of his proper name:

Меня зовут Дэн Ши-хуа. Я — Ши-хуа из рода Дэн, что в сычанской деревне Дэн Цзя-чжень на реке Янцзы. Имя Ши-хуа дал мне при рождении старший дядя, вечно пьяненький философ и неудавшийся мандарин. Ши-хуа значит «Мир Китая.» Одновременно это обозначает «Светлый цветок.»
«Мир Китая.» «Светлый цветок» — странные это имена в наши дни, когда в Китае война.⁹⁸⁷

[My name is Den Shi-khua. I am Shi-khua from the line of Den, which hails from the Sichuan village of Den Tszia-chzhen' on the Yangtze river. The name Shi-khua was given to me at birth by my uncle, an eternally drunken philosopher and failed mandarin. Shi-khua means "China's peace." At the same time it means "Light flower."

"China's peace," "Light flower" — these are strange names in our days, when there is war in China.]

Lejeune emphasises the importance for autobiography of the proper name, which he sees as "linked, by a social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a *real person*."⁹⁸⁸ But here we have not just a proper name, but a translation of a proper name—an opening more suited

⁹⁸⁶ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua* (1933), 4; *Den Shi-khua* (1935), 5.

⁹⁸⁷ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 5.

⁹⁸⁸ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 11. Emphasis in original.

to the mediated responsibility of the bio-interview. Soviet discourse on China in the 1920s often used Chinese names as a metonymic illustration of the impossibility of understanding China.⁹⁸⁹ *Den Shi-khua* announces its intention to dispel this ignorance by tackling the Chinese name first, and rendering it understandable through translation. Nonetheless, this translation maintains its cultural specificity and difference, not least its apparent capacity for double signification.⁹⁹⁰ Next Den, as narrator, continues his analysis of his name: we learn that “khua” is his personal name, while “shi” is his generational name, also held by his sister and male cousins, just as “pu” is the generational name of his father and uncles. It is not enough, in other words, for Den’s name simply to be given. The kind of pact Tret’iakov makes with his readers requires that the name be submitted to a kind of ethnographic translation.

This, then, is our first example of the kind of “detail and concreteness” Tret’iakov wants. He begins not from abstract categories, from the universalizing *anketa*, which moulds everyone to the communist master plot, but from a position of culturally specific difference and distance, a position that requires a significant degree of translation. Tret’iakov’s purpose is ethnographic: the essence of his method as he describes it is to “find in reality an object that possesses the maximum number of typical features, analyse it, and demonstrate how general laws of development operate in an authentic segment of reality.”⁹⁹¹ He wants to use

⁹⁸⁹ See for example Vladimir Maiakovskii’s use of Chinese names in his poem “Muscovite China,” discussed in Chapter One.

⁹⁹⁰ Tret’iakov seems to bend his translator’s rights here to suit his narrative purposes. Chinese sources I have consulted concur in rendering the Chinese name of Tret’iakov’s hero as 邓世华, Dèng Shihuá. (E.g. Gao Mang, “‘Te Jieke’—Beida de Sulian jiaoshou,” in “Xin ling de jiao chan” [Zhong yang bian yi chubanshe, 2005].) One of the meanings of the character 世, *shì*, is “world”; one of the meanings of 华, *huá*, is “China.” The double translation then rests on the fact that the sounds *shi* and *hua* could also be attached to homophonic characters: 花, *huā*, means “flower,” though I am not aware of a character pronounced *shi* that could mean “light.” In any case, Den-Tret’iakov perform a translator’s sleight of hand by translating 世/*shì* as “мир/*mir*,” which can have the meaning “world,” but then using the other connotation of “mir,” “peace” (which 世/*shì* to my knowledge does not have) to make the joke about the unsuitability of such a name in a time of war.

Den's biography as an exemplar, a typical life trajectory that can illuminate the experience of an entire class within a particular society during a specific historical period. Indeed, at the end of his introduction Tret'iakov claims that Den's biography is so typical for young Chinese intellectuals — both revolutionary and reactionary — that Chinese Communists have reacted to extracts with total identification: “Yes, that is our childhood, our school days, our life” (Да ведь это же наше детство, наша школа, наша жизнь).⁹⁹² The high degree of ethnographic detail that Tret'iakov includes, in the book's early chapters in particular, is all intended to illustrate this typicality of Den's story for his cultural group. This is why we begin with a translation of Den's name, an unravelling of its Chinese-ness.

This movement from confession to ethnography does not, however, remove the element of salvation. James Clifford has suggested that the entire Western tradition of ethnographic writing can be read as an “allegory of salvage,” in which Western science preserves through textualization a more innocent, “primitive” culture at the moment of its corruption by modernity.⁹⁹³ Tret'iakov's allegory of salvation works in the opposite direction: he seeks through Den's story to narrate the movement of Chinese culture out of the darkness of tradition towards the light of socialist modernity, under the guiding influence of Marxist-Leninist scientific knowledge. The scope of Den's typicality, however, is determined by class. Indeed, Den's narrative follows the trajectory Halfin identifies for intelligentsia autobiographies in the 1920s, which began at a greater distance on the “spectrum of purity”

⁹⁹¹ Tret'iakov, “Kak ia pisal Dena,” RGALI f. 2886, op. 1, ed. khr. 22, l. 1. “найди в действительности объект, обладающий наибольшим количеством типичных черт, проанализируй его и покажи как в подлинном куске действительности действует общие законы развития.”

⁹⁹² Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 5. This section is missing from the 1927 introduction—perhaps not enough Chinese Communists had had time to read it—but retained in 1932 and 1934.

⁹⁹³ James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in Clifford and Marcus, eds, *Writing Culture*, 109–115.

from correct consciousness and thus had further to travel.⁹⁹⁴ Soviet Russia remains the light; Den's story replays in microcosm the Chinese nationalist intelligentsia's attraction towards that light.

Tret'iakov is not unique in using an individual life as a metonymic representation of an entire group's cultural experience. The collaborative autobiography of Zheng Yuxiu, *Memories of Childhood and Revolution (Souvenirs d'enfance et de la révolution, 1920—* translated into Russian in 1929 as *Kitaianka Sume-Cheng*), also tells the story of a young revolutionary intellectual's education as an allegory of China's movement into modernity, though the end-point in this case is France and democratic liberalism, not Russia and Soviet Marxism.⁹⁹⁵ Lejeune notes the use of such collaborative autobiographies to examine working-class lives in Western sociology from the 1920s, and Clifford discusses the prominence of the method in post-modern ethnography. Both note the imbalances of power inherent in such situations. For Lejeune, this practice amounts to a “vast collective transference of memory” that defines the class that does not write as the cumulative Other whose lives can now be consumed by the class that both writes and reads.⁹⁹⁶ Invoking the trope of salvation, he insists: “At the same time that it is a form of rescue or help,

⁹⁹⁴ Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 28.

⁹⁹⁵ Zheng Yuxiu (鄭毓秀), also known as Zheng Sumei (鄭蘇梅) or Soumay Tcheng, was the first Chinese woman to receive a bachelor's degree and doctorate in law from the Sorbonne. In a brief introduction, B. Van Vorst, the “transcriber” of the narrative, affirms Zheng's existence by updating the reader on her achievements since the events of the main text ended; these include representing Chinese women at the Versailles Peace Conference. (Soumay Tcheng, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de révolution*, transcrits par B. Van Vorst [Paris: Payot, 1920].) Zheng later became a judge in the Republic of China, and was married to the Chinese ambassador to the USA, Wei Tao-ming. A continuation of Zheng's autobiography in English, entitled *My Revolutionary Years: the Autobiography of Madame Wei Tao-ming*, was published in 1943.

The 1929 Russian translation *Kitaianka Sume-Cheng* probably appeared too late to influence the composition of *Den Shi-khua*, if we take the date of the introduction to the first complete edition (15 November 1928) as an end-point. Both books appeared in close succession, however, and both with covers designed by Aleksandr Rodchenko—a concise illustration of the heightened attention paid to China at that time.

⁹⁹⁶ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 211.

intervention is an act of violation or voyeurism, a form of abuse of power.”⁹⁹⁷ This form of textual production creates and maintains what Lejeune dubs an “ethnological gap” between the expert who writes and the subject who remembers but does not write, and it is a gap that it is in the interests of the expert to preserve.⁹⁹⁸ For Clifford these collaborations remain “fictions of dialogue” in which the “monological authority” of the ethnographer as writer is retained, expressed most crucially in the “synecdochic interpretive authority” that allows the ethnographer to interpret this life as representative of a whole culture.⁹⁹⁹ Both analyses echo Foucault’s analysis of the confession dynamic: even if the agency to confess is with the speaker, authority lies with the listener, who in these cases is also the writer.

Tret’iakov’s introduction is intended to establish this ethnographic authority, the authority both to shape Den’s life-story and to interpret it as typical for his cultural milieu. But what qualifies Tret’iakov to exercise this authority? The 1927 and 1928 interviews offer little more than the fact of Tret’iakov’s presence in Beijing and the validity of the literature of fact as a method. In 1932, greater emphasis is given to the “stock of observations” garnered in Beijing that Tret’iakov turned to in shaping the book.¹⁰⁰⁰ The 1934 introduction adds a more empathetic form of contextual understanding, a “peculiar call-and-response” between Den’s intelligentsia childhood and Tret’iakov’s own in the family of a provincial Russian school-teacher.¹⁰⁰¹ However, the 1933 and 1935 introductions also dwell on the linguistic difficulties involved in the processing of Den’s raw material. We are told that Den did not speak Russian very well, and often resorted to drawing to try and express his meaning: “Den

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid., 210.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁹⁹⁹ Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” 135.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Tret’iakov, *Den Shi-khua* (1933), 3.

¹⁰⁰¹ Tret’iakov, *Den Shi-khua* (1935), 3.

spoke Russian with difficulty. Not letting the pencil out of his hand, he would draw as he narrated: a fireplace, a sword, a bed, a drag-net, a monastery, a flute, a nut. Often he would subsequently have to ask someone better informed what the thing in his drawing was called in Russian.”¹⁰⁰² In a draft article from 1934 revealingly entitled “How I Wrote Den,” Tret’iakov admits that sometimes he was the sketch artist, drawing various things and asking Den to choose the image that best suited what he was trying to describe.¹⁰⁰³ Communicating in Chinese does not seem to have been a viable alternative: although Tret’iakov uses occasional Chinese phrases throughout his China texts, his limited linguistic skills and need for interpreters are repeatedly emphasised, and there is no indication in *Den Shi-khua* that Chinese was used during the interviews. So we are asked to take this combination of broken Russian and sketched images as the source material from which Tret’iakov “formed” the narrative text *Den Shi-khua*, guided by the assistance of his own memories? This might seem a tall order; yet the first-person narrative that begins once this introductory frame is over proceeds in fluent and grammatically precise Russian.

The RAPP review of *Den Shi-khua* in *Oktiabr’* drew attention to this problem, identifying *Den Shi-khua* as a kind of “double ‘translation’: from Chinese into bad spoken Russian, and from the latter into literary Russian.”¹⁰⁰⁴ This produces, for the anonymous reviewer, “a transformation of speech style, which one might expect to characterize Den-Shi-Khua, but actually constitutes the free creation of Tret’iakov, hiding with excessive and harmful modesty behind the back of his documentary object.”¹⁰⁰⁵ The *Oktiabr’* reviewer,

¹⁰⁰² Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁰³ Tret’iakov, “Kak ia pisal Dena,” RGALI f. 2886 op. 1. ed. khr. 22, l. 2. Most likely, this is a draft of the rewritten introduction included in the 1935 edition.

¹⁰⁰⁴ “Bibliografiia: Den Shi-khua,” 279. It is not inconceivable that Tret’iakov added the section on Den’s linguistic limitations to the 1932 introduction in response to this article and similar criticisms.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

troubled like Lejeune and Clifford at the imbalance of power in this dialogic relationship, argues that Tret'iakov uses his harmful translation practice to suppress Den's authentic, emotional self, glimpses of which can still be obtained from the text. Den, an aspiring writer and lover of literature, would surely have written himself differently. "In this sense," the reviewer concludes, "Den-Shi-Khua and Tret'iakov are not co-workers, but rivals."¹⁰⁰⁶

In the 1927 introduction, Tret'iakov claims he wants to correct this imbalance, to close Lejeune's ethnological gap. Noting with a Mayakovskian flourish that Den "considered the brush of a writer equal to the bayonet of a soldier" (Кисточка писателя казалась ему равной штыку солдата), Tret'iakov excuses his incomplete narrative with the hope "that the continuation will be written by Den Shi-khua himself" (Я желаю, чтобы это продолжение было написано самим Дэн Сы-Хуа).¹⁰⁰⁷ But Den cannot write it yet, he insists, because he lacks the ability "to see what surrounds you, to discern the details of your own life" (Видеть то, что тебя окружает, разглядеть подробно свою жизнь).¹⁰⁰⁸ Den, narrator and protagonist, lacks the estranged perspective on his life that Tret'iakov insists is necessary for ethnographic authorship. This is why, in the bio-interview, the author function must be fulfilled by Tret'iakov. The unpublished note on "How I Wrote Den" humorously describes Tret'iakov asking Den an exhausting number of questions in order to elucidate details that for Den are invisible because familiar. Den never thinks to mention the ceiling on his childhood bed, nor the ink flowers that his mother drew on his palm so that she could check later whether he'd been swimming in the river.¹⁰⁰⁹ These are precisely the kind of details that to an inhabitant of the culture appear ordinary, but illustrate its difference to a foreign audience.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Tret'iakov, "Den Sy-khua," 15.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Tret'iakov, "Kak ia pisal Dena," 2–3.

Den has to learn from Tret'iakov which details are worthy of narration and which can be omitted.

Thus *Den Shi-khua* contains two processes of education, divided, to use the terminology of Émile Benveniste as adopted by Lejeune, between the level of utterance and the level of enunciation.¹⁰¹⁰ At the level of utterance, in the text itself, we have the narrative of Den's progressive enlightenment out of the mists of tradition towards modern, and ultimately Marxist, forms of social knowledge. At the level of enunciation, in the speech act of the series of interviews that produce the book, we have Den receiving practical training from Tret'iakov in the methods of the literature of fact. Both these narratives of education suggest or even demand allegorical readings. Den's educational trajectory through life is presented to us as ethnographic allegory: a metonymic exemplar of the Chinese intelligentsia's passage into intellectual and political modernity. Den's training as a factographic writer through his work with Tret'iakov, meanwhile, offers a political allegory, recalling the work of Soviet political and military advisors such as Mikhail Borodin and Vasilii Bliukher with the Guomindang in 1924–27. These allegories of education both position China as eager pupil and Soviet Russia as experienced, benevolent teacher. The utopian horizon of these allegories, never reached in the text, would be the erasure of this pedagogical gap between the two, the moment when Den begins to write his own life.

IV. Distance: Translation, Naivety and Irony

Den Shi-khua, then, is shaped by the establishment and gradual reduction of various distances. Firstly there is the cultural distance between the reader and Den, established from the start by the exploration of his name and the world of his childhood. This distance is both established and traversed by the act of translation. In a short note "On Translation," published while work was in progress on *Den Shi-khua*, Tret'iakov suggests that translating between

¹⁰¹⁰ Lejeune employs Benveniste's concepts of utterance and enunciation in his discussion of autobiography. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 8–9.

differing cultural practices of everyday life (*byt*) tends to produce an exotic, distancing effect by estranging the word from its contextual function. “Exoticism,” he argues, “is precisely the transmission of the everyday as something unprecedented, its estrangement [*ostranenie*].”¹⁰¹¹ To avoid this exoticization, the translator should try wherever possible to translate standard, everyday terms and items (*bytovye standarty*) from the foreign language by equivalent standards in the target language. “Spasibo,” for example, should not be translated into Chinese as “may God save you,” but simply as “thank you”—it is the term’s social communicative function, not its semantic content, that needs to be translated. “The unconvertible remainder will then be that specificity that distinguishes the cultures.”¹⁰¹² This remainder is especially great in situations whose socioeconomic set-ups radically differ, for example when dealing with different stages of development: “Council of workers’ deputies,” for example, cannot be translated by “guild.”¹⁰¹³ Thus exoticism can be explained as temporal distance within a universal stage theory of historical development: two cultures that have passed through the same developmental stages will, by this logic, be more “translatable” to each other.

This theory of translation is employed in *Den Shi-khua* to suggest that China, for all its apparent difference, is moving through the same historical stages earlier traversed by Russia. In the early chapters, a large number of Chinese terms describing the world of Den’s childhood world are given in the original with explanatory Russian translations. We learn that “litan” means “prayer hall” (молитвенный зал), that “chu-pu” is the “book of measures” (книга метрик), that the “shen’-kan” is the family altar, and that a “ma-gua” is a “shiny

¹⁰¹¹ Sergei Tret’iakov, “O perevode,” *Novyi Lef* 7 (1928): 41. “Экзотика и есть передача быта небывалым, остранение его.”

¹⁰¹² *Ibid.* “Необратимый остаток и будет та специфика, которая различает быты.”

¹⁰¹³ *Ibid.*

black satin vest with long sleeves that cover the hands.”¹⁰¹⁴ When Den’s grandmother tells a fairy-tale, however, it is given as an entirely Russian “skazka,” complete with Baba-yaga frightening the children with her wily cannibalism.¹⁰¹⁵ When Den witnesses a bandit execution, the bandits are given the Chinese appellation “tu-fei,” but their leader is an “ataman,” calling into comparison the Russian image of the Cossacks.¹⁰¹⁶ Later, Den’s life in the Buddhist monastery combines translated Chinese terms—“si-fu” (translated as наставник, spiritual mentor), “ho-shen” (equated to монах, monk)—with terms imported directly from the Russian Orthodox tradition: “молитва” (prayer), “богомолцы” (pilgrims), “настоятель” (senior priest), “библия” (bible), “монастырь” (monastery).¹⁰¹⁷ Here the critical intention is clear: at the very moment that Den is experiencing his “first lesson in socialism,” these lazy, venal Buddhist monks are to be identified with the degenerate priests of Bol’shevik propaganda. By translating Chinese *byt* into the everyday language of pre-revolutionary Russia, Tret’iakov implies that China, for all its cultural distinctiveness, is embarked on the same historical path. Absolute cultural difference is translated into relative developmental distance.

This relative distance is also represented in the educational shape of the bio-narrative itself. Beginning in the ignorance and naivety of Den’s childhood, the reader must be kept constantly aware of the distance to be travelled before Den can reach Moscow in 1926 and begin recounting his story. This distance, which produces what we might call the autobiographical irony of the narrative, is emphasised through the naivety given to Den’s narrative voice. From the start this voice is strikingly different from the assertive, almost

¹⁰¹⁴ Tret’iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 7–11, 32.

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17–17.

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 184–5.

¹⁰¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 163–167.

aggressive tone of Tret'iakov's introduction, with its programmatic statements and jarring metaphors. Den's voice is slower, more gentle, without the agit-prop dynamism of Tret'iakov's journalistic style. The commitment to factuality means that Den's narrative voice is composed largely of simple, factual statements and direct speech. Consistent with the programmatic statements in "Biography of a Thing," there is little in the way of internal psychology. This does not mean that Den's voice is simplistic. It shows a tendency towards parataxis, but also indulges in long, languorous poetic phrases.¹⁰¹⁸ However, in its commitment to factuality it possesses a marked earnestness, at times somewhat wooden and distinctly humourless. By contrast with Tret'iakov's interventions in his own voice, which bristle with ironic energy and avant-garde playfulness, Den is strikingly sincere, even naive. This naivety is crucial: it generates an ironic distance between Den and the reader, a space opened up by Tret'iakov's organizing author in order to encourage a critical perspective on Den. The story of education must inevitably begin from a position of relative innocence; but the ironic stance produced by the autobiographical frame allows the future overcoming of that innocence to be borne always in mind.

For example, the ironic distance produced by naivety enables the reader to perceive the degree to which young Den is enveloped within the conventions of traditional culture. The early chapters are saturated with detailed ethnographic descriptions of daily life and rituals. Rice farming and mealtimes are related with the same degree of detail as festivals, funerals and weddings. Myong calls this a "montage of journalistic reports," and argues that these passages could be detached from *Den Shi-khua* and understood equally well as free-

¹⁰¹⁸ For example, the analysis of his name at the beginning of the first chapter is conducted in dry, terse phrases. But once we switch to location and a description of native place, the register changes to poetic: "I was born in the large Den family home in the depths of January, when the mighty Yangtze, shallowed out and blue-tinted as if in sickly emaciation, runs roaring through the ravines of its steep Sichuan banks." (Я родился в большом родовом доме Дэн в январские дни, когда обмелевшая и поголубевшая, словно в болезненной худобе, с шумом бежит великолепная Янцзы в теснинах крутых сычуанских берегов.) Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 5.

standing newspaper articles.¹⁰¹⁹ However, within the text as a whole these passages contribute towards the ethnographic allegory of Den's education by enacting a growing critique of traditional daily life, or *byt*. *Byt* was one of Tret'iakov's primary aesthetic and ideological enemies. In the article "Whence and Whither?" Tret'iakov dubs *byt* a "deeply reactionary force," a "structure of feelings and actions that have been automatized through repetition in connection with a specific socio-economic base, entering into habit and attaining remarkable durability."¹⁰²⁰ *Byt* can also become objectified in "the form of the things with which man surrounds himself, onto which, regardless of their usefulness, he transfers the fetishism of his sympathies and memories, until in the end he becomes literally the slave of those things." In place of *byt* Tret'iakov demands *bytie*, "dialectically felt reality in the process of continuous becoming."¹⁰²¹ We can perhaps sense here an affinity with Shkolvskii's theory of artistic estrangement (*ostranenie*), which also seeks to overturn automatization and make the human environment newly accessible to cognition. Tret'iakov salvational ethnography begins with its subject trapped within this cultural automatization, only to show this enveloping unity fracture under the pressure of developing consciousness.

The hypnotic power of *byt* and its investment in objects emerge strongly in this early description of bedtime at the end of Den's typical day:

Out in the courtyard, cicadas ring out the darkness like relentless little bells. Squeaking mosquitos cluster in corners. Mama sits beside me, stroking her hand over the blanket, and sings a song with no words. I gaze at the fine linen bed-curtain. It is decorated with plum-tree branches: pink flowers, blue leaves. From the wooden ceiling of the bed there hangs a basket of white flowers, i-lai-sian. These flowers were odourless during the day, but now, through the knots of the basket, they release a fresh, perfumed aroma.

Above the bed of every Chinese at night hangs a basket of i-lai-sian.

¹⁰¹⁹ Myong, "S. Tret'jakov und China," 103–4.

¹⁰²⁰ Tret'iakov, "Otkuda i kuda?" 200.

¹⁰²¹ Ibid.

Mama's song mixes with the scent of the i-lai-sian, with the darkness, with the cicadas and the distant sound of the Yangtze slipping by. I fall asleep.¹⁰²²

The cosy security that saturates this passage is produced by a combination of family and culture, reinforced by the natural signifiers of place. As he lies drifting towards sleep, his attention wanders from his mother's comforting presence to the signs of typical culture that surround his bed. The plum-tree branches drawn on his linen bedcurtain are a stock image of East Asian visual culture, and we are explicitly informed in a free-standing line that the hanging basket of *yelaixiang* flowers above the bed connects Den's experience to that of every member of his cultural group.¹⁰²³ The soothing sound of his mother's song interweaves with this typical scent and familiar local sounds — the cicadas, the Yangtze river — to lull young Den to sleep at a homely co-ordinate triply established by nature, family and culture.

The sleeping child must be awoken, however, from the hypnosis of traditional life. The narrative chips away at this total childish naivety in stages. This gradual progress out of naivety means that successive ethnographic passages also serve to illustrate the development of Den's relationship towards his society. The chapter on his mother's funeral describes in great detail the coffin, the clothes she wears, the composition of her pillow, and the characters written on the tablet beside the coffin. But when Den's turn comes to read from the "Buddhist prayer-book," this largely visual ethnographic report is interrupted with a significant moment in the hero's progressive disenchantment with religion:

¹⁰²² Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 30. "Со двора неистовыми бубенцами обзванивают темноту цикады. Комариный писк тычется в углы. Мама сидит рядом со мной, гладит рукой по одеялу и поет песню без слов. Я гляжу на полог из тонкой льняной ткани. На нем нарисованы ветки сливы — цветы розовые, листья синие. С досок кроватного потолка свешивается корзинка. В ней белые цветы — и-лай-сян. Эти цветы были бездушны весь день, но сейчас от них сквозь прутья корзинки сочится свежее благовоние. Над кроватью каждого китайца ночью висит корзинка и-лай-сян.

Мамина песня смешивается с запахом и-лай-сян. С темнотою, цикадами и далеким скользким бегом Янцзы. Я засыпаю."

¹⁰²³ I am assuming that "i-lai-sian" here refers to *yelaixiang* (夜来香), or *telosma cordata*, also known as night willow herb. The fragrance of this plant's flowers is released with particular effect at night, hence its Chinese name, which roughly means "fragrance that comes at night."

...The good will become happy, and the unhappiness of the evil will know no bounds...

What lies are written in this book! Take Mama – she was good, virtuous, humble, yet who could call her life happy?

I read these words of comfort, do not believe them and cry tears of rage.¹⁰²⁴

By the time of Den's arranged wedding, conducted without his consent and after his May 4 political awakening, traditional culture has become something that inflicts physical pain on the bodies of its victims. His ceremonial shirt and *ma-gua* rub together "as if made of chain-mail, rather than silk."¹⁰²⁵ The drummers of the "frenzied" orchestra sound as if they are attempting to "mutilate" their drums; fireworks resemble "the clatter of machine guns."¹⁰²⁶ An endless succession of ceremonial bowing causes Den to almost cry out in pain; "you have to be a good athlete," he remarks with bitter humour, "to survive a game as gruelling as a Chinese wedding."¹⁰²⁷ Making the rounds of his guests at the wedding dinner, he compares himself, "sick, green, and exhausted," to the bandits whose execution he witnessed several chapters earlier.¹⁰²⁸ He ends the night shivering in bed with fever, faintly aware of the stranger who is now his wife lying beside him.

Such passages combine "authentic" ethnographic description with the progressive removal of Den from tradition's clutches. A more ironic attitude is produced by passages where the reader senses that Den's "enlightenment" is misguided or temporary. For example, an extended description of the Dragon Boat Festival is interrupted by Den's proud observation that he no longer gets the ceremonial presents designated for small children: as a

¹⁰²⁴ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 98. "...Добрые станут счастливы, а несчастью злых не будет предела..." Какая ложь написана в этой книге! Вот мама — она была добрая, справедливая, тихая, а разве ее жизнь можно назвать счастливой? Я читаю утешительные слова, не верю им и плачу гневными слезами."

¹⁰²⁵ *Ibid.*, 238. *Ma-gua* = 马褂, often described in English as a "mandarin jacket."

¹⁰²⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁰²⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁰²⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

young student, he receives brushes, paper and ink. “I walk about with dignity,” he declares, “and scorn the young children with ‘milk on their breath.’”¹⁰²⁹ This newfound pride in the relative prestige afforded him within the hierarchical structure of traditional society continues in the next chapter, “I Go Visiting” (“Khozhu v gosti”). “Ah, how pleased I am with myself!” he declares, revelling in his invitation to take tea with the adults. “No jokes, no giggles! My answers are considered, my intonations precise. [...] How good it is to be a grown-up!”¹⁰³⁰ The reader reads this line with irony, not only because we know that Den is not yet truly a grown-up, but also because we detect the entrenched pride in social position that enables such hierarchical systems to reproduce themselves.

Two chapters later, Den and some classmates are travelling home from school by boat. Of the coolies who row their vessel, he says: “We do not notice them, and they interest us very little. After all, there is not one son of a coolie among us.”¹⁰³¹ Moving away from the pan-Chinese significance of the *yelaixiang*, we are witnessing the formation of class consciousness. As Halfin notes, the individual born into the intelligentsia had further to travel to attain correct, proletarian consciousness.¹⁰³² Correspondingly, this moment serves to show young Den’s distance from the working masses, a distance that begins to be closed during his experiences in the monastery. Put to work by the monks, he appreciates for the first time the back-breaking nature of the peasant labour he had previously experienced only as an observer. Yet at the end of the day, his food is less tasty than it was when he was wealthy and

¹⁰²⁹ Ibid, 114.

¹⁰³⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰³¹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰³² See note 994 above.

did no work. This is Den's "first lesson in socialism," the realization that quantity of work and quality of reward do not strictly correlate.¹⁰³³

Lessons in socialism intensify once he reaches Beijing University. Here Den, following the fashion among his peers, becomes an enthusiast of anarchist ideas, particularly the works of Kropotkin and Tolstoy. The young student declares that Bolshevism and anarchism say essentially the same thing, and that "Tolstoy is Russia's most revolutionary writer."¹⁰³⁴ This political naivety is dismantled by his first properly Bolshevik teacher, A. A. Ivin (referred to in the text under his Chinese name, I Fa-er). Ivin, rubbing his hands with the aptly formational attitude of "a cook who has thrown some vegetables into a pot of boiling water and is waiting for them to cook," firmly denies that Tolstoy's philosophy is revolutionary.¹⁰³⁵ The professor's intervention causes Den to undertake a critical re-reading:

I pick up "Resurrection," and read it all the way through again. Turns out the Professor was right. Nekhliudov, generously giving away his land to the peasants, is a fabrication. Tolstoy is a utopian. That doesn't happen. The peasants should seize the landowners' land themselves, without waiting for all the landowners to become Nekhliudovs.¹⁰³⁶

Tolstoy has committed the anti-factographic sin of fabrication (*vydumka*), representing in literature what could never happen in the concrete circumstances of social life. Anarchism was frequently dismissed in Bolshevik discourse for just this non-correspondence between word and reality: "Except for pretty phrases, anarchists had nothing to say," concludes one of

¹⁰³³ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid., 280. Den also mimics Kropotkin in equating anarchism with the thought of the Chinese philosopher Laozi. This connection between anarchism and Laozi was made by Kropotkin in his article on anarchism for the 1910 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. See Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), xiv.

¹⁰³⁵ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 316.

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid. "Я беру «Воскресение», прочитываю его снова до корки. А пожалуй, профессор прав. Нехлюдов, благодарно отдающий землю крестьянам, выдуман. Толстой — утопист. Так не бывает. Крестьяне должны сами взять себе помещичью землю, не дожидаясь, пока все помещики станут Нехлюдовыми."

Halfin's autobiographers, attracted like Den to anarchism as a temporary wrong turning on the road to correct consciousness.¹⁰³⁷ Den is learning all the lessons his teacher-interviewer, Tret'iakov, would have him learn; indeed, Myong highlights this passage as one moment where the voice and worldview of Tret'iakov protrude most blatantly into Den's narrative.¹⁰³⁸

This ironic attitude towards Den's narrative of education is enhanced by its complex use of the present tense. Rather than situating Den as narrator consistently in the moment of enunciation in 1926, recounting his past life to Tret'iakov in the past tense, the use of the present tense locates narrator and protagonist together within the time and space of the past he is recounting. Constant interventions break this totality of present experience, however, to remind the reader of the interview situation established by the framing introduction. Thus, as Myong notes, Den is split between a narrating Den, whose perspective is external and retrospective, and an experiencing Den, whose experiences each event as if new.¹⁰³⁹ Even as he narrates his discovery of Tolstoy in present time, the Den of 1926 knows that its overturning by Ivin is imminent. For large portions of the text, this split between narrator and protagonist is effaced. But there are moments when the narrating Den comes to occupy the same ironic attitude towards his experiencing self that the reader is also encouraged to adopt, rupturing the narrative's mimetic transparency and reminding the reader of the specific situation of the bio-interview.

The complexities of this set-up are neatly illustrated in a passage from the second chapter, which describes Den's home life in Sichuan:

Вот сейчас май, у вас в Москве холодно, над Чистыми прудами идет снег, а у нас в Сычуане хозяйки рвут с желтых гряд и кладут на стол свежие огурцы.¹⁰⁴⁰

¹⁰³⁷ Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 68.

¹⁰³⁸ Myong, "S. Tret'jakov und China," 106.

¹⁰³⁹ Myong, "S. Tret'jakov und China," 101.

[Now it is May. In your Moscow it is cold, snow is falling on Chistye prudy. But in our Sichuan the farmers are tearing fresh cucumbers from their yellow beds and setting them on the table.]

The present tense, the deictic “vot” and the temporal marker “seichas” all here indicate the narrative time as Den’s childhood and the place as Sichuan. But “u vas” refers to the direct speech situation of 1926, indicating Tret’iakov and, by extension, the reader, who in reading the text steps into the listener position originally occupied by Tret’iakov. What’s more, Den here deploys knowledge of Moscow, its geography and its weather, that his childhood self could not possibly have possessed. The closure and smoothness of Den’s narrative is once more disrupted. This trick is constantly repeated, in the early chapters in particular. We must periodically be reminded in this way of the framing temporality in order to maintain the correct, ironic attitude towards Den’s naivety, an attitude that relies on our constant awareness of his trajectory towards his eventual destination, the interview with Tret’iakov in Moscow.

The framing situation is further recalled by footnotes from Tret’iakov himself that occasionally interrupt the narrative. Some anticipate accusations of the fallibility of memory. When Den describes an essay that he wrote in school, Tret’iakov interjects that Den’s memory may have been affected by the passage of time, as the theme and exposition do not seem to coincide.¹⁰⁴¹ Later Tret’iakov, highlighting his secondary research, corrects Den’s dating of a protest to the summer, insisting that other sources put it in January.¹⁰⁴² Tret’iakov is also capable of criticizing his interviewee’s objectivity, as when he notes that Den’s hatred for the man who sought to execute his father allows him to quote an unrealistic

¹⁰⁴⁰ Tret’iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 10.

¹⁰⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*, 322.

figure for the productivity of that man's land.¹⁰⁴³ Other footnotes support statements that may seem incredible. When Den reports protestors in the post-May Fourth boycotts "crying with rage" ("plachut ot zloby") beside bonfires of Japanese goods, Tret'iakov feels obliged to footnote that several other young Chinese have told him of such tears.¹⁰⁴⁴ When Den gives the number of guests at his wedding as 1,600, Tret'iakov intervenes to confirm that this figure's credibility has been verified, adding: "I draw attention to this as an aesthetically dangerous instance that induces thoughts about fabrication [*vydumka*]."¹⁰⁴⁵ These footnotes pull us out of the immediacy of Den's narrative, told in its vivid present, and back to the interview situation in 1926 Moscow. At one point, Den's recently deceased mother is mentioned, and the footnote tells us that here the narrator's eyes glistened once more with tears.¹⁰⁴⁶ The cumulative effect is that the narrative is not allowed to become transparent; the peculiar situation of its composition is constantly recalled, and Tret'iakov's editorial authority over Den's naïve account is repeatedly asserted.

Tret'iakov's strangest interruption, however, is his own appearance in the narrative. This appearance employs a small-scale variation on the movement from naivety to understanding that we have seen operating in Den's narrative as a whole. Den declares that he has reached his third year in the Russian section, and the students are awaiting the appearance of their new professor, "Te Ti-ko," recently arrived from Moscow. They are nervous; they know he speaks "not a word of Chinese," and they worry they will not be able to understand his lectures. Eventually, an "unusually tall bald man" appears in the classroom

¹⁰⁴³ Not included in the 1930 edition, this footnote appears in the 1935 text, reprinted in Sergei Tret'iakov, *Strana-perekrestok: dokumental'naia proza*, ed. T. S. Gomolitskaia-Tret'iakova (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), 241.

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

and, after an over-fast start, finds a speaking speed that his students can understand.¹⁰⁴⁷ Soon they warm to him, nicknaming his Te Zhu-gan, “Te Bamboo Pole,” in honour of his height.¹⁰⁴⁸

How long before the reader realises “Te Ti-ko” is Tret’iakov? If they do not decode his Chinese name straight away, perhaps they will guess by the time he starts telling his students about the Wanxiang incident of 1924—the event dramatized in *Roar, China!*, which had played in Moscow by the time *Den Shi-khua* appeared. Tret’iakov, whose voice has already been heard in the introduction and returns in a series of footnotes, here shows himself to the reader in almost parodic fashion through the estranged perspective of Den, reciting his ideological convictions in comically delayed classroom Russian:

Рассказывая, Тэ часто начинает торопиться, но тут же, заметив морщины напряжения между нашими бровями, одергивает себя.
— Ни о-дно про-из-ве-де-ние ис-кус-ства не бы-ва-ет бес-пар-тий-ным. Каж-дая ме-ло-дия... непонятно? Песня... музыка... каждый актер, каждая стро-ка, всякая кар-ти-на про-де-лы-ва-ет ра-бо-ту... непонятно? Действует.... служит. В интересах... на пользу... ка-кого ни-будь клас-са.¹⁰⁴⁹

[When talking, Te often begins to speed up, but as soon as he notices the frowns of concentration between our eyebrows, he restrains himself.
“No ar-tis-tic work can be without party af-fil-i-a-tion. Ev-e-ry me-lo-dy... understand? Songs... music... every ac-tor, every line, any pain-ting con-ducts its work... understand? acts... serves... in the interests.... to the ad-vantage... of some class or oth-er.”]

Here we can sense how the appearance of Te Ti-ko re-enacts, in comic form, the problem of communication that was touched on in the introduction and lies at the heart of *Den Shi-khua*’s documentary credibility. Te Ti-ko is here to teach his Chinese students, but also to learn from them—he takes great interest in their lives, accompanying them to the theatre and to demonstrations. But how will the Soviet teacher’s message transcend the cultural divide,

¹⁰⁴⁷ Ibid., 335.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ibid., 336.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ibid., 337.

when events such as Wanxiang seem completely normal to his students, and his height encourages them to think he will be martial and short-tempered, like the similarly tall Shandongese? In fact, the communication divide is overcome almost as soon as it is identified—an acceptable speed of Russian is found, and the students warm to Te Ti-ko’s jokes and tales of Moscow. Thus the anxieties that readers might be expected to have about *Den Shi-khua*’s credibility as a translation are here raised precisely in order to be resolved within the text.

Two chapters later, the ironies develop further when Tret’iakov takes over the narration himself—or rather, “Tret’iakov” becomes the narrator of the text that Tret’iakov the author is already shaping and writing. This open usurpation by Tret’iakov of a narrative he already controls is presented, moreover, as Den’s initiative. Den’s voice returns as quoted speech within Tret’iakov’s narrative to announce that, since his professor observed Den’s life during the major political events of 1925, he can narrate this period. Tret’iakov even seems to gesture to the irony of this account of the power dynamic in their relationship. Pledging to talk about Den, he immediately goes on to talk about himself. “Fine,” Tret’iakov-as-narrator announces. “Let Den himself be silent, and let Professor Te Ti-ko tell Den’s story.” The next paragraph begins: “How is Te Ti-ko formed from the surname Tret’iakov?”¹⁰⁵⁰ What follows is, in fact, a parodic re-enactment of the beginning of Den’s narrative. Tret’iakov explains that his full name rendered phonetically in Chinese would require eight hieroglyphs, and would sound “cumbersome, pretentious, incomprehensible, like the name of a joint-stock company.”¹⁰⁵¹ Instead, three characters are chosen that approximate phonetically his surname

¹⁰⁵⁰ Ibid., 344. “Ладно. Пусть помолчит сам Дэн, и пусть про Дэна расскажет профессор Тэ Ти-ко. Как из фамилии Третьяков делается Тэ Ти-ко?”

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid. In this jocular use of comparison we sense something of the change of style that marks the transition from Den’s narration to Tret’iakov’s. Den, though fond of metaphor, never employs this light, humorous touch. His metaphors are poetic and serious, like the long drama on the Shanghai massacre that Te Ti-ko suggests could better be replaced by short agit-pieces, possibly with a satirical bent. (Ibid., 355.)

while keeping within the standard form of Han Chinese names (typically two or three characters):

Мне опытный китайский книжник подобрал Тэ Ти-ко. В переводе это значит — «железо, острый, победить», благозвучно, поэтично, подходяще.

Ти-ко — мои имена, Тэ — моя фамилия. Обращаясь ко мне, зовут — Тэ сян-шен (мистер Тэ) или Лао Тэ (господин Тэ).¹⁰⁵²

[An experienced Chinese book-lover chose Te Ti-ko for me. In translation it means “iron, sharp, conquer”; harmonious, poetic, appropriate.

Ti-ko is my given name, Te my surname. When people address me, they say Te sian'-shen (Mr Te) or Lao Te (Te, sir).]

This clearly echoes the translational act that began Den's narrative, only in reverse: the Russian writer, whose project as a whole is to translate Den into Russian, here explains how he was translated into Chinese. Tret'iakov's decision to insert himself into Den's narrative as a character and then a narrator serves to draw attention once more to the complex translational game that lies behind the creation of the text. But in doing so, it highlights with playful irony the fact that Tret'iakov has been shaping and translating the narrative all along. As much here as at the start, it is Tret'iakov who is in control, rendering these translations on his own terms and with his own rhetorical purposes.

We also see Den from an estranged perspective in the chapters Tret'iakov narrates. Den did not catch his eye at first, we are told; he “holds himself aloof, a little cool, completely unobtrusive.”¹⁰⁵³ When Tret'iakov visits Den's dormitory in the company of some Russian women who examine and touch all his things, Tret'iakov senses in Den's smile “restrained pity, perhaps semi-contemptuous, towards a breed of people who have not been brought up

¹⁰⁵² Ibid. The Sinified version of Tret'iakov's name given by sources such as Gao Mang is 特捷克, Tiě Jiékè. “特/tiě” means “iron”; “捷/jié” means “quick” or “nimble,” which is not far from *ostryi* in the sense of keen or acute; “克/kè” can mean “to subdue” or “to overthrow.” The second syllable as Tret'iakov renders it, “ti,” seems somewhat distant from pinyin “jie” or from its Paladiia equivalent, “цзе” (“tsze”), though the distance is not insurmountable.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid., 346–47. “Он держится в стороне, суховат, совершенно лишен назойливости.”

properly.”¹⁰⁵⁴ Exposing once more the problematics of cross-cultural interaction, these hints of aristocratic hauteur also recall earlier intimations of Den’s class-based pride, long since submerged in his own narrative beneath nationalist outrage and revolutionary enthusiasm. They disrupt the linear progress from traditional child to revolutionary adult, interrupting the master plot with residual complications of class allegiance and cultural difference. These problems return in the text’s epilogue, where they threaten to undermine the entire edifice of authority on which *Den Shi-khua* is constructed.

V. The Limits of Authority

This estranged perspective on Den is resumed in a “post-script” to the text, where Tret’iakov once more takes up the narration. Den’s final chapter, un-numbered and entitled simply “Final” (Poslednee), gives his impressions of Moscow in rushed, almost note-like form. “My time is running out,” Den explains: the events of April 1927 in Shanghai call him back to China.¹⁰⁵⁵ His narrative ends with uncertainty: he knows he must go back to China, but “cannot name the date nor hour of departure” (Ни дня, ни часа отъезда я назвать не могу).¹⁰⁵⁶ Tret’iakov’s post-script, in turn, begins with waiting, uncertainty, and the slow realisation of Den’s absence, once more echoing Den’s own narration in the repetition of the double-negative “ni... ni...”: “One day Shi-khua did not come. Nor the next day, nor the day after that, nor even a week later. I began to understand that he had left” (Однажды Ши-хуа не пришел. Ни завтра, ни послезавтра, ни через неделю. Мне стало понятно — он

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibid., 347.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., 386.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ibid., 389.

уехал).¹⁰⁵⁷ Den slips out of the narrative in the chapter break between these two utterances. As Tret'iakov remarks in his 1927 introduction, “He left Moscow for China unnoticed and without a sound, just as he used to enter my room in Beijing without a sound, stepping softly on his cloth shoes[.]”¹⁰⁵⁸ Den’s final utterance serves, meanwhile, as one last proof of his naivety. Tret'iakov reports that Den considered Wang Jingwei the last GMD leader that could be trusted, and claimed to believe in him “like a father.”¹⁰⁵⁹ Tret'iakov adds laconically that Wang betrayed the revolution sixty days after Den left Moscow.

The final word, meanwhile, goes unexpectedly to Tin Iuin-pin (Ting Yunping), another of Tret'iakov’s students from Beijing. Tin’s story, itself a road-to-consciousness biography in miniature, was told in the chapters narrated from Tret'iakov’s perspective. A shy, nervous student, driven into hysterical fever at Sun Yat-sen’s funeral, he emerged from sickness as an uncompromising Communist, banging on tables with a large pole to carry his point in meetings. Tin’s status as “reforged” socialist hero is confirmed on his reappearance: “This is Tin Iuin-pin. His story is a complex tale of campaigns, camps, escapes, conspiracies. A man who has been thoroughly flattened out in the rollers of wars and uprisings. He is calm, his shoulders have broadened, his speech is assured.”¹⁰⁶⁰ The central section of this post-script thus becomes a sort of mini-bio-interview with Tin, in which he recounts his eyewitness knowledge of the last days of executed CCP leader Li Dazhao, and sketches out the current situation in his home province of Hunan. Den’s status as the sole provider of “raw material,” the only prism through which to view China, is hereby disrupted by the intrusion of another

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid., 390.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Tret'iakov, “Den Sy-khua,” 15. “Он уехал из Москвы в Китай так же незаметно и бесшумно, как бесшумно входил в Пекине в мою комнату, мягко ступая матерчатыми туфлями[.]”

¹⁰⁵⁹ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 390.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid. “Это Тин Юин-пин. Его рассказ — сложная повесть о походах, лагерях, бегствах, конспирациях. Человека хорошо раскатало в вальцах войн и восстаний. Он спокоен, плечи его развернулись, голос уверен.”

authority. Indeed, the credits to the 1930 edition list Tin Iuin-pin below Den Shi-khua as responsible for “factual material” (фактический материал).¹⁰⁶¹

Most strikingly, Tin provides an alternative perspective on Den, one that throws into disarray the entire system of authority on which *Den Shi-khua* has been constructed. Tin’s first recollection of his friend disparages his political credentials: “He had no interest in politics. He loved art. He set up a dance group and danced very well himself.”¹⁰⁶² This charge is not in itself new: Den himself reports in his final chapter how the “political” students at Sun Yat-sen University would mock him and his fellow “literati” for turning to the cultural sections of the newspaper before the section on foreign affairs.¹⁰⁶³ Tret’iakov’s reaction, however, suggests a nervous awareness of the limitations of his bio-interview technique: “But why didn’t he say a word to me about this?” Tin replies: “He was ashamed to admit to such trifling pursuits: a revolutionary, and suddenly, dancing?”¹⁰⁶⁴ This revelation was anticipated in a letter from Den asking Tret’iakov to find the students a Russian dance instructor. There, Den claimed he was not a dance enthusiast, that he was asking on behalf of some female students; but Tret’iakov added a footnote to warn us that “here Den Shi-khua sinned against truth, as the reader will see in due course.”¹⁰⁶⁵ The example used to open the issue of Den’s mendacity is comic, in other words; but it opens a huge crack in the authority on which the text is founded. What else might Den have lied about, in order to convince Tret’iakov of his credibility as a “revolutionary”?

¹⁰⁶¹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁶² Ibid., 391. “— Его не интересовала политика. Он любил искусство. Он создал танцевальный кружок и хорошо танцевал.”

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid., 386.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Ibid., 391. “— Но почему он мне ни слова не сказал об этом? — Ему стыдно было признаваться в таких пустяках: революционер, и вдруг — танцы.”

¹⁰⁶⁵ Ibid., 341.

Tin goes on to give a brief portrait of Den, in a manner described by Tret'iakov as “friendly” yet “patronizing,” the judgement of a party member on a non-party member: “Den is an anarchist intellectual. Modest. Generous. Blunt. Direct. Short-tempered. Unmercenary. For him, the person is more important than the deed. Anyone grubby getting into the party can spoil the whole party in his eyes.”¹⁰⁶⁶ This assessment seems to overturn the linear narrative of naivety-become-understanding that shaped Den’s narrative as “formed” by Tret'iakov, which consigned Den’s anarchism to a brief phase overturned by correct Bolshevik instruction. That narrative ended with Den as a committed revolutionary, returning to China in outrage at Chiang’s coup. Tin’s portrait suggests instead an intellectual idealist, “aloof” as he was through Tret'iakov’s classroom eyes. Myong’s suggestions that Den’s condemnation of Tolstoy, or socialist conversion in the monastery, sound too much like the direct voice of Tret'iakov, now take on a disturbing second possibility: perhaps Den was simply parroting Tret'iakov’s own lectures back to him? The possibility is even raised, though dismissed by Tin, that Den might betray the revolution and turn against the Communists.

Seeking to reassert some authority by proving his understanding of his bio-subject, Tret'iakov suggests this aloofness may have biographical origins: “But perhaps this mistrust was formed by personal experience. Den is lonely. He loves nobody.” “Not true,” Tin shoots back. “He has a fiancée, his third cousin... an artist... wealthy... in Beijing... She used to stay in his room, and on those occasions he would not unbolt the door straight away when you knocked.”¹⁰⁶⁷ Who is this cousin-bride? Not, it seems, the woman he was forced to marry,

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ibid., 391. “— Дэн — анархический интеллигент. Скромн. Щедр. Резок. Прям. Вспыхивает. Бесребреник. Для него человек выше дела. Один чумазый, попавший в партию, может всю эту партию опорочить в его глазах.”

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ibid. “— Но, может быть, недоверчивость сложилась на личной почве. Дэн одинок. Он никого не любит. — Неверно. У него есть невеста, его троюродная сестра... художница...

and later divorced; nor the childhood sweetheart whom he lost because his father disapproved. This seems to be a relationship that took place while Den was a student in Beijing: a period he recounts in detail, but with no mention of a new fiancée. Indeed, in the chapter entitled “Wife,” the voice of Den as present narrator flatly claims that “even now it seems to me that I have never loved any woman, nor has any woman ever loved me.”¹⁰⁶⁸ Tret’iakov’s ignorance of this fact suddenly throws the reader’s sense of Den’s naivety, which has been steadily nurtured by the text from its earliest pages, into doubt: what if Den is not so naive? What if he is the one who has been stringing Tret’iakov along, telling him what he thinks he wants to hear? Perhaps the aspiring writer has matured faster than his teacher thought, and composed for Tret’iakov’s ears a thoroughly credible fiction on the theme of “the education of a young Chinese revolutionary”? Indeed, Tret’iakov’s unpublished note on “How I Wrote Den” comments retrospectively that in speaking of his romantic life, “Den heroicized himself by portraying a man whose capacity to love had been mercilessly stamped out by his environment. But this was not true.”¹⁰⁶⁹ Tret’iakov seems to concede after the fact that authorship may not have been all his, that Den was perhaps already writing Den all along.

Tin’s brief intervention strongly suggests that Den has not told Tret’iakov everything. Accordingly, the post-script ends in total ignorance. Tret’iakov has heard nothing from Den, does not know where he is, and can only offer suggestions. Perhaps he is publishing, perhaps teaching, perhaps working as a clerk for General Feng Yuxiang. But perhaps, Tret’iakov

богатая... в Пекине... Она бывала у него в комнате, и в эти разы на стук он двери отпирал не сразу.”

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ibid., 259. “даже сейчас мне кажется, что никогда не любил я ни одной женщины, ни женщины меня.”

¹⁰⁶⁹ Tret’iakov, “Kak ia pisal Dena,” 4. “Рассказывая мне о своих брачных и любовных делах, Дэн себя героизировал изображая человеком, у которого среда бесжалостно растоптала его способность полюбить. А это было неверно.”

suggests with what seems now a more transparent attempt at wish-fulfilment, he has become a Communist and is raising partisan troops in Hunan and Jiangxi, the Red enclaves of southern China. Or perhaps, again, he has fallen already to the reaction: the final image of the book imagines Den's severed head hanging "with unblinking gaze" in a bamboo cage on a Chinese market square.¹⁰⁷⁰ Thus Tret'iakov's ending manages to invoke the heroic death that concluded the revolutionary sacrifice narratives, but as only one of many possibilities, from a position of ignorance. A text whose set-up and execution seems to assert the authority of the Soviet teacher-confessor, his power to shape and translate the life-story of his Chinese pupil, ends by exposing the limits of that authority. It is not that Den's "true voice" comes through; more that Tret'iakov's monological translation of a dialogical situation concludes by undermining itself. Den, rather than being translated seamlessly into the language and ideological framework of his confessor, slips from view into a discursive space of speculations and conflicting perspectives.

In fact, Tret'iakov's conclusion *restores* to Den the interiority that his introduction's reworking of the confessional situation sought to expunge. The essence of confession as a technology of the self is that it necessitates the existence of a concealed interiority that can only be evaluated and controlled by bringing it to the surface through verbalization. Tret'iakov's extraction metaphors sought to repudiate this psychological model, in part through a change in agency. Den was the holder of raw material, whose only action was to "open" the depths of his memory to Tret'iakov. The latter then took on all the agency of selection and evaluation—presumably by asking directed questions, metaphorized as choosing sites for drilling, boring, etc. This is fundamentally different from the confession scenario, where the confessing subject is responsible for bringing information up from the depths—only once the confessing subject has chosen to present something can the confessor

¹⁰⁷⁰ Tret'iakov, *Den Shi-khua*, 392. "немигающим взглядом."

evaluate it, and the confessing subject may choose to be selective, to conceal. (Confession under duress only proves this point: if the subject of confession were not capable of concealment, torture would never be necessary.) Tret'iakov's metaphor of his working relationship with Den suggests that, once Den has taken the decision to "open his memory," he is deprived of agency, powerless to select what he will reveal and conceal from his master-moulder.

But the conclusion overturns this metaphor of their relationship, opening for the reader the possibility that Den has, in fact, concealed information. At the final moment, the interiority that Tret'iakov seemed so keen to dismantle is hereby restored. As Joseph Brodsky commented when writing autobiographically of his own education, "The real history of consciousness starts with one's first lie."¹⁰⁷¹ Den's concealment suggests the assertion of his own consciousness in creative activity, against the prescriptive demands of his Soviet teacher. It seems that Den has in fact already taken over, as Tret'iakov avowedly hoped he would, the composition of his own self-image. The practical training given to Deng has been turned against his Soviet teacher, just as the Guomindang turned on the Communists with military resources and training acquired from the Comintern.

There is a darker element to this disorienting conclusion, however. Tin's intervention echoes the unmasking of false autobiographies as described by Halfin. Autobiographies were reviewed before a panel of judges, who often supplemented the information contained in the autobiography with the testimony of acquaintances of the individual in question. Such testimony could undermine an individual's attempt at self-presentation, revealing a sinister non-transparency.¹⁰⁷² From this perspective, with Tin providing destabilizing evidence and the reader sitting in the position of judge, Den's elusiveness becomes downright suspicious.

¹⁰⁷¹ Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁷² Halfin, *Terror in my Soul*, 59–63.

Here we must recall historical context. When Tret'iakov began work with Gao in 1926, the Guomindang were seen as Soviet allies and the best hope for socialist revolution in China. By the time he comes to write the conclusion, dated 17 January 1929, the Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek was a traitor and an enemy. The valency of Den's biography has changed; he now represents a class that cannot entirely be trusted. We might even detect here a faint evocation, as Tret'iakov admits defeat over China and over Den, of the old exoticist metaphor of the "inscrutable Oriental." The "real" Den retreats back to China and back into the opaque depths of his now absent self, guarding his authentic inner truth from his Soviet confessor.

Updating Tret'iakov's open conclusion in her review of the American translation, Agnes Smedley claims to know what happened to Den:

No, Tan, did not become a Communist. When I left China last year, Tan—that is not his real name—was editing a Peking newspaper in defence of the Chinese militarist, Feng Yu-hsiang. While many intellectuals did become Communists and are fighting with the workers' and peasants' Red Army in interior China, Tan remained among the confused, unclear groups of intellectuals who seem willing to act as spokesmen and apologists for any bandit militarist who sets up his own government.¹⁰⁷³

Tret'iakov's speculations were not far off the mark: Den is publishing, and working for Feng Yuxiang. Den remains, in his mendacity and elusiveness, a decent metonym for the Chinese intelligentsia that slipped away from Soviet Russia, leaving only a few dedicated Communists fighting in the countryside or hiding in Moscow. Tret'iakov will not interfere with reality to the extent of giving Den the "necessary," mythical ending of the sacrifice narrative. Indeed, his factographic method finds validation in the text's very incompleteness: facts are always partial and should be cross-checked with other sources, rendering the literature of fact an open, on-going process. The allegory of history it produces operates in a

¹⁰⁷³ Smedley, "Coming-of-Age."

less heroic tone: the metaphorical triumph of confession over extraction ultimately expresses the limitations of Soviet power to shape the Chinese revolution of the 1920s.

Den Shi-khua begins as an expression of the hegemonic ambitions of Soviet internationalist aesthetics, claiming for itself the authority to shape Den's fragmented evidence into an authentic life story, to translate his life into literary Russian and, in the process, discern its true meaning. The book ends by exposing the limits of those ambitions, leaving Tret'iakov, who once yelled on behalf of the Chinese, reduced to confused ignorance as his Chinese informants take over the narration of their own and each other's lives. None of the tools through which the authority of the Soviet perspective on China was earlier asserted—his periods of presence and observation in Beijing, his first-hand bodily experience of revolution, his sympathy, his grasp of Marxist doctrine——can help Tret'iakov to fix Den as an object of knowledge. Ultimately, for all that Den's own account remains inaccessible behind the mediation of his former teacher, *Den Shi-khua* retains the impression of its dialogic origins, declining to resolve into a single authorized truth. Tret'iakov and Den's bio-interview suggests that a truly inter-nationalist aesthetics, one founded on dialogue across cultures rather than the decisive authority of the Soviet position, must necessarily be open-ended and incomplete, a competing interplay of narratives instead of a decisive master plot.

Epilogue **Abandoning Internationalist Aesthetics?**

When the last edition of *Den Shi-khua* appeared in 1935, the events of 1927 were almost a decade in the past. The Guomindang government of Chiang Kai-shek still controlled China; their enemies the Chinese Communists had been forced to undertake the Long March to the north-west in order to evade destruction. In the Soviet Union, the authority of Stalin, cemented in the expulsion of the Left Opposition after the China disputes of 1927, remained uncontested. In the sphere of cultural production, the doctrine of Socialist Realism, with its promotion of the novel form and the positive hero, had relegated the literature of fact to redundancy and suspicion. As we saw in the previous chapter, Papazian reads Tret'ikaov's 1935 introduction to *Den Shi-khua*, the longest and most complex work in the literature of fact, as an accommodation with these new realities of cultural politics.

Though contact between the CCP and the Comintern endured, Soviet influence in China was negligible compared to the heights of the mid-1920s (those heights would be regained in the 1950s, after the Communist victory in China, only to be lost again following the Sino-Soviet split). The Soviet and Guomindang governments, meanwhile, found common cause in their opposition to Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria, but were not prepared to take this as far as formal alliance.¹⁰⁷⁴ Correspondingly, China's presence in the Soviet mediasphere was greatly reduced by 1935, compared to ten years previously. *Pravda's* digital archive records 384 mentions of China in that year, less than half the total for 1927.¹⁰⁷⁵ There were no high-profile writers or film-makers travelling to China to represent the coming

¹⁰⁷⁴ Katerina Clark suggests that the visit of Mei Lanfang, discussed below, was an attempt to substitute cultural diplomacy for a more openly political alliance. Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 193.

¹⁰⁷⁵ *Pravda* Digital Archive, accessed 24 February, 2014 via Columbia University Library Services: <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/browse/publication/9305>.

revolution, no hit shows or hyped films asking audiences to imagine and reimagine their huge neighbour in East Asia. The traffic of Soviet observers to China appeared to have stopped.

There was, however, one famous item of traffic in the other direction. In March 1935, the acclaimed Chinese actor Mei Lanfang made a famous trip to Moscow, giving a series of performances. Sergei Tret'iakov, as an old Soviet "China hand," was among the meeting party, and published several articles in the Soviet press praising Mei's art.¹⁰⁷⁶ Sergei Eisenstein tried to film Mei at work, and wrote an article, "The Magician of the Pear Orchard" ("Charodei grushevogo sada") on the significance of Chinese theater's art of images for Soviet artistic production. Bertold Brecht was also in the Moscow audience; the experience led him to expound the concept of *Verfremdungs-effekte* or "estrangement effect" in his 1936 article "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting."¹⁰⁷⁷ Other famous Soviet and European theatre directors attending Mei's performances included Vsevolod Meyerhold, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Aleksandr Tairov, Gordon Craig and Erwin Piscator.¹⁰⁷⁸

Much has been written about this famous and productive instance of trans-cultural contact. Haun Saussy reads the encounter to reveal the simultaneous coexistence of incommensurable modernisms, each of which relies on a foreign cultural influence to subvert or reject a local tradition. For the Soviet avant-garde, Saussy suggests, Mei's art offered a

¹⁰⁷⁶ "Mei Lan'-fan: nash gost'," *Pravda*, March 2, 1935; "Vstrecha (Mei Lan'-fan)," *Pravda*, March 1, 1935; "Polmilliarda zritelei. K gastroliam Mei Lan'-fana v SSSR," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 15, 1935; "Teatr, kotoromu 1000 let," *Trud*, March 15, 1935; "Velikoe masterstvo (o Mei Lan'-fane)," *Pravda*, March 23, 1935; "Novyi teatr starykh form," *Pravda*, March 26, 1935; "Teatr-gost'," *Krasnaia gazeta*, April 1, 1935.

¹⁰⁷⁷ As Haun Saussy observes via Janne Risum, *Verfremdung* translates more accurately not as "alienation" but as "estrangement," thereby indicating Brecht's double indebtedness to Moscow: to Mei Lanfang, and to Viktor Shklovskii's Formalist concept of *ostranenie*. Janne Risum, "Brecht's 'kinesiske' Verfremdung: Hvordan og hvorfor" (Brecht's 'Chinese' V-effect: how and why), in *SceneSkift: det 20. Århundredes teater i Europa*, ed. Alette Scaveniuis and Stig Jarl (Copenhagen: Multivers), 198. Quoted in Haun Saussy, "Mei Lanfang in Moscow, 1935: Familiar, Unfamiliar, Defamiliar," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 9.

¹⁰⁷⁸ This list is taken from Lars Kleburg, "Zhivye impul'sy iskusstva," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1992): 132.

covert opportunity to return to questions of form and composition that had been rendered taboo by Socialist Realism's mimetic fixation.¹⁰⁷⁹ For Brecht, Chinese acting suggested a mode for disrupting and critiquing bourgeois culture. Radical Chinese intellectuals, by contrast, rejected Mei's brand of theatre as false and illusory, precisely in the name of a realism influenced by imported Western models.¹⁰⁸⁰

Katerina Clark analyses Mei's visit as a key example of what she calls the "Great Appropriation," the multi-faceted attempt in the 1930s to position Soviet culture as the inheritor and culmination of all the positive cultural achievements of world history. In the context of this attempt to enshrine Moscow as the new capital of world culture, she suggests, Soviet cultural practitioners were willing to overlook the politically negative elements in Beijing opera—its feudal origins, its linguistic distance from the vernacular, its banning of women from the stage—for the sake of "potentially appropriating for Soviet culture a venerable tradition with centuries-old pedigree."¹⁰⁸¹ At the same time, Clark concurs that these Soviet intellectuals used Mei's visit to launch covert critiques of Stalinist cultural politics. In particular, she suggests, Eisenstein's "Magician of the Pear Orchard" article identifies in Chinese culture a certain fluidity in the relationship between sign and meaning, thereby implicitly opposing the one-to-one correlation between text and meaning on which the authority of Stalinist culture depended.¹⁰⁸² The power of these signs, including the conventional gestures of Mei's art, depend for Eisenstein on repetition, and hence on

¹⁰⁷⁹ Saussy makes extensive use here of the transcript of a 1935 round-table discussion on Mei's performances in Moscow, in which Eisenstein, Tret'iakov, Meyerhold, Nemirovich-Danchenko,

¹⁰⁸⁰ Saussy, "Mei Lanfang in Moscow," 8–29.

¹⁰⁸¹ Clark, *Moscow*, 194.

¹⁰⁸² *Ibid.*, 199–205.

memory: it is the power of “deep historical memory” that, for Clark, Eisenstein finds voiced in the Chinese mode of expression that Mei represents.¹⁰⁸³

Both Saussy and Clark concur that avant-garde figures such as Tret'iakov and Eisenstein sought used Mei's visit to strike a blow for the importance of conventionalism (*uslovnost'*) in theatre, the open acknowledgement of theatrical device advocated in the writings of the early Meyerhold, as against the naturalist school of Stanislavsky, whose premises were newly endorsed by the mimetic demands of socialist realism.¹⁰⁸⁴ However, the conventionalism that these Soviet theatre artists praise in Mei's performance, a performance they take as representative of “Chinese theatre,” is an *organic* conventionalism, one that has not mechanically been imposed or intellectually conjured up, but has developed over centuries of refinement. At the round-table discussion, A. Tairov describes the Chinese theatre he sees exemplified in Mei's performance as a “synthetic theatre” that has developed from “folk origins” and is entirely “organic.”¹⁰⁸⁵ Eisenstein praises the “vivifying, organic quality” (*живительность и органичность*) of Chinese theatre in contrast to the more “mechanical” Japanese theatre, introducing here for analogy the relation between Greek and Roman drama.¹⁰⁸⁶ Culture here is not a machine, as productivists like the early Tret'iakov might have insisted; nor is it a false layer imposed on an exploitative socio-economic reality, as a Leninist argument might have claimed. Culture is an organism, and the power of cultural forms is drawn from the depths of their roots.

Tret'iakov's reaction is particularly striking, given the unstinting antagonism towards traditional Chinese culture that runs through his texts from the mid-1920s. Tret'iakov's articles from that earlier time criticized traditional Chinese theatre as a form of “aesthetic

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid., 207

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ibid., 195–6.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Kleberg, “Zhiviyi impul'sy,” 133-34.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ibid., 135.

narcosis”: a spectacle, functionally equivalent to religion in European societies, that rendered the population docile while enforcing feudal morality and class relations.¹⁰⁸⁷ Notably, the age and popularity of the tradition both contributed in Tret’iakov’s analysis to the hold of this harmful aesthetic illusion: because the spectators knew every moment in the repertoire, there was no call for new plays or formal innovations, and performances were evaluated purely for their aesthetic qualities.¹⁰⁸⁸ From a factographic perspective, this amounts to what Fore calls a “representational metaphysics,” a sealed system of representation that enables perception to become automatized, concealing the constructedness of the art form and its functions in the social world.¹⁰⁸⁹ Such theatrical performances, Tret’iakov observes, had no connection to contemporary, everyday Chinese life: the same shopkeeper could curse the modern-day general whose soldiers robbed him, and then cheer the character of “The General” in the theatre that same day, without making any link between the two experiences.¹⁰⁹⁰

The one innovator Tret’iakov mentions in these earlier articles is, in fact, Mei Lanfang, whom he credits with introducing a languorous new form of singing. (As Saussy confirms, Mei, greeted in 1930s Moscow as a representative of an ancient art, was regarded in China as an innovator.)¹⁰⁹¹ But this is not greeted as progress; instead, Tret’iakov expresses the hope that Mei’s innovations are merely a stylization that amount to “a sign of the death of the national [*narodnyi*] theatre.”¹⁰⁹² Tret’iakov in the mid-20s wants to de-sinify (*raskitait’*) Chinese theatre, but fears that its roots are too deep to be removed; his hopes lie

¹⁰⁸⁷ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Asiatskii teatr. (Ot nashego spetsial’nogo pekingskogo korrespondenta),” *Prozhektor* 21, 30 (1924). This article was greatly expanded to form the chapter “Teatr” in *Chzhungo* (1927).

¹⁰⁸⁸ Tret’iakov, “Teatr,” in *Chzhungo* (1927), 94.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Fore, “All the Graphs,” 50.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Tret’iakov, “Teatr,” in *Chzhungo* (1927), 95.

¹⁰⁹¹ Saussy, “Mei Lanfang in Moscow,” 23.

¹⁰⁹² *Ibid.*, 96.

instead with the cinema, where foreign, including potentially Soviet, influence can penetrate more easily.¹⁰⁹³

While Chinese theatre's negative class origins of Chinese theatre and its equation to religion are still acknowledged in 1935, they are now less significant for Tret'iakov than its sheer mass popularity, a quality that instils this art form with national meaning.¹⁰⁹⁴ This popular power is a direct result of the antiquity of theatrical forms. Hence Tret'iakov begins one article, revealingly entitled "One and a half billion spectators," by enveloping his reader in the mists of time: "You are entering a theatre whose untraceable sources are lost from view several millennia before our era, and whose full bloom was already in evidence ten centuries ago."¹⁰⁹⁵ Through centuries of repetition, these forms have become deeply embedded in the popular consciousness; even when contemporary actors attempt a modern agitational play, Tret'iakov concedes, the intonations, gestures, and *mise en scene* of traditional theatre can still be sensed.

In the mid-1920s, this would have been considered a defeat. Indeed, a long passage at the end of *Chzhungo's* article on theatre breathlessly describes a "street agit-play," written by two of Tret'iakov's students in the wake of the May 30 massacre in 1925, as an energetic display of contemporary characters and contemporary events that contains no traces of the theatrical past. By 1935, Tret'iakov argues that the forms of traditional Chinese theatre can be retained, without retaining the "poisonous" content of feudal class relations: "The epochs change, the old meaning is worn away, but the form remains, and suddenly this old form can be filled in a new epoch with new meaning."¹⁰⁹⁶ This process of pouring new wine into old

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Clark, *Moscow*, 195.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Sergei Tret'iakov, "Polmilliarda zritelei."

¹⁰⁹⁶ Ibid. "Меняются эпохи, выветривается старый смысл, но остается форма, и неожиданно в новую эпоху новым смыслом может быть наполнена эта старая форма."

bottles seems a succinct summary of the Great Appropriation that Clark describes: any art form from any age can potentially be filled with new, socialist content. Mei's achievement, meanwhile, has been to enable this ancient and deeply national art to transcend its national boundaries and enter world culture:

The greatness and significance of Mei Lanfang [...] lies in the fact that he has been able to make Chinese theatre a global phenomenon. In his person, Chinese theatre has for the first time broken through its national borders and entered into the consciousness of the Euro-American theatrical spectator as something other than an "exotic" spectacle. Mei Lanfang has stepped forth onto the world stage as the delegate of a great art that half of humanity claims as its own, an old art, refined and full of meaning. Knowledge of this art constitutes a basic requirement for general cultural literacy.¹⁰⁹⁷

The "death sign" that Tret'iakov hoped Mei's art might be in 1927 has by 1935 become the sign of Chinese theatre's second life, its sublimation from the national to the global level of human culture. The "petrified" art form that Tret'iakov earlier considered reduced to meaningless aestheticization has, a decade later, become venerable, "refined," and "full of meaning."

If we look back at the tensions between naturalism and open conventionalism that circulated around the China productions of the mid-1920s (Chapter Four), we may find that the reactions to Mei's visit perform a curious synthesis of the contradictions noted in the productions of *Roar, China* and *The Red Poppy*. *Roar, China!* rejected the open acknowledgement of theatrical artifice, which had earlier been championed by the Meyerhold Theatre and was to be praised in Mei's performances by Brecht, in favour of an ethnographic naturalism more suitable to its agitational purposes. Elements of Chinese theatricality,

¹⁰⁹⁷ Sergei Tret'iakov, *Mei Lan'-fan i kitaiskii teatr* (Moscow: izd-vo VOKS, 1935). Copy held in RGALI f. 2886, op. 1. Ed. khr. 70., l. 2. "Величие и общезначимость Мэй Лань-фана состоит в том, что он сумел сделать китайский театр мировым явлением. Впервые в его лице китайский театр прорвал национальное ограждение и вошел в сознание театрального зрителя Америки и Европы не как «экзотическое» зрелище. Мэй Лань-фан вышел на мировую арену, как делегат громадного искусства, родного половине человечества, искусства старого, изощренного и бмногозначительного, знание которого является требованием общей культурной грамотности."

according to Meyerhold himself, were used for a realistic purpose, to display a certain ceremoniality and falseness at work in Chinese social life. *Roar, China!* invested heavily in producing an aura of Chinese “authenticity” through the use of authentic props and authentic music played on authentic Chinese instruments, which had made the long journey from China just as Mei and his troupe did. This authenticity, however, was not linked to any explicit sense of a cultural tradition extending into the past: the only figure who appeals to tradition is the Buddhist monk, who is unambiguously portrayed as a liar and a fake. National authenticity in *Roar, China!* has no real historical dimension; it serves entirely to bind together the Chinese as a national group, which is a necessary stage in their revolutionary progress into the future.

The explicit valorization of Chinese tradition, however, was Tikhomirov and Gel'tser's intention in their staging of Act Two in Moscow's original *Red Poppy*. Can we say that the reception of Mei Lanfang shows the second act of that ballet winning out over the first? It certainly seems that it was this China of venerable aesthetic tradition, valorized by Tikhomirov and Gel'tser, that the Soviet public were encouraged to see in Mei's visit, not the labouring, proto-proletarian China of coolie *dubinushkas*. Tikhomirov and Gel'tser, however, sought to express an aesthetic that they considered specifically, irreducibly Chinese. Eisenstein and Tret'iakov, by contrast, suggest that Mei's art, with its deep historical roots in China, can nonetheless transcend those national boundaries and offer useful models for the reimagined internationalist aesthetics of the 1930s. In the culture of the Great Appropriation, it is the deep national roots of this art—its authenticity, from a Herderian perspective—that guarantee its capacity to transcend the national.

When looked at from the perspective of the 1920s texts that have formed the bulk of this dissertation, the most striking aspect of the Soviet reaction to Mei's visit is the rediscovery of China's history, of China's antiquity as a positive value. In Eisenstein's case,

this dovetails with his longstanding interest in archetypal forms of symbolic and artistic thought.¹⁰⁹⁸ Tret'iakov, meanwhile, reworks his earlier analysis to find an accommodation with the Stalinist emphasis on national character and the positive valorization of folk tradition. Either way, this transforms the temporal structure through which China is perceived. The China of the 1920s Soviet imagination finds its past relegated to a negative baggage that must be stripped away; it exists in a present that both echoes the recent Russian past and points necessarily towards an imminent revolutionary future. The China embodied in Mei Lanfang, who was taken to represent and express Chinese theatre and, in Eisenstein's article, an entire "Chinese" system of representation and thought, traces its roots into the deep cultural past, from which it brings forth forms of thought and expression, tempered by time, that can enlighten the socialist present and future.

This pattern endures in the next major Soviet documentary film about China: Roman Karmen's *China in Battle* (*Kitai srazhaetsia*, 1941). Made while China was resisting invasion by Japan, the film invokes the same tropes of national-historical greatness that Soviet propaganda mobilized in the war against Nazi Germany. Karmen's film opens with shots of pagodas atop misty hills, boats moving slowly along rivers, and the Great Wall, as a voiceover intones: "The Great Chinese Wall: for fifteen centuries it has stood as a monument to the ancient civilization of a people that created, many millennia ago, the foremost values of science and culture."¹⁰⁹⁹ It is China's ancient greatness that is expected to inspire trans-national solidarity at a time of war. Shots of ruined palaces and temples in northern China tell of "heroic feats, of wars of liberation, of the culture and civilization of ancient China."¹¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁹⁸ Ibid., 204–6.

¹⁰⁹⁹ *Kitai srazhaetsia*, directed by Roman Karmen, 1941. RGAKFD N. Uchetnyi 5128, reel 1. "Великая китайская стена — пятнадцать веков стоит он как памятник древнейшей цивилизации народа, создавшего много тысячелетиями назад первейшие ценности науки и культуры."

Oskar Erdberg also noticed these ruins in his final *Chinese novella*, as he charted the retreat of Borodin and the Comintern mission out of China through the Gobi in 1927. But Erdberg's account stressed discontinuity: these ruins recall unjust, unequal societies, and their lingering traces are to be overthrown by the Chinese students, returning from Moscow, whom Erdberg meets in the depths of the desert.¹¹⁰¹ In Karmen's film, by contrast, these ruins assert a continuity of greatness, and the possibility of national resurrection.

Where once Tret'iakov sneered at tourists from his superior position of observation, Karmen's film uncritically joins a group of white-hatted tourists inspecting some Buddha statues, "created by unknown sculptors many centuries ago."¹¹⁰² In another redirected echo of 1920s precedents, Karmen films a Chinese city as a dynamic flurry of rickshaws and coolies. But the purpose here is not to embark on a critique of oppression. Instead, these shots display the normal life of urban China on the verge of savage disruption by Japanese bombs. "An hour ago, the life of this city flowed along peacefully," mourns the narrator over shots of fire, smoke, destruction and death.¹¹⁰³ Class analysis is subsumed by the need for national unity.

By the time Karmen's film appeared, many of the cultural producers involved in the re-imagining of China in the 1920s had been lost in the Purges. Tret'iakov remained a voice on Chinese themes in the mid-1930s, hosting Mei Lanfang, writing the afterword to a translation of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, and working, it seems, on a second Chinese "bio-interview."¹¹⁰⁴ Participating in a 1936 journal questionnaire entitled "What are writers

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid. "о героических подвигах, об освободительных войнах, о культуре и цивилизации древнего Китая."

¹¹⁰¹ Erdberg, *Kitaiskie novelly*, 166–171.

¹¹⁰² Karmen, *Kitai srazhaetsia*, reel 1. "созданы неизвестными скульптурами много веков тому назад."

¹¹⁰³ Karmen, *Kitai srazhaetsia*, reel 2. "Час тому назад, мирно текла жизнь этого города."

¹¹⁰⁴ Pearl S. Buck, *Zemlia*, trans. N. L. Daruzes, with an afterword by Sergei Tret'iakov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936).

working on?,” Tret’iakov announced that he had been working for three years on “a book about the heroic campaigns of Soviet China”: a hint, perhaps, at the Great March. This work was to mark a return both to China and to the genre of the bio-interview that Tret’iakov had announced with *Den Shi-khua*. “To a significant extent,” he promised, “this book will constitute a bio-interview based on materials I have collected about concrete participants in this campaign and their biographies.” With this second bio-interview, however, Tret’iakov intended to correct the political mistake of the first, which had offered an intimate portrait of someone who, by the time the book appeared, had become a class enemy. By so doing, Tret’iakov would once more assert that history in China was moving in the right direction: “In contrast to ‘Den Shi-khua,’ the son of a Guomindang intellectual, the hero of the new book—a poor peasant, a farm labourer, who becomes a partisan and Red Army soldier—is one of the decisive figures of awakening China in that generation which follows historically after the generation of Den.”¹¹⁰⁵ Tret’iakov had already signed a contract for this volume with Gosudarstvennaia izdatel’stvo (the State Publishing House) in 1935. According to that contract, which gave a deadline of June 1, 1936, the project bore the distinctly non-documentary title of *Chinese Tales (Kitaiskie povesti)*.¹¹⁰⁶

It is unclear how far Tret’iakov got with this second Chinese bio-interview; his wife, Ol’ga Tret’iakova, noted in a letter two decades later that it remained unfinished at the time of his death.¹¹⁰⁷ Whatever had been written was most likely destroyed with the majority of

¹¹⁰⁵ Sergei Tret’iakov, “Sovetskii Kitai (otvet na anketu ‘nad chem rabotaiut pisateli),” *Kniga i proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 7 (1936): 164. “Основная работа, которой я занимаюсь в течение трех лет, это книга о героических походах советского Китая. В значительной мере эта книга будет представлять собой биоинтервью на основании материалов, собранных мною о конкретных участниках этого похода и их биографиях. В ней я развиваю жанровую линию, начатую мною в «Дэн Ши-Хуа». В отличие от «Дэн Ши-хуа», сына интеллигента-гоминдановца, герой новой книги — бедный крестьянин, батрак, становящийся партизаном и красноармейцем, — одна из решающихся фигур пробуждающегося Китая в том поколении, которое следует исторически за поколением Дэна.”

¹¹⁰⁶ RGALI f. 613, op. 3, ed. khr. 7, l. 155–6.

Tret'iakov's papers following his arrest and execution in 1937.¹¹⁰⁸ The charge leveled against Tret'iakov, that of being a Japanese spy, stemmed directly—we might even say ironically, given the anti-imperialist tenor of his work—from his involvement with China. According to his NKVD file, Tret'iakov confessed to being recruited into Japanese intelligence in 1924, presumably during his time in Beijing, and to passing information to his Japanese handlers about the development of Soviet-Chinese relations.¹¹⁰⁹ Espionage for the Japanese was also one of the charges leveled at Boris Pil'niak, who was arrested and executed in 1937. Another was aiding the family of an “enemy of the people,” namely Karl Radek, the former rector of Sun Yat-sen University and prominent public authority on China in the 1920s, who was tried at the Second Moscow Trial in 1937 and subsequently murdered in prison.¹¹¹⁰

Other political figures connected to 1920s China were also eliminated: Lev Karakhan, the former Ambassador to China, was arrested and executed in 1937; Vasilii Bliukher, who had played a key role in reforming the Guomindang army before the Northern Expedition, suffered the same fate in 1938 (Borodin survived until after the war, dying in a prison camp in 1951).¹¹¹¹ Nikolai Kostarev, who dedicated his *Chinese Diaries* to Bliukher, was arrested, it seems, in 1939.¹¹¹² Several of the peripheral figures in this study, including Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose theatre first staged *Roar, China!*, and Isaac Babel, who was so obsessed with his Chinese story in 1919, were also arrested and killed. By the end of the 1930s, the

¹¹⁰⁷ RGALI f. 2886, op. 1, ed. khr. 70, l. 2.

¹¹⁰⁸ The loss of large quantities of Tret'iakov's personal archive at the time of his arrest is described in the written introduction to his file in RGALI, f. 2886, op. 1.

¹¹⁰⁹ Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth*, 66.

¹¹¹⁰ Reck, *Boris Pil'niak*, 3–4. On Radek's arrest, trial and death, see Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998), 116–127.

¹¹¹¹ Wilbur and How, *Missionaries of Revolution*, 426–7.

¹¹¹² My only source for this is a remarkable LiveJournal blog dedicated to Soviet publications on China from the 1920s: <http://alter-vij.livejournal.com/142783.html> (accessed 4.17.2014). I am very grateful to this source for providing leads, discovering rarities, and posting many book covers.

generation of political and cultural agents who had sought, in real and imaginary terms, to shape revolutionary China in the 1920s had been decimated. When China became once more a focal point of Soviet attention in the 1950s, following the Chinese Communist victory in 1949, a very different generation with very different concerns would take up the task of understanding and representing China in its difference and similarity.

For a final word on the internationalist aesthetics of the 1920s, we might return to Isaac Babel. Babel produced one other “Chinese” text in the 1920s: the screenplay for *The Chinese Mill—A Mobilization Drill* (*Kitaiskaia mel’nitsa—probnaia mobilizatsiia*), a 1928 film comedy directed by A. Levshin. The film does not survive, and was not well received.¹¹¹³ Nonetheless, a reading of Babel’s screenplay reveals a gently satirical take on the images of China presented to the Soviet public in the 1920s, and on the feelings of internationalist solidarity they were supposed to provoke. Babel’s screenplay offers a fitting conclusion to this study: rehearsing in comic terms the Soviet loss of China in 1927 and the turn towards the First Five-Year Plan, it also offers a rare interpretation of how the images of China produced by internationalist aesthetics were received and made their effect.

In keeping with the “documentary” impulse of the time, it seems Babel took his subject from an article in the newspaper *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*.¹¹¹⁴ Indeed, the script places repetitive emphasis on various modern media forms and their affective potential: radio, newspaper, and photo-magazine all feature prominently. The opening scene shows a peasant attaching a radio antenna to the dilapidated roof of a former landlord’s house, and typical village figures gathering to connect through technology with the voice of Moscow as

¹¹¹³ See for example the criticisms in “Na prosmotrakh: Kitaiskaia mel’nitsa,” *Kino* 23 (June 5, 1928): 5. The critics in *Kino* accuse the film of producing a “parody” of the Soviet village, and, moreover, one that rural residents will find it difficult to follow.

¹¹¹⁴ Khris. Khersonskii, “Kitaiskaia mel’nitsa,” *Kino* 30 (July 24, 1928): 3.

it emerges from the loudspeaker.¹¹¹⁵ This familiar assertion of “connection” (*smychka*) between village and capital anticipates a cut to Moscow, where a more trans-national form of connection is introduced. At the Bolshoi Theatre, a meeting of Moscow’s Chinese community has gathered to protest English atrocities in China; through the radio microphone onstage, their words reach the peasants in the village. What’s more, sitting among the Chinese students in the Bolshoi is Yegor Zhivtsov, secretary of that same village’s Komsomol cell. Zhivtsov befriends the Chinese student sitting beside him; they meet again on a train out of Moscow, and the student, bound for Hankou, tells Zhivtsov about the situation in contemporary China.

Bringing his newfound sense of solidarity with the Chinese people back to the sleepy village, Zhivtsov gives a rousing speech exhorting his fellow *komsomoltsy* to mobilize for military action “in defence of the Chinese Revolution.”¹¹¹⁶ The mobilization point is to be the broken mill at the edge of the village. Seized with enthusiasm, the villagers prepare for war in comic, chaotic fashion: spurs are attached to bast shoes and a rooster’s leg; the infantry report for duty wielding rifles and accordions; a cavalry is formed from five forest wardens wearing German helmets that date back to the First World War.¹¹¹⁷ A dreamy drunkard, Yeryoma, digs up a machine gun in the churchyard and pledges it to the war effort. Seeing that the mobilization and accompanying war frenzy has disrupted the less heroic work of reconstructing the village, Zhivtsov, bedecked with medals, makes a second speech to his assembled troops at the broken mill:

Citizens! Volunteers! Last night I was in touch with the all-union central executive committee of the Party... *Our Chinese brothers are managing by themselves...* The

¹¹¹⁵ Isaak Babel’, *The Chinese Mill: A Mobilization Drill*, trans. Nathalie Babel Brown, *Ubandus Review* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 102–3. The following summary is based on this publication, which gives Babel’s original Russian text alongside a parallel English translation.

¹¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-31. “мобилизацию на защиту китайской революции.”

¹¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 144–47.

all-union committee definitely suggests that we take care of our current business—namely repair the mill to do our job 100%...¹¹¹⁸

The war-mongering fantasist Yeryoma is disappointed, but the Komsomol members turn their energies to fixing the mill. Rifles are replaced by spades and hammers; the script ends in a flurry of joyous labour, as the mill is prepared and the water wheel begins to turn.

Babel's script shows an awareness of many of the China images explored in this dissertation, suggesting they had attained a degree of fixation in popular consciousness. The student's parents, for example, run a laundry in Moscow, which is shown in sentimental, sympathetic tones of hard immigrant graft. Moisture and tears are neatly interwoven: when their son comes to say goodbye, the woman's tears fall on the linen she is ironing, and she irons stoically over them; at their final parting, the son leaves a soapy hand-print on his mother's shoulder.¹¹¹⁹ The expression of oppressed Chinese labour, meanwhile, is reduced to one of its standard images, the belaboured rickshaw driver. When the Chinese student tells Zhivtsov on the train about the situation in China, his description is not conveyed through titles; in general, there is little dialogue in Babel's script, which leans towards explanation and connection through images. Instead, we are shown what the student is trying to describe. Idyllic scenes of the train rushing through the Russian countryside at night are intercut with shots of a rickshaw puller dragging his vehicle up a hill. His passengers are "an Englishman and a bulldog."¹¹²⁰

Later, as Zhivtsov prepares for his speech, he leafs through an issue of *Prozhektor* devoted to China.¹¹²¹ The photographs in the journal recall the images summoned by the

¹¹¹⁸ Ibid., 148–49. (My emphasis.) "Граждане! Добровольцы! Ночью связь со ВЦИКом... Китайские братья самосильно управляют... Определенно ВЦИК СССР предлагает заниматься текущими делами — починить мельницу на 100% задания!"

¹¹¹⁹ Ibid., 106–9.

¹¹²⁰ Ibid., 110–11.

student's tale on the train: "Zhivtsov's distorted face bent over a photograph. A detail: the face of the rickshawman bathed in sweat."¹¹²² According to Babel's script, these photographic images of Chinese oppression are to be set into motion as the visualized content of Zhivtsov's imagination. These shots of the rickshaw driver in Zhivtsov's mind are then intercut with pastoral scenes of the villagers sitting down to dinner, producing for Zhivtsov, whose perspective the film spectator shares, a disconnect between this peaceful happiness and Chinese suffering:

The woman doing the cooking sets out a big bowl of cabbage soup.
A rainbow circle of sunshine floats in the middle of the bowl, in the greasy soup.
A detail—the upward journey of the rickshawman.
Zhivtsov's face bent over the photograph. Through the network of his dishevelled hair can be seen a page of a magazine with a picture of Chinese workers killed in a shootout with foreign troops.
The merry meal of the Komsomols, mouths chewing, eyes laughing, shining drops dripping from spoons.¹¹²³

Distant China is *here*, for Zhivtsov as he looks at the photograph, but also for us, the spectators, as we watch the film (or, in this case, imagine the film from the script).

These images of the rickshaw driver return to him as he delivers his speech, in three inserted shots. First, after his opening words, we see a neutral shot of "the face of the rickshawman": the image in Zhivtsov's mind is also, it seems, the image he seeks to conjure in the mind of his audience through his speech.¹¹²⁴ Next, after Zhivtsov proclaims "When our

¹¹²¹ China featured heavily in the pages of *Prozhektor* in 1927. Quite possibly, Zhivtsov is looking at *Prozhektor* issue 5, published 15 March 1927, which was dedicated largely to China in the wake of what seemed like a Communist victory in Shanghai. Ivin's text on "Revolutionary Beijing" was published in this issue (see Chapter Two).

¹¹²² Babel', *Chinese Mill*, 126–29. "Искаженное лицо Живцова над фотографией. Деталь — лицо рикши, облитого потом."

¹¹²³ *Ibid.*, 128–29. "Стряпуха ставит большую миску щей. В середине миски, в жирных щах плавает радужный круг солнца. Деталь — восхождение рикши. Склонившееся над фотографией лицо Живцова; сквозь сетку разметавшихся его волос видна страница журнала с изображением рабочих китайцев, убитых в перестрелке с иностранными войсками."

¹¹²⁴ *Ibid.* "Лицо рикши."

Chinese brothers are being drenched in blood,” a more disturbing shot flashes up: “The face of the rickshawman—terrible, naked, black, round—like a polished cast-iron sphere from which stream sun and sweat.”¹¹²⁵ The dehumanized, frightening aspects of this image may recall the grotesque Chinese migrants in Civil-War Russia that filled Chapter One: when the affective power of internationalist aesthetics allows this Chinese rickshaw driver to appear in Russia, to Zhivtsov, to his audience, and to the film’s spectators, it is in a form reduced by suffering almost to inhumanity or monstrosity. Lastly, this monster of suffering seems to come straight for the observer: “The rickshawman has fallen,” Babel’s script tells us, “and crawls straight towards Zhivtsov on all fours.” But how can the rickshawman crawl towards Zhivtsov? Are they in the same shot? It is not clear how Babel’ intended this sequence to be filmed, or indeed how it was filmed, but one possible interpretation is to see the rickshaw driver crawling directly towards the camera, i.e. towards the audience. From Babel’s description, it is a sense of horror bordering on terror that internationalist aesthetics produce, provoking Zhivtsov to call for mobilization to save China.

New networks of trans-national connection, expressed by the presence of Chinese in Moscow and enabled by the trans-Eurasian railroad, combine with the affective power of these images of China, conveyed by mass media and magnified by imagination, to produce in Zhivtsov this visceral sense of internationalist solidarity. At the same time, however, the powerful internationalist sensibility created by mass media is constantly undermined by the film’s humour, which depends on the gap between these dreams of solidarity and what is actually achievable. The jarring effect produced by this meeting of internationalist aesthetics and parodic comedy was noted by Khrisanf Khersonskii in a contemporary review, which offers a rare glimpse of how Babel’s script was realised onscreen: “The eccentric jollity of Babel’s comedy and the jokey levity of its characters’ thoughts are incongruous with the

¹¹²⁵ Ibid., 130–31. “Лицо рикши — страшное, голое, черное, круглое, как отполированный чугунный шар, по которому стекают потоки солнца и пота.”

shocking footage of executions and the Chinese workers' bitter struggle, taken from authentic newsreel, that is edited into *Chinese Windmill*.”¹¹²⁶ This authentic newsreel footage sounds a lot like the closing reel of *Shanghai Document*, which came out a few months earlier. Such documentary evidence of Chinese suffering, Khersonskii implies, should evoke sentiments more elevated than laughter.

Indeed, Babel's script works constantly to forestall elevation. The heroism of Zhivtsov's call to arms is patently absurd: his rousing speech, full of passionate sympathy for “our Chinese brothers” who are being “drenched in blood,” is delivered atop a haystack into which he gradually sinks up to his waist.¹¹²⁷ These images of China, moreover, are revealed to offer little understanding of practical reality. When a group gathers to study a map of China (we may recall that such a map hung also on Pavel Korchagin's wall), one peasant suggests they attack Beijing via the south-western province of Sichuan—a route that suggests little connection between the map-image and any sense of China's geographical reality.

In sum, internationalist sentiment, fired by the aesthetic power of mass-media images, is revealed in Babel's script as a kind of madness, an excess of enthusiasm that must be tempered with a call to practical, present work. The trans-national sympathy produced by Zhivtsov's encounter with the Chinese student does not lead to any concrete action. In any case, the script assures us, there is nothing to be done: “Our Chinese brothers are managing by themselves.” Although the positive references to the Guomindang in Babel's script suggest that it was written before Chiang turned on his Communist allies, this line remained, according to Khersonskii, in the final film of 1928.¹¹²⁸ Such a statement seems remarkable

¹¹²⁶ Khersonskii, “Kitaiskaia mel'nitsa.” “Эксцентрическая весельба бабелевской комедии и анекдотическая легкость в мыслях ее действующих лиц не вяжутся с теми жуткими кадрами подлинной хроники тяжелой борьбы и казней китайских рабочих, которые вмонтированы в «Китайскую мельницу».”

¹¹²⁷ Babel, *Chinese Mill*, 130–31. “Когда китайские братья обливаются кровью...”

¹¹²⁸ Khersonskii, “Kitaiskaia mel'nitsa.”

after the events of 1927, with the Chinese Communists persecuted and their Soviet allies expelled. The evocation of internationalist solidarity, of China's war as our war, is no longer, it seems, to be taken seriously.

Deliberately or not, *Chinese Mill* expresses in comic fable the defeat of Soviet policy in China in 1927, and the consequent turn away from internationalist intervention towards a policy of internal consolidation and construction. The villagers' decision to abandon the march on China and instead reconstruct their broken water mill anticipates the imperatives of the First Five-Year Plan, and serves as a neat endorsement of Stalin's policy of socialism in one country, which was rising to undisputed dominance at this time. Socialism, it seems, must first be constructed in the USSR, before dreams of world liberation can be entertained. The ambitions of internationalist aesthetics, which sought to connect the Soviet public with their Chinese neighbours on both cognitive and emotional terms, are discarded as a youthful fantasy.

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