

The Image of China in Russian Literature from the Early 20th Century to the 1950s

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Abstract: In recent years, scholars from various countries have begun to focus on the theme of “the East” in their literary studies, and more attention has been paid to the image of China in Russian literature. However, most of the studies on Russian literature in the first half of the 20th century focus only on the Silver Age, and pay less attention to the image of China in Russian literature of other eras. This article focuses on the early 20th century to the 1950s, when Russia interacted with China most frequently, systematically combing it with the specific historical background and international situation of the times, and presents a complete image of China in the Russian literature. The study found that although Russian writers of each era had different experiences about China, and their own writing intentions were different, even the images of China written by Russian writers of the same era presented different characteristics, Russian literature from the early 20th century to the 1950s consistently reflected the social realities of both China and Russia. In fact, the process that Russian writers from the early 1900s to the 1950s constructed a more realistic and complete image of China was also a process that literary creation broke through national stereotypes. The evolution of the image of China in Russian literature from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1950s reflects the process of mutual interaction between the cultures of China and Russia, and also symbolizes the macro-trend of the world's national cultures to continuously eliminate the barriers between them and mingle with each other.

Keywords: Russian literature, image of China, 20th century.

1. Introduction

China appeared in Russian literature for the first time in 1678, and in the three hundred years since then, the image of China in Russian literature has been changing in accordance with the social environment and diplomatic relations between the two countries. In fact, the process of integrating Chinese culture into Russian literature is a process of mutual recognition between the two people. On the one hand, Russians have a perception of China through the images of China written by their own writers, and then understand the connotation of Chinese culture. On the other hand, through these literary works, Chinese people can understand Russian writers' perception and attitude towards China, and then clarify the construction of Russian society's image of China. Therefore, the study of the image of China in Russian literature has important academic value and social significance at the same time.

In recent years, foreign scholars' research on the image of China in Russian literature has focused on the collection of historical materials, however, the multi-century historical span has led to less focus on the early 20th century to the 1950s. In addition, there is a lack of further analyses combining the author's experience and social environment. *The Russian Bear Looks at the Chinese Dragon: The Image of China in Russia in the 17th-20th Centuries* by Lukin A.V., a renowned Russian scholar, discusses the history of the formation and evolution of the image of China in Russian literature from a diplomatic perspective [1]. *The Near and Far World - China in the Writings of Russian Writers*, edited by Romanenko A.D., contains accounts of China by Russian writers from 1678 to 2005 [2].

At the same time, Chinese scholars' research on the image of China in Russian literature from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1950s is more concentrated, mostly focusing on the Chinese cultural elements embodied in Russian literature of the Silver Age. Most of them only focus on specific classical works based on the research method of textual close reading, and their attention to Russian literature of other eras is more scattered and lacks systematic sorting out.

This paper focuses on the early 20th century to the 1950s, when Russia interacted most frequently with China, and systematically compiles them in the light of the specific historical background and international situation of the times. It presents the complete image of China in Russian literature of different eras from the early 20th century to the 1950s, and further studies the trend and reasons for the evolution of the image of China in Russian literature.

2. The Image of China in Russian Literature in the Early 20th Century

Russian literature at the beginning of the 20th century was in the Silver Age, which is an era of great prosperity for Russian literary creation. Accordingly, the images of China written by Russian writers at the beginning of the twentieth century also reflected the spiritual needs of Russian society at that time. Due to the differences in the authors' personal experiences and creative intentions, the images of China in Russian works of this period are roughly divided into two categories.

The first type of image of China was created on the basis of utopian imagery, where China was portrayed as an ancient oriental civilization full of romantic and philosophical flavour. Some Russian writers of the early twentieth century portrayed China as a perfect exotic state, which was used as a means of expressing the unfulfilled sentiments of the Russian society, and thus reflecting the social problems of the Russian society of the same period. In the writing of Gumilev N.S., the founder of the Akhmet school, China was an ideal country where the poet's romanticism was placed. The poet's poem *The Chinese Girl*, written in 1914, depicts the fidelity of a Chinese woman who misses her fiancé [3]. Although the poem is full of typical images of classical Chinese culture, such as "porcelain" and "pavilion", it is still different from the behaviour of a real Chinese woman and more straightforward than the lyricism of classical Chinese poetry. This proves that the author's image of China is a projection of his own emotional tendencies. Tolstoy L.N. wrote more than a dozen books and essays on ancient Chinese philosophical thought, and his image of China is inextricably linked to ancient Chinese Taoist thought. In 1910, he wrote *Quotations from the Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu*, edited by Tolstoy, which once again portrayed China as a peaceful country ruled by inaction [4]. In reality, China was going through a war at that time, so his image of China was a fantasy divorced from reality, sending his own advocacy of not fighting evil with violence.

The second type of Chinese image was created on the basis of real insights. The image of China at the beginning of the twentieth century in the eyes of these Russian writers was that of a weak country lagging behind the trend of modernization. *Under the Stagnant Great Wall of China*, written by Yanchevetsky D.G. in 1903, depicts China experiencing foreign invasion at the beginning of the 20th century from a journalist's point of view [5]. The author pointed out the

ignorance of the Chinese soldiers and the low combat effectiveness of the Chinese army at that time. Gorky M. expressed his humanitarian concern for the innocent Chinese people in the war in his novel *Complaint* written in 1911 [6].

Although these two types of images of China in Russian literature of the early twentieth century are completely different, both of them reflect the attitudes and emotional tendencies of Russian writers towards China at that time. One group of writers expressed their expectations for the future development of Russian society by creating a utopian image of China. Another part of the writers portrayed China as lagging behind the trend of modernization and expressed their humanitarian concern for the people of the disadvantaged country.

3. The image of China in Russian literature from the 1920s to the 1940s

From the 1920s to the 1940s, as the cause of the democratic revolution in China gained strength and the anti-fascist war began, more and more literary works by Russian authors became closer to the realities of Chinese society in the same period. Because of the different experiences of each author with China, the image of China in the writings of Russian authors from the 1920s to the 1940s also reflected their own subjective emotional tendencies.

The first group of Russian authors saw China as a friendly country who shared the same position against Japan, and their images of China were more positive. Although objectively the Chinese people were still experiencing the ravages of war, their resilience was the subject of their praise. In 1925, Utkin I.P., in his work *Friends on the Songhua River*, encouraged his childhood friends in China to continue to fight for their motherland [7]. In his writing, Chinese people are strong patriots. In 1941, Carmen R.L. portrayed the image of China, where the whole population actively participated in the patriotic war, in *A Year in China: The Record of a News Filmmaker* [8]. As a Russian journalist who personally came to China, the centre of his writing was not the depression and dilapidation of China during the war, but the praise of the Chinese people's tenacious and unyielding spiritual qualities.

The second group of Russian authors did not have a distinct emotional tendency to be close to China. They wrote about both positive and negative aspects of China's image, focusing on a more realistic portrait of the Chinese people and on China's discourse in the international community at that time. In 1927, Goncharenko G.I. portrayed a vivid image of the Chinese people in his own travelogue of China [9]. The Chinese people he writes about are no longer just stereotypical "yellow-skinned", but also "calm", "intelligent" and other diverse adjectives are used to describe them. To some extent, this reflects a reduction in discrimination and prejudice. However, he believed that compared to the Russians, the Chinese did not have the ability to comprehend art, thus showing that subjective prejudices still existed. In 1934, Tsvetaeva M.I. depicted the difficult life and humble social status of a Chinese women exiled to France in her works, which to a certain extent reflected China's weak voice in the international arena in the first half of the 20th century [10].

On the whole, the image of China in Russian literature from the 1920s to the 1940s has become more figurative, and the different aspects of its portrayal reflect the differences in the sentiments of different Russian writers towards China.

4. The Image of China in Russian Literature in the 1950s

In the 1950s, when socialist China was already established, the stable social situation allowed Soviet writers to look at China no longer in the context of war. The increasing national strength of China also gradually broke the national stereotypes of Russian writers, and China's natural beauty and long history were more often incorporated into the national image. In addition, because of the

same socialist nature of the country, friendly diplomatic relations between China and the Soviet Union reached an unprecedented level. The unbreakable revolutionary friendship between the two countries at that time largely influenced the feelings and positions of Soviet writers when they wrote about China. As a result, the image of China in Russian literature in the 1950s was generally positive.

In 1957, Surkov A.A., who visited China as a scholar, not only praised the friendly relations between China and the Soviet Union in his collection of poems *East and West*, but also expressed his admiration for the natural scenery of China, which was very different from that of his homeland [11]. In the same period, there were many other Soviet writers who appreciated the beauty of China from new perspectives, and traditional Chinese culture was no longer synonymous with backwardness and decadence. In the poems, people can distinctly feel that, unlike the early 20th century, the perspective of Russian writers in writing about China has changed from a top-down view to an equal view. This phenomenon not only reflects the emotional tendency of Russian writers towards China under the influence of international relations, but also reflects the fact that the stereotype of China as “weak” is gradually being broken down with the rise of its comprehensive national power. When the perspective of literary creation breaks the limitations of national stereotypes, the image of the country in the literature of other countries becomes truly complete.

5. Conclusion

To a certain extent, literature reflects in real time the ever-changing social environment and international situation. The image of China in Russian literature from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1950s evolved from “an utopian ideal country” and “a weak country lagging behind the trend of modernization” at the beginning of the 20th century to “a tough and resilient nation” and “a country with a weak voice in the international community” from the 1920s to the 1940s, and then to “a comrade-in-arms of the socialist cause” and “a country with both natural beauty and long history” in the 1950s. Russian writers of each era had different experiences about China, and their own positions and writing intentions were also different, so the images of China written by Russian writers of the same era ultimately showed different characteristics. However, these literary works have one thing in common that will not change: the image of China in Russian literature of each era is a microcosm of social reality.

In fact, the process by which Russian writers from the early 1900s to the 1950s constructed a more realistic and complete image of China was also a process by which literary creation broke through national stereotypes. This trend was particularly important for the promotion of identity among national cultures around the world. The evolution of the image of China in Russian literature from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1950s reflects the process of mutual interaction between the cultures of China and Russia, and also symbolizes the macro-trend of the world's national cultures to continuously eliminate the barriers between them and mingle with each other.

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