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Abstract

During the 1920s, Soviet cultural authorities sought to develop a new, post-imperialist literature that would acknowledge a "new East" and supersede the enchanted exoticism of writers like Pierre Loti. They also sought to establish in the countries of the Far East institutional and individual cultural links that might attract leading writers there to the cause of communist internationalism. With these goals in mind, they sent to East Asia two prominent writers, first Sergei Tretiakov, who spent eighteen months in 1924 and 1925 as a professor of Russian literature at Peking University and correspondent for *Pravda*, and then Boris Pilniak, who traveled to China, Japan, and Mongolia in 1926 (and returned to Japan for a visit in 1932). This article discusses these writers' visits and some of the literary works they generated in response to their encounters with East Asia in order to address the general question of whether communist internationalist culture was generated vertically (by instructions, efforts, and institutions set up by "Moscow" and the Comintern) or forged horizontally (by personal links and as a result of individual agency). As a case study in how the two writers attempted to present a more authentic account of the East, the article discusses the contrasting ways they represented the Chinese revolutionary.

Keywords: communist internationalism, Comintern, First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, Russian literature, Sergei Tretiakov, Boris Pilniak, Russia-East Asia relations

In November 1921, the Comintern-sponsored First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East met in Irkutsk (Siberia) and again from January 21 to February 1, 1922 in Moscow, closing with a session in Petrograd on February 3. Delegates at the preceding, and more famous, similarly titled First Congress of the Peoples of the East (the Baku Congress sponsored by the Comintern), which had met in September 1920, were primarily

representatives from countries and Soviet areas that were largely Muslim (“Sostav s’ezda” 1920, 5). The delegates at the second congress (hereafter, “Congress of the Toilers of the Far East”), explicitly convened for the Far East, included a sprinkling of Russians and Westerners but were overwhelmingly East Asian (*The First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East* 1922, 200).

The speeches delivered at the Baku Congress had called for the creation of a “new culture,” a merging of the cultures of the oppressed of the East and the European proletariat. The Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, however, focused more on international affairs. Speakers argued that it was imperative that, as Comintern head Grigory Zinoviev put it, communists and leftists in Korea, Mongolia, and Japan “unify for the cause of wresting independence from the imperialists” (*First Congress* 1922, 4). Here, as in Baku, Zinoviev and other speakers implicitly invoked the Marxist doctrine from *The German Ideology* (1845–1846) that the proletariat is in essence international and had only been divided into antagonistic national groups by its class enemies (Marx and Engels 1976, 50, 84). “There can be no nationalism among the toilers of Japan, China, Korea, Mongolia, etc. who are here represented,” Zinoviev insisted, adding, “We are absolutely certain, that the present representatives of the Japanese proletariat... are sufficiently internationalized in the true sense of the word in their relations with the Chinese, the Koreans, and all other nations who are oppressed by the Japanese bourgeoisie” that they “keep alive the legacy of Karl Liebknecht [who opposed the postwar “bourgeois” government of Weimar—a European example to emulate], that the enemy is within the country, [and] that the principal enemies of the toilers are their own bourgeoisie.” To counteract such retrograde forces, Zinoviev assured the delegates that “the present Congress will strengthen the brotherhood of the toilers of all countries in the form of organization, too” (*First Congress* 1922, 5). But what would be the “true sense” of “internationalized” for him? The answer was evident when, echoing a point commonly found in Bolshevik speeches at that time, he proclaimed Moscow “the center of the world proletarian revolution” and as such counterposed to Washington as “the center of the world’s capitalist exploitation” (Li-Kieng 1922, 42).

Zinoviev and other delegates to this congress also lamented that the networks of leftists in the countries represented existed only marginally, and that they knew very little about each other. “This lack of appropriate information about each other can lead to unwarranted hostility,” he pointed out (*First Congress* 1922, 38). Consequently, perhaps, presentations of the main speakers from each country provided extensive background information on their country’s current political and economic situations and the history of its anticolonialist movement.

The Comintern and an assortment of Soviet state bodies sought to redress two critical deficiencies identified in the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East: (1) the lack of transnational “organization” among leftists in East Asia, and (2) the paucity of “information” or “knowledge” in each country about the others. This two-pronged effort would, in principle, as Nicolai Volland put it in his recent book, “change the existing world order, empowering groups of subalterns” and “topple the hegemonic

structures of global culture” (2017, 13, 15)—though as yet that culture should more accurately to be described as “imperialist.” Clearly, literature as bearer of ideology would play a critical role in fostering an internationalist consciousness in both Asia and the Soviet Union. Consequently, assorted Soviet bodies sought to reposition international literature and create a new center, Moscow, around which those who rejected capitalism and/or sought to combat imperialism could orient themselves, thus rejecting more powerful international literary capitals such as London and Paris as both bourgeois and implicated in imperialism, and even to a degree supplanting Chinese leftists’ orientation around Tokyo.

In this new Comintern conception, and in practice, the exchange of “knowledge” and culture was to be primarily two-way rather than inter-Asian: Soviet readers and viewers were to receive “true information” on the countries of the Far East to overcome their ignorance, while, in turn, readers and viewers in East Asia were to be given “true” information about the Soviet Union. But these Asian recipients were also to receive “true” information about themselves *from the Soviet Union*: in the name of a “new” culture that was to bridge East and West, the Soviet Union sought to create its *own* “new,” post-imperialist account of the East.

Traditionally, cultural historians have viewed the way these aims played out in actuality as a top-down process. The Soviet Union gathered around itself writers from a number of countries who were organized in national leftist literary societies affiliated with Soviet bureaucracies, principally the Comintern or VOKS (the All-Union Society for Cultural Links with Abroad, a federal government-, as distinct from Communist Party-, generated body), or, starting in the mid-1930s, the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers’ Union. In more recent studies, however, literary historians and theorists have reacted against this model, proposing in its place others that foreground a horizontal, rather than vertical, axis of literary organization and of the dissemination and generation of texts. A good example is Kris Manjapra’s 2010 article, “Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition,” in which he discusses an international community of like-minded leftist internationalists he sees as not defined by the programs of the Comintern and broader in scope than any communist literary movement, a community he calls “the socialist global ecumene” that incorporated a “transcolonial ecumene” (Manjapra 2010, 159). Manjapra means *ecumene* in the modern sense of a far-flung or worldwide community of people committed to a single cause and engaged in discussions, lobbying, and writing aimed at working toward a common program and generating a common discourse. In Manjapra’s somewhat idealized account, this ecumene involves not relations between powerful centers and their dependencies, but rather lateral connections of the worldwide like-minded, and more particularly of anti-imperialists. To a large extent, Volland uses a similar model when he writes of a “new pansocialist literature” generated by “the multiple and multidirectional links and connections, the intersections and nodes that embed local literary production and consumption within transnational cultural circuits” so that “the socialist world would never be reduced to the USSR alone” (Volland 2017, 2, 9).

“Socialist cosmopolitanism,” he suggests, has been driven less by a center-periphery pattern than by a multi-axial organization of “interlocking nation-states” such that “this bold new cartography of culture inverted customary notions of center and periphery” (2017, 21, 153).

Applying Manjapra’s and Volland’s models to the case of the interwar cultural links between the Soviet Union and Asia is problematic, because they primarily address the postwar situation when something more like Manjapra’s “*ecumene*” or Volland’s “vibrant networks of cultural producers *in the socialist world* [emphasis added]” (2017, 62) had cohered. In this earlier, interwar period, contacts were developing, but, for example, what Volland calls the “socialist world” comprising not just the Soviet Union but Eastern European countries—and by affiliation some countries in Africa and Asia—did not exist. In the 1920s, the decade that I discuss in this article, leftist internationalist culture was less developed outside the Soviet Union and a handful of other centers such as Berlin and Tokyo. Nevertheless, the correctives of such recent cultural historians are useful in that they highlight the extent to which not only a vertically articulated axis (all subordinated to Moscow as the center), but also horizontally articulated axes of association (such as networks) characterized the evolutionary dynamic of socialist internationalist culture in the interwar years.

The “new culture” for a post-imperialist consciousness was, then, generated both vertically—through directives, textual models, and ideologically inflected discourse emanating from Moscow—and horizontally, through networks of encounter and cross-fertilization involving leftist intellectuals, not all of whom were communist (and even the communists were not always inclined to follow directives). Moreover, whether articulated horizontally or vertically, the Moscow-oriented leftist international literary networks were not silos. That is, each member had multiple connections and affiliations (often including the non-leftist affiliations), and membership was not constant, since individual members floated in and out.

Each leftist writer, even if he or she was affiliated with Moscow-oriented bodies, had his or her own agenda and, to varying degrees, exercised his or her own agency. Consequently, for the particular case of the interwar years, I find a dialectic relationship between what I am calling “structure” and “agency” more useful than a center-periphery binary model for characterizing the dynamic within internationalist literature. The dialectic operates in two spheres. On the one hand, there is the tight dialectical relationship between “structure” (hegemonic organizational structures, bureaucracies, and other bodies that organized this literary movement) and “agency” (in this case, the relationships of particular writers to the structures in which they may or may not be incorporated or that come under their purview); even Soviet-generated bureaucratic structures were not hermetic, and the individuals who ran them sometimes even exercised agency independent of official policy or mandated directives. On the other hand, the dialectic plays out in the sphere of the production of texts seen in the competing pull of “structures,” or, more specifically, hegemonic textual structures as normative narrative forms and topological conventions; individual agents (writers) may

consciously or unconsciously diverge from these norms in their writings, at times reinfecting the norms and at times producing counter-“structures.” Clearly, the two spheres in which this dialectic operates are interrelated, but here I will be treating them separately, discussing each in turn.

We will look at these dynamics and complexities in the case of two Soviet writers who were sent to East Asia in the mid-1920s with the aim of fulfilling both of the aims articulated in the Comintern-sponsored Congress of the Toilers of the Far East: fostering links and organizations that would facilitate the drawing closer of Soviet and East Asian leftist literary worlds, and developing new, post-imperialist conventions for literature that would facilitate a Marxist epistemological revolution in the representation of the East as a potential precursor to political revolution.

Bureaucratic Structures and the Individual Writer’s Agency

Even though “scientific socialism” was believed to be manifestly superior to Western epistemologies, in the campaign during the 1920s to found a “new Asia,” the Soviet Union and the Comintern struggled to compete with Western sources of *their* “knowledge.” To help in the revolutionary effort, the Soviet Union sent to China hundreds of advisors—a group that included many Chinese graduates of KUTV (the Communist University of the Toilers of the East) and Sun Yat-sen University (after it was founded in 1925)—who would train Chinese revolutionaries. The Soviet Union also pushed for greater cultural links with both China and Japan, especially after it was able to establish diplomatic relations with China in May 1924, and with Japan in February 1925 (Mongolia had essentially become a Soviet client state after the Bolsheviks crushed the government of the warlord Baron von Ungern in 1921).

Founded in 1925, VOKS was the critical Soviet institution for facilitating transnational cultural exchange aimed at, ideally, generating the “new culture” or, at any rate, creating closer cultural ties.¹ The Society, as VOKS was known, answered to the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (its agents were always placed in embassies or consulates), though it inevitably also had connections to the security organs (David-Fox 2012, 34–39).

From the very beginning, the lion’s share of VOKS’s efforts was directed at the West, especially Weimar Germany; cultural exchanges with China and Japan were less active. Even in 1925, while VOKS was still forming, Olga Kameneva (Leon Trotsky’s sister, Soviet leader Lev Kamenev’s wife, and, until July 1929, the head of VOKS) gave dismal predictions first to the new Soviet ambassador to China, L. M. Karakhan (on June 12), and then to Georgy Chicherin, the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs (in August), about the Society’s chances of making inroads in China. With no “friendship society” (*Obshchestvo kitaisko-russkogo sblizheniia*) in sight, and little Soviet expertise in the

¹ Although its formation began in May 1925, VOKS was officially established by the Council of Peoples’ Commissars on August 8, 1925. There were analogous earlier organizations for international cultural work starting in 1921 (David-Fox 2012, 36).

language, “cultural exchange promises us very little.” VOKS had “practically no ties” with China, and though the Japanese connections were more developed, they likewise left much to be desired. Kameneva’s overall conclusion to Chicherin was that “the best approach is to review prewar book exchanges.”² Book exchanges were the bread and butter of VOKS activity in the early years, especially as regarded China and Japan, where the Society’s principal activity was promoting the publication of Russian texts in translation,³ but also, as indicated by Kameneva’s statement, VOKS’s efforts in this area were not an innovation; they picked up and centralized an established prerevolutionary pattern. VOKS, then, was the main bureaucratic “structure,” but its office bearers exercised some independent agency. For example, Kameneva promoted the works of her brother Trotsky in Asia, even after his fall from power in a leadership struggle with Joseph Stalin.

Dissemination of Russian and Soviet texts in translation, VOKS’s main activity in the East, could go so only far in effecting cultural convergence. Trying to forge connections with literary groups in East Asia had proved heavy going. With this in mind, two Soviet writers were sent in turn to Japan and/or China (and Mongolia) in the mid-1920s. The first was Sergei Tretiakov (1892–1937), who spent eighteen months from February 27, 1924, until late June 1925 as professor of the history of Russian literature at Peking University⁴ while serving as a special correspondent for *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, and its associated newspapers and journals. The second writer was Boris Pilniak (1894–1938),⁵ who was sent by VOKS.⁶ The political calculations in sending each of these writers can be sensed in their visits’ timing: Tretiakov arrived in Peking at about the same time as the first Soviet ambassador to Peking, Lev Karakhan, whereas Pilniak’s trip was largely occasioned by the signing of a Soviet-Japanese accord in 1925.

Why were these two particular writers sent to the Far East? Tretiakov perhaps suggested himself for his China mission because he had already visited the country in 1921 while fleeing the Japanese occupation of Vladivostok, where he had been working (Kazani 1963, 93). He also had a track record as a cultural internationalist. After moving from the far eastern Soviet Union to Moscow, he had served as a literary mentor to several foreign writers, including Nazim Hikmet, a Turkish avant-garde poet, communist, and, at the time, student at KUTV. But a major reason for sending Tretiakov to China was that, as reported in the Soviet journal *Vostok* (The East), Peking University students

² GARF f 5283 op 4, d 5, l 1.

³ GARF f 5283 op 4, d 5, l 83.

⁴ Peking University Archive MC192402, MC1925 03-04.

⁵ Vsevolod Ivanov, who also wrote on the East, was meant to go with Pilniak but withdrew at the last moment, a possible explanation being that he was worried that his reputation would be tainted by association with Pilniak and the looming scandal occasioned by the 1926 publication of Pilniak’s short story, “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon” (“Povest’ nepogashennoi luny”).

⁶ GARF f 5283 op 4, d 5. Tretiakov was not sent by VOKS, which had not yet been founded, but VOKS organized the visit of his successor at Peking University in the summer of 1925.

were proving “indifferent” to learning Russian; enrollments in Russian were dwindling (while the popularity of English, the language of the prime imperialists England and the United States, was growing apace), so much so that the program shut down altogether in 1923 (Vorob’ev 1924, 171–172). At the time, the university was a hotbed of radicals (Mao had worked earlier in its library), and an exciting teacher was needed to help channel this enthusiasm and to vet students for study at KUTV, where it was hoped the students would become the future leaders of a (Moscow-inspired) revolution in China. Tretiakov was a great success. His passionate lectures about Russian literature and his enthusiasm for the Russian poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky proved infectious, but Tretiakov also moved in other circles. He was at the same time a darling (*dushoi obshchestva*) with the Soviet embassy crowd, where he entertained them all with his “infectious” humor and wit (Vishnekova-Akimova 1965),⁷ and he appears to have made contact with a wider circle of leftist intellectuals in Peking. For example, he worked with Lu Xun on his translations of Alexander Blok’s 1918 poem about the revolution, “The Twelve” (“Dvenadtsat”), at the end of which there is a vision of Jesus Christ walking at the head of the twelve revolutionaries in Petrograd (Belousov 1982, 564).

Pilniak had a more problematic political record than Tretiakov. He had just published his scandalous short story, “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon” (“Povest’ nepogashennoi luny,” 1926), a scarcely veiled account of the suspicious death of Mikhail Vasilyevich Frunze, a famous Soviet military commander, during surgery. In the furor that followed its publication, Pilniak was blackballed on his return from the Far East. Despite such indications of political unreliability, VOKS sent Pilniak to Japan, where he stayed from mid-March until late May 1926, traveling extensively over 6,835 miles (Pil’niak 2004, 28, 95). He then spent several months in China, working for VOKS, hanging out in the Shanghai film world, and waiting in vain for a ship to take him home; when none materialized, he made an unplanned return to Moscow via Mongolia. Among Pilniak’s VOKS-assigned tasks were to set up a Soviet-China cultural society and to try to beef up the Japanese-Russian Literary-Art Society (IaRLKhO), which had been founded in March 1925, soon after diplomatic relations were reestablished.⁸ In 1925, the head of VOKS in Japan, Professor Spalvin (a former a teacher of Japanese at Vladivostok University), had reported to headquarters that the society was not going well; it had not attracted “important people,” rather mostly the young (Savelli 2004b, 174–175). To enhance the impact of Pilniak’s visit, VOKS hastily tried to arrange for translations of his works to be published, though that proved difficult because journals required material to be submitted to them two months before publication.⁹

⁷ The Peking University Archive gives his address in the city as Doncheng Dishot Yandong Hutong Tianxian An (Peking University Archive MC 192503-04).

⁸ Letter of Kameneva, 1926: “VOKS namereno ispol’zovat’ ego prebyvanie v svoikh tseliakh, t. e. kul’turnogo sblizheniia s Iaponiei,” GARF f 5283 op 1, ed. khr. 65, l 58.

⁹ GARF f 5283, op 4, d 17 (1), ll.19, 74; GARF f 5283, op 4, d 26; GARF f 5283, op 4, d 17 (10), ll.74–75.

Pilniak was no stranger to foreign assignments, having already been to Berlin, London, and Turkey.¹⁰ He was probably chosen as an envoy because as a noncommunist and maverick figure he could not be accused of being a purveyor of communist propaganda. A further attraction might have been that in the first half of the decade he had been perhaps the most popular writer in Russia and was then head of the All-Russian Union of Writers (not to be confused with the later Union of Soviet Writers, this was an independent Soviet body to which largely uncommitted writers belonged). Despite his political and literary independence, he had difficulty obtaining a visa, and Japanese authorities were never persuaded that he was not a spy. Thus, he was followed everywhere, as he delighted in pointing out ad nauseam in his writings about the trip.

But Pilniak could not be contained by his mandate. The archive of VOKS, his sponsor in Asia, includes complaints about his being incommunicado in China and Japan despite his promise to send regular reports about the progress of assignments he had been given. He claimed that he had, as instructed, set up an “initiative group” for a new Soviet-Chinese cultural organization in Shanghai, but VOKS found no evidence of this.¹¹ Though popular with some writers in Japan, Pilniak offended many of his hosts with his articles about their country (some found those articles too negative, whereas others faulted his analyses for being “petty-bourgeois” and “reactionary”).¹² They also complained about his dismissive attitude toward their own writings and his arrogant neglect of obligations to further their cause in Soviet Russia; again and again, VOKS officials found themselves obliged to apologize to Japanese literati for their representative’s behavior.¹³

Nevertheless, and counterintuitively, Pilniak was sent to Japan again in 1932 (he had also been sent to the United States in 1931). I say *counterintuitively*, because he was in even hotter water after 1929, when he permitted an émigré publishing house in Berlin to publish his novel *Mahogany (Krasnoe derevo)*, which includes an idealized portrait of a Trotskyite communist. The book was immediately banned in the Soviet Union, after which Pilniak became a favorite target of Soviet critics and literary bureaucrats. But in 1931 the Japanese took Manchuria and there were mass repressions of leftists and their publications in Japan proper.¹⁴ The Soviet leaders apparently saw the author as a good subject for a tentative, apparently unofficial probe into Japan; Stalin and Karakhan urged a reluctant Pilniak to revisit the country, but in a private-seeming capacity (Chukovskii 1994, 58). The aim of the visit was officially represented as the retrieval of a stepson whom he had left with friends during his previous visit, but Pilniak was apprehensive and insisted on staying at the Soviet embassy rather than with his

¹⁰ Some commentators, such as Dani Savelli, claim the idea for the trip came not from the Soviet administration but from Pilniak himself (2004b, 181).

¹¹ GARF f 5283, op 4, d 13 (1), l 3.

¹² GARF f 5283 op 4 d 40 (1), l 46.

¹³ GARF f 5283, op 4, d 17 (1), l 19.

¹⁴ GARF f 5283, op 4, d, 91, ll.3–5, 11, 14, 18, 25–27.

Japanese hosts. He also conspicuously spent more time there promoting his own works than settling this domestic problem. In 1933, the year after he returned, he was nevertheless put on the Japanese subsection of the Chinese Section [*sic*] in the secretariat of MORP (Mezhdunarodnoe ob"edinenie Revoliutsionnykh Pisatelei), at the time the Comintern's central international literary body.¹⁵

Soviet cultural agents of the 1920s, then, did not have to be cookie-cutter Bolsheviks. In fact, neither of the two writers considered here—notionally facilitators of the merging of the literature of the East Asian oppressed with that of the Western proletarians—was himself of proletarian origins or a member of a self-styled “proletarian” literary organization. Rather, they were both prominent Soviet intellectuals. And though Pilniak's writings were singularly *sui generis* and eccentric, as we shall see, the more dutiful-seeming Tretiakov—the model Soviet cultural bureaucrat—did not follow the more officially sanctioned literary approaches. Rather, he was a leading member of the Soviet avant-garde, a movement that was waning in influence and status within Soviet culture (during the winter of 1925, while Tretiakov was still in Peking, its principal mouthpiece *Lef* [The Left Front of Art, 1923–1925] was closed down). And both writers, in their writings produced in response to their East Asian visits, also evinced a significant degree of agency in resisting, challenging, or parodying the emerging hegemonic literary models.

Normative Structures and the Exercise of Agency in the Composition of Texts

The implicit task of the Soviet writer reporting on the East was to come up with a new narrative about it that not only was “new” but also conformed to the emerging normative structures for Soviet literature. A particular mandate was to debunk Western literary accounts of the East, which were seen as tainted by colonialist exoticism. The quasi-official critique of exoticism was formulated most systematically in lectures delivered to students from abroad at Moscow's KUTV and also in a new journal, *Novyi Vostok* (The new East), founded in the wake of the Baku Congress and edited by the leading Bolshevik authority on the East, Mikhail Pavlovich. *Novyi Vostok* was intended to foster the emergence of a precisely “new” communist East, a “red East,” or at any rate a post-imperialist East, and by extension a post-imperialist culture. Between 1923 and 1927, Solomon Vel'tman, the brother of Pavlovich (a pseudonym), published a series of articles in the journal attacking exoticism in colonialist literature, primarily francophone North African, but also East Asian literature.¹⁶ In one of these articles, he provides a capsule formulation of his critique of the “colonial novel,” arguing that it primarily purveys “material for political propaganda”: “Instead of colonial realia [*byt*] [you get] colonialist fantasy [*vydumka*]” (Vel'tman 1925a, 324, 331).

¹⁵ “Po Sekretariatu 4.X.33,” RGASPI f 541, op 1, d 7, l.21.

¹⁶ Vel'tman (1923; 1925a; 1925b; 1925c; 1926a; 1926b; 1926c). The pieces were republished in his collection *Vostok v khudozhestvennoi literature* (Vel'tman 1928).

The most celebrated purveyor of such “colonialist fantasy” at the time was Pierre Loti (1850–1923, pseudonym of Louis Marie-Julien Viaud), a French naval officer who had produced a host of popular travel memoirs and novels including texts about China and Japan (the latter including *Madame Chrysanthème*, on which Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* is loosely based). Loti’s writings were wildly popular in Europe and also in early twentieth-century Russia, where translations of his works appeared in journals and in a profusion of books and three multivolume editions, including a 1911 twelve-volume set. Improbably, Vel’tman actually mentions Loti only glancingly. However, even before Vel’tman published his series of articles in *Novyi Vostok*, an unsigned article condemning Loti had appeared in a 1923 issue of the popular mass-circulation journal *Ogonëk* (Anonymous 1923)—and, actually, Loti had been disparaged in Bolshevik commentary even before the October Revolution [Kogan 1916]).

In the *Ogonëk* article, the caption for Loti’s photo describes him as “the first literary propagandist of the East.” And, he is reproached for essentially not taking an anti-imperialist stance (as, for instance, outlined by Vladimir Lenin in his classic text *Imperialism, As the Highest Stage of Capitalism*) and for not exposing

what was truly capable of captivating Europe: the struggle of the Chinese, Indians, and Australians with the white conquerors, a struggle for gold, pearls, copper, rubber—all these subjects of world significance did not attract the sated Parisian. Loti retreated to the teahouses, harems, and haunts of low repute in the ports. All the romance, exotica, and erotica of distant Eastern countries was revealed to the European reader. (Anonymous 1923)

Typical Loti novels purvey what Tzvetan Todorov called “enchanted exoticism.” In them, an Eastern, or at least non-European, woman has an affair with a Loti-like European. The novels have an oneiric atmosphere, and they are suffused with romantic nostalgia for a simpler and more innocent age such as the Orient purportedly offers (Todorov 1989). In Loti’s most famous novel, *Aziyadé* (1879, set in Turkey), the eponymous Oriental (a Circassian) is an alluring beauty. A Loti character first glimpses her enchanting, green eyes through a lattice, and they are the only visible part of her, since she is totally veiled and shuttered. The man develops an obsession to find out what lies behind the veils. The novel fast-forwards to the unlikely situation in which Aziyadé steals out every evening for erotic assignations with an entranced “Loti” who defies the curfew on his naval vessel. This development satisfies his quest to find the sensual woman behind the veil, his version of solving the “mystery of the East,” but he essentially never gets to know his love object. In all of Loti’s novels, the “subaltern” does not “speak” (quite literally).

One could see Loti’s romances of miscegenation as allegories informed by the standard imperialist narratives about the encounter between East and West, between a “sleepy” East— here gendered and sexualized as languid and sensual—and a more

robust West.¹⁷ Colonization is justified there as bringing about a necessary awakening from the slumber of centuries. This narrative of a “sleepy East” was, incidentally, essentially reiterated by Marx (1862) and also commonly found in Soviet accounts of what they plan to do in Asia, as seen in speeches made to the two Comintern Asian congresses. For example, at the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, Zinoviev said that the Comintern “considers it its greatest task and will do everything possible to hasten the awakening of the toiling people of the Far East” (*First Congress 1922*, 4). The colonialists believed that they—like a veritable fairytale prince (armed with superior “knowledge” and “civilization”)—would awaken non-Europeans to new life. But this scenario is absent in the typical Loti novel, in which the prince (Loti) condemns his child of the East to a life of perpetual sexual encounter with no development for her, and ultimately to abandonment and (usually) death. Moreover, Loti’s novels are in fact antimodern and even somewhat anticapitalist.

Another cliché of reductivist Western accounts of the East that hovers over Loti’s novels is the idea that she (the East) is fundamentally unknowable, inscrutable, impenetrable. This cliché challenges the idea that the culture of Eastern oppressed peoples can merge with that of the Western proletariat. Soviet scenarios of encounter with the East were to be implicitly or explicitly counterposed to such positions, effectively establishing that the “mystery” of the East can be dispelled, the princess awakened, not by military might or economic domination (not by “imperialist” interventions) but by “scientific socialism,” a comprehensive knowledge system, which its adherents believed to be more advanced than that of the imperialists. Its light was to penetrate the veil of unknowability and bridge the seemingly absolute gulf between East and West. The danger, however (as we will see in the example of a Pilniak novel) is that works informed by “scientific socialist” internationalism devolve into utopian generalizations or a set of abstractions that presuppose a common humanity or a truly international proletariat (a further complication in the case of China was that its urban underclass were coolies rather than industrial workers), or those works purvey essentialist notions, such as the “sleepy” East. Such static, “synchronic essentialism,” as Talal Asad called it (1975), is at cross-purposes with the diachrony of a dynamic dialectics.

Tretiakov and Pilniak were, then, expected to draw on their experiences in contributing to the development of a new, post-imperialist, non-exotic literature that acknowledged a new East and also provided for *its* readers (readers in the East)—and for the world at large—“new images.” To that end, both writers produced a lot of semijournalistic work. Tretiakov wrote dozens of articles for the Soviet press on topics such as Chinese students, Chinese women, the new Soviet ambassador, the funeral of Sun Yat-sen, and Mongolia. Many of these pieces were incorporated in his 1927 book *Chungo* (a russification of *Zhongguo* 中國, “China”). Tretiakov also wrote a play titled *Roar, China!* (*Rychi, Kitai!*, 1926), which was promoted by VOKS and performed

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson (1986) has made a similar point.

throughout the world in the late 1920s and 1930s to enthusiastic leftist audiences (particularly in Germany) and is probably the text for which Tretiakov is best known (Fevral'skii 1932). He also published several poems on China, scripts for three feature films that he planned to make during a return visit to China with Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (a project that never materialized),¹⁸ and a work titled *Dèn Shi-khua* (much of which was published in the avant-garde journal *Novyi lef* (New left) between 1927 and 1928 before being published in English as *A Chinese Testament: The Autobiography of Tan Shih-hua* in 1934).¹⁹ Pilniak's relevant publications include two novellas: *A Chinese Tale* (*Kitaiskaia povest'*, 1926), about China, and *A Mighty Heart* (*Bol'shoe serdtse*, 1927), about Mongolia. Also, while still in Japan, he began publishing in the presses of Tokyo and Osaka articles outlining his impressions of the country. Some of them came out subsequently in assorted Soviet papers and journals such as *Izvestiia* and *Krasnaia nov'*; a few appeared in a mass-circulation booklet published by the press of *Ogon'ek* (Pil'niak 1927); and then a larger selection was put together as *Roots of the Japanese Sun* (*Korni iaponskogo solntsa*, 1927; Savelli 2004a, 129–133). After his 1932 trip to Japan, he published *Stones and Roots* (*Kamni i korni*, 1933).²⁰ Most of the works by the two authors also appeared in the West in translation, especially in the case of Tretiakov in Germany, the European headquarters of the Comintern.

These writings by Tretiakov and Pilniak were meant to counter “exoticism” by providing “true” information about the East, to dispel the “mystery,” get further behind the “veil” than did Loti, and replace “fantasy” with “realia”—inflected, of course, by the “scientific socialism” that was an alleged feature of Marxism-Leninism. And yet, Pilniak's *Chinese Tale* seems in many places to echo passages from Loti's *Last Days of Peking* (*Les derniers jours de Pékin*, 1901). I emphasize “seems” because it is unlikely that Pilniak read this book, one of the few by Loti that was not published in Russian translation in book form, though sections appeared in Russian periodicals in the early 1900s.²¹ Both writers, for example, use repeated motifs and phrases pointing at once to China's vastness and to its physical decline. Their common mantra is “dust, steppes and ruins” (Loti 1914, 119, 124).

In his account of China, Pilniak recurrently stresses the enervating heat, which seems to define the China that he experienced. No doubt this is a realistic account of how the heat oppressed him, but his comments give the predicament a central role in his idiosyncratic appropriation and conflation of both traditional Russian anti-Western

¹⁸ “Dokladnaia zapiska zamestitelia khudozhestvennogo soveta 1-oi Goskinfabrikoi S. M. Tret'iakova v Goskino ob organizatsii kinoèkspeditsii v Kitai dlia s"ëmok 3-i seriinogo fil'ma 'Dzhungo' i orientirovochnye smety,” RGALI f 1923, op 1, ed. kh. 133, ll.1–3.

¹⁹ In *Novyi lef*, the title was rendered as “Dèn Sy-Khua.” For a more complete account of this work's publication, see Jung-Boek (1987, 90–91).

²⁰ *Kamni i korni* first appeared in issues 4, 7, and 8 of the Russian journal *Novyi mir* in 1933, with extracts appearing the same year in some issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva*. The work first appeared in book form in 1934. See Pil'niak (2003, 541).

²¹ These sections were published in 1901, 1902, and 1904. See Savelli (2001, notes 14 and 90).

narratives and Bolshevik scenarios for the emergence of a “new man” and a “new [internationalist] culture,” here specifically in Asia. In his account, China has been subjected to European incursions that have been destroying their traditional culture (a common lament of Slavophiles about the impact of European culture on Russian traditions), “but in its place... is arising a new culture that is already not national but of the world, precisely in this spot are born [committed revolutionaries], for whom I am enduring the wasting away [*marazm*] brought on by this heat” (Pil’niak 1928, 50). *Marazm*, a verbal motif of Pilniak’s novel, is related to marasmus, a medical term that comes from the Greek *marasmós*, meaning “wasting away,” but in Russian it also has connotations of senility, dotage, and decay. So although it becomes a figure for the “sleepy” Asian, the heat-induced *marazm* has also reduced the “I,” the Pilniak-like narrator, to the point where he is no longer able to think well. He is limited in his ability to “see” China, to penetrate its reality (Pil’niak 1928, 96–97). In an epistemological dead-end, he increasingly spends his time shut away from the outside, Chinese world, playing cards with compatriots—in other words, failing to live up to the mandate of the Soviet author in Asia. The actual Chinese are rendered as an inchoate mass crowding the streets and the sampans. There are no “pagodas” or other accoutrements of the exotic in this novella, it is true, but nor are there any real Chinese.

Besides Loti, the source on which Pilniak most frequently drew for *A Chinese Tale* was the most famous of his own books, *The Naked Year* (*Golyi god*, 1922). Using his characteristic collage method of composition, he intermittently veers off in his narrative about China to recycle passages he used to represent quintessential Russia in *The Naked Year* and interpolates them somewhat incongruously to convey China, throwing in vaguely internationalist sentiments for good measure (as we just saw in miniature, in the passage from *A Chinese Tale*). No wonder critics, including Veltman (Vel’tman 1927, 214, 219), accused him of never getting beyond the “point of view” of his own provincial origins. (His parochialism also emerges in his periodic expressions of disgust at Chinese cuisine and hygiene.)

Collage, however, mitigates the linear structure of Soviet hegemonic literary narratives, tied as they were to canonical accounts of historical progress. In one of his many digressive interpolations in the text, Pilniak also sabotages standard trajectories of Soviet biographical narratives. This passage is framed by a passage in which Pilniak appears to be presenting an orthodox Soviet narrative about a China emerging from decades of imperialist oppression as workers and communists organize resistance. But then follows an embedded biography about a worker, Liu-Khfa, who comes from a poor family living on a sampan and rises progressively out of this limited background. The year 1918 finds him working as a typesetter at a printing press, as if to invoke the long-standing trend among European socialists to be closely associated with printing presses (see de Bray 2007). Then, having done what Pilniak identifies as “a Lomonosov” (*lomonovstvuia*)—that is, like the eighteenth-century Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov, Liu-Khfa, an illiterate and dirt-poor member of the lower classes, manages to get an advanced education—he works for a university library (not coincidentally,

perhaps, Mao Zedong also worked at Peking University Library in the early 1920s). In other words, in presenting this mini-biography of a Chinese, Pilniak is constantly presenting his observations in terms of Russian points of orientation such as Lomonosov. Liu-Khfa is keen to break free of the China of the concessions and compradors, so he becomes a “herald” of world revolution, organizing the masses. But, like one of Pilniak’s idealized sectarians from *The Naked Year*, he is “without a home, without rice, without nights [i.e., sex]” (Pil’niak 1928, 65).

The life of Liu-Khfa is idealized and conventionalized: the narrator tells us that it is not clear how Liu-khfa dies (though he is arrested by the British, tried, and executed), but the Chinese are already writing poems about him, and “I” (the narrator) have a copy of one of them. But this idealization is undercut in that it is presented in the hypothetical, a mood that begins on the first of the several pages about Liu-Khfa’s life when the narrator says, “Perhaps he was born on a sampan near our bridge, on our canal,” to suggest how generic it is. But more importantly, the expected trajectory stalls when Liu-Khfa is consumed by a romantic love. His love object, a young, wide-eyed American missionary who has come to China to convert the Chinese, is unaware of his love, and on the day he is executed she marries a secretary of the English Consulate, the very one who represented England at Liu-Khfa’s trial. The narrator comments that Liu-Khfa was a “human being” and hence subject to love, a passion that can lead one into “unreality” (Pil’niak 1928, 63–67). Somehow even the worthy Liu-Khfa cannot be thrust into the procrustean bed of the model communist revolutionary. The template of the Marxist-Leninist biography of a revolutionary breaks down. The intended trajectory of Liu-Khfa’s life, the standard arc of revolutionary development, collides with human nature, passions seethe “within”—and it collapses. No matter how much enthusiasts are “writing poems” about him, the gulf between template and reality has widened. In a sense this was bound to happen in a Pilniak text, given that he generally privileges the irrational and the fabular.²²

Another cliché that is challenged here is the story of East-West encounter as commonly found in popular literature of the time. In this tale of romance and miscegenation manqué, the enamored person of color is the male, rather than the sensual female, as in most Orientalist romances. Potentially, then, this mini-narrative also represents a parody of the colonialist exoticist romance of a Pierre Loti.²³ Pilniak mentions Loti by name in his 1927 book about Japan, *Roots of the Japanese Sun*, and rejects Loti’s version of that country; yet, in this book he also draws on some of Loti’s accounts of Japan.²⁴ Generically, this text is a travelogue, not a novel, and is not structured by a romance of miscegenation. But its obsession with the possibility of some

²² See, for example, the discussion of the conflict between enlightenment and the irrational in Anisimova (2011).

²³ The plot of Loti’s *Last Days of Peking* is also parodied in Victor Segalen’s *René Leys*, published posthumously in 1922 but written before his death in 1919.

²⁴ For example, as Savelli (2004a, 138n23) points out, Pilniak draws on Loti’s *Japonneries d’automne* (1889) using a 1904 Russian translation (Loti 1904, 203).

merging between Japanese and Russians or Europeans could be seen as a preoccupation with “miscegenation” in a less biological and more ideological and cultural sense. As in his account of China, however, Pilniak’s observations on Japan are hyperbolic and contradictory, particularly his conclusions on whether such a merging is possible.

In *Stones and Roots*, his 1933 book based on his later trip to Japan, Pilniak presents biting attacks on colonialist “fantasy” (*vydumka*) and on Loti in particular as a writer who “invents [*pridumyvaet*] all sorts of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ souls” (Pil’niak 1934, 55). Yet, and more blatantly than in his account of Liu-Khfa, Pilniak sends up a series of “standard” plots about the Orient in this book, presenting two juxtaposed narratives about the same set of characters (who are, in any case, composites of Americans, Japanese, and Europeans, of feudalists and capitalists). One plot concerns a “Marxist” and the other a “fascist.” After presenting the Marxist plot, Pilniak shatters the illusion with an almost Shandyan intervention, “And so on./ One can shut the novel and not read further,” adding, “The novel, it seems was begun by an extremely mediocre author, and his vocabulary, his way of constructing the plot, the plot itself, and the types are standard” (Pil’niak 1934, 7). Undoubtedly, these remarks are partly directed at his Soviet critics and the increasingly rigidified convention for socialist realism, the Soviet generic narrative, though they are also directed specifically at the many critics, both Japanese and Soviet, who had attacked *Roots of the Japanese Sun*. Many of the ensuing pages after this intervention in the “novel” consist of diatribe against passages from that earlier book. But in this pseudocritique of his *own* works, Pilniak is interrogating the distinction between a templated narrative arc and “actuality,” using these reviews as a motivation. He calls *Stones and Roots* a novel, and his earlier *Chinese Tale* a novella (*povest’*), as if both texts were fictional and not travelogues. The Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts in Moscow contains pages from Pilniak’s diary from his visit to China that correspond closely to the text of *A Chinese Tale*,²⁵ raising the question of the distinction between the factual and the fabular in his writings.

Tretiakov’s approach would at first seem to provide a contrast with Pilniak’s representations of China, especially because the years he was writing up his China material (1925–1929) are commonly regarded as the high point for a literary movement he led, the “literature of fact” (*literatura fakta*; Papazian 2009, 27); most of his “fictional” works on China of this period are insistently “fact-based.” As described in the preface to a 1929 collection of programmatic articles that came out in *Literatura fakta*, a canonical source, this literary movement involved “turning away from the literature of idle invention [*vydumka*].” In other words, adherents distanced themselves, as in anti-exoticist writings of the 1920s, from fantasy or invention, or thinking things up; *vydumka*, a negative term common to the theoretical writings of both trends, has at its root *dumat’*, “to think.” But this did not mean the proponents of the “literature of fact” were advocating some kind of transparent reproduction of “reality” in their texts

²⁵ B. A. Pil’niak, “Putevye zametki o poezdke v Kitai. Konets 20-kh gg,” RGALI f 1692, op 1, e/x 32.

(impossible anyway because of the necessity for some mediating use of language and the inevitability of using some delimiting “structure,” or organization, of the verbal text), and so the preface goes on to describe “the literature of fact” as “a literature not of naïve and false verisimilitude but rather of the most real and maximally precisely expressed truth” (*Lef* 1929, 5). In effect, then, representations, while they were not to be “fictional,” would be framed or inflected from a Marxist or Marxist-Leninist point of view.

Dèn Shi-khua, Tretiakov’s biography of a Chinese revolutionary (published in full in Russia in 1930), was intended to exemplify these principles put into practice. With his puritanical rigidity about rooting out all “fiction” in favor of “fact,” Tretiakov classified this book not as a biography, or biographically based fiction, but as a “bio-interview,” an act of extended, fact-based journalism. In other words, though in a different way, he was declaring his resistance to the emerging standard conventions for a revolutionary biography, as did Pilniak in his works on China and Japan. As with Tretiakov’s play *Roar, China!*, which dramatizes a conflation of several newspaper accounts of an actual incident (Belousov 1963, 143–145), *Dèn Shi-khua* was grounded in actuality—more specifically, in a long series of interviews that Tretiakov conducted with a former student from Peking University called “Dèn Shi-Hua” about his life. The student had moved on from Peking University to become a student at Sun Yat-sen University in Moscow, which gave Tretiakov an extended opportunity to interview him after his return to the capital.

In his introduction to *Dèn Shi-khua*, Tretiakov condemns the “old view of China,” insisting that “we have to break the arm and set it anew.” “We demand precise knowledge” (that favorite term of the Comintern Congress of the Toilers of the Far East), he adds, and then, using a metaphor from mining, “We demand a deep boring” (Tret’iakov 1930, 30).²⁶ In other words, we have here another claim to penetrating “within,” to dispelling the mystery of China, in this case using a more technologized metaphor than ripping off veils à la Loti’s *Aziyadé* or penetrating the Forbidden City as in *The Last Days of Peking*. But the metaphor—mining to extract valuable ore—is also reminiscent of colonialist or imperialist narratives. Just as in colonial power relations, there is a distinction between those who extract the raw materials and those who process them; in Tretiakov’s approach, there is a hierarchical distinction between the interviewee—the purveyor of raw information about his own life—and the creative individual, the “author” who constructs a narrative out of that information. This distinction was popular in Soviet documentary-film theory and practice of the time and was especially associated with Esfir Shub’s “compilation method,” which envisioned two levels of filmmaker—those who go out and shoot realia and those who put their footage together as a film (Yampolsky and Spring 1991, 161). But here the distinction is particularly marked because it is between the role of a European “author” and that of an Asian purveyor of raw materials. Moreover, despite Tretiakov’s claim to “bore

²⁶ Perhaps coincidentally, a geologist was one of the characters in Pilniak’s *Stones and Roots* used to send up both capitalism and narrative conventions.

deeply,” he himself knew no Chinese (though his wife and stepdaughter knew some of the language). The actual Chinese student whom Tretiakov interviewed for the biography was Gao Shihua, who told Tretiakov the story of his life not in his native Chinese, but in Russian, which he reportedly spoke “with difficulty” (so much so that they occasionally had to resort to pencil sketches to convey their meaning; Belousov 1982, 567). For all Tretiakov’s claims to “boring deeply,” the text provides evidence that he did not know his subject very well—for example, it emerges that he had misjudged Dèn’s private life, maintaining that Dèn was not very interested in sex, though in fact he had a girlfriend living with him (Tret’iakov 1930, 100–101). How much “deeper,” then, did Tretiakov “bore”?

Clearly, Tretiakov never intended to make *Dèn Shi-khua* into a generic biography of a revolutionary of the sort Pilniak sent up in his account of Liu-Khfa. That would not involve “boring.” To thrust one’s subject into an exemplary narrative is to deny the specificity of his life. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Sun Yat-sen University was founded to train Chinese future leaders of the China revolution, its expectation was that its students would become active revolutionaries. This “bio-interview” came out in successive editions, each with a different preface that framed it in a new way. In the preface to the first version (1927), there is an implicit expectation that Dèn will become a revolutionary. But in that year the political situation in China changed radically. The Bolshevik-sanctioned alliance between the Chinese communists and the Guomindang (GMD) ended abruptly as the GMD brutally suppressed a communist-led uprising in Shanghai and began arresting and executing communists all over the country. Sun Yat-sen University had both GMD and communist students, and most of those oriented toward the GMD were either expelled after the 1927 debacle or left voluntarily in its aftermath. Dèn’s father had been a GMD leader, at times outlawed for his political involvement, and Dèn decided to return to China. But this “fact” complicated the narrative arc of the biography. To an extent, Tretiakov compensated by including in the 1930 edition more material on Dèn’s childhood, which rendered the text more of an ethnographic excursion. But he also added a postscript in which the narrator speculates as to where Dèn is “now” and asks what he is doing—for example, has he joined the GMD? Or, has he been arrested? In other words, the trajectory Tretiakov might have assumed the biography would follow is overtaken by unforeseen events, but it also reorients the entire narrative somewhat into an exercise in the subjunctive comparable in this sense to Pilniak’s narrative about the exemplary revolutionary Liu-Khfa.

Tretiakov cannot be faulted for failing to anticipate the Shanghai debacle of 1927, but it could be said that he failed to get “within” the mental world of his subject. As readers, we are not to know whether Tretiakov’s student informant and subject sabotaged the truth-value of Tretiakov’s narrative about his revolutionary development by withholding or misrepresenting information. And in any event, Tretiakov’s “bio-interview” was an act of translation from one culture system to another, and as such inevitably fraught, especially given that Marxism itself emerged from the West European cultural tradition.

A common, transnational culture linking East and West, even a common “proletarian culture,” was a utopian notion, especially in the early postrevolutionary years. For any attempt to generate and disseminate a single post-imperialist culture, it would be critical to develop networks of the potentially like-minded, but, as we have seen, the Moscow-oriented leftist internationalists had decidedly frail institutional structures at best. Moreover, the Russian internationalists and their East Asian would-be confrères had little common language. This gap is evident literally in the case of “Dèn” and his interlocutor, but—considering language in the extended sense of tropes, discourse, and narratives—there was also little common language between the Russian and East Asian leftist writers. As we have seen, Tretiakov and Pilniak connected with the existing (though limited) Moscow-oriented cultural networks in East Asia, tried (in theory) to build on them, and attempted to further the quest for a new, post-imperialist narrative about the “East.” But there were limits to what they could achieve at that time.

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