

# Images of China in Contemporary Russian Literature

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Russian orientalism is usually related to Caucasia or Central Asia with which Russian history has been deeply connected. Compared with such “near” East, China is located enough far away, especially, in Russian people’s mental map rather than in the real map. Even one of the authors whose novel will be analyzed in my paper, Viacheslav Rybakov told that he was interested in China because it was completely deferent unknown world for him. It resembles even habitants on the Mars for him. China has a history and culture which are imagined to have developed independently of the Western influences. In contemporary Russian fictions the image of China is sometimes used as something which could compete with Western values. And the authors could find (exaggerated or idealized) an original self image of Russia against the threat of globalization, partly by associating Russia with China.

In this paper I focus on image of particular Chinese character, fox spirits. Recently two influential writers Victor Pelevin and Kholim van Zaichik introduced this character in their novels, about them I will discuss later.

Fox-spirits play a remarkable role in Chinese mythology, folklore, and classical literature. They are not usual animals, but supernatural beings which are able to transform themselves into any figures. Especially, they prefer to take an appearance of beautiful woman. In many well-known stories fox-spirits deceive stupid men, tempt them into sexual relationship, thorough which foxes squeeze vital energy from men and as a result they would die. But in other cases fox-spirits really fall in love with men and bring them wealth or help them succeed in life. They might be both evil and good. Such unsustainable image of fascinating and terrible fox-spirits is stereotypical female image for male readers. The fox-spirit character in Russian fictions may have the function of triple «otherness»: first, otherness as Asian identity (as opposed to Europe, the character was taken from Chinese mythology); second, otherness as female gender; thirdly, as animal or half animal being. Such triple otherness is effective in the novels.

The other characteristic of Fox-spirits are their philosophical and religious tendencies. They are able to live more than thousands years. After longtime spiritual practices some of them can transcend the superficial world and become “heavenly fox”. This motif also appear in both fictions, in particular, Pelevin’s novel.

Victor Pelevin is a famous Russian contemporary writer. It is characteristic

that there are plenty of Eastern and Chinese motives in his works. Particularly *The Holy Book of Monster* is filled with reference and allusion to Buddhism, Taoism, and other Chinese classical literature. “Monster” is not appropriate translation from the original word, the original word in Russian is *oboroten*. According to Russian folklore and Mythology this word means supernatural beings which are able to transform themselves into various animals like wolves and bears. But in Pelevin’s novel *oboloten* includes both Russian and Chinese mythological character.

Heroine of the novel is a fox spirit named A-Huli. She works as a prostitute in contemporary Moscow. She was born in ancient China, moved to prerevolutionary Russia in relatively recent time. She lives more than one thousand years. But she looks young like a teenager girl. Her daily business (as prostitute) is conducted in following way. A-Huli shows illusions to her male clients with the hypnotizing power of her fox tail. The clients in their sexual illusion provide vital energy, which makes her possible to keep her eternal youth.

Meanwhile, there is a rumor going around among fox spirits that so called “super monster (that is, super *oboroten*)” will appear soon in Moscow. This term is parody of Nietzsche’s conception of super-human. A-Huli falls in love with a young FSB (intelligence agency, former KGB) officer Alexander. He also proves to be *oboroten*, Russian mythological being, werewolf (person who can transform into wolf). Alexander has skill to find out place where oil can be gained. However, as a result of his private affection he loses his previous ability, but now he transform himself to a terrible black dog who is capable to destroy anything on the world. Alexander and A-Huli once escape from FSB. But, eventually, Alexander leaves A-Huli and returns to serve the government, believing that he becomes super-monster. A-Huli decides to leave this illusionary world and move into transcendental level (*pustota*, nothingness). Riding on a bicycle she jumps out and disappears in mysterious light. In her understanding in this way she becomes “super *oboroten*”.

The *Eurasian Symphony* series written by van Zaichik is a kind of subgenre of Science Fiction which is named alternative history. This genre speculates what would happen if any historical event would go in a different way from real history. In van Zaichik’s novels turning point of the history is set in the age of the Tatar-Mongol Yoke for Russia. In this world Mongolians didn’t invade Russian territory unlike real history. One of the grandsons of Genghis Khan and Russian Prince (Aleksandr Nevskii) concluded a treaty of equal union which would develop into a great empire. China (Ming Dynasty) has also joined in the union. In the twenty-first century it has developed into a

huge Eurasian empire, where a Chinese monarch reigns with the capital city Chinese Khanbalyk (大都; alternative Beijing).

The author Khol'm van Zaichik is presented as a Dutch Orientalist who wrote his series *Eurasian Symphony* originally in Chinese. And later translators translated his novels into Russian. This is, of course, a kind of mystification. Genuine authors were Petersburg SF writers Viacheslav Rybakov and Igor Alimov (an important point in that they are not only writers, but also sinologists).

I focus on the 5<sup>th</sup> book in the series *The Case of Fox-Oboroten'* (Fox Spirits). One of the heroes Bogdan is broken-hearted (because his beloved wife has left him forever) and decides to go on a pilgrimage to the holy islands of Solovki. In the alternative world of Eurasian Symphony Solovki is not a holy land for Russian Orthodoxy, but a symbol of multi-confessional empire where Christian churches coexist with Buddhism temples. Bogdan takes meditation in a deserted place within the island. In a night a fox-oboroten' visited him. She looked like Bogdan's divorced wife and so attractive that he couldn't refuse her. After that night Bogdan finds fox-spirits killed in the woods several times. At the same time the other hero Bagatyr investigates strange incidents, deaths of babies whose parents have taken a kind of love potion named "fox charm". He finally discovered that the potion was made from the bodies of fox-spirits killed in Solovki islands. There are many people in the empire whose ancestors had enjoyed the favor from fox-oboroten' (as Chinese classical literature suggests it). When they use the potion made from dead fox's body their babies must die according to the law of karma (Buddhist idea of a causal relationship between ancestors and their descendents).

In Pelevin's novel apparently the East is predominant over the West in moral and spiritual aspects. But the wave of globalization penetrates all over the world and diverse local values are destined to perish. It is an interesting point that Russia doesn't belong neither to the West nor the East. The werewolf Alexander, the character symbolizing Russia, has a desire to be a super oboroten' (monster) who will be able to bring the end of the world. On the other hand, Chinese character A-Huli decides to abandon this world which is getting more and more boring and painful and move into the other world or the higher level of spiritual state, that is, "nirvana" in the Buddhism terminology. A-Huli's non European, non male, non human way of thinking allows her to make a distance to the existing orders of the world.

More important point is the ability of fox-spirits to give an illusion. In some regards love resembles a hypnotized state of people, their mutual illusion. The figure of fox (who deceives or fascinates men) can be translated to the image of woman able to

create an illusion of love. A-Huli goes more ahead. She understands that all the world consists of illusions and simulacres from which she decides to be released. And she realizes that the way she has chosen must lead her to the super oboroten', which is opposed to the way of Alexander to be super oboroten' in his own understanding.

The Eurasian empire created by van Zaichik consists of so many heterogeneous cultures, nations, and religions. Even people whose ancestors were married to the fox-spirits are now living as legitimate subjects of the empire. Differences between Russia and China are merged into an enormous Eurasia. And this empire stands in opposition to the West (Europe and America).

It is interesting that van Zaichik criticize Western feminism in this novel (his understanding is, of course, superficial and stereotypical). Feminism eliminate differences between men and women. As a result female characteristics, female gestures and manners are disappearing more and more. So love potion "fox charm" (made from fox spirits' bodies) substitutes for this femaleness, that is, ability to create an illusion of love (which has been lost in the Western society and might be threatened in the Eurasian empire under the influence of the West),.

It is difficult to identify Russia one-sidedly as Europe nor Asia. I have analyzed writers who try to oppose Russia to European values by means of Chinese image. In Pelevin's novel the "marriage" of Russia and China eventually fails, while Van Zaichik's Eurasian empire has merged both Russia and China into singly entity. Furthermore, in van-Zaichik's novel the Eastern moral values cope with the Western globalization trends, while in Pelevin's novel this scheme move into more metaphysical level, that is, the opposition between superficial this world and transcendental spiritual world. In any case the writers look for the way to relocate Russia in their mental world map with the help of Chinese image.