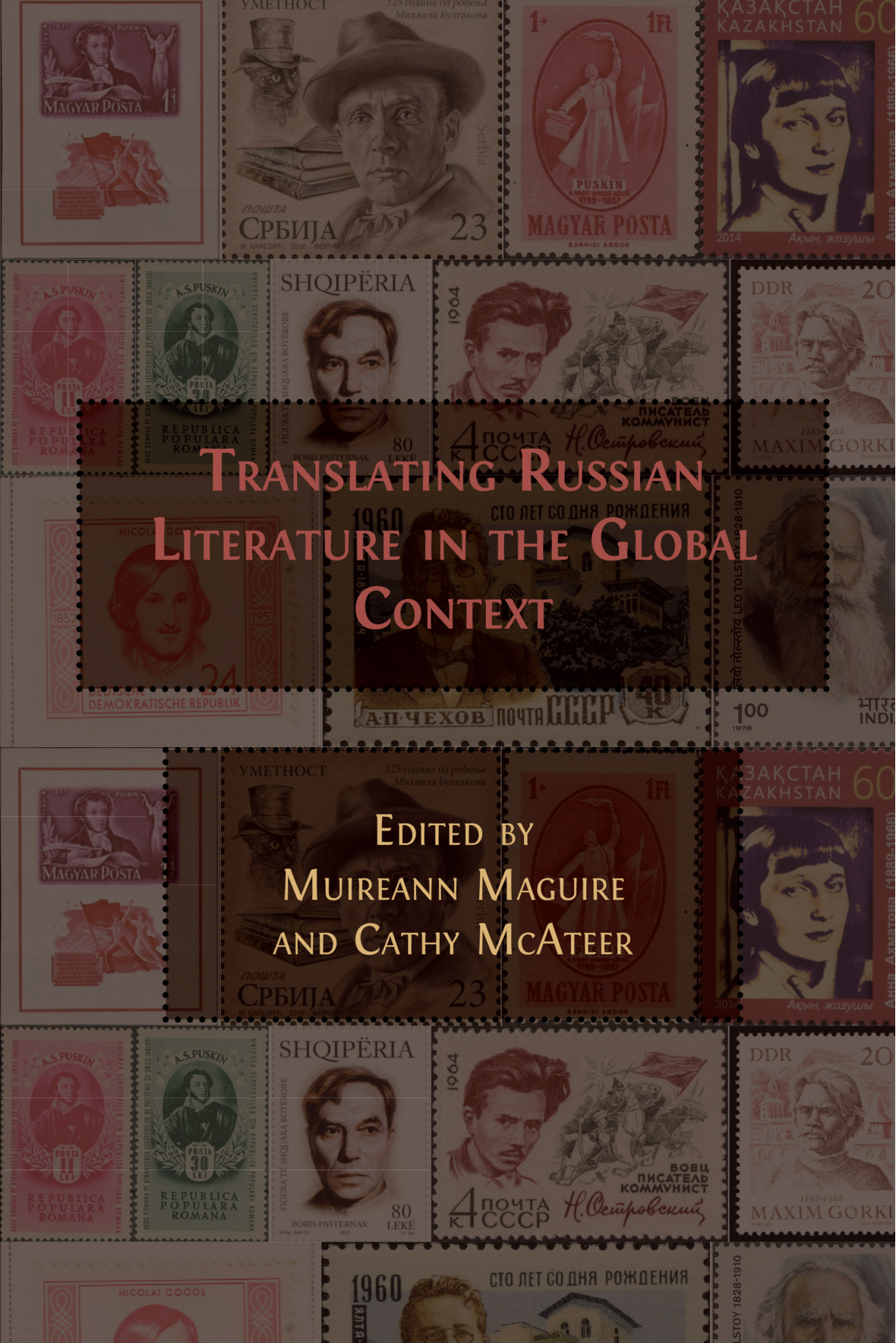

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

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Russian Literature in Asia: An Overview

Cathy McAteer

The task of mapping the modern circulation of Russian literature in Asia, identifying the agents and motivations behind its dissemination, has never been tackled as a geographical whole. This is primarily due to Asia's sheer extent as a continent which, according to the United Nations, comprises forty-eight countries. If we had been able to allocate each an individual chapter, Asia would require a volume in its own right. Instead, the eight case studies in this section provide a far-ranging and diachronic examination of Russo-Asian translation-publishing relations during the twentieth century. Our authors have contributed chapters on China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Besides consolidating and advancing existing scholarship (on China and Japan in particular), this section includes the first English-language studies of our topic, including five new essays on India's multilingual relationship with Russian literature within one composite chapter, co-written by five different subject experts.

Several scholars have researched discrete geographical contexts within Asia. Challenging his own assertion that Anglophone research on the reading of Russian literature in China is "limited in scope and has rarely so far ventured beyond tracing the influence of Russian stories and novels on the creative work of Chinese writers",[1] Mark Gamsa has produced several comprehensive works on the dissemination of Russian literature in China.[2] Heekyoung Cho has researched the reception history of Russian literature in Korea and more broadly

1 Mark Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China: A Moral Example and Manual Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.

2 Besides *The Reading of Russian Literature in China*, Gamsa is the author of *The Chinese Translation of Russian Literature: Three Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004168442.i-430.2; *Harbin: A Cross-Cultural Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

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in East Asia.[3] For Cho, analysis of East Asia's interactions with Russian literature reveals "common cultural denominators in China, Japan, and Korea that do not necessarily surface when we approach East Asian modern literatures vis-à-vis 'the West'".[4] Cho refutes the Eurocentric approach that she attributes to Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti. Instead, Cho focuses her attention on the semi-peripheral zones that exist alongside centres of world literature and produce their own literary activity. The earliest Russian craze in Korea—from 1900 and peaking in the 1920s—was roughly synchronous with Britain's so-called 'Russomania', but in Korea's case, Cho infers a Casanovan, or specifically Herderian, interest on the part of Korean writers to create "a new type of literature for the modern era".[5] She emphasises that Russian enjoyed greater popularity than other world literatures, and not only among Koreans; it was the most popular of the Western literary canons among Chinese and Japanese readers too:

> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, East Asian cultures avidly translated and imported foreign texts in the process of creating a new type of literature for the modern era. In Korea, translation of foreign literature started in the 1900s and reached its peak in the 1920s. Essays by Korean writers show that they eagerly sought out Russian literature, which was the most favoured of all foreign literatures. For example, Yi Hyosŏk recalls that during high school in the early 1920s, he and his friends 'also read English and French literature such as Hardy and Zola, but nothing could compete with the popularity of Russian literature'.[6]

Zaya Vandan, in this volume, endorses a similar view of Russian literature's significance to Mongolian culture, asserting that its influence "on the formation and history of Mongolian literature is impossible to measure". Cho explains four possible reasons for the impact of Russian literature on such cultures:

> [...] geographical proximity; political and military events, including the Russo-Japanese War and the Russian revolution; and the availability of translations of Russian literature in multiple languages, especially in English and Japanese. It is also very likely that writers in Japan, China, and Korea felt a strong sympathy with Russian writers and with the

3 Heekyoung Cho, *Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47w7v7; Heekyoung Cho, 'World Literature as Process and Relation: East Asia's Russia and Translation', in *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, ed. by Debjani Ganguly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 566–84, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009064446.031.

4 Cho, 'World Literature as Process and Relation', p. 571.

5 Ibid., p. 569.

6 Ibid.

> characters described in their works. Literature takes on a special role as a voice of social conscience in societies in which the state controls political speech. The tsarist regime in Russia, the strong state in modern Japan, and the Japanese colonial government in Korea all controlled public speech and blocked politically dangerous messages.[7]

This evaluation of East Asia's motivations for incorporating a Russian literary canon in translation resonates with Johan Heilbron's and Gisèle Sapiro's definition of the transnational movement of texts elsewhere in the world and the local gains that emerge as a result:

> We have already mentioned, with respect to translations into Hebrew in the 1920s, the role of translation in the constitution of national cultures. Brazil and Argentina built their national identities through competing cultural exchanges in which translations of Brazilian works into Argentinian Spanish played an important role throughout the 20th Century (Sora 2002; 2003). This use of symbolic goods can also be observed in the construction of social identities, of religious identity, genre identity, local identity (regionalism), and the identity of a social group (proletarian literature) [...].[8]

The fact that great Russian works depicted the lives of ordinary people set the Russian canon apart from other world literatures for the Asian readership and resulted in the shaping of national writers in the twentieth century whose own literary contributions forged new canons. Both pre-Revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union, with their rejection of European cultural models, offered an acceptable template for imitation by East Asian writers, where there was a desire to avoid excessive dependence on Western literary approaches in the formation of their own national canons. Futubatei Shimei, identified by our contributor Hiroko Cockerill as the founder of the modern Japanese novel, assumes a key position as a modern, literary-canon builder in Japan with his Turgenev-inspired *The Drifting Cloud* (*Ukigumo*, 1889). In China, the arrival of Russian literature was comparatively delayed, eventually replacing the earlier Chinese craze for British literature. According to Gamsa, by 1920 the absolute majority of titles translated into Chinese were by English-language writers. Russian literature trailed far behind the second most-translated Western literature: French. With British and American missionaries living in China at the start of the century, English was predominantly the pivot or bridge language for transmitting French literature there. The translator Lu Xun, whom Yu Hang describes in our chapter on China,

7 Ibid.

8 Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation: Current Issues and Future Prospects', in *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, ed. by Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: Benjamins Translation Library, 2007), pp. 93–107 (p. 104).

helped engineer the shift towards reading Russian authors. In 1918, influenced by the Russian novelists he had read in German and Japanese translations while a student in Japan, Lu Xun produced his own Gogol-inspired 'A Madman's Diary'. This work is perceived as China's first modern short story, published at a time when, according to Gamsa, "the rise of interest for Russian literature was inseparable from the political victory of the Russian revolution".[9] As with Cho's assessment of Korean interest in Russian literature, Gamsa maintains that in China:

> Russian, and then Soviet, literature [...] was identified with real life, its fictional characters with living men and women and its authors with teachers. This equation [...] was applied to Russian literature more than to any other in the Chinese perception not merely out of political considerations but because [...] of the shared, or similar, postulates in the understanding of literature in both cultures. It was an equation responsible for the inspirational power of Russian literature in China, as for much of the brainwashing done in its name.[10]

Cho credits the Korean author Yi Kwang-su, who considered literature to be "a fundamental force which determines the rise and fall of a nation",[11] with introducing the Russian classical canon to Korean readers through his own literary influences. Kwang-su's *Heartless* (*Mujeong*), written in 1917, is regarded as his most famous work and as the first modern Korean novel. Much as Indian writers recognised in Tolstoy a crystallisation of the peaceful resistance to colonialism that inspired Mahatma Gandhi (as Ranjana Saxena and Ayesha Suhail assert in our India chapter), Cho explains that Korean intellectuals took as their model "not the author who wrote aesthetically excellent works but the activist who engaged with the problems of contemporary society through literature".[12] Korean and Chinese readers distinguished Russian literature from the European canon because the former pursued societal reform, adopting a "literature for life" rationale that appealed to the East Asian reader's political aspirations more than the ubiquitous European literary slogan of "art for art's sake". Thus "East Asian writers' passionate engagement with Russian literature was related to their own desire for an active role for literature in their specific sociopolitical situations".[13] In the early 1920s, Korean intellectuals interpreted Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and even Turgenev as Socialists and as a source of inspiration for Korea's proletarian writers.[14]

9 Gamsa, *The Reading of Russian Literature in China*, p. 4.
10 Ibid., p. 12.
11 Cho, 'World Literature as Process and Relation', p. 570.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 571.
14 Cho, *Translation's Forgotten History*, p. 132.

Many of the case studies in this section show how Russian literature informed both literary ideas and political aspirations in the receiving countries of several Asian nations. Notable examples are India, where the influences of Tolstoy and Maksim Gorky, in particular, reinforced and fuelled revolutionary sentiments already rooted in the national independence movement, while serving as creative inspiration for national writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Premchand, as discussed in our India chapter. In conflict zones, like North Vietnam, Russian literature (translated from both French and Russian) directly reinforced Soviet ideology (as Trang Nguyen asserts in the present volume). In Western Asia, our two chapters on the Turkish reception of Russian literature (by Sabri Gürses and Hülya Arslan, both translators from Russian themselves) show how the newly founded Republic of Turkey in 1923 correlated the promotion of foreign literature in translation to the country's modernisation projects. Translated Russian literature was particularly influential on the early career of the Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk (as Hülya Arslan recalls in her essay). Other case studies in this section, however, exemplify a collision course between a nation's creative inspiration and Soviet politics. Benjamin Quénu's chapter highlights the phenomenon in post-Stalinist Uzbekistan of weaponising the professional act of translation against Uzbek translators by enforcing tight Soviet controls; he argues that literary translations from Russian resulted in a Soviet-controlled redefining of the Uzbek language. Similarly, Sabina Amanbaeva's essay uses the changing profile of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Kazakh writer Abai Kunanbaiuly to explore the extent to which power relations between Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Russia, and between Kazakhstan and the West, play a key role in determining the shape of Kazakh national literature.

As the chapters in this section demonstrate, the aim of Soviet literary translation policy in Asia during most of the twentieth century—keeping Asia within the sphere of Soviet political influence—faded following the collapse of the USSR. Russia, however, has renewed efforts to expand its geographical influence by bolstering cultural links with Asia even after the invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions. Unlike the major 2022 European book fairs (London in April and Frankfurt in October), which had banned Russian delegates from participating, India's Kolkata book fair (on 1 March 2022) did not exclude the Russian pavilion it had already agreed to host (albeit with the added precaution of a police presence at the door in case of political protest).[15] Later in 2022, Russian publishers and writers continued to be welcome at other high-profile Asian book promotion events, including Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia in May; Baku, Azerbaijan during October; and in

15 Souvik Ghosh, 'Book Lovers' Enthusiasm over Russian Literature in Kolkata Book Fair Unperturbed by Ukraine War', *India Blooms*, 6 March 2022, https://www.indiablooms.com/life-details/LIT/6402/book-lovers-enthusiasm-over-russian-literature-in-kolkata-book-fair-unperturbed-by-ukraine-war.html.

Turkey, Russian delegates attended Istanbul's 'Week of Russian Literature and Translation' (*Nedelia russkoi literatury i perevoda*), also in October. In Hanoi, Vietnam, the annual Russian Language Week went ahead as planned, on 6 June 2022. At this event, Nguyen Thi Thu Dat, the head of Hanoi's Pushkin Institute, was quoted as saying: "In Vietnam, not only Vietnamese translators, poets and writers translate Pushkin poems into Vietnamese, but also entrepreneurs, soldiers, and students. This proves that Pushkin's poetry has touched the hearts of the Vietnamese, bringing Russian culture closer [to them]."[16]

Twenty-first century Korea is witnessing new directions in the translation of Russian literature, which continues to entertain and to influence Korean writers and translators. Seung Joo-Yeoun, who studied Russian language and literature in St Petersburg, is one of a new generation of translators to channel their excitement about this subject into the creation and promotion of Korean translations of contemporary Russian writing. In 2018, her translation of Viktoriia Tokareva's *One of Many* (*Odna iz mnogikh*, 2007) was published, followed by Alisa Ganieva's *Offended Sensibilities* (*Oskorblennye chuvstva*, 2018) in 2019 and Eugene Vodolazkin's *The Aviator* (*Aviator*, 2016) in 2021. In 2020, *Offended Sensibilities* was nominated for the 'Short List' of the fifth *Read Russia* Award for 'Works published after 1990'. Joo-Yeoun's translations of Liudmila Ulitskaia's *Big Green Tent* (*Zelenyi shater*, 2011) and Guzel Iakhina's *My Children* (*Deti moi*, 2021) were scheduled to be published in the first half of 2023.[17] Nor is Joo-Yeoun the only female Korean advocate for Russian literature in Korea. The Seoul-born, award-winning author and translator Bora Chung is a graduate of Russian Studies at Yale University with a doctorate in Slavic Literature from Indiana University. She cites Andrei Platonov and Liudmila Petrushevskaia, among others, as her key literary influences. She teaches Russian language and literature and science-fiction studies at Seoul's Yansei University and translates modern Russian and Polish fiction into Korean. Chung's short story collection, *Cursed Bunny* (2017), translated into English by Anton Hur, was awarded an English PEN/Heim translation grant in 2020, published in 2021, and was subsequently shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize. *Cursed Bunny* is described as "genre-defying", with lines that blur "between magical realism, horror, and science fiction" (Booker Prize Foundation, 2022), a fusion influenced, inevitably, by her personal connection with Russian culture.[18] Like Korea, other Asian nations are developing a vital, (trans) creative relationship with Russian literature, as we hope the following chapters will show, which has transcended the one-way influence of the Soviet period.

16 Rosie Nguyen, 'Week of Russian Language Launched in Hanoi', *Vietnam Times*, 18 June 2022, https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/week-of-russian-language-launched-in-hanoi-42766.html.

17 'Seung Joo-Yeoun Profile: Translator Profile' in *K-Book Trends*, 6 December 2021, https://www.kbook-eng.or.kr/sub/info.php?ptype=view&idx=884&page=&code=info&total_searchkey=YA.

18 'Bora Chung', profile page on 'The Booker Prizes' website, https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/authors/bora-chung.