

The Image of China in the Eurasianist Ideal of Boris Pilnyak: From the Imaginary to the Documentary*

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As a writer who witnessed the entire process of Russia's transition from its imperial to Soviet period, Boris Pilnyak (1894–1938) chronicled the life of the Russian people in social and political unrest in his fragmentary language style. While his works contain a kaleidoscope of new questions, ideas and phenomena that writers of an older generation could not anticipate, Pilnyak inherited a mythical vision of Asia and China prevailing among poets and writers of the Silver Age. What sets him apart is, *inter alia*, that he was not confined to some “imaginative travelling” to East Asia, but enjoyed a privileged experience of life in the Far East encountering people of China and Japan in their everyday living conditions. What is more, the cultural-political ideal linked to the myth of China found a new brand in

Pilnyak's time, a brand that became known as Eurasianism in the early 1920s.¹ These circumstances helped to create Pilnyak's unique viewpoint in his literary excursions to China, which in turn reflected his rumination on the historical life and vocation of Russia, which underwent continuous change throughout his literary career along with the vicissitudes of the Russian nation.

Pilnyak's conception of China continued the palimpsestic inscription of the myth of China in the Russian cultural milieu, in the sense that China figures in his works written before 1920 largely as a product of poetic imagination. His fantastic vision of China involves an uncircumscribed use of poetic license, which in turn generates different symbolic meanings of China in his novel *The Naked Year* (*Golyi god*, published in 1922). From 1922 on, China in Pilnyak's works acquired completely new implications. Two stories, "Sankt-Piter-Burkh" (published in 1922) and "The Big Heart" ("Bol'shoe serdtse", published in 1927), show, on the one hand, his knowledge of Chinese history and society, and reflect, on the other, the impact of contemporary events on his understanding of China. The writing of "Sankt-Piter-Burkh" was associated with the Xinhai Revolution that broke out in October 1911 and eventually ended China's imperial history. Similarly, "The Big Heart" was written in the wake of the May Thirteenth Movement, an anti-imperialist strike and demonstration that occurred in Shanghai in May 1925. The anti-imperial and nationalistic sentiments aroused by these two events proved to be influential on Pilnyak's composition of these two pieces. Pilnyak spent the summer of 1926 in China as a government representative with the task to create a firsthand report of life in Republican China and to establish the Chinese-Russian Literary-Artistic Association. Both his newly acquired knowledge about China and personal contact with its people challenged and altered his mythical vision of the country, and provided materials for a realistic depiction of China in his "Chinese Diary" ("Kitaiskii dnevnik", 1927), which introduced to the Soviet readers a China in social turmoil that might have reminded them of their own country of the recent past.

As it turns out, Pilnyak's early vision of China had little to do with the reality of Chinese modernity. The most impressive implication of this vision appears in the novel *Naked Year* (completed in 1920), where he uses the symbolic image of "China-town" (*Kitai-gorod*)² as the uniting element of a lyrical "refrain" that stands outside the narrative frames of any of the fragmentary events in the novel, but contains a thematic core that links the surround-

¹ Russian Eurasianism is originally a Russian emigre intellectual movement in the 1920s that accentuated the historical homogeneity, cultural kinship and economic connections between Russian and Asian civilizations, primarily nomadic empires. For the different proponents of Eurasianism, the conception of Eurasia had different centers, peripheries, structures and borders, while the relationship between Russia, Eurasia and China bore different meanings and implications. For a brief introduction of the movement, see Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov and Marlene Laruelle, "What Was Eurasianism and Who Made It?" in *Between Europe and Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, edited by Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov and Marlene Laruelle, 1-12 (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2015).

² In reality *Kitai-gorod* denotes a historical district in Moscow, an area surrounded by the "Chinatown Wall" (*Kitai-gorodskaia krepostnaia stena*) built in 1538 as a fortification and razed in subsequent history. *Kitai-gorod* served as an aristocratic district in the 16th century, and later developed into the trading and cultural center of Moscow. The name origin of *Kitai-gorod* is still disputable: One common explanation is that it originates from the word "kita", which means "the binding of poles", thus reflecting the construction of the fortification. See Aleksandr Prokhorov, ed., *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sov. entsiklopediia, 1973), vol. 12, 242.

ing events together.³ In this refrain, which appears first early in the book and then towards the end of it, he portrays three “China-towns” – those of Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Ordynin – in the pattern of a “trptych”, i.e. in the form of three panels standing independently from each other but paralleling each other in structure. In each of these panels the China-town assumes the appearance of a collage that consists of freely assembled pieces appealing to different sensations. Both objects and their properties – shapes, colors, textures, smells, etc. – are arranged in such a way as to maximize the ornamental and impressionistic effect. In spite of the spatial disorder, one observes in the depiction of the first two China-towns a temporal sequence: the Moscow China-town shows a contrast between day and night, while the Nizhny Novgorod one demonstrates a contrast between fall and winter. Each component of these temporal pairs is tied to corresponding sensations and undertones:

In the daytime China-town stirred with a million people and a million human lives – in bowler hats, in felt hats and homespun coats – itself in a bowler hat and with a briefcase of bonds, shares, invoices, bills of exchange – of ikons, skins, manufactured goods, raisins, gold, platinum, Martyanich vodka – a virtual Europe, all bowlered. – But at night the bowlers disappeared from the stone side-streets and town houses, emptiness and silence arrived, the dogs roamed about, and the streetlamps shone funereally among the stones, and people, as rare as dogs, and wearing peaked caps, walked only into and out of Zaryadye. And then in this desert out of the town houses and from under the gates crawled: China without a bowler hat on, the Heavenly Empire, which lies somewhere beyond the steppes to the East, beyond the Great Stone Wall, and looks at the world with slanting eyes, like the buttons of Russian soldier’s greatcoats. This is one Chinatown.⁴

[...]

In Nizhni-Novgorod, in Kanavino, beyond Makarye, where along the Makarye the same Moscow daytime Ilinka squatted on its huge behind, in November after the September millions of poods, barrels, pieces, arshins, and quarters of goods, exchanged for rubles, francs, marks, pounds, dollars, lira, etc., after the October debauchery, under the curtain of the Volga flood of wines, caviar, “Venice”, “Tartar”, “Persian”, “Chinese,” and liters of spermatozoa – in November in Kanavino, in the snow, from the boarded-up stalls, from the dismantled booths, from the emptiness – looking through the soldier’s buttons instead of eyes – it: the China of nocturnal Moscow, and the one

³ Gary Browning has discussed Pilnyak’s use of this specific device, which he names as the “accretive refrain”, in *Naked Year*. See Gary Browning, *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter* (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1985), 120-125. Robert Maguire underlines Pilnyak’s predilection to repetition that draws upon an artistic repertoire of incidents, images and themes. His catalogue of images, stylistically organized in a paratactic structure, often serves allegorical functions. See Robert Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920’s* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 118-124.

⁴ Boris Pilnyak, *The Naked Year*, trans. Alexander Tulloch (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1975), 31-32. “Днем Китай-Город, за китайской стеной, ворочался миллионом людей и миллионом человеческих жизней — в котелках, в фетровых шляпах и зипунах, — сам в котелке и с портфелем облигаций, акций, векселей, накладных, биржи, — икон, кож, мануфактур, изюмов, золота, платины, Мартьяныча, — весь в котелке, совсем Европа. — А ночью из каменных закоулков и с подворий исчезали котелки, приходили безлюдье и безмольвье, рыскали собаки, и мертво горели фонари среди камней, и лишь из Зарядья и в Зарядье шли люди, редкие, как собаки, и в картузах. И тогда в этой пустыне из подворий и подворотен выползал тот: Китай без котелка, Небесная Империя, что лежит где-то за степями на востоке, за Великой Каменной Стеной, и смотрит на мир раскосыми глазами, похожими на пуговицы русских солдатских шинелей. — Это один Китай-Город.” (Boris Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo., 1929), vol. 1, 55)

concealed behind the Great Stone Wall. Silence. Inscrutability. Without a bowler hat on. Soldiers' buttons instead of eyes.⁵

Moscow China-town at daytime is a marketplace: it is associated with merchants wearing "bowler hats" and all kinds of goods they bring with them, which has turned it to "virtual Europe". Much of the same can be said about the Nizhny Novgorod China-town in September and October, which is equally presented as a meeting place for traders, except that here "European" brands are juxtaposed with Asian ones – "Tatar", "Persian" and "Chinese". The two China-towns are transformed into empty and silent spaces at night and in winter respectively. What is significant is not only that the appearance of China-towns dramatically changes in cyclical patterns, but also that their existence changes accordingly both on the geographical and metaphysical level. The "Chinese wall" of daytime, which refers to the medieval fortification that surrounds the Moscow China-town, is replaced at night by the Great Wall of China, while China-town, the trade center of the city, is projected outside of Russia onto the "Heavenly Empire", gazing at Russia not with eyes but through the "buttons of Russian soldiers' overcoats". This image appears again in the third China-town of Ordynin, where all human activities have ceased and given way to natural elements. Unlike the first two China-towns, the Ordynin one does not display temporal fluidity: it is a desolate and deserted town where snow and wind still dominate in March, while factories and shops are covered with rust. Here the "buttons" peep out from the foundries, and there is no trace of "bowler hats".⁶

One might interpret each of these "China-towns" as an allegory about Russia's identity. In the Moscow China-town there is a clear-cut opposition between day and night, which correspond respectively to Europe and Asia. The alternating identity of China-town in this daily setting mirrors the historical identity of Russia that has been vacillating between Europe and Asia. The transformation from China-town to "China" is an allegorical action that implies the process of becoming "Asian", of revealing the Asian facet of the Russian soul. The meaning of "China" in this episode is elucidated by the appearance of "China-town" in another novel of Pilnyak, *Machines and Wolves* (*Mashiny i volki*, published in 1925). In this montage-style work, which was completed four years after *Naked Year*, Pilnyak inserted his depiction of Moscow China-town from *Naked Year* into the final chapter. This self-citation contains several minor changes, including the following: "And then into this desert from the town houses and from under the gates crawled the real China-town (*podlinnyi Kitai-gorod*)".⁷ This adaptation confirms the idea that the author intends China-town to be a symbolic bearer of Russia's Asian heritage, which is concealed in daylight and only manifested at nightfall.

⁵ Ibid, 32. "В Нижнем-Новгороде, в Канавине, за Макарьем, где по Макарью величайшей задницей та же рассаживалась московская дневная Ильинка, в ноябре, после сентябрьских миллионов пудов, бочек, штук, аршин и четвертей товаров, сменных на рубли, франки, марки, стерлинги, доллары, лиры и прочие,— после октябрьского разгуля, под занавес разлившегося Волгой вин, икор, «Венеции», «европейских», «татарских», «персицких», «китайских» и литрами сперматозоидов,— в ноябре в Канавине, в снегу, из заколоченных рядов, из забитых палаток, из безлюдья — смотрит солдатскими пуговицами вместо глаз — тот: ночной московский и за Великой Каменной Стеной сокрытый: Китай. Безмолвие. Неразгадка. Без котелка. Солдатские пуговицы — вместо глаз." (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 1, 55)

⁶ Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 1, 56.

⁷ Pilnyak, *Mashiny i volki* (Munich: W. Fink, 1925), 177. Italic mine.

Does Pilnyak offer his judgment or opinion on this Asian heritage, this inherent “China” in Russia’s ontogeny? In the depiction of Ordynin China–town, China seems to embody the stubborn and hostile natural force that immobilizes life and work, discourages human endeavors, and inhibits progress. In a word, it is connected to the notorious *kitaizm* that might have occurred to the author when he observed the backward and static condition of Russian provincial life: “from smoked workshops, from dead rusted cars, gazes – China, it grins, as soldiers’ coat buttons are able to grin”.⁸ This negative implication of China leads to a second opposition in the author’s rumination on the nature of Russia – that between the natural chaos embodied by the bleak rural landscape and the artificial order represented by the newly emerged factories and technologies. While the Ordynin China–town appears lifeless in the first China–town episode of *Naked Year*, it is brought to life again by the workers and engineers who resurrected the factory (*zavod – samovozrodivsja*). The same opposition between stasis and mobility, deterioration and construction is found in Pilnyak’s sketch of Moscow China–town in *Machines and Wolves*:

From March to May chilling water washed away everything man–made in China–town – and from May to March China–town was pulled down with the aspen stake – in the three fruitful months after summer there was work in the Moscow Il’inka day and night – everyone pulled as much as they could, with the most efforts, with the will and the craftiness of the whole nation; woods for fuels, signboards for roofs, glass for the clattering of stones, bricks for the stones and the stoves with no woods, for the repair of houses, and for the monuments of October Revolution; [...]⁹

If opposition is the guiding theme in the portrayal of China–town in both *Naked Year* and *Machines and Wolves*, there is also a glimpse of harmony and unity in it. In *Naked Year*, it is the Nizhniy Novgorod China–town that gathers together merchandise from Europe and Asia; while in *Machines and Wolves*, it is the Moscow China–town that witnesses the confluence of Persian, Tatar, Caucasian, Ural and Ukrainian traders who brought goods from every corner of Russia and transformed it into a commercial center reminiscent of the 19th century exchange market. These two market scenes evoke not Eurocentric but Eurasian sensations, and they become microcosms of transcontinental Russia. In Pilnyak’s terminology, “China” is born again in the “Eurasian market”, not the isolated and deserted “China” guarded by the Great Wall, but the revived “China” which opens its gates to all the Eurasian inhabitants. This new “China” no longer corresponds to the past of Russia but to its multi–ethnic and multi–cultural future, which is to be constructed by the Bolsheviki:

...and here another will has revived a new China – new people. [...] On the trains and steamers – thousands of poods, barrels, pieces, quarters, arshins of goods – were pulled out from the forests, the swamps, the factories, the mountains, from the Caspian Sea, the White Sea, the Chusovaya,

⁸ Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 1, 56. *Kitaizm* is an idea that employed China as the emblem of inertness, stagnation and spiritual barrenness in social development and national character. It gained currency in the Russian intellectual and academic discourses in the late 19th century through the writings of Dostoevsky, Herzen, Solovyov, etc.

⁹ Pilnyak, *Mashiny i volki*, 177. Translation mine. “с марта по май стужные воды размывали в Китае–городе содеянное – и с мая по март рушили Китай–город осиновым колом – московскую Ильинку без ночей в три плодоносных месяца за летом – рушили кто как мог, все всеми силами, волею народной и народным озорством; – дерево – на топливо, вывески – на крыши, стекла – на звон от камней, кирпичи – на камни, на печурки по бездровью, на ремонт домов, на памятник октябрьского восстания; [...]⁹”

Pechora and Ob, from splinters, from kerosene lamps, from turbines, directly from the sun and from the Northern Lights – for the sake of sorrow and happiness, death and birth – so that one may live, as Rus' has lived for centuries – Persians, Tatars, Caucasians, Urals, Ukrainians in their thousands – with them the bowlers, the round glasses with frames, the smoking pipes – Asia and Europe together – Azevr – Eurasia opened with the all-Russian Gum.¹⁰

While “*Kitai*” in *Naked Year* refers to a mythical China which is ultimately directed at an encoded Russia, the Chinese elements in Pilnyak’s later works connect to China in reality and portray both its imperial history and republican present. In his story “Sankt-Piter-Burkh”, Pilnyak looks at both ancient and modern China, which he parallels with Petrine and modern Russia respectively. Lacking a complete plot line, “Sankt-Piter-Burkh” consists of snapshots taken from different historical stages of China and Russia, as well as fragmented portrayals of several characters belonging to different historical epochs and countries, including a Chinese Red Army man, a Russian Red Army man, a Russian engineer, a Russian White Army man, Peter the Great and the Kangxi Emperor. As its name suggests, “Sankt-Piter-Burkh” serves as an addition to the corpus of “Petersburg myth”, a literary tradition established and enriched by such 19th century masters as Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, etc. In both style and imagery it shows the heavy influence of Andrei Bely (1880–1934) and Dmitri Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), both of whom have contributed to the “Petersburg myth” itself.¹¹ What Pilnyak added to the tradition is that he extrapolated the “Petersburg myth” forward into the Soviet social context and associated it with the historical narrative of another nation. Such revision in turn shed new light on the “myth” itself. One thing that distinguishes “Sankt-Piter-Burkh” from Bely’s *Petersburg* is that the former, via its conception of parallel history, no longer concentrates on the “internalization of Asia” that arises from an obsession with Russia’s past identity, but lifts the “Petersburg problem” beyond the confines of Russian history onto the universal level, which suggests the possibility of a universalist stance inspired by anarchism.

“Sankt-Piter-Burkh” begins with a metaphor of time and history that becomes a recurring motif later in the story:

The centuries are stacked in sober layers like packs of cards. The packs of the centuries are encrusted with years, and the years are shuffled into ages – in Chinese cards. “No seller of idols bows down to the gods, for he knows what they are made of.” How, then, should the centuries bow down? Should they bow to the centuries? They know what has gone into their making: no wonder the fashions of years can be sorted out like suits of cards.

[...]

¹⁰Ibid. Translation mine. “...и вот иная воля возродила вновь Китай – иные люди. [...] На поездах, пароходами, – тысячи пудов, бочек, штук, четвертей, аршин – потянулись товары – из лесов, с болот, заводов, гор, с Каспия, Белого моря, с Чусовой. Печоры и Оби, – от лучин, от керосиновых лампочек, от турбинных, просто от солнца и от северного сияния – на горе и радость, на смерть и рождение, – чтобы жить, как жила Русь столетьем. – Персы, татары, кавказцы, уральцы, украинцы тысячи – с ними котелки, круглые очки в оправе, трубки, – Азия с Европой, – Азевр – Евразия открывался всероссийский Гум.”

¹¹Some scholarly writings on the Petersburg leitmotif in *The Tale* as well as on Bely and Merezhkovsky’s influence on Pilnyak include: Nirman Moraniak-Bamburian, “B. A. Pilnyak i ‘Peterburgskii tekst’,” in *B. A. Pilnyak. Issledovaniia i materialy, mezhvuzovskii sbornik naucznykh trudov 1*, ed. Aleksandr Auer (Kolomna: Izd-vo KGPI. 2001), 36-46; M. I. Liubomova, “O Peterburgskikh povestiakh Borisa Pilnyaka,” in *Boris Pilnyak, Opyt sevodniashnevo prochteniia* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), 55-62.

The centuries are stacked in sober layers like packs of cards. What fortuneteller from Kolomna in St. Petersburg can throw down the cards so that history will repeat itself, so that the years will repeat the cards of the centuries and come up exactly the same a second time?¹²

Inside this metaphor is a Nietzschean idea: History is eternal recurrence. It renews itself by changing the sequence and the combination of preexisting elements, emblemized by the “Chinese cards” which are reshuffled into new orders by chance. Neither the essence nor the mechanism of history changes: history is not the reflection of some preordained plan, but that of arbitrary improvisation. In other words, it is not governed by the will of the Gods, which are actually “idols” created by man and for man. Neither is it defined by the will of individual human beings, for the process of human activity itself is dominated by chance. Such non-teleological view of history is not only a rebuttal to the ideal of cosmopolitan progress, which lies at the center of the positivist moral, but also a contradiction to the eschatological or Messianic belief shared by many Silver Age thinkers, for it renders the proposal of such question as “the destiny of Russia” or “the predestined mission of Russia” invalid.

In Pilnyak’s eyes, history repeats itself many times. In “Sankt-Piter-Burkh”, Peter’s Russia is seen as a repetition of Qin Shi Huang’s China, while the history of China itself is presented as a series of repetitions. The author mentions several historical scenes of Imperial China, each corresponding to the history of Russia in its own way. Let us examine these episodes according to their chronology. First comes Qin Shi Huang, China’s first emperor and the creator of the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), who Pilnyak compares to Peter the Great. In his description, Qin Shi Huang “cut off the Middle Kingdom from the world by means of the Great Wall of China”, and “abolished all ranks and insignia”.¹³ These deeds would make him the direct opposite of Peter the Great, who cut a way into Europe for Russia and introduced the Table of Ranks to Russian socio-political life. However, Pilnyak emphasizes the similarity of these two figures: both have gathered absolute power over the nation and transformed the mode of life in their countries by taking arbitrary actions. Qin Shi Huang’s despotism delivered “a death blow to feudalism”¹⁴, while Peter’s autocracy marked the inception of Russia’s Europeanization. Pilnyak implies that both Peter’s personality and his rule reflect the heritage of absolutism and tyranny carried in his blood. As he writes, Peter remained an emperor only because he “did not live long enough to become a Great Khan”.¹⁵

¹²Boris Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon and Other Stories*, trans. Beatrice Scott (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 99-100. “Столетия ложатся степенно колодами. Столетний колоды годы инкрустируют, чтоб тасовать годы векам — китайскими картами. — «Ни один продавец идолов не поклоняется богам, он знает, из чего они сделаны.» — Как же столетьям склоняться — перед столетьями? — они знают, из чего они слиты: не даром по мастям подбираются стили лет... [...] Столетия ложатся степенно, — колодами; — какая гадалка с Коломны в Санкт-Питер-Бурге китаец картами так, что история повторяется, — что столетий колоды — годы повторяют раз, и два?!” (Boris Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh* (Letchworth: Prideaux Press, 1979), 5.)

¹³Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 100. Qin Shi Huang decreed numerous social and administrative reforms, including the abolishment of feudal lords inside the imperial territory, but he did not eliminate the entire aristocratic system. Qin Shi Huang also ordained the construction of the Great Wall to defend his empire from nomadic enemies.

¹⁴Ibid. Feudal kings were the *de facto* rulers of the various feudal states on the Chinese Plain during the Warring States period (475–221 BC). The title was annihilated under Qin Shi Huang’s rule, thus transitioning China from the era of feudal states to that of empire with a centralized power.

¹⁵Ibid.

The second episode mentioned in “Sankt–Piter–Burkh” concerns the Yongle Emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644):

Yung Lo, the third emperor of the Ta Ming dynasty, passed here on his way to make war against the Mongolians, supporters of the Yuan dynasty and exiled from China by his father, Hung Wu”: this is engraved upon blocks of white marble [...]¹⁶

The inscription on the marble plaque, which stands near the fortress–town of Dushikou beneath the Great Wall, refers to one of the five military campaigns led by Zhu Di (Yongle Emperor), the third Emperor of the Ming dynasty, against the Mongols between 1413 and 1424. The Mongol rulers of China during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) were defeated by Zhu Yuanzhang (Hongwu Emperor), the first emperor of Ming and Zhu Di’s father. Still, both the eastern and western Mongolian tribes constituted threats to the social and political stability on the Northern border of China. Zhu Di’s campaigns, which were intended to extirpate the Mongolian peril, partly coincided with Muscovy’s resistance against the Tatar yoke, which persisted until 1480. Pilnyak draws attention to this specific episode to place China in a historical context that unites it with Russia in their relationship with the Mongols. This is of particular interest if one considers the frequent conflation of “China” and “Mongolia” that took root in Vladimir Solovyov’s (1853–1900) proposal of Panmongolism and the “Chinese peril”, which had since circulated among Russian cultural elites in their imagination of the “yellow threat” and their conception of the Asian inheritance in Russian blood.¹⁷ Pilnyak’s close examination of history compels the readers to realize that the “East” is indeed a mental construction and obsession that does not possess semantic coherence within itself. Acknowledging this, the reader is prompted to consider the historical life of Russia and China from a new perspective.

The third historical episode in “Sankt–Piter–Burkh” is also associated with the defense of the Chinese Empire against the Mongolian invasion:

And the Emperor K’ang–his passed there likewise on the thirteenth day of the second moon, in sixteen hundred and ninety–six, according to European chronology, to destroy men and horses by famine in Shamo. Shamo means the same as Gobi. Shamo is a Gobi, a desert.¹⁸

¹⁶Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 99. “Третий император династии Да–Мин, Юн–Ло, прошел здесь, отправляясь на войну с монголами приверженцами династии Юан, изгнанными из Китая его отцом Хун–Ву, – она высечена на глыбах белого мрамора [...]” (Pilnyak, *Sankt–Piter–Burkh*, 5)

¹⁷“The yellow threat” or “the yellow peril” is a notion widely circulating in the cultural and political discourse across Europe from the mid–19th century to the early 20th century, finding its origin in the intellectuals’ and politicians’ anxiety over Japan’s modernizing program after the Meiji Reformation (1868) and the massive immigration waves of Chinese workers to Europe and America. On the one hand, the “yellow threat” as an ideological construct was inextricably tied to the political network constituted by major powers of the world since the 1870s. On the other hand, the image of the “hordes from the East” also arose from the irrational and psychotic anxiety associated with the historical reference to the invasion of Europe by Attila the Hun in the sixth century, and to Golden Horde period in Russia (13–15th centuries). The notion of Panmongolism, for instance, was invoked in Solovyov’s writings in response to the rise of Japan in the 1890s. For a study of the history of “yellow peril”, see Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow or the Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 121–157.

¹⁸Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 99. “И там же в тринадцатый день второй луны, в тысяча шестьсот девяносто шестом году, по европейскому летосчислению, прошел Император Конси, чтоб уморить голодом в Шамо и лошадей и солдат. Шамо значит тоже что Гоби: Шамо – есть Гоби, пустыня.” (Pilnyak, *Sankt–Piter–Burkh*, 5)

These sentences refer to the campaign of the Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) against the Dzungar Khanate. Kangxi, a contemporary of Peter the Great, orchestrated the Battle of Jao Modo, a decisive battle leading to the defeat of the Dzungars that was fought in May 1696 near the town of Dushikou, where Zhu Di passed in his anti-Mongolian campaign in 1424. What links all three episodes together is that they are reflections of the effect of individual power and decisions on the process of history. While Qin Shi Huang's autocracy totally transformed the social and cultural structure of ancient China, the military feats of Yongle and Kangxi exerted great influence on the geopolitical status on the northern border of China. Pilnyak structures his story in such a way as to make Peter the Great parallel to these Chinese emperors. Just as Qin Shi Huang is the first ruler of the Qin dynasty and the first emperor on the Chinese plain, Peter the Great is referred to as “the first Peter of the Romanov dynasty and the first emperor of the Russian Plain”.¹⁹ In Pilnyak's portrait, Peter, like Qin Shi Huang, was obsessed with his power and driven to insanity by it. Like the Chinese emperors, he strived to organize his territory according to his own will, the result of which is the birth of Petersburg, a product of one man's whim, an illusion that presents itself as the abstraction of rectilinear streets by day and as the freezing mist by night. Such a conception of Petersburg, by the way, clearly shows the influence of Bely. Like Bely, Pilnyak sees Petersburg as a foreign encrustation on the Russian land, forced upon it by Peter:

It is left for St. Petersburg to leap from the *rectilinear* street into the mists of metaphysics, the fumes rising from the marsh. That same Finnish day promised to remain till night and with a misty night to destroy the straight lines of the street, to cloud with mist.²⁰

In “Sankt-Piter-Burkh”, Peter's Petersburg is juxtaposed with the Petersburg of the revolutionary era. Moments from history and those from the present are interwoven together with no natural transitions in between. In the Petersburg of the present one observes a character named Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, who is a Bolshevik and a professor. One learns that Ivan was tortured by his conscience for having sent his brother, Petr, to be executed. Petr Ivanovich Ivanov, a White Army officer, did not perish but became an émigré in Beijing. Ivan lies at the center of the Petersburg myth reconstructed in “Sankt-Piter-Burkh”, connecting the past with the present. On the one hand, he bears resemblance to Peter the Great by repeating his sin: as Peter the Great sent his own son to inquisition, which indirectly caused his death, Ivan persecuted and expelled his own brother. Being an intelligentsia also indicates his link to Peter the Great, for Pilnyak deems Peter as the first “intelligentsia” in Russia.²¹ Living in the darkness, like a “cockroach in the crevice”²², Ivan deteriorates alone and slowly, like the city he

¹⁹Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 6. Translation mine. “Первый Петр в династии Романовых и первый император Российской Равнины”.

²⁰Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 107. “Питербургу остаться сорваться с прямолинейной — проспекта — в туман метафизик, в болотную гарь. Тот же финляндский денек обещал быть к ночи — туманною ночью, уничтожить прямолинейность проспектов, затуманить туманом.” (Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 13)

²¹In his essay “Zakaz Nash”, Pilnyak writes: “Peter tore Russia away from Russia. Peter hung himself by the tail onto Europe — Razumnik Vasil'ich Ivanov was wrong in tracing the genealogy of Russian intelligentsia to Radishchev — Peter was an *intelligent*.” (“Петр оторвал Россию от России. Петр повесил себя за хвост на Европу — Разумник Васильич Иванов был неправ, начав род русской интеллигенции с Радищева, — Петр первым был интеллигентом.”) See Boris Pilnyak, *Stat'i 1922-1929* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991): 254.

²²Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 16.

dwells in. It is said that he is “afraid of space”²³, which brings him close to the same self-isolating Apollon Ableukhov in Bely’s *Petersburg*. In a word, Ivan suffers from “Peter’s fever” or “St. Petersburgism” (*Petrovshchina, Likhoradka, Sankt-piterburgovshchina*)²⁴, a foreign disease, as the title of the story suggests, that has isolated generations of Russian intelligentsia from the rest of the nation and split their self-identity.

It turns out, then, that despite being a revolutionary, Ivan could not understand the true meaning of the revolution, which is viewed by Pilnyak as a “rebellion of the folk” ignited in the spirit of Pugachev and Razin. The essence of the Russian revolution as understood by Pilnyak is summarized by the following words of the engineer Andrei Liudogovsky, a friend of Ivan:

I assert that a deeply national well-being, a vital movement from the depth exists in Russia, and that this has nothing whatever in common with European syndicalism. In Russia an anarchistic revolt exists in the name of no-government, against every kind of government. I assert that Russia must experience and is experiencing a fever of *Peterism*, of Petersburgism, a fever of ideas, theories, mathematical catholicism. I assert Bolshevism and Stenka Razinism, and renounce communism.²⁵

If the motivation behind the “anarchist revolt” is the will of the nation, then the new Russia to be born from it should be perceived as the exact opposite of Petersburg, the creation of a single man’s will. It is here that the roads of China and Russia cross again, for China had been swept by revolution when the story was written, and the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty of the Chinese Empire, had approached its end. The “idols”, which have been mistakenly taken as “Gods” by the common folk, were abdicating from the histories of Russia and China around the same time.

In the engineer’s eyes, the promise of revolution – understood by him as a spontaneous upwelling of the national energy – should justify all the miseries currently born by the Russian nation, as he reveals in his response to Ivan’s agony:

“Remember, Andrey? We played bone marbles. But my own brother, I sent my own brother to be shot, dear Andrey!”

“Peter’s fever, St. Petersburgism? The Bolsheviks will bite one’s head right off. So what? There is no Bolshevik, there is no Russia. Savages! There is only...the world!”²⁶

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., p. 18.

²⁵Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 110. “Я утверждаю, что в России с низов глубоко — национальное здоровье, необходимое движение, ничего общего не имеющее с европейским синдикалистическим. В России анархический бунт во имя бесгосударственности, против всякого государства. Я утверждаю, что Россия должна была — и изживает лихорадку петровщины, петербурговщины, лихорадку идеи, теории, математического католицизма. Я утверждаю большевизм, разиновщину, и отрицаю коммунизм.” (Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 17)

²⁶Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 111. “Помнишь, Андрей, мы играли в бабки. Но я своего брата послал расстрелять, милый Андрей!” — ‘Петровщина Лихорадка, Санкт-петербурговщина? Большевик голову откусит, возьмет в рот и так: хак?! — Нет большевика, нет никакой России, — дикари! Есть — мир!’” (Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 18)

As Russian sectarians have foretold, the blizzard of revolution should “strip the husk from all dead things – death to the half-alive” all “along the Russo–European plain”.²⁷ The movement would render Russia the center of Eurasia, uniting all the vital national forces on the continent, like the center of the pentagon in *The Naked Year*. Russia would become, in Pilnyak’s terminology, the second Middle Kingdom (*vtoraia Imperiia Serediny*)²⁸, as China was the first Middle Kingdom.²⁹ The role of Russia as the gathering ground of international revolutionaries–anarchists is indicated by the journey of Li Yan, a Chinese insurgent, to Russia. It is told that Li Yan was born in a peasant’s family near the town of Dushikou, and that his father joined the Boxer Rebellion against the foreign invasion when he was a child, and later died in a village skirmish after the Xinhai Revolution broke out. Li Yan soon left home and travelled first to Beijing and then through Vladivostok to Russia. He appears there in a prison, perhaps incarcerated by the Russian Provisional Government as a Bolshevik. In the prison Li Yan sings the war song that he heard as a child when his father chanted with other members of the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious, the organization that led the Boxer Rebellion. This scene completes Li Yan’s self-identification by connecting his current identity as a Bolshevik to his childhood memory among the peasant rebels. The placement of the Chinese revolution in the context of peasant uprisings conforms to Pilnyak’s perception of the Russian revolution. In his parallel reconstruction of the history of two nations, the Chinese and Russian anti-imperialist revolts are rooted in their respective traditions of national resistance against foreign influence, ideas, and practices.

If the Russian revolution is defined as a willful expression of suppressed national vitality and creativity, then it should combat everything alien in the national life, including the identification with Europe, to which the intelligentsia grew accustomed. Such a mentality needs to be stripped off the Russian soul by the revolution as a cleansing movement, as the blizzard has torn away the encrustations over the Russian soil in *Naked Year*. In “The Big Heart”, a story published in 1926, Pilnyak celebrates the spirit of national resistance in the defiance of European capitalists by indigenous Mongolians. “The Big Heart” demonstrates Pilnyak’s effort to adopt the voice of a Bolshevik who advocates the welfare of the over-exploited proletarians in the third world and consciously distances himself from the Europeanized and capitalist mindset.

“The Big Heart” tells the story of three English entrepreneurs who intend to negotiate with a Mongolian chieftain for the expansion of their bean–oil business in China and end up instead humiliated by the Mongolian tribe, who plotted against them together with their Mongolian interpreter. From the very beginning of the novel, Pilnyak strives to de-stereotype the Eurocentric vision of China by adopting a narrative perspective that distances him from the “European eyes” and the “European ear”:

²⁷Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 106.

²⁸Pilnyak, *Sankt-Piter-Burkh*, 7.

²⁹Pilnyak’s imagination of the “second Middle Kingdom” here contrasts with his vision of “Moscow the third Rome”, revealed in his story “The Third Capital” (“Tret’ia stolitsa”, written in 1922). In the light of this, the writer’s choice of paradigm in “Sankt–Piter–Burkh” enables him not only to pronounce his Eurasianist ideal, but also to dismiss any association with the Judeo–Christian tradition.

To Europeans all Chinese have the same face. In their government concessions, Europeans check their lists with a dash when one Chinaman has earned about a hundred *dayans* and goes off home to Chefv after selling his job to his brother or a friend for two *dayans*, along with his passport. And so non-European eyes and non-European ears would be needed to catch this brief exchange by the factory fence:

“Are you a Mongol?”

“No, I’m Chinese. I want to be with Russia. How about you? Are you a Mongol?”

“Yes, I am. A Mongol *boy* from Shin–Barga is going on your train. We both came from Shin–Barga, from Kwot–ulang. Let me take your place.”³⁰

The “non-European ear” allows the narrator to record this conversation between a Chinese worker and a Mongol who wants to buy his work. However, he is also able to borrow “European eyes” so as to expose a stereotyped picture of China with an ironic overtone. Immediately below the quoted conversation, the narrator describes the town where the bean–oil factory is located with an exotic touch that combines beauty and filth, attraction and disgust, fascination and fear, all of which are condensed in the image of the Chinese woman’s feet “warped by the shoe of beauty”.³¹ The town itself is compared to “an anthill” (*muraveinik*)³², an image already associated with *kitaizm* by Dostoevsky in his prose piece “Baal”, which denotes a society that is organized by its common worship of materialism. What Pilnyak intends here is to contrast the entrenched impression of China as a mixture of exotic *chinoiserie* and primitive *kitaizm* with a realistic and objective portrait of the town’s factory workers, men, women and children, who are struggling to make a living in inhuman working conditions:

Old women or young girls, naked save for loin cloths, stood inside the drums in the milling department, where the beans were crushed into grits. They revolved along with the drums inside them sweeping up the waste and sorting the beans. The women who do this work, old women and young girls alike, change every three months, since people die after three months of such labor.³³

The details of life in the bean–oil factory do not concern the “European eyes”, which Pilnyak continues to explore with the description of three English gentlemen who are cooperating on the business expansion project. Each of these gentlemen represents a stereotyped character and opinion that is associated with capitalist or colonialist thinking. Mr. Grey is the archetypical capitalist preoccupied with the maximization of his profit and possessions. He understands and respects only the “theory of finance capital,” and believes it to be the key to human

³⁰Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 193. “На глаз европейца все китайцы однолицы; на концессиях европейцы считают бичом, когда один китаец наработает даян сто и уходит к себе в Чифу, продав место брату или соседу за два даяна, вместе с паспортом. Поэтому надо было иметь не–европейский глаз и не–европейское ухо, чтобы услышать у заводского забора короткий разговор. ‘Ты — монгол?’ ‘— Нет, я китаец. Я хочу быть с Россией. А ты — монгол?’ ‘Да, я монгол. У вас в поезде едет монгол–бой, из Шин–Барги. Мы оба из Шин–Барги, из Кувот–улана. Я поеду вместо тебя.’” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 6, 167)

³¹Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 193–194.

³²Ibid., 194.

³³Ibid., 195. “В дробильном отделении, где дробятся бобы в крупу, в барабанах стоят женщины, или старухи, или подростки, голые, с тряпками на чреслах. Они вертятся вместе с барабаном, посредине барабана, подметая сор и сортируя бобы: на этой работе женщины, — старухи или подростки, безразлично, — меняются каждые три месяца, ибо через три месяца такой работы люди умирают.” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 6, 169)

progress. In his eyes the Chinese workers in his factory are merely instruments and numbers that require bookkeeping, while the Mongolian tribe is a group of savages to be conquered. In contrast, Mr. Smith stands for the Romantic European adventurer who is ever ready to explore foreign lands, to be intoxicated with “a storm at sea”, with a passion “for some little Japanese girl” or with “the music of Chinese drums”.³⁴ The third gentleman, a “philosopher in khaki”, is an embodiment of philistine epicurean, devoted to the pursuit of material abundance and pleasure and uninterested in any efforts involved with mental activities:

The third man, the philosopher in khaki, rose clumsily from his easy chair, pushing his glasses onto his forehead, and it was plain how painstakingly this khaki had been crumpled during its span of existence by sitting around in every kind of chair.

[...]

The philosopher in khaki came back from his visit to the lavatory.

“Don’t you think, gentlemen, that you’re talking just for the sake of talking, when we have more practical work on hand? For example, it’s time for a drink, and after a whiskey we’ve got to tackle the thoroughly boring task of calculating the freight rates for the northern and southern branch lines [...]”³⁵

Pilnyak conveys his repugnance at colonialism and imperialism in the Mongolian tribe’s repudiation of the Englishmen’s attempt to bribe them for the convenience of their business. Mr. Smith, who was eager to enjoy the visit to which they were invited by the chieftain, was instead disturbed and disgusted by the impaled head hung on the fortress gate and the food that contains rotten eggs. The visit ends hurriedly with an unexpected intimidation: The horse, which was presented as a gift by the chieftain for the Englishmen, was shot right in front of Mr. Grey holding its reins. The Englishmen rushed into the train and escaped in full speed. In Pilnyak’s depiction, the steppe is “a desert to the European”, but “the native land to the Mongol”, who alone feel the scorching sun as the benevolent “big heart”.³⁶ The successful defense of their steppe from capitalist encroachment summarizes the anti-colonialist and anti-Eurocentric argument of the author.

Both “Sankt–Piter–Burkh” and “The Big Heart” seem to have prepared the way to his journey to China in 1926, which became the subject of his semi-fictionalized travelogue *The Chinese Diary*, which was published in Feb 1927 (also published as *The Chinese Story, Kitaiskaja povest’* in 1928). *The Chinese Diary* recorded Pilnyak’s impression of several Chinese cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Hankou and Wuchang, interlaced with his fictional description of the activities of Chinese revolutionaries and the life of foreigners in the concessions, as well as the story of his Russian fellow-traveler Krylov.

³⁴Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 200.

³⁵Ibid., 200-201. “Третий, философ в хаки, вылезает из своего кресла, очки он ссовывает на лоб, — и видно, как его хаки старательно измято креслами и стульями, на которых он пересидел за век своего хаки. [...] Третий, философ в хаки, возвращается из уборной. ‘— Вам не кажется, джентльмены, — говорит он — что вы разговариваете только для того, чтобы разговаривать, хотя у нас есть работы более существенные. Например, надо выпить сода-виски и после виски приступить к совершенно скучному подсчету тарифов с северных и южных веток [...]’” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 6, 175-176)

³⁶Pilnyak, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon: And Other Stories*, 218-220.

Pilnyak arrived in China at a time of great social turmoil, when the warlords, the Nationalist government and foreign imperial forces were striving for political power and business profits, while the Communist party was preparing to counterattack the Nationalist party that initially cooperated with the former but later started to undertake a purge of Communist members. From the beginning of the travelogue, the author depicted repeatedly the shocking contrast between the excruciatingly poor living condition of the masses – both the city workers and the village residents – and the situation in the city concessions, where foreigners enjoyed their “incorporeal, unimpeded, inviolable” privileges.³⁷ To give the readers some understanding of this contrast, he quoted a paragraph from a local newspaper in Shanghai that told how foreigners found it intolerable and infuriating that the concession administration chose to allow Chinese people to enter the local parks, which not long ago were designated as “inaccessible to dogs and Chinese”.³⁸ He also records the daily trials that a Chinese rickshaw man, who serves Englishmen in Hankou, must go through:

An Englishman in cork helmet, dazzling white suit, and white shoes sits in his rickshaw encouraging the rickshaw man with a white hose in the back. The rickshaw man opens up a way through the mass of humanity with hoarse shouts. This is how it is: in Peking, in Wu-ch'ang, as in Hankow, Sikhs – Indians in crimson turbans who are Britain's colonial police – stand at intersections. They hold bamboo sticks with which they paste the thighs of each and every Chinese coolie or rickshaw man that runs past. This is how it is in all British or “international” concessions. Nowhere else will you see so much stick swinging and beating as in China!³⁹

Pilnyak never restrains from satirizing the order, the comfort, and the “civilized modernity” of the expatriates’ life in Chinese concessions. He also makes fun of the “humanitarian concerns” and “moral superiority” of European and American residents. For instance, he tells the story of how an American, in order to separate two Chinese fighting on the street, “for the sake of order” and “on a ‘humanitarian impulse’”⁴⁰ struck and kicked one of them almost to death before leaving with two other foreigners in their automobile. In this scene Pilnyak also shows the apathy of Chinese people who have accustomed themselves to endless fighting, squabbling and suffering and have ridded themselves of human sensibility and dignity:

It seemed to me that the American had killed the Chinese [...] But the Chinese got up, and then the American once more – with a sigh of relief – kicked him in the back. The Chinese ran away from the American like a beaten dog. About two hundred spectators stood about...⁴¹

³⁷Boris Pilnyak, *Chinese Stories and Other Tales*, trans. Vera Reck and Michael Green (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 24.

³⁸Ibid., 28.

³⁹Ibid., 27. “Англичанин в пробковом шлеме, в белоснежном костюме, в белых туфлях – сидит в рикше, подгоняет ломпацо белой своей туфлей в спину, – ломпацо расталкивает человеческую толпу охриплым криком: это и в Пекине, и в Ханькоу, и в Учане – на перекрестках стоят «сикхи» – индусы в малиновых чалмах – английская колониальная полиция, – у сикхов в руках бамбуковые палки – и каждого, каждого китайца, пробегающего мимо, кули или ломпацо, бьют сикхи этими бамбуками по ляжкам: это везде, где есть английские или «международные» концессии. – Нигде нет столько полиции, как в Китае, – и нигде так много не бьют и не дерутся, как в Китае!” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, 188)

⁴⁰Pilnyak, *Chinese Stories and Other Tales*, 83.

⁴¹Ibid. “Мне показалось, что американец убил китайца. [...] Но китаец поднялся, – тогда американец еще раз ударил – облегчено вздохнув – ногою по спине. Китаец побежал от американца – так, как бегают битые собаки. Кругом стояло человек двести зрителей –” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, 251)

Pilnyak sees the only light amidst this darkness in the individual rebels who rose against all: against the warlords, the colonizers, the municipal police, the entrepreneurs, the compradors, “those for whose freedom America fights”, in a word, the “unreasonable reality”. He tells the story of one such individual, Liu Hua, who was born as a peasant’s child and became one of the leaders of the May Thirteenth Movement of 1925 in Shanghai. Pilnyak’s story is a combination of journalistic report and fictional writing, with the addition of many imaginary details. Most curiously, this story is woven together with the fictional story of Miss Brighton, an American woman who was a member of the Siccawei missionary group and was travelling from San Francisco to China to work “with the aim of educating the savage Chinese in the light of Christianity”.⁴² The girl’s path in China crossed with that of Liu Hua once, when she borrowed books from him who was working as a librarian. However, as Liu Hua was organizing the workers’ union and dodging the persecution from the policemen, Miss Brighton was having an exotic city trip with her American acquaintance in Beijing. When he was executed, she was marrying the secretary of the British consulate, the man representing Britain in the city court that “naturally applied its hand to the case of Liu Hua”, without any knowledge of that she was “loved by a half-naked librarian who could not follow her into Jestfield Park” for “Dogs and Chinese Not Allowed”.⁴³

As with the “English gentlemen” in “The Big Heart”, Pilnyak is aware that he is creating a stereotypical image of a Westerner with a stereotypical vision of the East. Like the gentlemen in “The Big Heart”, Miss Brighton possesses no psychological depth or dispositional complexity. Instead, she is outlined as, in the author’s own words, an individual who was “subjectively... right in every way”, but certainly not so objectively.⁴⁴ By creating Miss Brighton, Pilnyak does not wish to lampoon the hypocrisy in the Westerner’s “enlightening cause”, but desires to show the enormous gap between benign intention and effective action as well as the tremendous difficulties of empathy and involvement for an outsider who is not ready to confront and to be contradicted by the unpredictable reality. As the author reveals:

...later everything was to be just as she had imagined it on the way over, as she had constructed it from the letters of a friend and from photographs – because her life was built on traditions, on the stern tolling of regulations; Americans and Englishmen have no idea of the meaning of the word “abroad,” living as Americans even in China and knowing their future three years in advance – to the week – and without mistakes!⁴⁵

While the contrast between East and West inside China receives ample attention from the author, another topic has also left its trace in many places in the travelogue: the comparison between Russia and China. On the one hand, the author often conveys the incomprehensibil-

⁴²Pilnyak, *Chinese Stories and Other Tales*, 60. The Siccawei missionary group was a Jesuit society based on the present-day Xu Jiahui District of Shanghai.

⁴³Ibid., 73-74.

⁴⁴Ibid., 61.

⁴⁵Ibid. “...все впоследствии так и было, как представляла она себе в пути, как создала она по письмам подруги и по фотографиям, – потому что жизнь ее построена была традициями, строгими курантами регламентов, когда американцы и англичане не имеют понятия «заграница», проживая даже в Китае по-американски, – и когда они могут – за три года вперед с точностью до недели знать свое будущее – и не ошибаться!” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, 226)

ity of China with respect to its food, its smell, its nature, etc. On the other hand, he feels that from all the countries he has visited, “China resembles Russia the most”.⁴⁶ He admits that he kept “stumbling upon Russia” in China and asserts that “it is no accident that both China and Russia were conquered by the Mongols”.⁴⁷ In one place, the author describes how Beijing resembles Moscow of 1918: Soldiers crowd all the palaces and temples, “cannon stands, patrols guard intersections”, and husks of watermelon seeds are all over the ground.⁴⁸ In another paragraph, he records how a morning in Hankou aroused the sensations of his childhood in Saratov:

...I awoke today with the most astonishing sensation of childhood, my childhood in Saratov, in the house of my grandmother Katerina Ivanovna, among the noises of the embankment, the boom of the barge hauler’s song. I don’t know whether they borrowed this harbor song from us or we from them, but I know that the tune and the rhythm of it here in Hankow, as everywhere else in China, are the same as in Saratov and everywhere on the Volga. [...] And in the morning, freed from the nightmare of sleep under a mosquito net, I went to the embankment to wander through my childhood, for the picture is exactly the same, amazingly so: the same barge haulers wearing a variety of national costumes, the same overseers, men carrying sacks and bales on their backs in the same way [...].⁴⁹

In a paragraph of abstract reflection, Pilnyak attempts to explain the affinity between Russia and China by the correspondence of their modern development. In both Russia and China, he argues, there now exists a confrontation between the masses and the intelligentsia. The tradition of life, replete with rituals that contributed to its solemnity, has been well preserved in the Russian and the Chinese peasantry respectively. While the intelligentsia is a faceless phenomenon in both nations: They have all their ideas borrowed from the “European culture” that “destroys a national mode of life, removing its distinctive qualities, as too inane and stationary”.⁵⁰ However, it is such destruction, which has weakened the “pillars” of national cultures, that has made possible the growth of a “new, world culture” represented by such heroic figures as Liu Hua.⁵¹ The “world culture” – the culture of mass rebellion, of the struggle for human justice and well-being – has already taken root in Russia, and is now shooting new sprouts in China. Both countries would be the construction sites for a “supernational culture”, a culture that cultivates a new form of social organization that is founded on a new relationship between human beings.⁵²

⁴⁶Pilnyak, *Chinese Stories and Other Tales*, 40.

⁴⁷Ibid., 40–41.

⁴⁸Ibid., 24.

⁴⁹Ibid., 22–23. “...Я проснулся сегодня в удивительнейшем чувстве детства, моего детства в Саратове, в доме бабки Катерины Ивановны, в шуме набережной, в гуле дубинушки. Не знаю, кто у кого взял дубинушку, эту портовую дубинушку, – но знаю, что мотив и ритм ее здесь в Ханькоу, как везде в Китае, таков же, как в Саратове, как везде на Волге. [...] И утром, освободившись от кошмара сна в москитнике, я пошел на набережную – бродить по моему детству, ибо картина одна и та же, разительно, – такие же разноплеменно одетые бурлаки, такие же надсмотрщики, так же на спинах (непонятно, почему не ломаются хребты) тащат люди мешки и тюки.” (Pilnyak, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, 183)

⁵⁰Pilnyak, *Chinese Stories and Other Tales*, 58.

⁵¹Ibid., 59.

⁵²Ibid.

This comparison of Russia and China's modern histories that stresses their common dialectical nature summarizes Pilnyak's observation of China. From the "China-town" in *The Naked Year* to China in turbulence in *The Chinese Diary*, his conception of China evolved from a mythologized locus that embodied Russia's Asiatic character and the Eurasianist ideal to a center of conflicts where the drama of colonialist ambitions and national aspirations was being staged. The China he illustrates is set against a variety of historical backgrounds, changing from the semi-fictional "Heavenly Empire" that mirrors Russia's history to the country in crisis that recalls Russia's recent past. The latter folio of Pilnyak's portrayal of China represented the general shift of attention and change of perception among writers with regards to China in the 1920s. For writers such as Sergei Tret'iakov (1892–1937), Vsevolod Ivanov (1895–1963) and Nikolai Kostarev (1893–1939), "China" no longer epitomized a system of values, beliefs and life modes that constitutes the alterity for both Europe and post-Petrine Russia. Rather, it started to be represented as a society that was following the footprints of the Soviet Union to become an "echo" of Soviet Russia.⁵³ The change of literary interpretation corresponded with the ideological shift and socio-political transition in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. By introducing the China that was rebelling against its own tradition, Russian writers like Pilnyak not only updated the image of China for Russian readers, but also examined China as a testing ground for socio-political transformation that would help to shed light upon the global values and effects of Soviet ideology.

⁵³Several studies that dedicated themselves to the images of China in early Soviet literature have emerged in recent years. For a cultural-political analysis of the images of China in Soviet literature of the 1920s and 1930s, see Edward Tyerman, "The Search for an Internationalist Aesthetics: Soviet Images of China, 1920–1935" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014). For a survey of the trans-national influence of Sergei Tret'iakov's theatrical representation of China in his play "Roar, China!" ("Rychi, Kitai!", 1926), see Mark Gamsa, "Sergei Tret'iakov's Roar, China! between Moscow and China," *Itinerario* 36, no. 2 (2012): 91-108. For a focused study of the image of Chinese Red partisan in Vsevolod Ivanov's novel *Armoured Train 14–69* (*Bronepoezd No. 14–69*, 1922), see Roy Chan, "Broken Tongues: Race, Sacrifice, and Geopolitics in the Far East in Vsevolod Ivanov's *Bronepoezd No. 14–69*," *Sibirica* 10, no. 3 (2011): 29-54.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the imagination and description of China in the works of Boris Pilnyak. It proposes that Pilnyak's fictions and travelogues demonstrate two approaches to the literary representation of China: the imaginary and the documentary. What unifies these two approaches is the underlying Eurasianist vision of the author, which may be seen as a heritage of the universalist stance of Russian modernist tradition, on the one hand, and as a response to the national identity crisis that arose from the contemporary geopolitical circumstances on the other. The imagery of China served largely as a product of poetic imagination in Pilnyak's works written before 1922, where it continued the palimpsestic inscription of the myth of China in the Russian literary milieu, perpetuating the conceptual internalization of "China" in the self-fashioning of Russia. An example of this is the image of "Kitai-gorod" in his novel *The Naked Year*, which generated different symbolic meanings of China. From 1922 on, the variations of narrative settings in Pilnyak's prose reflected the impact of contemporary events in China on his ruminations on the historical relationship of Russia and Asia. Of seminal significance was his excursion to China in 1926, the product of which became *The Chinese Diary*, in which China figured as a point of reference for Russia in its self-reflection on socio-political and ideological fluctuations. Combining imagination of history and commentary on reality, Pilnyak's various conceptions of China served to illuminate the shifting identity of Russia from both the mythologized past and the highlighted present.

The Naked Year

PILNYAK

China

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