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THE CHINESE IMAGE IN GUMILEV'S POEMS

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Abstract

This research article explores the representation of China, its location, culture and specific aspects in the poems of the Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev. In particular, the poet's poem "In China" describes a dragon typical of Chinese culture.

Keywords: *Nikolay Gumilev, Gumilev's poetry, "The Poem of the Beginning", dragon, Chinese image, Chinese motifs*

Nikolay Gumilev (1886–1921) was a Russian poet, literary critic, and playwright, known for his association with the Acmeist movement in Russian poetry.

Gumilev's poetry is known for its vivid imagery, rich language, and exploration of various themes, including love, nature, and the human experience. He often drew inspiration from his travels to Africa and Asia, which influenced his poetic style and choice of imagery.

In Gumilev's poems, the image of China appears as a symbol of the exotic, the mysterious, and the unknown. He often used Chinese motifs to evoke a sense of otherworldliness and to explore the boundaries of the familiar and the foreign. The Chinese imagery in his poems reflects his fascination with Eastern cultures and his desire to transcend the limitations of the everyday world. Never having been to China, he learned about the country and its literature primar-

ily through translations, especially through Judith Gautier's (1845–1917) collection of classical Chinese poetry, *The Book of Jade*, which served as the source for his "Chinese poems," published under the title *Chinese Poets* in 1918 and 1922. He classified eleven out of the sixteen poems as belonging to the category "China".

The works included in *Chinese Poets* combined translations with original poetry, and blended the elaborate details of chinoiserie with an overall impression of a mythical oriental world. They display a kaleidoscope of images from Classical Chinese poetry, infused with a melancholic mood and united with the themes of secret longing and unfulfilled desire. Although all those poems find their equivalents in Gautier's *The Book of Jade*, the two poets have given discrepant names regarding the works' original authors. Gumilev noted the Chinese poet Tze-Tie as the author of the poem "Road", while Gautier

claimed the author was unknown. This suggests that Gumilev used other sources for his adaptations, an idea which is supported by his own notion that the works of Judith Gautier, le marquis d'Hervey Saint-Denis, Huart and Arthur Waley, etc., have been "the foundation of these poems" (Gumilev, N., Struve G. and Filippov, V., 1962).

Researchers of N. Gumilev's poetic cycle "The Porcelain Pavilion" found in it a fusion of the cultures of East and West, finding in mysterious countries a "source of spiritual forces" (Kovalenko A. G., Porol P. V., 2021). N. Skatov wrote that N. Gumilev's late poems are permeated with a feeling of the birth of a new, "sixth" human feeling, "which would help poems – fragments of the ancient, medieval, oriental, Chinese, Russian world to be put together in a grandiose picture of being and comprehend the connection of times and spaces" (Kovalenko A. G., Porol P. V., 2021).

It is known that when creating the "Porcelain Pavilion" N. Gumilev used poetic transcriptions from Chinese into French by Judith Gauthier, the daughter of Theophile Gauthier, who in 1867 under the pseudonym Judith Walter published the book "Le Livre de Jade" ("The Jasper Book"). Accordingly, most of the texts of the cycle contain at least two layers – native Chinese and French. To date, scientists had made correspondences between the Porcelain Pavilion and the Jasper Book, Chinese and French texts.

One of the studies that explore the Chinese image in Gumilev's poetry is an article titled "The image of a dragon in the poetry of N. Gumilev: Chinese subtext" by Polina V. Porol (Porol, Polina 2019). The article discusses the image of a dragon in the poetry of N. Gumilev and explores the Chinese subtext of the image of the dragon in his poetry. The study identifies, describes, and interprets the Chinese subtext of the image of the dragon in Gumilev's poetry, considering the author's reception and comparing the perception of the image of the dragon in Russian and Chinese cultures. The results of the study show the frequency of the image of the dragon in Gumilev's poetry and the poet's use of this image as originally Chinese. The study also highlights the relationship between the descriptions of the image of the dragon in the works of N. Gumilev and A. Tolstoy and the

poet's appeal to Chinese mythology and hieroglyphic writing.

In N. Gumilev's unfinished poem "In China" (1918) (another title of the poem is "Two Dreams. A Chinese Poem") the image of the dragon has a "domesticated" character, it is endowed with a very good-natured appearance: "His huge mustache / Sticking out, cutting the cloud, / Two thin dragonflies / They sat on them, resting" ("In China") (Gumilev, N., 1986). The dragon is the guardian of the Lai-Tse family, the "family dragon": "When, as if reported / A roar rang out from under the ground, / An ancient bronze dragon / Grumbled at the stone gate: // "I have been standing here for five centuries, / And I will still be idle and ten, / My troubling fate / How should I weigh. // The same ones on the porch / Chinese women and Chinese girls, / I remember Lai-Tse's grandmother, / When she was a girl. // One will have a terrible dream, / The other will fall in love with a poet, / And I, their family dragon, / Should I be responsible for this?" (In China) (Gumilev, N., 1986). In July 1918, the poet created a cycle of Chinese poems "Porcelain Pavilion", in February 1921 the first issue of the almanac "Poets' Workshop" – "Dragon" – was published.

N. Gumilev's poem "The Wanderer" is a symbol of China:

Just heard the flute of autumn,
The iridescent sound of cicadas,
Just seeing a cloud in the sky
Spread like a dragon
You will understand all the endless
Sorrow you got

And you will rush off with your thoughts
to your homeland,

Shading his eyes with his hand (Gumilev, N. S., 2000).

The poet shows the perception of the reality surrounding him by the lyrical hero – the Chinese: he yearns for his homeland so much that even the cloud is seen by him as a dragon.

In N. Gumilev's poem "The Serpent" (1916), the geographical origin of the snake is indicated – the Golden Horde, the Chinese plain: "Oh, otherwise in the past years / The earth conjured with heaven, / The marvelous diva ripened then, / Wonderful miracles worked themselves ... // Forgetting The Golden Horde, / The motley rumble of the Chinese

plain, / The winged serpent in the desert garden / Often hid at midnight in May. // Only the girls to see the moon / They went out with a stately gait, – / He quickly picked up one, / And soared, and strove back. // How it sparkled, how it blinded and burned / The copper shell under the predatory moon, / How it flew like a silver ring / A measured scream over forest Russia: // “I am the beauties of such swans / With such milky whiteness, / Never met anywhere, / Neither in an overseas country, nor in an eastern one. // But not one has yet been / In my magnificent palace, in Lagor: / They die on the way, and the bodies / I throw into the Caspian Sea. // To sleep at the bottom, among the monsters of the sea, / Why is it more dear to them, mad, / Than in my mighty arms / On the solemn princely bed? // And sometimes I envy the fate / A guy with a white shepherd’s pipe / In a meadow where a maiden crowd / So pleased with his joke. // Hearing these cries, Volga / Came out and looked gloomily, / Put a bowstring on the horns / of the Belovezhskaya old tour” (Porol, Polina, 2019). The poem was created on the basis of the well-known mythological story about the abduction of a girl by a dragon (Ivanov, V. V., Toporov, V. N., 1991).

N. Gumilev was familiar in practice with Chinese hieroglyphic writing, as evidenced by N. A. Engelhardt: “I remember the poet’s Christmas tree, where, by the way, the famous writer Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky was. Gumilev read me two songs of the poem, which then disappeared. These were two pictures: China and India. The poem was unusually talented. The poet managed to capture the spirit and the whole opposite of the culture of China and India. I interested him in China so much that he took a few lessons in Chinese characters from me” (Gumilev, N., 1994).

Longevity has always been an eternal theme of Eastern philosophy, in which the Chinese

emphasize the value of life. In addition, the expressions “more sons – more happiness” and “children around the knee” are a hallmark of the traditional Chinese concept of happiness. Thus, the continuation of the family lineage is crucial to achieving the ideal of happiness.

“My boat is made of mahogany,
And my flute is made of jasper.
Water removes a stain on silk,
Wine – anxiety from the heart.
And if you own a light boat,
Wine and a sweet woman,
What more do you need?

You are like the geniuses of the sky in everything” (Gumilyov, N. F., 2023).

The true author of “Happiness” is the poet Li Bai (701–762), some Chinese researchers find here similarities with his poem “Elegy about Jianshan”. It can be argued that in his poetry, Li Bai, although showing contempt for worldly life, nevertheless emphasizes the desire for freedom and a better life. In general, the poem reveals a positive ideological meaning. It seems to the poet that in the real world it is difficult to find true happiness. Only having risen from the depths of despair, the lyrical hero finds the light of hope in the happy sky of the Motherland.

Thus, it can be stated that China “went beyond” the geographical concept of reality and became an ideal place for the spiritual “wandering” of the poet. Under the influence of the cultural and spiritual atmosphere of the Silver Age, with a personal interest in world culture, N. S. Gumilev created a unique image of China. Compared with real China, the image of China that exists in the poet’s mind inevitably turns out to be “far-fetched”, fabulous. Nevertheless, the depth and breadth of the poet’s knowledge of China is sufficient to assert that China, to one degree or another, has become a kind of spiritual support in the creative development of N. S. Gumilev.

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