IN COMMEMORATION OF IX ICCEES WORLD CONGRESS

**The Seagull Goes to the Cosmos, and Haruki Goes to
Sakhalin:**

**A Special Talk delivered at the 5th East Asian
Conference on Slavic Eurasian Studies
At Osaka University of Economics and Law,
August 8, 2013**

Mitsuyoshi Numano
(*The University of Tokyo*)

Two quotations from the Soviet Cosmonauts

Let me begin my talk with two famous quotations from the Soviet Cosmonauts Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova.

On April 12, 1961, the first man in space, Gagarin, wrote in his journal:

«Лучи просвечивали через земную атмосферу, горизонт стал ярко-оранжевым, постепенно переходящим во все цвета радуги: к голубому, синему, фиолетовому, черному. Неопиcуемая цветовая гамма! Как на полотнах художника Николая Рериха.»

(Rays were blazing through the Earth's atmosphere, the horizon became bright orange, gradually passing into all the colors of the rainbow: from light blue to dark blue, to violet and then to black. What an indescribable gamut of colors! Just like the paintings of the artist Nicholas Roerich).

Who on earth is this artist Roerich, whom the cosmonaut, apparently not well versed in arts, refers to? He is a rather mysterious genius whose multifaceted talent ranged from fine arts, the stage design for *Le sacre du printemps* (*The rite of spring*) performed by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, to

studies in medieval Russian and Slavic culture and Eastern philosophy and mysticism, and whose extensive unflagging travels across the world covered Russia, Europe, the United States, the Himalayas, and the depths of Tibet, India and Central Asia. I would call him the truly Eurasian genius.

The combination of such an artist with a cosmic rocket might seem strange, but curiously enough, Roerich, who emigrated from the Soviet Russia after the Revolution and lived in India in his later years, was not banned during the Soviet era and an exhibition of his pictures was even held in the Museum of Oriental Arts in Moscow shortly before Gagarin's historic travel into space. It is, therefore, highly possible that Gagarin had seen Roerich's pictures, which are famous for the beautiful, subtle nuances of the color blue. (Slides). Let me show you his pictures, as the proverb goes: "One picture is worth a thousand words."

Let me remind you that Gagarin's spacecraft was named "Vostok" (the East).

Now, let me move on to Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. On June 16, 1963, she sent her message from the cosmic heavens:

"Я "Чайка", я "Чайка". В иллюминаторы вижу Землю. Вижу горизонт. От облаков идет голубая полоска. Все в порядке. Все в порядке. Я "Чайка". Прием!"

(I am the Seagull, I am the Seagull. I see the Earth in the portholes. I see the horizon. From the clouds there comes a blue stripe. Everything is all right. I am the Seagull. Received.)

Here we see a peculiar correspondence of words. Tereshkova called herself a "seagull" simply because the call sign allotted to her as a cosmonaut, was Chaika. At that time it was customary in the Soviet Union to give each cosmonaut a bird's name as his or her call sign. But these are precisely the same words uttered by the heroine of Chekhov's famous play "The Seagull." So it was natural for those Japanese who admired Russian literature in general, and Chekhov's plays in particular, to associate in their mind the voice of the space seagull with the figure of their beloved tragic beautiful heroine of Russian literature.

Actually, that cosmic voice had ramifications for contemporary Japanese literature. For example, Natsuki Ikezawa wrote an interesting novella entitled *Ya Chaika* in 1988, where the author directly uses Russian words. The main plot of this story involves a Japanese engineer and a Soviet spy, a narrative based on rather stereotypical images, and in addition to the spy story line, it contains a remarkable Russian motif that warrants our attention. While the female astronaut Tereshkova is orbiting Earth, the protagonist, the Japanese engineer, as a small child, feels a strange sensation. To the young Japanese boy, Tereshkova appears as a kind of goddess, blessing the Earth as she gazes at it from the heavens. Although originally conceived on the basis of scientific materialism and a rejection of religion, the Soviet Union is here imaginatively transformed into both a scientific and religious source of cosmic perception. Here, in the Japanese imagination, Russia functions as a stage that enables a kind of cosmic perception that was lacking in Japan.

Although I don't want to draw any moral from these two quotations, I'd like to direct your attention to the fact that there is something interesting going on in the process of reception of the images created by the astronauts. In the case of Gagarin, state-of-the-art space technology was connected to Eastern mystic aesthetics, and in the case of Tereshkova, Japanese heard in her message some literary, and cosmic, I would say, overtones that go far beyond the aerospace engineering.

Chaika – Chekhov – Haruki Murakami

The topic of the play “Chaika” and its author's popularity in Japan naturally lead us to another contemporary Japanese writer, whose renown is truly worldwide today and whose works are translated into more than 40 languages and are read throughout the world: Haruki Murakami.

Although Murakami is considered to be an Americanophile, very well versed in American literature and fluent in English, he never avoided talking openly about his love for Russian literature. In his previous works he made frequent reference to the classics of Russian literature in general, and to Dostoevsky in particular. His recent bestselling novel *1Q84*, however, was a

turning point in terms of his relationship to the Russian classics. In this novel, a motif involving not Dostoevsky, but Chekhov is brought to the fore, and Chekhov's famous axiom—"once a gun appears in a story, it has to be fired" or, according to a slightly different version, "If in the first chapter there is a rifle hanging on the wall, then in the second or the third chapter it must be fired"—serves a special function with regard to the development of the plot.

Also deserving of our attention are the book's numerous references to *A Journey to Sakhalin*, or *Ostrov Sakhalin*, Chekhov's collection of observations taken during his trip to Sakhalin Island. In 1890, at the age of 30 (roughly the same age as Tengo, the protagonist of *1Q84*), Chekhov was inexplicably struck by the idea of setting out for the island of Sakhalin. Risking disease (it was practically a suicide expedition, as he was already ill), Chekhov proceeded to investigate the conditions of the prisoners in exile living on the island, recording his findings and impressions in a book. As Tengo explains, it was a work that "did little more than bewilder most readers, who found that it more closely resembled a dry investigative report or gazetteer than a work of literature" that "radically suppressed all literary elements and was rather close to a practical research report or a topographic study." Why did Haruki Murakami specifically single out this work for use in his novel, putting aside other more famous works by Chekhov?

In *1Q84*, Tengo considers why Chekhov must have felt so compelled to travel to Sakhalin Island—a question that has been a riddle for Chekhov scholars for over a century. Tengo tries to explain that Chekhov himself might not have understood exactly why he went, but he was both a novelist and a doctor, and as a scientist, he wanted to examine something that could be viewed as a diseased part of the vast Russian nation. By going to the island and writing about it, Chekhov was able to set aside his usual literary pursuits and escape from the literary world of Moscow "he was fed up with" and from the "malicious critics of the day" he was disgusted by, and as a physician, investigate the conditions of the island. These arguments make us wonder whether Murakami himself was superimposing himself onto Chekhov, as we can presume that is exactly what the Japanese author also tried to do through his own investigations into the 1995 Sarin Gas Attack on the Tokyo subway. After the Sarin Gas Attack, Murakami wrote two works of nonfiction, *Underground* and *In the Promised Place*, based on his

interviews with victims of the act of terrorism and with followers of Aum Shinrikyō, the cult responsible for the attack. The project was Murakami's own attempt at a kind of social commitment, and the incident was his own version of Chekhov's Sakhalin Island. Perhaps it is for this reason that Murakami sees a bit of himself in Chekhov. Perhaps it would be better not to add that Sarin and Sakhalin make a good rhyme.

The Cover of *Lexington Ghosts* / Illustration to *Kapitanskaya Dochka*

Haruki Murakami, by the way, is also very popular in Russia today, almost as popular as sushi. His books have been translated into Russian and each has become a commercial success. The question, however, of how his writings are received and understood in Russia can be a topic for serious research in its own right for comparative literature specialists. It is well known that, generally speaking, literature in general, and poetry in particular, loses much in the process of being translated into a foreign language. But it was David Damrosch, a scholar of comparative literature at Harvard who maintained that world literature is a kind of writing that gains from translation. Then, can we presume that Haruki Murakami is an example of world literature that does not lose, but gains, in translation as far as his works cross linguistic and cultural borders so easily that they are even becoming an integral part of the Russian book market today.

I think it is true to a certain extent, but at the same time we have to be aware that certain perception gaps always remain even in the case of such a readable writer as Murakami, whose style seems deceptively simple. A good illustration of it can be a book cover for the Russian translation of the collection of stories by Murakami, *Lexington Ghosts*. The title story of this collection is such a modern, sophisticated horror story which is set in the suburbs of contemporary Boston that a reader cannot expect to see there any scary, bloody ghosts explicitly. But the Russian publisher somehow decided to use a very horrible Japanese traditional picture for the cover design, freely combining it with a contemporary urban landscape and making a strange collage. Probably the publisher calculated that it would meet the expectations of the average Russian reader despite the fact that Murakami's story has nothing to do with such horrible *ukiyo-e*, the traditional Japanese wood-cut

print. The problem is, the Russian publisher seems for some reason reluctant to show the source of that horrible skeleton and fails to indicate the artist's name. But as a matter of fact, it is taken from a work by one of the most famous Japanese *ukiyo-es*, Hokusai Katsushika, who lived in the late Edo period. The work in question is a wood-cut print from the series entitled "One Hundred Horror Stories."

Is it possible that the editor of the translation was so ignorant about contemporary Japan that he or she didn't know that the picture was no more relevant to the contemporary sophisticated writer? I doubt it. My guess is that the publisher simply wanted to please the readers, using stereotypical images that are entertaining to them. That is why they also stick to the images of geisha and Mt. Fuji until now.

On our part, in Japan, we also have had a lot of such strange images of Russia that are stereotypical, anachronistic, or simply wrong. One of the illustrations to the first translation of Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* (1883) can serve as a good example. It is a work by one of the most famous *ukiyo-e* artists during the Meiji era, Yoshitoshi Tsukioka. As you see, the picture does not quite reflect the Russian reality. I don't know whether the artist was so ignorant about Russia that he thought palm trees grew there.

One cannot underestimate, however, the important role of Russian literature in the history of modern Japanese literature. It would be no exaggeration to even say that Russian literature, along with English, French, and German literature, played a decisive role in the formation of modern Japanese literature, and we are proud to announce that the Japanese have published to date more than a dozen multivolume collections of works by Dostoevsky that were labeled *The Complete Works of Dostoevsky*. It is true, however, even in such a country, where Russian literature has been read avidly and widely, it is so difficult to have correct knowledge of the Other without relying upon stereotypical images.

I am not saying that the pictures I have shown today are worthless because they carry incorrect images and do not accord with the reality of the foreign country in question. On the contrary, I think it would be very interesting and fruitful to study in what way we have been wrong in our perception of the Other. My sincere belief is that it is not so much our mutual correctness as our failures to understand each other properly that make our history of cultural relationship.

Even stereotypes are important to study, as they reflect, as a rule, yourselves rather than your foreign neighbors. About this sad truth, Nikolai Gogol had this to say:

Над кем смеетесь? Над собой смеетесь!

(Who are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!)

If my talk seems to be taking a pessimistic note, I would like to conclude it by adding something more positive and amusing.

Even if there are a great number of various misunderstandings and distorted stereotypes, the history of cultural relations between two different cultures is interesting and fascinating in itself. Come to think of it, although we are so different from each other, we nevertheless want to understand each other, and the process of interactions between two different cultures has always been producing not only harmful stereotypes, but also disarming charms, and more than anything, spiritual repercussions. The seagull goes to the cosmos, and it sends a cosmic message from the heavens down to Japan; Chekhov's Sakhalin and the act of terrorism in Tokyo are interwoven into a new novel by a Japanese author – all these are fascinating phenomena that cross borders and at the same time connect ourselves with the other people. That is what culture is all about.