



Title	<BOOK REVIEW>ROSIA BUNKA NO KISO [Substrata of Russian Culture], By Tokuaki Bannai, Tokyo : Nihon Editor School Shuppanbu, 1991,ii+252pp., /2,600
Author(s)	Nakamura, Yoshikazu
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 10, 184-186
Issue Date	1992
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/8049
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	KJ00000034002.pdf



[Instructions for use](#)

ROSIA BUNKA NO KISÔ [Substrata of Russian Culture]. By Tokuaki Bannai. Tokyo: Nihon Editor School Shuppanbu, 1991. ii + 252pp. ¥ 2,600.

This is the first academic book on Russian ethnography ever written in Japan. Soon after publication it had the rare fortune to be favorably noticed by almost all the leading newspapers and magazines of the country. It is not due to accidental circumstances that the Soviet Union, now on the verge of collapse, has been attracting the attention of the whole world. Even without Mr. Gorbachev's *perestroika* and its consequences, the work would not have been ignored by the reading public because of its intrinsic value.

Mr. Bannai's book consists of three parts (five chapters in all): (1) Power of the tongue, "Formation" of the folktale – preparing for the reconsideration of folk culture; (2) A glance at woodcut prints – taking "The Mice Bury the Cat" as an example, The Russian swing – about its "interpretations"; (3) Folklore about the other world. The table of contents tells a great deal about the character of the book. First of all, it is clear that the author does not aim at either an overall survey or a textbookish description of Russian ethnography. His purpose is an approach, through a series of case-studies, to the depths of the Russian mentality. In this sense the work appears to be not a monograph but a collection of papers which are threaded together by a common theme. It is also obvious that the author is always very conscious of the methodology of ethnography.

Mr. Bannai is a great strategist. Citing in the beginning of the book the case of Anna Larina, the wife of N. Bukharin, who had memorized the rather lengthy last will of her husband during the hard times of Stalinism and made it public at the end of the 1980s, he strongly impresses upon the reader the significance of memory in the oppressed Soviet society. Then he continues to talk of his personal experiences in Leningrad and concludes that Russian people have a marked predilection for foul language and that oral transmission, to which he prefers the term "orality," has been playing an important role in Russian culture. (We think that the abundance of words of abuse in the Russian language in contrast with their scantiness in Japanese will surely constitute the theme of independent treatises.) In fact, a distrust of literacy originated long ago in the mind of the Russian people. It did not emerge for the first time in the Soviet era.

In the second chapter the author proposes to grasp dynamically the meaning of *skazka*, the Russian term for the folktale. Following the investigations by contemporary Soviet scholars beginning with Yu. Lotman and B. Uspensky, he tries to demonstrate that the Russian folktale was "captured" in the period from the latter half of the eighteenth century to the middle of the 1830s by a small group of writers who shared a common idea and wished daringly to represent by letters the world of the tongue, which is by nature unsuitable for expression with letters. Those writers are thus called

“rebels”. The traditional ascription of the Russian upsurge of interest in popular culture to the influence of European trends of thought is avoided, perhaps intentionally. But it may be difficult to suppose that all the readers will be easily persuaded to agree with the author’s opinion.

Both chapters of the second part are copiously illustrated with reproductions of *luboks*, i. e. Russian popular prints, illustrations from old books, pictures of famous painters and photographs of by-gone days, numbering in all as many as fifty, of which four are even colored. Doubtlessly, these visual images add much to the vigor of the author’s arguments.

In the third chapter Mr. Bannai refutes the conception about *luboks*, almost a fixed idea since the nineteenth century, that they are exclusively simple and naïve. By way of example, he pays special attention to the *luboks* called “The Mice Bury the Cat” (not a few prints were created on this theme) and ingeniously explicates the meaning of each character in the pictures. It turns out that, as many obscure and enigmatic symbols are deciphered one by one, the *luboks* are neither simple nor naïve.

In our opinion, the greatest success in Mr. Bannai’s book is a chapter on the Russian swing. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century many foreign travelers to Russia continued to observe with special interest how the people were enthusiastic over riding on a swing. According to the author, there were in Russia three types of swing: the simple one, the revolving up-and-down type, and the seesaw. They were all called in Russian *kacheli*, originating from the verb *katat’/ katit’*, to roll. Here in this chapter an enormous quantity of travel literature is quoted, i.e. the records of S. Herberstein, A. Olearius, A. Meyerberg, K. Klenk, C. Bruyn, P. Pallas, J. Atkinson, J. Kohl, to say nothing of reports by Daikokuya Kodayu, a Japanese drifting merchant who stayed in Siberia and Petersburg from the mid-1780s to the early 1790s. The pictures drawn by some of these travelers are very impressive. Needless to say, Russian sources are also mentioned quite extensively, e.g. sixteenth and seventeenth century royal edicts forbidding the ride on the swing, complaints of clergymen (riding on the swing was thought to be a diabolical pastime), investigations by professional researchers and so on. Firmly based upon this immense amount of material, the author pours his stock of knowledge into speaking of the place where the swing was set up, the time when it was available, the people who enjoyed it, the social significance of the pastime and its historical changes through the ages. The author’s erudition may bring the reader a feeling of dizziness as might be caused by riding on the swing.

The last chapter is, in the author’s words, a preliminary inquiry into the traditional views of the Russian people about the human soul and the other world. We are guided there by the ritual lamentation songs of a famous weeper, Irina Fedosova, and other women as well as funeral customs of the past. Opulent illustrations help us, too, to have a peep into the Russian realm of the shades.

The merit of the book lies not only in the profound learning of the author or in the lucid exposition of his arguments. Mr. Bannai declares in the postscript

of the book that ethnography must not be confined to the status of an auxiliary discipline to historical science and the study of literature, but must claim to be an independent science. From this standpoint, every piece of written material and each statement of informants and researchers are always subjected to severe methodological criticism. This guarantees the very high academic level of the work, while the style of description makes it so attractive and intelligible to the reading public.

It is only to be regretted that the book is written in Japanese and is thus not accessible to the outer world.

Yoshikazu Nakamura
(Hitotsubashi University)