Imagining Korea:
Images of Korea in Russian/Soviet Culture

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Introduction

One has to admit, until recently Korea and things Korean have played only a very marginal role in the Russian worldview. The ‘discovery’ of South Korea in 1988-90 dramatically increased Korea’s profile in the Russian popular mind. Nonetheless, even nowadays the attention paid to Korea in Russia is well below that enjoyed by Japan and China, let alone major countries of Western Europe.

This relative neglect partially reflects geographical reality. Even though Korea and Russia share a short common border, a great distance lies between Korea and the major population centers of Russia. One should bear in mind that there are 2500 km between London and Moscow, and merely 1300 km lays between Berlin and Petersburg. Concurrently, the distance between Moscow and Seoul is 7,000 km, and most of Russian territory adjacent to the Korean border is sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped. It would be just a small exaggeration to say that Korea faces Russia’s backyard, not Russia’s front-door.

The geographic reality is not the only reason for this relative neglect. Russian culture has been Euro-centric since at least the adoption of Christianity in the 10th century, and these features were reinforced by Peter the Great’s reforms in the 1700s. Russians sometimes like to describe themselves as a Eurasian people, but in popular culture, Europe is usually associated with progress, enlightenment, and things to be emulated. Conversely, ‘Asia’ has a different and largely negative set of connotations; it is sometimes associated with ‘ancient wisdom’ or a ‘sophisticated exotic culture’, but much more frequently with ‘barbarity’, ‘repression’ and ‘stagnation’. Admittedly, these negative stereotypes are no longer as strong as they once were, but they have by no means disappeared. Needless to say, Korea is seen (and rightly so) as an Asian country, and therefore it is still the subject of such negative stereotyping.

There is yet another reason why Korea has not attracted as much attention as it probably deserves. Korea is a relatively small country, and it exists in the shadow of its huge neighbors – Japan and China – which have always featured prominently in the Russian worldview. Koreans, who

* The author wants to be frank: the present article is clearly impressionistic. It has to be. Over the time that Russo-Korean cultural and political interaction, both countries have developed a quite complicated set of mutual perceptions (sometimes misperceptions) and images. A thorough research of this topic would probably produce a book-length study which would draw on multiple sources: public opinion polls, publications and periodicals, works of fiction and art.

In this article the author does not intend (and perhaps, taking into consideration size restrictions, cannot afford) to go into such detail. The article aims to provide readers with a general sketch of the Russian perceptions of Korea. To a large extent, it is based on the author’s personal observations and memories – after all, the present author has been engaged in Korean studies for twenty five years. This approach has its own shortcomings, but I believe that readers will benefit from somewhat general, essay-type treatment of the issue. The author would like to express special thanks to Peter Ward who helped with editing this article and whose remarks and questions were very stimulating.
understandably see their identity as completely distinct from that of China and Japan, would be surprised to learn that in Russia the average person tends to bracket Korea as ‘a minor Asian country’, something of a lesser version of Japan or China. The average Russian would probably apply to Korea what they know (or think they know) about China and Japan.

Keeping all this in mind, we should probably have a brief look at how Russian’s images of and attitudes toward Korea have changed over the past few centuries. Understandably enough, in this review we will pay much attention to the developments of the last few decades, but we will start from a much earlier date.

‘A Tiny Country Somewhere in the Orient’:
Korea and Russia Prior to 1945

Russia and Korea came into contact for the first time in the late 17th century. This contact began with a military confrontation, the only military confrontation fought between these two countries to date. Korean forces joined the Qing imperial army when it fought Russian Cossacks during the ‘Albazin conflict’ in the 1680s. This historical episode seems to be relatively well known to educated Koreans, but nearly all Russians (including those who are interested in the history of the region) are not aware of Korea’s involvement.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Russian and Chinese diplomats had occasional encounters in Beijing where they sometimes had cordial discussions. Interestingly, it was during one of these early encounters that Koreans were first introduced to the wonders of modern photography. The first ever photographic portrait of a Korean was made in the Russian legation in Beijing by a Russian diplomat who also happened to be an amateur photographer (Park Chonga 2003, 203).

Until the late 19th century, Russia was not so much interested in East Asia. Even the establishment of formal relations between Chosǒn and Russia in 1884 did not change the situation substantially. Karl Weber, the first Russian envoy to Seoul, might have been a brilliant diplomat, but back in 1884 he had every reason to see his new appointment as an unwelcome – if somewhat challenging – exile to a diplomatic backwater.

Things changed around 1890 when Russia began its advance into East Asia. The Pacific was suddenly ‘discovered’ by the Russian public and for a while was seen as an area of vital importance for the future of the Empire. In the late 19th century, Russia was increasingly involved with imperialist rivalries which were so intense in East Asia of that period. Manchuria and the Korean peninsula came to be seen as parts of Russia’s potential ‘sphere of influence’, and also an area where the influence of rival powers (especially Japan) should be contained and curtailed.

In 1860 Russia and Korea acquired a common border, and from 1864 Korean farmers began to migrate to Russian Far East in growing numbers. The local administrators soon learned how to distinguish between them and Chinese migrants. For governors of Russia’s Maritime province, Koreans tended to be the ‘desirable Orientals’ (or, at least, the ‘least undesirable Orientals’). Unlike Chinese migrants, they came as permanent settlers, and were known to be capable of producing food stuffs that the area badly needed. Furthermore, unlike the Chinese, the Koreans were not backed by a potentially dangerous neighbor (no sane Russian administrator or politician would have seen Korea as a geopolitical threat). Of course, in those times when the idea of ‘yellow peril’ was much in vogue in European intellectual circles, some people were inclined to see Korean settlers as the first wave of a dreaded ‘pan-Mongolian expansion.’ However, this opinion was not all that common. In 1883, discussing the first experiences of Korean settlers in the area, a prominent Russian official expressed his wish that such migration should be encouraged since ‘Koreans are family-oriented, they are law-abiding, industrious and make wonderful farmers’ (Скальковский 1883, 9).

By 1900, Korean farmers had become a common sight in the Russian Far East. They were, judging by the publications of the period, seen as hardworking and somewhat docile creatures. However, this awareness was geographically limited. In the major population centers of Russia, located far to the west, Koreans were almost never seen.

The early 1900s were a time when journalistic and academic publications that dealt with Korea began to appear in Russia. A brief period of Russian diplomatic and political activity in Korea
1895-1905 might have been driven by Russia’s imperialist schemes and ambitions, but it also produced a number of articles, booklets and research publications dealing with Korea and things Korean. Most of these publications can be seen as travel accounts, produced by visitors to the ‘Land of Morning Calm’. These writings are generally sympathetic – if occasionally paternalistic. The image of an ‘Oriental backwater’ populated by hard-working and polite people is predominant.

For example, Nikolai Przhevalsky, a prominent Russian geographer (and a spymaster) was one of the first educated Russians to come in contact with Koreans in the late 1860s. He was much impressed: “As I far as I have seen, politeness, industriousness and ability to cooperate are, generally speaking, the most distinguishing features of the Koreans, who are so superior to their Chinese neighbors in this regard” (Пржевальский 1937, 95).

Similar opinions were frequently repeated by journalists of the early 1900s: “In spite of all hardships, the Koreans have managed to remain good-natured and tranquil. The Koreans have another remarkable peculiarity: they are ready to help others whenever necessary.”(Федорова 1904, 8).

For a brief while in the early 1900s Korea was one of a few Asian countries which were widely featured in the Russian print media. This did not last for long. The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 brought Russian diplomatic and political ambitions in the area to an abrupt end. Korea slid to back to the ranks of ‘minor Oriental countries’ and remained as such for another half century.

The 1917 Communist revolution brought important changes to the perceptions of Korea, or at least the image of Korea projected in the Russophone media. In earlier times Korea was, generally speaking, perceived as a ‘stagnant Oriental society’ to be ‘enlightened’ and ‘civilized’. After 1917, it was presented as a victim of foreign imperialism and of the capitalist system, waiting to be ‘liberated from the heavy yoke of Japanese imperialism’.

A fairly typical article was published in Pravda on the 9th October 1925. It described the economic situation in Korea as terrible, but it also implied that Koreans were yearning for liberation to be brought by their more advanced comrades:

Cold and hungry Korea is suffering under the weight of natural, social and political disasters. It looks gray, depressed and all too reminiscent of a cemetery during the autumn rains. Only one piece of news provides the Korean peoples with consolation and happiness. In these hard days of bitter suffering: it is the reports that the Peasants’ International (branch of the Comintern-A.L.) and red farmers of the Soviet Union provided Korea with fraternal aid (Правда 1925).

The Soviet view of Korea in those early days of the Communist rule was clearly sympathetic, even though India and China enjoyed much more publicity in the Soviet press of the 1920s and 1930s. The bold raids of Korean guerillas (including those of a young field commander known as Kim Il Sung), street rallies of Korean nationalists and – above all – the factory strikes of Korean workers were widely and sympathetically reported by the Soviet media.

The Soviet Korean community, some 180,000 strong by the mid-1930s, also attracted some attention in the Soviet media. It was depicted generally in the same way as the ‘liberated ethnic minorities of the Orient’, with a curious mixture of progressivism and paternalism. Koreans in the Soviet Union were shown as essentially backward people who were happy to shake off the heritage of the reactionary past, and move forward with ‘a new and happy life’ as proscribed by the decisions of the Communist party:

A small girl with a yellow and flat face came from the coasts of the great ocean. In the Vladivostok region there is a village called Novaia Dieryenia, [and] the Communist Youth member Yelyena Em worked there as a deputy at the village council. ‘Where did you learn to speak Russian?’ Her narrow as-if swollen eyes smile, ‘At school’ (Известия 1927).

Things changed suddenly in August 1945 when much to its own surprise the Soviet Union found itself masters of North Korea’s destiny, and Korea suddenly moved to the forefront of great power politics.
Perceptions of North Korea, 1945-2010: From ‘Heroic Little Brother’ to Dubious Ally (And Half-Way Back)

The division of Korea 1945-48 and the birth of the North Korean state drastically changed Russian attitudes towards the Korean Peninsula. From 1945 onwards we should divide these into two sets of perceptions and stereotypes, one related to the South and the other to the North.

From 1945 to 1950 North Korea was largely seen as yet another country liberated by the ‘Great Soviet Army’, a nascent ‘popular democracy’, somewhat akin to Bulgaria or Hungary. Korea-related materials did not appear in Soviet publications too frequently, but when they did, they usually enlightened the Soviet people about the gratitude the Korean people felt toward the Soviet people, the Russian nation and Comrade Stalin. Periodicals also spoke of the crimes of the greedy Japanese, and the first achievements the Korean people had made in building a new life under the Korean Workers Party’s leadership. Stories of atrocities which allegedly were committed in the South by the US imperialists and their henchmen also began to appear from around 1947, as relations with the US deteriorated.

And then, in 1950 the Korean War erupted. The overwhelming majority of the Soviet population accepted the official explanation, which stated that the war was launched by US imperialists with the sole purpose of destroying the ‘People’s Republic’ in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. Of course, this ‘act of aggression’ was universally condemned, Alexander Tvardovsky, probably the most popular poet of the period and a future leader of the liberal, pro-reform movement in the Soviet Union of the 1960s, unequivocally compared the Americans with the Nazis. “You are wearing a different uniform // but the world will make no mistake, // you are those whom we met near Moscow // and to whom we showed the way to Berlin” (Твардовский 1960, 11).

In summer months of 1950, during the successful advance of the North Korean Army towards Pusan, Korea probably attracted more attention in the Soviet media than ever before or after. In some cities large maps of Korea were placed in windows of shops or government agencies with the advances of Kim Il Sung’s armies being marked with small red flags. Of course, after the Inchon landing and the complete turnaround in the military fortunes of the North Koreans, these maps promptly disappeared. Nonetheless, reports of the heroic deeds of North Korean soldiers and the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV), as well as reports of the alleged US brutality remained a staple of the Soviet media until the armistice of 1953.

Like it or not, a typical Soviet person saw the Korean War as a continuation of his/her nation’s struggle in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45. North Korea was seen as a little heroic country which was treacherously attacked by a mighty foreign power and fought for its dignity and independence. It was not uncommon for the younger people to inquire whether they could go to Korea as volunteers to join the righteous fight against US imperialists and their Seoul puppets. These expectations resulted from official stories about Soviet volunteers who fought for the Spanish republic in the 1930s. Actually these stories were misleading: the so-called ‘volunteers’ in Spain of 1936-39 (as well as Soviet advisers sent to Korea in 1950-53) were not volunteers, but carefully selected military officers, technical and political specialists who went there under the orders of the Soviet state.

At the same time, a small number of North Korean students who were sent to study in the USSR in 1946-1955 enjoyed a great deal of popular admiration and sympathy. Some of them noticed (as they later admitted to the present author) a touch of paternalism and even racism in this attitude. But in general, in 1945-55 North Korea enjoyed much genuine sympathy in the Soviet Union and among the Russian people. Soon this was to change.

In the mid-1950s, profound political changes occurred in both the Soviet Union and North Korea. And from around this time the two countries began to drift apart. The Soviet Union entered a period of liberal reforms which are usually described as ‘de-Stalinization’. North Korea moved in the opposite direction, making the initial Stalinist model – never known for excessive liberalism – even more restrictive and repressive.

From around 1956, relations between the USSR and North Korea began to deteriorate, reaching a freezing point around 1963. Those North Korean officials who were seen as potentially
pro-Soviet perished in purges or were exiled back to the USSR. Concurrently, Soviet advisers were forced out of the country. North Korean students were hastily recalled from the USSR and other pro-Soviet countries in the Communist bloc. Even mail exchanges came to a halt; from the early 1960s a North Korean would get themselves into trouble by sending a letter to the ‘revisionist’ USSR. At the lowest point, the exchange of accusations between the two governments became public: Pravda rebuked North Koreans for hiding the real scale of Soviet aid from both the domestic and international audience whilst Rodong Shinmun accused Moscow of being arrogant and chauvinistic. Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang improved somewhat in the mid-1960s when the appearance of an alliance was partially restored. Nonetheless, deep mutual distrust persisted.

In the new, more liberal environment of the post-Stalinist era, the Soviet public quickly lost its admiration for North Korea. The official press remained silent, but rumors spread widely and these rumors – largely correct – did nothing to improve the image of North Korea in eyes of the average Soviet citizen. The rumors were of the persecution of the Soviet Koreans, of attempts to play down or even deny the Soviet Army’s decisive role in the liberation of Korea (then as now a topic very important for the Russian’s collective mind), about the personality cult going mad, and of the widespread poverty and exceptional brutality of the North’s social system.

To a very large extent, the negative perceptions of North Korea were reinforced by North Korean official propaganda itself. The North shot themselves in the foot by expending huge resources on propaganda targeting Soviet audience. Had they been less willing to spend so much time and money on their propaganda targeting the Russian speaker, they would probably have been seen as similar to Albania (otherwise very similar to North Korea), and would largely remain outside the worldview of the average educated Soviet citizen.

From the 1960s, North Korea flooded the Soviet Union with propaganda material. The glossy Korea Monthly could be subscribed to very cheaply. Added to that, North Korean radio conducted hours of daily broadcasts (in seriously broken Russian). On paper, the North Korean propagandists might have enjoyed their results since these magazines were subscribed to widely. Few of them realized that this was done for fun since the propaganda looked grotesque and bizarrely ridiculous to the Russian reader. It usually consisted of pages of unreserved exaltations to the Great Leader, his extraordinary genius and superhuman virtues. It did not help that propaganda materials were never edited by native speakers, and that the Russian they used was extremely populous, artificial and weird. The general impression was of a comically self-important and pompous regime, completely out of touch with reality.

The effect was greatly strengthened by uncanny similarities which occasionally existed between Soviet and North Korean reality. North Korean propaganda was often perceived as an unintended parody of the Soviet system. It was like a strange mirror which depicted some features of the Soviet system in a comical and grossly exaggerated way. As the present author’s friend said long ago: “I don’t like these jokes about North Korea; it’s a bit like a person who has no leg making jokes about a quadriplegic”.

In Leningrad of the 1970s, where the present author grew up, copies of Korea magazine could be found easily. They seemed to be especially popular in barbershops, where they were subscribed to as a cheap means of amusement for the patrons. Their impact was deep, and even now in the Russian press and in books, one can easily come across references to the impact produced by the ‘unforgettable Korea magazine’.

The unflattering references to Korea monthly can be found even in a book written by an unreformed Communist/nationalist and a prominent activist of the CPRF, an orthodox-style communist party of the post-perestroika era. He says: “The official mouthpiece of that state, the Korea magazine was full of the Leader’s pictures: on the construction sites, steel mills, at farms and fields, accompanied with his explanations of how one should build houses, make steel, raise piglets and increase harvests. This, of course, produced in the USSR where Khrushchev’s voluntarism was still remembered, a wave of jokes about North Korea” (Чекалин 2009, 165).

People of more liberal persuasions are predictably even harsher, even though the message is essentially the same: “…back in my youth I and my friends made clippings from Korea Monthly. The clippings were then stuck in a special notebook which we called ‘Crocodile in Korea’ (Crocodile was
a leading Soviet satirical magazine – AL). People around borrowed these notebooks to read aloud to their families and friends, dying of laughter."

Therefore, from the 1960s to the 1990s, North Korea was genuinely unpopular with all sections of the Soviet people, though different groups disliked it for different reasons.

The Soviet officials, including the Foreign Ministry, KGB and the CPSU Central Committee bureaucracy, as well as those Soviet citizens who unconditionally sided with the Soviet government, disliked Kim Il Sung’s North Korea because it was seen as an ungrateful, unreliable and manipulating ally. North Korea’s successful attempts to play the USSR and China off against one another were also well known to an educated Soviet citizen. The Soviet bureaucracy and public alike felt genuinely offended when they learned that the North Korean official media was completely silent on the Soviet role in the liberation of Korea. They also knew that Soviet aid which continued to flow to Pyongyang due to geopolitical considerations was seldom, if ever, acknowledged in the North Korean press. All these facts reinforced perceptions of North Korea as a country which was shamelessly taking advantage of the Soviet Union while ignoring its interests and demands. Last but not least, communist true believers, which were still influential in the USSR of the 1960s, saw the grotesque personality cult of Kim Il Sung and virulent nationalism of his regime as an embarrassment to the Communist cause.

Soviet liberals had good reason to perceive North Korea as the embodiment of the things they hated most in their own country. From their point of view, the worst features of Soviet regime were magnified in North Korea. Whether they wanted a reformed socialism or a complete switch to a liberal democracy and market economy, North Korea remained the near perfect embodiment of everything they stood against.

Russian nationalists, who reemerged as an independent ideological force in the 1960s, also looked upon North Korea with disgust. The major reason for this was the ‘ingratitude’ Kim Il Sung and his people showed towards their Soviet liberators. For the re-emerging nationalists, North Korea was a small Asian country which did not know its proper place and did not know how to be thankful.

Until the late 1980s North Korea was, probably, the least reported on country of the Communist bloc. Editors and journalists did not want to sound positive since they knew that such an attitude would go against the majority view of North Korea. They also could not be negative because an open critique would adversely influence already strained relations with Pyongyang. Therefore, they preferred to remain silent.

The situation changed with the arrival of Perestroika; as early as 1985 more daring journalists began to make veiled critical remarks and drop hints about the situation in the North. As far as the present author remembers, one of the first articles to so was published around 1986-1986 in the widely read (and liberally minded) Literaturnaia Gazeta weekly. It was penned by Arkadi Vainer, arguably the most popular author of detective stories in the late Soviet era. Soon afterwards, such critical articles became a staple of the late Soviet media, and by the early 1990s a sarcastic and scornful tone for a while became the norm when journalists discussed North Korea, its policies and its leaders.

Of special interest were reports about the plight of North Korean loggers which appeared in the Soviet press in the years 1990-1991. The news about a secret North Korean prison which operated on Soviet territory in Chegdomen logging camp also attracted much attention. For a brief while, aspiring North Korean defectors could rely on the goodwill of both the Soviet public and political circles. Unfortunately, this would not last long.

It was widely thought in the early 1990s that Kim Il Sung’s North Korea was in its death throes and soon would be absorbed by the successful South. Therefore, it was seen as common sense that post-Soviet Russia should keep its distance from this brutal and grotesque and seemingly doomed regime. At the time, the Russian public overwhelmingly believed that the collapse of Communism in Russia was opening a door to a new bright future where ‘new Russia’ would join a peaceful, prosperous, capitalist, democratic world community. North Korea was seen as a bizarre vestige of a bygone era.

Kim Il Sung died a peaceful death in 1994, and the widely expected violent collapse of his regime never came to pass, but even this non-event produced some reasonably good literature in Russia. Lev Vershinin, a historian and writer, authored *Endgame*, a novel that described a violent collapse of an imaginary communist dictatorship. The country of the novel is reminiscent of Romania, Cuba and North Korea at the same time. Even geographic names were deliberately mixed up so that the capital of this imaginary country had the Korean-sounding name of Taedongan and the site of the Stalinists’ doomed last stand was called Munch’on in the novel. Around the same time, Igor Irtensiev, arguably the most popular Russian satirical poet of the 1990s, mockingly wrote of an event many people then expected to take place soon: “I still cannot sleep without a sedative / in the dangerous darkness / I keep imagine Kim Il Sung / in the blood-stained hands of the executioners” (Iртеньєв 1998, 154).

Yet, by the mid-1990s the expectations and naïve illusions of perestroika decade were fading. Russia’s switch to capitalism did not bring immediate prosperity and affluence. Rather, an unprecedented economic crisis was its immediate result. As a result, popular attitudes toward the developed capitalist West changed as well. Russians saw how the US and other western countries took advantage of the weakened Russian state and infringed upon what (with or without reason) they perceived as Russian national interests.

In this situation, attitudes toward North Korea also began to change once again. For a majority of the educated post-Soviet Russian public, the North Korean state remained a near perfect example of a brutal and inefficient dictatorship. However, in the course of time these critical judgments lost their initial harshness. From 1995-97, more and more people in Russia were started to view North Korea somewhat differently, not as a crazy anachronistic dictatorship but rather as an underdog which dared to stand up to the American bully; a country brave enough to challenge the forces which the government of Russia was unwilling or unable to resist. The staunchly anti-American position maintained by Pyongyang began to evoke conditional and reserved sympathy among a significant and growing number of Russians.

This change was especially notable among experts of North Korea in the press and academia. Even people who in the 1980s had actively attacked the North Korean regime began to look for justifications for at least some of Pyongyang’s policies, and proved themselves extremely eager to give Pyongyang the benefit of doubt in its confrontations with the US or South Korea. The recent ‘Ch’onan affair’ once again reconfirmed this trend. It is telling that among a dozen prominent experts on North Korea, now active in Russian in academia and the media, only two or three agreed with the assumption that the Ch’onan was sunk by a North Korean attack. All the others chose to support a variety of conspiracy theories, albeit with varying degrees of certainty and enthusiasm. A deliberate US provocation, a false flag incident, a stray mine, and other similar explanations were advanced (or at least seriously considered) by people, whose academic credentials are generally beyond doubt. It is not surprising that the same academics vehemently denied the very existence of the HEU program in North Korea until the very moment the HEU production facilities was shown to a visiting US delegation in 2010 (none of them bothered to admit that they had been wrong).

It is also telling that from around 2000 Russia and other post-Soviet states saw the emergence of a small group of people who were sincere students of Juche and genuine supports of the North Korean regime. Most of them are very young people who did not experience the Soviet period firsthand; for them, North Korea represents the supposed virtues of the Communist system in its purest form. These are tiny fringe groups with no political influence, but their emergence is nonetheless indicative of recent changes, since no Juche sympathizer was even conceivable in the Soviet Union of 1960-1990.

These new trends should not be overstated. The half-hearted sympathy toward North Korea largely reflects knee-jerk anti-Americanism, so common in Russia nowadays. Paradoxically enough, the average educated Russian nowadays is much less critical of the North Korean system than his/her parents were in the 1960s or 1970s. But, among a majority of educated Russians, North Korea is still seen as, above all, a brutal and backward dictatorship.

That said, it is South Korea which usually comes to the popular mind when ‘Korean culture’, ‘Korean history’ and ‘Korean art’ is concerned.
Glories of the Korean Past Being Discovered and Admired: The Korean High and Classical Culture in Russia

The last decades of the Soviet era were also marked by another interesting and peculiar phenomenon – the discovery of Korean historical and cultural heritage by the educated Soviet public.

This discovery was a part of a larger phenomenon. From the early 1960s the Soviet intelligentsia experienced a dramatic upsurge in interest in traditional Asian cultures. As we have mentioned above, educated Russians generally looked at Asia with a measure of contempt, assuming that good culture is almost by definition European (of course, there were some exceptions to this rule, but these largely remained exceptions). This attitude changed in the 1960s, and the traditional cultures of Asia began to enjoy much popularity. Works by traditional Japanese and Chinese writers – Dream of the Red Chamber, The Tale of Genji and the like – were published and read in the USSR much more widely than anywhere else in the world (outside East Asia, of course). Thirty thousand copies were seen as a small number if a classical Asian novel was published; with 50 thousand copies not being unusual. Sufficient to say, for example, that in 1984 fifty thousand copies of the Romance of Three Kingdoms were published in Moscow, and in 1982 the same publisher printed 75 thousand copies of Tale of Taira Clan (Повесть одоме Тайра 1982; Ло Гуаньчжун 1984).

The popular interest in martial arts, tea ceremonies, and flower arrangement reached their heights in the 1970s. The works of obscure philosophers of classical Asia easily found their way into Samizdat – not least because the official publishing houses often considered these texts ‘dangerously idealistic’, and did not want to run a large enough number of copies to satisfy demand (admittedly, the number of Daodejing copies which would suffice to satisfy the Soviet book market of the 1970s would have to be truly astronomical).

During this boom Korea, as before, remained in the shadows of Japan and China. But it was not untouched by this sudden upsurge in classical Asian culture and history. In the late 1950s a number of dedicated and gifted scholars began to do research on classical Korean culture. By the late 1970s, in the Soviet Union there were probably 30 or 40 people who were engaged in this seemingly esoteric research.

Just to provide some example I will describe the situation which existed in my native Leningrad in the early 1980s when the present author was an undergraduate at the Leningrad State University. In that year, Korea-related research at the aforementioned University and in the Soviet Academy of Science was conducted by the following persons: M.I. Nikitina (Korean poetry of the first millennium A.D.), A.F. Trotsevich (Hangul novels of the 17th and 18th Centuries), L. Zhidanova (Koryǒ poetry in classical Chinese), D.D.Yeliseiev (Hanmun fiction of the Koryǒ era), M.V. Vorobiov (archeology of the Korean peninsula and adjacent regions in the first millennia A.D.) E. Ionova (anthropology of the Korean village in the Chosŏn period), Lim Su (Korean proverbs), A.G. Vasiliev (history of Korean grammar). This is a near complete list, and the absence of any specialist on modern history, politics or economics is staggering. Admittedly, to some extent this reflected peculiarities of Leningrad academic environment which has traditionally emphasized classical studies. Even in the more politically-minded Moscow, the number of specialists that dealt with pre-1900 history and culture outnumbered people who dealt with more current topics.

This academic interest in bygone eras has a curious cultural and political explanation. Most of these people avoided dealing with modern history because they assumed that such studies were much more politicized and therefore often had to be distorted to conform with the current political agenda. Classical studies were seen as a respected way to avoid politicization and, as the present author eventually discovered, most of the above-mentioned people as well as many of their colleagues fancied themselves as ‘closet dissidents’ and treated the then communist regime with a remarkable amount of skepticism, if not hostility. The choice of these seemingly obscure subjects allowed them to do research freely and avoid involvement with what they saw as dishonest propaganda, while still drawing on a reasonable income (the Soviet state paid academics well without asking too many questions about the practical applicability of their studies).
In the above mentioned cultural climate, their seemingly esoteric research was not obscure or inconsequential. The Soviet Korean specialists produced first-rate works on classical Korean culture which were widely read and helped to introduce classical works of Korean literature and the arts to the Russian audience. Until the late 1980s, the Russian speaking audience had better access to classical Korean literary texts in translation than the access enjoyed by contemporary western readers.

As we have mentioned above, the books were published in quantities which would be unthinkable outside East Asia. For example, in 1985 a collection of works of Korean classical literature was published in Leningrad. It included *The Cloud Dream of Nine* (九雲夢), *The Story of Queen Inhyon* (仁顯王后傳) and some other texts, all translated from early hangul manuscripts (Записки 1985). The publisher printed 50 thousand copies, but the book was extremely hard to get. A few years later, a 100,000 copies of a collection of early hangul novels which included, among others, *Tale of Ch’unhyang*, was printed (ВернаяЧхунхян1990).

This translation work was not in vain. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of these people, the educated Soviet public came to see Korea as a country with a fascinating ancient culture. It did not approach the popularity of Chinese or especially Japanese culture, but it was increasingly known and taken seriously.

**Images of South Korea, 1945-1990:**

**From Starving American Colony to the Great Capitalist Success Story**

The deterioration of Moscow’s relations with Pyongyang after 1960 did not have much impact on Soviet official attitudes towards South Korea. It was described as a place where US neo-colonialism reigned supreme. Some small and isolated groups in the Soviet population (like, for instance, ethnic Koreans of the Sakhalin island who largely originated in what is now South Korea) might have gained access to some information about the ‘South Korean economic miracle’. Until the mid-1980s the average Soviet citizen imagined South Korea as a run-of-the-mill underdeveloped military dictatorship with some Asian specifics. In short, it was a country run by brutal and corrupt generals, where common people lived in abject poverty and fear.

Only the political class and small but influential groups of policy analysts knew the actual situation. Contrary to the common misperceptions, the prospects of formal diplomatic recognition of South Korea were seriously discussed in Moscow from the early 1970s. The present author remembers how in spring 1983, he – together with a few dozen other students – was attending a presentation by Mikhail Kapitsa, then the Soviet Vice Foreign Minister responsible for the Asia-Pacific region. Kapitsa loved to talk to students and during such encounters he could be very open and frank for a Soviet official (indeed, for any official), more so because the meeting was conducted behind closed doors. One of the participants asked Kapitsa whether the official recognition of South Korea would ever happen, Kapitsa replied that in the long run the USSR would definitely establish formal diplomatic relations with South Korea. He said: “It would make sense to wait until North Koreans once again do something stupid and clearly detrimental to Soviet interests, and then we can react by establishing an embassy in Seoul”. He also remarked that in the long run a cross-recognition would be desirable with the US establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea as a gesture of reciprocity.

However, the dramatic discovery of South Korea had to wait until the early days of Perestroika. This discovery was dramatic indeed. In the late 1980s South Korea came to be seen as a symbol of everything the Soviet people then considered desirable: market economy, dynamic economic growth and openness to the outside world. In a somewhat curious twist, Soviet public opinion tended to overlook the features which for decades had defined their perceptions of South Korea; for example, they conveniently ignored that until 1987 the country remained a military dictatorship.

It was the Soviet decision to dispatch its athletes to the 1988 Seoul Olympics which opened the floodgates. The Soviet press run admiring stories about the affluence, sophistication, and economic success of South Korea, frequently contrasting it with the economic failure of the North,
this success story was seen as the best confirmation of the unstoppable power of the market economy. This was exactly the message the Soviet public wanted to hear around 1990.

This trend clearly contradicted with what the majority of the educated young Koreans wanted to believe at the same time. In South Korea of the late 1980s Leninism (and sometimes even Stalinism) was popular among students. It led to amusing misunderstandings when young Soviet intellectuals, then overwhelmingly firm believers in the great potential of capitalism and liberal democracy, encountered their South Korean peers who had an equally ardent belief in the virtues of the planned economy and state-managed society. Their inability to understand one another was truly staggering.

This clash of worldviews was especially pronounced when it came to literature. The aspiring Korean revolutionaries were profoundly shocked to learn that the works of socialist realist ‘cannon’ they studied with zealous diligence (like, say, Gorky’s Mother or Mayakovski’s poems) were despised in the country of their origin as worthless crap produced by the regime’s paid hacks. Visiting Russians were equally amused to see that seemingly normal people were ready to talk about these works without contempt.

In this regard Oleg Proskurin, one of the leading Russian literary scholars, wrote with amusement in his blog how in 1992 he encountered a South Korean scholar at some international conference. The young Korean scholar complained how the military regimes made her and her friends study Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak while preventing them from dealing with ‘real’ Russian literature, which, in her mind, included Fadeev, Ostrovsky and, above all, Gorky’s Mother. For a young Moscow professor who saw these ‘official’ authors as a cabal of shameless propaganda-mongers, such statements were seen as almost unbelievably absurd and outrageously comical, so even now he relates the incident because of its amusingness.1

This early enthusiasm for South Korea would subsequently wane, but did not disappear completely. For the average Russian person, South Korea remains a country of technological wonders and economic success. But it has still not completely emerged from Japan’s shadow, so it is still not unusual to read in a Russian tabloid newspaper that ‘Koreans once again demonstrated their traditional samurai qualities’. Nonetheless, for the most part Korea has acquired its own distinct identity, different from those of China and Japan.

Perhaps, the single most important factor which influences Russian perceptions of South Korea is the current omnipresence of large Korean companies in the Russian marketplace. LG, Samsung, and Hyundai have long since become household names in Russia even though some Russians do not necessarily associate these companies with Korea. Some people still presume that Hyundai or Samsung must be Japanese companies – in 2009 I was sitting in a bus next to a Russian who confidently said that Hyundai was a Korean branch of Honda, with the name being slightly changed for marketing purposes. The quote which is put at the beginning of the present article clearly shows the role which the commercial success of Korean brands plays in promoting a positive image of Korea.

Another confirmation can be found in an online forum where in April 2006 one of the participants asked himself an interesting question which is very relevant to our topic:

We are going to sell a Korean brand of consumer goods, so I asked myself, ‘what is Korea?’ I replied to myself: LG, Samsung, Kia, Hyundai, the Korean War, Koreans eat dogs, there was a movie about honggildong and a couple of other martial arts movies too (a North Korean movie about Hong Gil-dong was widely shown in the USSR in the 1980s – AL).2

Indeed, this seems to be a pretty good summary of what the average Russian, without much interest in Asia or some specific Korea-related hobbies, thinks and knows about Korea.

Talking about popular perceptions of Korea and Korean culture in Russia, one must mention a few things which clearly influence what the average Russian knows and thinks about ‘The Land of Morning Calm’. These are Korean cuisine, Korean cinema, and Taekwondo. Korean cuisine is widely known in Russia. Essentially, three things normally come to a Russians’ mind when Korean cuisine is

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2 http://www.forumsostav.ru/1/14015/
mentioned. First, this is spicy food, second, ‘the dog-eating habit’ and third, ‘Korean salads’, the so-called ‘Korean carrot’ in particular. References to ‘Korean carrot’ are very common in the Russian press (in August 2010 a search on Russian Google produced 70,000 results referencing the dish). Since the dish is virtually unknown in Korea, it warrants some explanation.

Korean food was introduced to Russia by local Koreans. After 150 years of Koreans living in Russia, they have modified their cuisine, making food more suitable for Russian palate. As a result, most South Korean visitors do not see ‘Russian-Korean cuisine’ as Korean, and with good reason: most their dishes are only distantly related to the food eaten on the Korean peninsula. At the same time, this flexibility has allowed them to make their fare a huge market success; virtually every large Russian supermarket sell Korean food and specialized Korean food sections can be found in specialized stores. Indeed, Russia is one of the very few countries where Korean cuisine has become genuinely and widely popular. To some extent, it plays the same role as Chinese cuisine in the United States, that is, the role of affordable ‘Oriental exotic’.

The best seller is ‘Korean carrot’ – carrot cut into matchsticks and then treated with a special spicy sauce. This dish can be bought virtually everywhere in the former Soviet Union, and for most Russians this carrot – not kimchi – is the culinary symbol of Korea. Nearly all Russians are sure that Korean carrot is the main dish in Korea, and are shocked to learn that in Seoul it is served only in Russian restaurants.

One can easily find such statements as “Korea carrot, since long ago, has been the culinary symbol of Korea […] We are much indebted to the Koreans, we cannot imagine our lives without such things as LG and Samsung consumer goods, Daewoo cars, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, the Seoul 1988 Olympics, World Cup. But this is not the main thing. The main thing is Korean carrot” (Sumbur, September 2002).

This enthusiastic tribute to a ‘Korean’ product which is completely unknown in Korea is both curious and instructive.

One of the things different from the perceptions of Korea in other countries is the absence of so-called ‘Hallyu’, the craze for things Korean which in recent decade or so has been so typical for the countries of East Asia. Russian TV networks never show Korean serials, even though sometimes such serials can be seen on the cable networks in major cities. Korean pop stars, in spite of their occasional concerts in Russian cities, remain largely unknown to the public. With the sole exception of cinema, the average educated Russian still remains unaware about modern Korean mass culture.

It also makes sense to note that in some major cities there are groups of younger Russians who are interested in some aspects of the Korean popular culture. Many of participants in such groups are ethnic Koreans, but their activity is by no means restricted to this ‘ethnic’ audience. These people might be fans of some Korean pop groups or Korean TV dramas. Yet this is a marginal phenomenon. Its scale is marginal compared to ‘Hallyu’ in East and South-East Asia.

The situation is slightly different in Uzbekistan and other countries of now independent Central Asia where Korean serials have been shown with measure of success. But it must be remembered that nowadays these regions are becoming increasingly different from Russia, and their interaction with Russia is limited.

The situation with the Korean cinema is different. Korean movies enjoy some limited success among the Russian audience. One should distinguish the art house movies from more mass-oriented films.

Of the mass-oriented films, one should mention such movies as Shiri (什莉), JSA, Bichunmoo (飛天舞), My wife is a Gangster (마누라), 38th parallel (태극기 휘날리며). All these movies were shown in Russian theaters, made some money and won some approval from the critics, although none of them can be seen as a runaway success. Still, penetration of the Russian movie market, heavily dominated by Hollywood blockbusters and, increasingly, local productions, is an achievement in itself. That said, in recent 3-4 years no new Korean mass audience movies have been a hit with Russian cinema audiences.

Talking about the high-brow audience, one cannot overlook the success of Kim Ki-duk’s films among the educated Russian audience. However, in spite of his success among elite audiences,
Kim Ki-duk can hardly be seen as popular among the average cinema-going person (very likely, the vast majority of them never heard his name).

Finally, one should mention the success of Taekwondo in Russia. Since the late 1970s, Russia has witnessed an explosion of interest in the Asian martial arts, initially associated with Karate. From around 1990 Taekwondo’s popularity increased and probably overtook Karate in popularity. The cultural associations between Korean and Taekwondo are quite clear, and for some Russians Korea is, first and foremost, ‘the country of Taekwondo’.

Some Final Remarks

The sketch above indicates that to a very large extent Russia’s perceptions of Korea reflects Russia’s own concerns, hopes and illusions. This is true for any country after all. Korea was seen as a backward country in need of Russian imperial protection, as an oppressed colony dreaming about liberation, as a younger brother ready to fight for the just cause of communism (and later as an embarrassment to this cause), as a country of ancient wisdom to be studied and as an embodiment of a social system to be emulated. All these images have more to do with Russia itself than with Korea.

The age-old Russia Eurocentric worldview is in slow retreat. Russia still tends to look to Europe in search of cultural patterns and fashions, but the role of Asia is steadily growing. The economic successes of Asian countries, Korea included, make people re-consider the somewhat arrogant attitude toward Asia.

Korea itself is slowly advancing on the Russian cultural stage as its economic and political influence increases. A hundred years ago it was seen as a tiny and politically insignificant place, while now it is perceived as an important developed nation. The images associated with Korea and Korean culture are spreading, and – with the exception of some images related to the Kim’s family dictatorship in North – most of these images are positive.

There seems to be almost no potential for political conflict between Russia and Korea, and this also makes it likely that the Russian public will continue to see its eastern neighbor in a positive light. Of course, more efforts are needed, but it seems that now, in 2011 we can look forward with confidence. However, if earlier experiences are a guide, we might expect that Russians will still see Korea largely through the lenses of their own expectations and fears.

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The article provides an outline of changes which have occurred in the Russian perceptions of Korea over the 150 years of contacts between these two countries. It shows how the Korea of Russian imagination evolved from an insignificant, if pleasant, distant country (perceived through the prism of the then dominant Orientalist paradigm) to a country struggling for its liberation against the evil forces of imperialism, and finally to a country which is the embodiment of material success and technological sophistication.

KEY WORDS: Images of Korea, the Russian perceptions of Korea, Korean studies, Russo-Korean cultural and political interaction