

Russian and Oriental Elements
in Anatoly Kim's Prose *

---- About 'WE' Thought in the Prose of A. Kim ----

Choi, Gunn-young

INTRODUCTION

The study of current Soviet literature involves both the literature in the USSR and that of the so-called 'dissident' within and out of the Soviet Union. The picture of Soviet literature in the Soviet Union alone, however, implies that of national multifariousness.

One of the main streams in the development of Soviet literature in the 1970s and 1980s has a strong tendency to write about myths and legends from various national traditions all around the country. The prose works of such non-Russian writers as C. Aitmatov, T. Pulatov and F. Iskander are pervaded with the spirit of their own cultural traditions.

This trend, however, does not mean that the world of their prose works is entirely discontinuous with the Russian tradition, not only because of the primordial reason that they are writing in Russian but also because of the fact that these writers - raised, educated and well versed in Russian tradition - create a unity of both traditions.

Anatoly Andreevich Kim, whose recent works (Lotos or Belka) are quite experimental and Western-oriented, belongs to this group of writers. The world of 'polyphony' experimented in his recent works claims its foundation on

the multi-national origin of Anatoly Kim. He is well acquainted with the Korean and Japanese traditions in the Far East and Sakhalin where he had spent a long time. He knows much about the Korean community and their vicissitudes in Russia and the Soviet Union through the one hundred years of immigration history, not to speak of their strong attachment to the spiritual inheritance of their own traditional culture. Kim also finds himself to be one of the Korean third generations raised in the Central Asia, esp. Kazakhstan, into which he was born in 1939. He knows the culture and language of the Kazakh land where he had spent his childhood until his family was to move to the Far East in 1948 and where he got to know the war to the bone. He spends about ten years in the Far East and Sakhalin and ends up as a student of a Moscow art school in 1957.

Anatoly Kim, albeit he wrote since the end of the 60s, managed to have two short stories printed in the Leningrad journal Avrora in 1973. His unique and original style by means of a painting-like manner drew the attention of many critics and came to secure a broad readership. Now he is one of the most popular non-Russian origin writers in the Soviet Union. Not a few prose works from more than ten collections published during the last ten years have been translated into English, French, German, Polish, Korean and other languages of the world.

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Only two chapters are presented here to show the family background of A. Kim and one of the Oriental aspects of his prose works. As for the writer, some new informations are added.

FAMILY HISTORY OF ANATOLY KIM

Though Anatoly Kim was born in Kazakhstan, his family history starts from the Far East where the immigration of many Chinese, Koreans and Japanese was in full swing at the end of the 19th century. The immigration of many Koreans into the Russian Far East dates from the 1860s. 'Until the beginning of the twentieth century this Korean immigration was prompted mainly by economic reasons, but the Japanese occupation of Korea provided new political incentives for the trek into the Russian Far East.' 1

Anatoly Kim belongs to the third generation of one of these Korean immigrants. Kim's grandfather, a poverty-stricken Korean peasant, crossed the border through Manchuria into the Far East of Russia at the turn of the century, in c 1906. Though he had left his wife and two children in Korea, he remarried in Russia and had three sons. The second of these three, christened 'Andrey' in the church, was Anatoly Kim's father.

Anatoly Kim's grandfather was leading a miserable life with his three children, when his younger brother from Korea finally found him out in 1918. The uncle of Anatoly Kim's father was looking for his brother since he had come to Russia from Korea where he could have no longer put up with the miserable condition of his brother's deserted family.

With the appearance of his younger brother, Anatoly Kim's grandfather was at a loss what to do. He knew that he had no other choice but to accept the proposal of his brother to go back to Korea where his original family was waiting. Anatoly Kim's grandfather, however, was suddenly

taken ill out of grief and died. His brother could not help staying there to take care of the three children left without father. In spite of this unexpected development of affairs, the uncle of Andrey Kim never abandoned his original plan to go back to Korea, which had been just about to come true.

There had been no peace between the uncle of Anatoly Kim's father, Andrey Kim, and the widow, who in the end abandoned the three children to get married again. This made the uncle of Andrey Kim penniless. She was the owner of the house. Later, the uncle even had to guard the three nephews against their new-married mother who was trying to bring them to her new family. She was loitering around the house to have a look at her children over the fence everyday in tears. From that time on the uncle of Anatoly Kim's father had to look after his nephews for about ten years.

The uncle had to work hard to educate his nephews. In doubt about his plan to go back to his and brother's families in Korea, he could not dispense with opium. It was a time of drastic change after the Revolution in the Soviet Union, the 1920s, and the children were also provided with jobs to do. For the three children, the Young Communist League, Komsomol, meant a promise for a new life. The uncle, dreaming only of going back to Korea, tried to persuade them not to join the Komsomol, only to fail. His nephews were quite satisfied with the new life to come.

Later, Andrey Kim found his way to study in Rabfak and his two brothers also made their ways to education. The uncle who had raised and educated them for about ten years since he came to Russia in 1918 was left alone by then. There was

nothing he could do any more, it seemed to him, for the future of the three Soviet Koreans. Finally he made up his mind to leave the place alone and wrote his last letters for three nephews. He died while he was crossing the Chinese border line.

Informations about the life of the three nephews in the 1930s are not available at the moment. One can presume, however, that they had to leave the Far East to the Central Asia, Kazakhstan, in 1937 by the Stalin's policy. Almost all of the Soviet Koreans in the Far East were forced to move as far as the Central Asia.

It must have been in Kazakhstan that Anatoly Kim's father had finally settled down. Anatoly Kim was born there in 1939. During his childhood in Korean villages, Anatoly Kim could get acquainted with the traditional Korean folklores, many of which, later, play an important role for his prose works. 'In the evenings bonfires were sometimes lit, and fairy tales were told and retold around them. Fairy tales, and all things associated with them, are natural to me,' says Anatoly Kim. 2

With this unique experience in the Far East and Sakhalin (1948 - 1957) and Kazakhstan during his childhood behind, Kim's observation of human soul destined for existential hardships began to be transformed into his early short stories.

PROSE WORKS AND ORIENTAL ELEMENTS

Although Anatoly Kim has established his place as a writer in Soviet literature mainly by his povest' and the novel Belka, his literary career begins with short stories. He considers a short story, rasskaz, to be the source, from which all other

literary genres originate. All literature grew out of oral tales, he says. For him, a short story is a form of literary genre through which he can best exert himself to express the world of human soul.³

Since the first two short stories printed in 1973, more than 70 stories were published and most of them were collected for his first book, The Blue Island in 1976 and another one, The Taste of Wild Plums at Dawn in 1985. In his first collection of short stories, Kim portrays mainly the Korean community and their life in the Soviet Union, focusing on the conflict and tension in the human soul trying to justify the destiny and existence given to them. Kim's pursuit for spirituality predominates in his early long stories as well - in Sabiratelyi tray and Poklon oduvanchiku to name a few.

Anatoly Kim's search for the istoriya dukha never stops all through his povest' printed in 1975 - 1980 and his first novel Belka in 1984, up to the second collection of short stories The Taste of Wild Plums at Dawn published in 1985. Though many of the short stories in this collection have urban setting of modern life Anatoly Kim keeps on giving prominence to the themes of human spirituality and death. It is through human souls that, Anatoly Kim believes, the state of immortality (beccmertie) can be achieved.

A. Kim claims that the world of human soul is all connected beyond time and place. In the formation of A. Kim's outlook, this 'link of chains' in the form of human spirit and soul (dukhovnost') is of utmost importance. This idea leads to Kim's 'WE' (kimovskoe MY), which is repeated in his Lukovoe pole, Lotos and the novel Belka. And this is the

point where the state of immortality can be achieved through the Universal Voice (Khor Zhizni). All philosophical development in the prose works of A. Kim converges upon this idea - whether WE can achieve this state of harmony by the ascent from the state of I (ya) to that of WE (MY), a transformation from I to WE.

For A. Kim, the state of ya is something mortal and transitory. Only through the state of brotherly MY (WE), a moment of transformation (moment preobrazheniya) can take place. This is also a moment of ascent (voskhozhdenie) and, as it happens in the povest' 'The Jade Belt' or 'Gurin's Utopia', a moment of flight (polët) as well. All these philosophical metaphors are presented to form a personal mythology, as is often called, kimovskii mif.

It comes as no surprise that the philosophical aspect of Kim's personal mythology has been influenced by Tolstoy. And, needless to say, Tolstoy's idea of brotherhood is an echo of N. Fyodorov's religious philosophy. In A. Kim's philosophy, however, different from Fyodorov's idea of resurrection that is to take place by restoring the dead physically to life, the ancestors are to return spiritually to life.

In this sense, the idea of 'WE' in Kim's prose works denotes spiritual harmony rather than physical resurrection upon which Fyodorov's Christian idea centres. Kim's belief in the return of a man's spirit from the dead and the existence of ancestors' spirit alive in the memory of the descendants is clearly Oriental. Besides, Kim's 'WE' thought is a manifestation of traditional Korean feeling, 'Woo-ri' which must have been resounding all the time in his memory as one

of his spiritual inheritances.

Another Oriental aspect in Kim's 'WE' philosophy can be explained by presenting his belief in transformation of things. He is concerned with both physical and spiritual transformations (prevrashchenie and perevoploshchnie) and the spiritual one is more valued than the physical one in Kim's world. Even though one dies physically, his spiritual 'I' remains immortally to join the eternal 'WE'. This motif is often combined with the traditional Korean folk tales about the transformation of animals and men. There is an echo of Buddhism as well.

These two aspects of Kim's 'WE' thought - harmony/ relatedness and the spiritual transformation - are best expressed in Belka. The point of this experimental roman-skazka lies in the fact that Kim's philosophy, focussed on the spiritual transformation and set against the physical one, has come to gradually take shape, if int clear enough, in his own style through this novel.

This voice of all mankind, 'WE' is one of the literary symbols for Anatoly Kim, just as a tower or a winding stair for W. B. Yeats, and the 'objective correlative' for T. S. Eliot. It is one of Kim's private symbols for his meditative long stories and the first novel. It also distinguishes Kim from the other writers of myth trend in Soviet literature. Anatoly Kim's personal mythology, for instance, is different from that of C. Aitmatov in the sense that Aitmatov takes Kirghizian and Kazakh legends directly into his novels. He does not creat personal myths for the development of his thought while Anatoly Kim does.

Notes

1. Walter Kolarz, The Peoples of the Soviet Far East,
2nd ed., NY, 1954, p. 34.
2. Sputnik, No. 10, 1987, p. 126.
A. Kim, Dykhaniye legendy, LG, Oct. 21, 1981.
3. A. Kim, Puteshestvie k istokam, DN, No. 8, 1981,
p. 240.