10-1-2004

The Acceptance of Dostoevsky in Japan—A Dialogue Between Civilizations

Seiichiro Takahashi
Tokai University, Japan

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol51/iss51/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
THE ACCEPTANCE OF DOSTOEVSKY IN JAPAN—A DIALOGUE BETWEEN CIVILIZATIONS

SEIICHIRO TAKAHASHI
TOKAI UNIVERSITY, JAPAN

The United Nations proclaimed the year 2001 the year of dialogue between civilizations. Regrettably, partly because of September 11th attacks, many countries seek to settle their disputes by force, not through dialogue.

Dostoevsky, a Russian novelist who considered deeply the problem of conflicts between "self and others" in his many works such as Crime and Punishment, is one of the most popular foreign writers in Japan. For example, three different editions of Dostoevsky's complete works have been published so far.

In addition to that, in 2000 an international conference on the theme of "The Twenty-first Century through Dostoevsky's Eyes-The Prospect for Humanity" was successfully held for five days during which many scholars, including 25 from foreign countries, participated. (The schedule included a short excursion introducing Japan.) At the conference there many reports were made on the importance of dialogue in the works of Dostoevsky.  

Henceforth this paper will analyze the meaning of the acceptance of Dostoevsky in Japan from the viewpoint of comparative civilizations, noting the theme of the ISCSC St. Petersburg conference and dialogue as the means. Through this attempt, I intend to gauge the possibility of overcoming the clash of civilizations.

Peter the Great's Reforms and Russo-Japanese Relations

In 2003, St. Petersburg celebrated its tricentenary. It is interesting that also in 2003 Edo, which was once the seat of government of the Tokugawa Shogunate and later turned to be the capital Tokyo, was 400 years old. Moreover, like the Romanov dynasty, the Tokugawa Shogunate maintained a very long regime; it lasted over 250 years, from 1603 until 1867. The big difference is that while the Romanovs, especially Peter the Great, employed an open-door policy, the Shogunate enforced isolationism. In 1612 international trade with European countries was forbidden. The Shogunate prohibited the Japanese people from returning from abroad and, at one point, even refused to receive its own people when shipwrecked.

Peter the Great was the first ruler who wanted to begin trade with
Japan during the period of Japanese isolation. Knowing the Japanese policy, Peter the Great met with Japanese who couldn't return home; in 1702, he founded a Japanese school in St. Petersburg and in 1705, he appointed these Japanese as teachers. (The death masks of some Japanese teachers had been kept in the Kunstkamera). Some of these Japanese have an interesting history.

In 1783, a Japanese merchant, Kodayu, was shipwrecked on a Russian island. He learned many things while he was in Russia, but he still longed to go home. Catherine the Second, the successor of Peter the Great, thought that this was a good chance to have contact with Japan. In 1792, she sent the merchant in a Russian ship to the Japanese ruler. Kodayu gained reentry to Japan and provided a wide range of useful information about Russian customs, history, and language. He also gave Japan information that Peter the Great had reformed Russia and was regarded very highly.

**Peter the Great's "Enlightenment" and the Meiji Restoration in Japan**

From the beginning of the 19th century, other Western countries also came to Japan to demand the opening up of several ports for trade. Many Japanese wanted to preserve traditional Japanese ways and, for that purpose, they went so far as to propose the killing of foreigners. Some able administrators, however, found such measures useless and wanted to establish a new political system immediately so as not to be overwhelmed, as India and China had been. They urged adopting many elements of European civilization.

It is interesting that there were some thinkers who thought Peter the Great's enlightenment in Russia would be a good model for Japan. Indeed after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the new Japanese government carried out many comparable reforms. They established military conscription and compulsory education, sent many students abroad, and employed foreign engineers and teachers at top salaries. They also relocated the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo (once Edo). That is, the new Edo became a "window" from which European civilization came in. They even banned the old traditional hair style and constructed a special ballroom in Tokyo to learn European dances. Of course not every reform was based on Peter's, but some of them are obviously similar.

After opening its doors, Japan's situation changed dramatically. Successful industrialization and the militarization of the country brought the government wealth and produced a newly rich class.
1894 Japan dared to go to war with China, a country which once had a great influence on Japanese culture. Japan won this encounter and gained a market in Korea.

But a successful modernization of the country did not mean an improvement of the situation for the general population. To carry out its reforms, the new government needed more money and they exacted heavy taxes from the people.

Although Russia did not play an important role in the political and industrial modernization of Japan, Russia influenced Japanese literature. Kawabata Kaori, a scholar of Russian literature and comparative literature, suggested that in 1908 the total number of translations from Russian literature exceeded those from English. He explained the reason: the description of deep suffering from rapid industrialization and a resultant search for solutions to such problems aroused the sympathy of the Japanese people, because they had almost the same problems.

In this sense, it is intriguing that Yamamoto Shin, a Japanese scholar of the comparative study of civilization, writes that both Japan and Russia started as civilizations peripheral to the Chinese and Byzantine Empires, respectively, and only gradually developed their own civilizations. He observes that, when they encountered Western civilization in the modern age, "Both countries adopted a policy to strengthen their economic base and military power in a hurry, for fear of being colonized by the great Western powers which surpassed them. They forced modernization 'from the top' by means of Westernization for that purpose." This is particularly true of Peter the Great, who abolished Russia's former isolationism, and whose "policy was similar to our Meiji Restoration to some extent."2

However, when Japan's economy worsened and there were conflicts with Western nations, the public wanted to reject Westernization and revive their own traditions. Noting contempt for Japan's indigenous culture by those who worshipped the West and ethnocentric nationalism as a reaction to it, Yamamoto Shin argues that the cyclical change takes place every twenty years. It is interesting that both the highest and the lowest point in the cycle curiously coincided with the acceptance of Dostoevsky in Japan.

Dostoevsky's

Dostoevsky's father, Mikhail, rose to the nobility in his lifetime thanks to the system established by Peter the Great which made it possible that any able man should be promoted.
Young Dostoevsky appreciated highly such modernization by Peter, while he criticized in his first novel, *Poor Folk*, the problems of serfdom and censorship from a westernizer's viewpoint following the grand tradition of Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. Dostoevsky was sent into exile to Siberia, and when he returned to St. Petersburg, he began to advocate "Pochvennichestvo" (native soil conservatism), observing the importance of and reconciliation with Russian cultural and historical tradition. He feared that drastic Westernization was apt to shake the cultural foundation of his country and bring its people to identity crisis, only to provoke chauvinism as a reaction.

After a journey through Europe in 1862, he wrote *Crime and Punishment*, in which he depicted murders and the agony of an excellent student who had been forced to leave law school because of his poverty. Dostoevsky had the protagonist, who regarded the struggle for existence as the law of nature, invent a theory that an 'extraordinary man' had the right to kill evil men. This novel, especially before the World War II, put questions to Japanese readers as to one's own self and the means of enlightenment. About this novel, various interpretations were made. One went so far as to sympathize with the protagonist and insisted that one should not flinch from war for the benefit of reforming the world.³

As the studies of Dostoevsky are proceeding, however, gradually it has become clear that this novel did not promote the theory of the "superman," but represented the catastrophe of such a notion. In the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, having Raskolnikov dream of the extinction of the human race, Dostoevsky showed the consequence of Raskolnikov's "egocentric view of the world."⁴

This point of view was a result of Dostoevsky's own experience in Siberia, when lived with people in the bosom of nature. Although it appeared to be an idea of compromise, it already had some modern themes such as importance of dialogue between self and others, intellectuals and the public, one's own nation and other nations, the human race and the nature.

"Diversity" in the Edo Era and Golovnin

When Russia was invaded by the Napoleonic army in 1812, it was on the brink of another war in the Far East, because its relations with Japan had become soured by territorial issues and trade friction. It was
Takadaya Kahei, a Japanese merchant, who contributed to avert this crisis. With knowledge of the level of Russian culture, he respected both Russian and Japanese cultures and maintained persistently the risk in war, saying that Japan had not made war nor invaded any countries for two hundred years. He finally succeeded in liberating the Russian man, Golovnin, who had been detained for intrusion into Japan's territorial waters.

Golovnin, who had been in prison in Japan for three years, was surprised at the high literacy rate of the Japanese and their politeness. In his book, _The Experiences of a Russian Prisoner in Japan_, published in 1816, he defined Japanese civilization as completely different type from a European civilization, still described Japan as one of the most civilized nation in the world. Chaadaev, in _Philosophical Letters_ referred to this book.\(^5\)

Actually, the policy of isolation gave Japan about 300 years of peace, providing enough national wealth for development, not only of a good commercial system, but also of education. Therefore, about 270 clans live together and competed with each other to develop their own cultures and enhance their productivity. Ukiyoe or wood block prints which greatly influenced French Impressionists is one of the instances. This high level of culture led to the rapid successful modernization in Japan after the Meiji period.

Golovnin's book gained popularity and was translated into all European languages. A young missionary, Nikolai, was most influenced by this book. He came to be interested in above-mentioned Takadaya Kahei and the Japanese culture. He came to Japan and in addition to missionary work, he introduced Russian literature, including Dostoevsky, which had great influence on many Japanese.

I believe that this episode proves that the world today needs understanding of self and others through dialogue. Dostoevsky wrote his novels as though they were polyphony (dialogue) rather than monophony, and his writing has had a great influence on other novels since then. Shiba Ryotaro, a novelist who wrote a novel about Takadaya Kahei, said the diversity of the Edo period enabled Japan's peaceful development.\(^6\) I think the principle of diversity was very important for opening up the possibility of overcoming the clash of civilizations. In other words, the world is not composed of just one kind of flowers and butterflies, but is made up of variety of flowers, trees and butterflies. Just like this, when the polyphonic voices, not monophonic one, sing in harmony, we can...
establish the peace of the world.

The Clash of Civilizations and Its Solution

In 1993, Samuel P. Huntington analyzed the world situation after the cold war and suggested that a number of countries which shared the same religion might begin an alliance mainly against European civilization.7

However, this is not the first time in history that we encountered such a situation. From the viewpoint of comparative civilizations, it is noteworthy that after the Crimean War, Danilevsky, an old friend of Dostoevsky, appealed to Slavic counties to unite against Europe.8 And before the Second World War, Japan also proposed a confederation among Asian countries against Europe.

In other words, when the clash of civilizations is emphasized, small and weak countries with a civilization in common seek to unite for survival. In his philosophical book written in the form of dialogue, Nakae Chomin analyzed French and German history and concluded that wars were apt to recur and expand, because after a war, the lost country claimed the right of reprisal and then developed powerful weapons.9 Indeed oppression by strong military power may obtain success for a while, but after several years or several decades, a war of reprisal will possibly break out.

Thus along with dialogue as the means, the idea "thou shalt not kill" which Dostoevsky stated in Crime and Punishment is the basic principle of all civilizations.

Notes

1 See, Doetoevsky Square, No.10, Edited by The Japanese Dostoevsky Society, 2001 (in Japanese)


5 Chaadaev, P. Ya., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij i izbrannye pis'ma*, vol. 1, Nauka M. 1991, p. 333, p. 695

6 Shiba Ryotaro, *Nanohana no Oki*, Bungei-shunju, 1982

7 Huntington, S. P., "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993

8 Danilevsky, N. Ya., *Rossiya i Evropa*, izd. Glagol i izd. S-Peterburgskogo universiteta, SPb, 1995

9 Nakae Chomin, *San suijin keirin mondo*, Iwanami-shoten, 1965 (originally published in 1887)