

プロジェクト報告

The Problem of Establishing Mutual Understanding in East Asia

Dr. Petr E. Podalko
Professor, Aoyama Gakuin University

Preface

From the mid-1550s, Russians began their historical “Move to the East” that finally produced a huge empire whose borders widely spread from the Baltic Sea to the shores of the Pacific. But to the people of East Asian countries, Russia, while being located in both Europe and Asia with the latter part triple bigger, always used to be accepted as a European power whose cultural tradition has also been viewed as nothing but a part of the so-called all-European civilized environment. The reason for such thinking probably lies in a racial or physical type of the great majority of Russians, although the roots of such attitude are still unclear. Interestingly, the Turks, who share with Russians the same geographical dualism, have always been treated as a typical Asian nation, despite the fact that their biggest city, Istanbul, also historically known as Constantinople (before its capture by Turks after the fall of the Byzantine empire in 1453), is located on the European shore of Bosphorus.

The history of Russian contacts with China date back to the Middle Ages. For a long time Russia was the only Western state that knew “how to climb over the Great Wall”: the first treaty between these two countries was concluded about 150 years earlier than any treaty with other Western powers (the Treaty of Nerchinsk, 1689).

Impressed by Russian expansion in East Asia with relatively little or almost no use of direct force, Western observers often attributed the Russian ability to get along with East Asians to a so-called “Muscovite shiftiness” and even to a common cultural and/or racial heritage. However, a more acceptable explanation of Russia’s “know-

how” in the Orient can rather be found in language proficiency as well as first-hand acquaintance with Asian ways.

Russian relations with Japan also have a long history. However, commercial dealings or diplomatic intercourse did not occur for a long time, as was the case with China. Many Russians, who later served in Japan, had prior experience of living and working in China. Their so-called “Chinese experience” led them to certain perceptions that could be easily found in their memoirs, which are still valuable today, even if only partly published until recent time.

The success or failure of a nation’s diplomacy depends to a large extent on the skill and experience of its representatives abroad, as well as on the frontier. After all, this is nothing but people who actually realize their country’s interests when communicating with the neighboring states.

Although it mostly applied to those who served in China, and less to Japan, most of the Russian representatives in the Far East had prior experience of living and working in East Asia that made them well-informed in local things and finally led them to significant achievements in their service and other activities, including cultural things as well. By studying their lives, by reading their interesting memoirs, where they described their professional pursuits with special emphasis on the Orient and included many interesting episodes of the modern history of Russo-Chinese and Russo-Japanese relations that are still unknown to the public, we benefit from their vision of the relationship between these major states and get a better understanding of the world order today.