Alternative Opening and Making of Modern Japan

Sho Konishi, Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan. Harvard East Asian Monographs #356. 2013.

The back-cover describes the book: "Mid-nineteenth century Russian radicals who witnessed the Meiji Restoration saw it as the most sweeping revolution in recent history and the impetus for future global progress. Acting outside imperial encounters, they initiated underground transnational networks with Japan. Prominent intellectuals and cultural figures …… pursued these unofficial relationships through correspondence, travel, and networking, despite diplomatic and military conflicts between their respective nations." It "uncovers a major current in Japanese intellectual and cultural life between 1860 and 1930 that might be described as 'cooperatist anarchist modernity'—a commitment to realizing a modern society through mutual aid and voluntary activity, without the intervention of state governance. These efforts later crystallized into such movements as the Nonwar Movement, Esperantism, and the popularization of the natural sciences." This 411-page book is indeed an admirable scholarship of history research with 31-page bibliography of archives and special collections, newspapers, journals, and other serials, books, articles and unpublished papers in Japan, Russia and the U.S. From the point of Japanese history research, I only want to find Chinese characters (kanji) of original Japanese in the Index, since one spelling in English usually corresponds to different kanji or meaning and it is easy now to print out kanji in a book.

The book starts like a novel. "In 1861, in the little port town of Hakodate, one of the several cities recently opened by the Japanese government to foreigners, an American captain bustled about his ship, preparing for a dinner party that would ring in the arrival of a new cosmopolitan era in Japan." (p.1). Here the American captain introduced to his honored guest Consul General I. A. Goshkevich (1814-75), the head of Russia's first diplomatic mission to Japan, his compatriot Mikhail Bakunin, who had escaped from Siberia after over ten year's imprisonment and exile, riding piggyback on the newly opened Vladivostok-Hakodate shipping route. The author states: "The chance meeting in 1861 between Consul General Goshkevich and Bakunin in revolutionary Japan represents the beginning of an anarchist vision of progress founded on principles of mutual aid in Japan that would color Japanese intellectual and cultural life for well over half a century." (p.3). While Bakunin left Japan soon without any publicity and never came back again, six decades later, a blind Russian youth, the Esperanist poet Vasili Eroshenko's being deported caused nationwide disturbance (Chapter 5 Translingual World Order: Language without culture). This is a dramatic nonfiction. "Foreign Minister archives show that the state considered this blind bard and composer of poems and children's stories one of the most dangerous foreigners in Japan." (p.285). "When Arishima and Akita asked police why Eroshenko was to be deported, arguing that he 'is a mere poet,'

the police replied, 'Yes, in fact, that is precisely what is wrong with him.'" (p.293). I noticed Eroshenko when I was under threats from various Japanese governmental agencies since I organized democratic and human rights activities in Japan to protest the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. In 1992 when I was beaten in Tokyo by a Chinese agent, who was hired by National Kobe University as a Law professor because of his betrayal of our Chinese students in Japan, I reported to the Tokyo police and received 4-5 hours investigation from uniform and secret polices. They promised me "justice" because "Japan is a rule-by-law country." However, after several weeks of non-action, I went to the police station again and was told that there was no record of my report. Furthermore, I was warned not to pursue this case anymore, because otherwise I would be charged and deported[1].

On the other hand, the author states: "In macro historical perspective, the Russian culture presence in Japan from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century was, for interpretive purpose, comparable to that of the Chinese culture presence in the intellectual life of Tokugawa Japan before 1860 and the American cultural presence in the intellectual life of Japan after the Asia-Pacific War." (p.5). These statements are really bold enough. However, interesting though, the stories of Lev Mechnikov (Bakunin and Herzen's comrade) in Japan (Chapter 1 Revoliutsiia meets Ishin[2]: The emerging Vision of Cooperatist Civilization) or Arishima Takeo, who sponsored Osugi Sakae's Europe trip nonetheless was not regarded an anarchist (Chapter 4 The History Slide), or Konishi Masutaro who translated the Chinese classical Lao Zi's Daode Jing (Tao te ching道德经, the Way) to Russian (Chapter 2 Anarchist religion: Translation and conversion beyond Western modernity) do not convey such a tremendous anarchist influence. The author frequently mentions Lev Tolstoy as "the most translated author," however Tolstoy's popularity was the same in the world and not due to his anarchist or religion thinking.

To defense, the author further explains: "The phrase 'anarchist history' here does not mean simply a history about anarchists. Rather, it expresses a view of modern global history as simultaneously existing, multiple imaged and lived ideas of progress, or 'modernities' absent teleological and hierarchical ordering." (p.6). It is also problematic that the author frequently utilizes some people's writings as "historians" authority, such as "Historians have long defined anarchy…" (p.9), "Similarly, historians have described anarchism in Japan as a reactionary impulse against the

[1] See my article "The Betrayal of Democracy: Tiananmen's Shadow over Japan," Historia Actual Online. ISSN 1696-2060. 2004. Issue 4 Volume 2, and my letter to Japan's Prime Minister Hatoyama five years ago asking the Japanese government to disclose related records at http://cpri.tripod.com/cpr2009/Zhao_to_Hatoyama.pdf.

[2] Meiji明治 Ishin维新, Meiji Restoration. Here ishin actually means renewal: "restore" and "new". That is the reason the author in the book uses "Meiji revolution."

Western civilizational order, expressing an emotional preoccupation with 'traditional' and 'conservative' moral and spiritual values threatened by the West." (p.9-10). In fact, from this judgment, the author accuses James C. Scott's The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia[3] as "the Western modern conceptual framework that has labeled anarchism in the first place." (p.10). From the frequent uses of "anarchist Kropotkin" or "anarchist theorist Kropotkin" (not just "Kropotkin") we can feel that the author is not familiar to anarchist history per se.

Being not a professor supervising this Ph. D dissertation (the author has to summarize each chapter to guide readers not to get lost), I have less interest in the book's goal stated as: "Examining cooperatist anarchism as an intellectual foundation of modern Japan, Sho Konishi offers a new approach to Japanese history that fundamentally challenges the 'logic' of Western modernity. It looks beyond this foundational construct of modern history writing to understand people, practices, and cultural expressions that have been forgotten or dismissed as products of anti-modern nativist counter urges against the West." As a comparison, James C. Scott's book provided a more consistent perspective to guide much richer contents. If you are not familiar to Japanese or Russian modern history, it is better to directly read other materials specifically on Japanese anarchism, such as Kotoku Shusui, anti-war movement in that period[4]. That said, "'cause I know there is strength in the difference between us and I know there is comfort where we overlap."[5] It is certainly welcome to see the cultural anarchist account reviewing modern Japan alternatively.

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[3] Yale Agrarian Studies Series, 2009. The book was reviewed by Graham Purchase at ASR Summer 2011 #56.

[4] In English, "The Anarchist Movement in Japan", a pamphlet by John Crump (which is a summary of his book Hatta Shûzô and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan. Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1993.) is a very good start. http://www.spunk.org/texts/places/japan/sp001883/jappref.html.

[5] Ani DiFranco. Cited from Jamie Heckert in Anarchism and Moral Philosophy, ed. by Benjamin Franks & Matthew Wilson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.