Ivan A. Goncharov "A Voyage to Japan" (Included in *The Frigate Pallada*) (1858)

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Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov

Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov, the son of a rich merchant, was born in 1812 in Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk) on the Volga River. After graduating from Moscow University with a degree in literature, he worked as secretary to the governor of the province. While working at the Finance Ministry's foreign trade department in St. Petersburg, he continued his literary training and made his literary debut in 1847 with *An Ordinary Story*. From 1852 to 1854 (when the Edo period was drawing to an end) he visited Japan in his capacity as secretary to Admiral Putyatin, and his record of this experience was later published in 1858 as *The Frigate Pallada*, which included "A Voyage to Japan." After returning to Russia, he rose steadily in the ranks of government, becoming censor of the Ministry of Education and editor-in-chief of the Severnaya Potchta (The Northern Post), among other posts. During

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this period, he wrote *Oblomov* (1859), which depicted the stagnation and lethargy of Russian society, and *The Precipice* (1869), which is said to have been modeled by Futabatei Shimei's *The Drifting Cloud* (*Ukigumo*, 1887). Both of these works received critical acclaim and criticism. The former was praised by the then famous critic Nikolay Dobrolyubov as a scathing critique of serfdom, while the latter was unpopular with the left-wing camp because of its depiction of crude revolutionaries as well as impotent aristocrats. Later, he was somewhat overshadowed by the achievements of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, but he was still a first-rate writer. He died in 1891.

> Here was the locked casket whose key was lost, a country whose acquaintance was sought doggedly, with gold, with guns, with sly diplomacy. Here is a populous part of the human race that has cleverly avoided contact with civilization and has dared to live by its own brains, its own laws; that has steadfastly denied the friendship, religion, and trade of foreigners; that laughs at our efforts to enlighten it, and sets the native customs of its antheap against the natural, democratic forms of life, the merits and demerits of Europe. (*The Frigate Pallada*, translated by Klaus Goetze, published by St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987, pp. 265–6)

On the very day the port of Nagasaki came into his view, Goncharov expressed this sentiment about Japan's stubborn isolation. It was August 10, 1853 (18th day of the 7th month, Kaei 6), about a month and a half after Perry's arrival in Uraga-bay.

Russia had begun diplomacy with Japan at the end of the eighteenth century, with Adam Laxman bringing back Daikokuya Kōdayū and two others under the order of Empress Ekaterina II in 1792, and Nikolai Rezanov had come to Nagasaki in 1804 with four shipwreck victims under the order of Emperor Alexander I. After this, however, Russia's engagement with Japan was minimal.

Thus, the arrival of Yevfimiy Putyatin in 1853 came as a surprise to Japan. It was also fortuitous that Goncharov, a writer known for *An Ordinary Story,* and chief translator or rather a subsection chief of the finance ministry's foreign trade department, came to accompany Admiral Putyatin. Goncharov, who had been in a slump due to the loss of his mother, monotonous bureaucratic work, and lack of time to write novels, when his good friend Nikolay Maykov, a painter, and his wife, Yevgeniya Maykova, a writer and poetess, facilitated an excellent opportunity. According to them, Abraam S. Norov, the then Deputy Minister of Education, was looking for a secretarial assistant to work under an Admiral to write down the voyage records of their journey to Japan. A strong curiosity about foreign countries and a longing for the unknown Japan led Goncharov to jump at the opportunity. This was the direct cause of Goncharov's decision to write "A Voyage to Japan." (There is another view that Goncharov was averse to the tightening of censorship following the French Revolution of 1848 and sought other venues for his activities. "A Voyage to Japan" is not the name of the original book, but is part of a larger travelogue entitled, *The Frigate Pallada*, which was translated into Japanese and published under the name of Nihon tokōki.)

Already informed that the U.S. was pressing Japan to open its ports, the Putyatin mission set sail from Kronstadt in October 1852, stopping at Portsmouth, England, at the end of the same month to purchase and rig schooners and to prepare for the

voyage. It departed from there on January 6, 1853, via the Madeira Islands, Cape of Good Hope, Java Island, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands, and arrived in Nagasaki on August 10, as mentioned above. This first stay in Nagasaki lasted 3 months.

The Russian envoy left the country with the enthusiasm that "if not us, then the Americans, and if not the Americans, then someone else to follow, will soon be destined to pour healthy fluids into the bloodstream of Japan," but what awaited them was a stalling tactic by the magistrate in Nagasaki. When the Russians tried to negotiate with the Japanese, according to Goncharov, they "can't do the jobs, they stall, they cheat, they lie, and then they refuse" and "the officials said that one has to ask the magistrate, and the magistrate will then send word to Edo, to the shogun, who will in turn send word to the Mikado, the Son of Heaven, in Miyako."

In retrospect, however, the Nagasaki magistrate's stalling tactics, which may have been unavoidable under the isolationist regime, in fact gave the Russians more opportunities to experience various things in Japan. Goncharov's logbook-style writing is never tasteless, perhaps because it takes the form of letters addressed to old and trusted friends, and is written in the spirit of impulsive curiosity.

Let us now examine the specifics of *A Voyage to Japan*, Goncharov's method of depiction, and its distinctive features. The chapters consist of "Hong Kong," "Bonin Islands (Ogasawara Islands)," "The Russians in Japan," "Shanghai," "The Russians Again in Japan," and "The Ryukyu Islands." Among them, the main descriptions are "The Russians in Japan" and "The Russians Again in Japan."

The content of the book may be divided into three main types, Firstly, it includes descriptions of the scenery of Nagasaki and other places. "It is all like a picture, like an artistically composed scene," he says, praising the Japanese landscape in the highest terms. Secondly, it comments on the general manners and customs of the Japanese people and their ways of thinking and behaving, ranging from the common people, interpreters and the plenipotentiaries from Edo, Tsutsui Hizen-no-Kami, and Kawaji Saemon-no-jō (Toshiakira). The third type of content may be said to explore the cultural frictions observed.

Goncharov's genuine talent lies in his portrayal of people, as demonstrated in his later writings, such as *Oblomov*. For example, he portrays the curious Japanese as follows. "Gokenshi treated us Russians most courteously, asked for our names and our ranks, for each man's obligation on board, and wrote everything down, taking from their bosoms a folding inkwell that looked like a little like our old-fashioned candlesticks." Although he was uncomfortable with the Japanese costume and their ungainly "chonmage (topknot)" hairstyles, he wrote that the Japanese "are cultured, socially secure, entertaining, genial and remarkable for their distinct sophistication" and that "they are not a people hopelessly set in their ways and rigid; on the contrary, they can be logical, astute, able to grasp foreign ideas, if they consider this necessary."

The most vivid descriptions given are of the interpreters' behavior, with the exception of the description of the Russians who ate the Japanese meal. For one thing, Goncharov observed, the warrior class, because of its class system, must pretend to be incompetent in front of their superiors, even if they were competent,

whereas interpreters were given their own field of activity and were intellectually curious and eager to learn about the world as quickly as possible. Here we find Narabayashi, who dreams of traveling the world; Kichibei, a skilled senior interpreter; and Einosuke, who is competent and became Kawaji's personal interpreter, but who sometimes looks boastful. Some were brave enough to speak not only in Dutch, but also in English and French, albeit in a broken manner.

After a 3-month stay in Japan, the Putyatin's mission temporarily left for Shanghai, but returned to Japan on the fifth of December for the climax of their visit. It was a meeting between the Russian delegation and the plenipotentiaries, Tsutsui and Kawaji, who had been entrusted with the mission by the rōjū (the senior councilors of the Tokugawa shogunate). Even though the isolationist policy had almost broken down, the meeting between the shogunate's plenipotentiaries, who were determined to persist with this policy, and the Russian delegation, who were pressing for the opening of ports, was a friendly but fierce confrontation. This is probably the scene of most interest to us Japanese. In his *Nagasaki Diary*, Kawaji wrote about the Russian side as follows: "The name of the Russian who came this time is an envoy Putyatin, written "布恬廷": this person has an extraordinary gaze and seems to be a heavyweight. ... Goncharov: this person has no titles, but can be said to be a man in charge of organizational matters who performs secretarial duties, and appears to be the real intellect behind the envoy, always staying by his side to advise him."

Even if they are formally divided into two sides, able men can communicate sincerely with one another. Goncharov, as a Russian, unexpectedly proved that even in the late Tokugawa Shogunate there was a brilliant man like Kawaji, who possessed intelligence, wit, insight, skill, and wisdom.

> I liked it when Kawaji, holding a magnificent fan, looked and listened, when the talk was addressed to him. Up to the halfway point of the speech his mouth was half-open, his brow knitted, all signs of concentrated attention. On his forehead the play of wrinkles showed clearly how the questions, one after the other, reached his understanding, and how the general sense of what was said, formed in his brain. After the mid-point of the speech, when he had grasped the meaning entirely, his lips pressed together, the wrinkles on his forehead vanished, his whole face shone: he already knew what he was going to answer. If the question contained a secret meaning behind what was officially said, an involuntary smile appeared on Kawaji's face. When he started to speak and talked for a long time, he stayed with his subject, and his intelligence showed plainly in his eyes. When the old man (Tsutsui) spoke, he dropped his eyelids and did not look at him, as if it was not his affair, but the vivid play of his wrinkles and a trembling of his eyebrows showed that he listened to him more than to us. On Kawaji obviously fell the whole burden of the negotiations, and Tsutsui was sent more to lend authority, and possibly because of his agreeable character.

It may be noted that Goncharov's attitude toward the Japanese is somewhat patronizing, like an adult who slightly looks down on children. Although he understands that the "infantilization" of the Japanese is half due to their national isolation, words such as "childish," "childlike," and "naïve" are often used as adjectives to describe the Japanese. This is perhaps why the dignified plenipotentiary, Kawaji, seemed more "grown-up" in his eyes.

Various episodes in the book foreground the differing customs, ways of thinking, and cultural frictions between the Russians and Japanese. The Japanese were

surprised, for instance, when the visitors touched the piano keys; the Russians felt that the sake served from the Japanese side was nothing more than "water"; Goncharov could not understand the tea stalk floating erect in his cup and stated, "I looked: in the bottom of the cup were tea grounds, what a barbarous custom! Even in the land of tea!" The Japanese and the Russians argued over whether the meeting with the Nagasaki magistrate should be held "seated" or "on a chair" (this is not only a difference in custom, but also a political and diplomatic tactic.) The Russians, while admiring the gifts of inkstone boxes and swords from the plenipotentiary, felt that the cotton and silk textiles from the Shogun, which were probably splendid from the Japanese point of view, were "too simple to be used as window coverings in a respectable house, although they were of two colors, red and white, with patterns woven into the fabric." These interesting anecdotes are often written with excellent humor.

One of Goncharov's interesting characteristics is his relativist view in relation to people of different races. This may not be so unusual an attitude for seafarers who have been through England, Cape Town, Southeast Asia, China, and other places, but the fact that his "comparative" view is free from preconceived ideas or prejudices, is very clearly conveyed and he does not necessarily consider Europeans to be ethically superior. For example, referring to British attitudes in Shanghai and elsewhere that were "imperative, coarse, cold and contemptuous," he writes, "I don't know which of the two peoples (the British or the Chinese) is civilizing the other; the Chinese may well be civilizing the British with their modesty, humility and business acumen." Similarly, he expresses his high regard for the Ryukyu Islands, with their well carefully tended fields, thatched houses and gardens, and peaceful human relations.

Goncharov's book *A Voyage to Japan* is not only a good memoir and observation of Japan at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate from a foreigner's perspective, but first and foremost it is a record of voyages. The chapters "The Russians in Japan" and "The Russians Again in Japan" were first serialized in the Russian naval magazine *Morskoĭ Sbornik* from issue numbers 9 to 11 in 1855, and published in book form in the same year. Three years later, in 1858, *The Frigate Pallada*, which had tripled in length, was published in two volumes, and the unknown and "curious" Japan became widely known to Russian readers. During his lifetime, the book went through six editions, an unprecedented number for the time, suggesting how much credit he deserves for fostering dreams about "Japan," particularly among young Russians.