Concept of “tea” in Russian culture

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Abstract. The paper is devoted to the study of the literary functions of the concept of “tea” in Russian culture and the history of the formation of the conceptual framework associated with it and the representations demonstrating this concept. The paper considers the introduction of the concept of “tea” into Russian culture; reveals related meanings that have origins in both eastern (Chinese) and European culture. The material for generalization is the texts of Russian classical literature of the 19th century, reflecting different versions of the studied concept – the works of N. Karamzin, A. Pushkin, N. Gogol, A. Ostrovsky, L. Tolstoy, A. Chekhov and other authors. The main types of representations of the concept of “tea” are revealed: tea as an “element of life”, “part of a meal”, “medicine and a source of strength”, “part of an alcoholic culture”, “attribute of a calm life”, “attribute of secular reception”, “attribute of friendship”, “method of communication”, “means of stimulating reflection”, “method of intellectual rest”, “means of the dialogue of cultures”, etc., as well as some plot-driven and style functions of the concept. The repeated use of the concept of “tea” in the works of writers of the 19th century suggests that it is one of the significant symbols of Russian literature, which is reflected in the realistic (E. Antashkevich, E. Baryakin) and postmodern (V. Sorokin) texts of the past.

1 Introduction

The humanities (philosophy, cultural studies, logic, art science, linguistics, literary criticism, etc.) of the 20th century began to widely use the notion of “concept”. This “interdisciplinary” concept, which arose at the intersection of different sciences, allows revealing the continuity of meanings, diverse intercultural connections: symbolic meanings of images are formed on their basis, associative connections are built. The associative potential of cultural concepts revealed in the reflections of the author and reader identifies various aspects and levels of literary reality, their connections with the literary worlds of other historical eras and national cultures.

Academician D.S. Likhachev considered the term “concept” as “an algebraic expression of the value in all its complexity”, which any addressee of aesthetic information “interprets depending on education, personal experience, belonging to a certain environment, profession, etc.”, i.e., creates a “conceptual framework” of culture representing the culture in a “compressed” and concentrated form [1].

Z.D. Popova and I.A. Sterlin interpreted the concept as a “global thought unit” noting both subjective and objective reasons for its formation as a specific feature of this cultural phenomenon. With such an understanding of the concept, the sources of its formation are the sensory experience of a person and his substantive work, as well as his cultural experience and diverse thought operations with other concepts that lead to new concepts and related meanings and cultural associations on their basis [2].

Thus, we can state that in the modern sense, the concept is a “cell” of the spiritual world of an individual and the mental world of culture as a whole, the embodiment through the culture of the “collective unconscious” (simultaneously connected with the “collective conscious”), i.e., by means of which a person enters the culture, and in some cases affects it [3].

Russian culture in the 19th century created many concepts, the totality of which – the “conceptual framework” – made up its spiritual “core” associated in our consciousness with ideas about its “classical”, “golden” era. This conceptual framework is associated with many connections and associations with cultures of previous eras and, in turn, affects the culture of subsequent periods. However, the conceptual framework of Russian culture – both in general and through its individual components – concepts – is still not fully studied.

Among the many concepts of Russian culture of the “classical” era we chose the concept of TEA. This choice is explained by a number of reasons. Firstly, this concept has a rich background in other national cultures (both Europe and Asia), which, together with the concept, somehow entered the Russian cultural consciousness. Secondly, the material of Russian literature of the 19th century clearly shows the process of its formation (entry into culture), the emergence of numerous variants of its representations and determines its artistic functions in the text. In accordance with the tradition established in the humanities the representation is understood as a

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variety of “secondary” representations in culture, a way of mediated, through culture, presentation of another cultural object that acquires new interpretations, meanings and cultural connections as a result of this process.

The concept of “tea” is correlated with two different cultural traditions. One of them – “Asian” – was connected, first of all, with China, from where this drink came to Russia at the end of the 17th–18th centuries. Within the framework of Chinese life, this drink had many functions: it was considered as a special product of agriculture (the process of its cultivation and preparation for use is especially complicated), a good gift, a medicine [4] that cures a person from many diseases, a means of promoting productive communication of people, an attribute of festive life, an indirect indicator of a person’s social status, one of the main symbols of national culture, as well as a special aesthetic object bringing unique pleasure to a person [5, 6].

A description of the tea preparation procedure, the tea ceremony associated with it and the special “tea philosophy” is contained in many Chinese books, among which the most famous was the treatise “Cha Jing” (茶經) – “The Canon of Tea” created in the era of the Tang dynasty by the “tea sage” Lu Yu, who considered tea as a source of world harmony [7]. In Chinese art, tea and tea drinking were a source of a number of folklore and literary plots, a source of inspiration for many poets and musicians (composers), the subject of images of artists, and the creation of objects necessary for the tea ceremony (made of metal, porcelain, wood and varnish) [8] became a special industry of national decorative and applied arts. It is interesting to note that many of these Chinese representations of tea immediately penetrated into Russian everyday life and culture and became an integral part of the chinoiserie style popular in the 18th century: along with Chinese tea sets, tea became the subject of a literary image.

The first book from which Russian readers learned about tea, its production and the process of its correct preparation was a book published by one of the first Russian Sinologists and translators from the Chinese language A.L. Leontiev (1716–1786) – “Notice of tea and silk from the Chinese book of Wan Bou Guanyin” (1775), which described both the work of growing tea and tea ceremony. This description was accompanied by poetic writings and recommendations on the use of tea for medicinal purposes, i.e., reproducing almost the entire range of main associations correlated with tea in Chinese culture [9].

Almost at the same time – in the second half of the 18th century performances related to another – “Western” (primarily English) – tradition penetrated Russian culture. In accordance with English ideas, tea was primarily the subject of commerce and related foreign policy, and all other meanings associated with this drink – tea as a drink that promotes a certain type of friendly communication – faded into the background. In Russian use, the concept of “tea” drew into its intertextual field the meanings coming from the conceptual framework of the culture of Great Britain. However, in Russian culture, representations related to “European” traditions throughout the 19th century also actively developed.

2 Results and discussion

The concept of “tea” included a number of motifs associated with this drink and the process of its consumption in its conceptual framework – tea dishes, samovar, accompanying food – as well as certain plot situations and the surrounding environment (space). All these “accompanying characteristics” of the concept determined the originary of its representations in Russian culture.

One of the first works to represent the concept of “tea” in Russian culture was the “Letters of the Russian Traveler” by N.M. Karamzin (1791), where it is interpreted as a sign of European culture. The “Letters…” present a number of representations of the concept, which later actively developed in Russian culture of the 19th century – tea as part of a daily meal, an attribute of one’s own house in Europe (the basis of comfort and housekeeping) and the characteristic of a certain quality of life, tea as an element of communication and a means of achieving a fair solution to issues, tea as part of the national culture” (in this case English), and finally tea as a way of a dialogue of cultures.

In the process of further development in Russian literature, the concept of “tea” acquired more and more representations. New versions of representations appeared, for example, in the rogue novel by V.T. Narezhny “Russian housing base, or the adventures of the head of Gavrila Semenovich Chistyakov” (1813–1814), where tea is shown as an expressive detail of life of a certain class and an attribute of communication that contributes to the unity of people (which in general corresponded to “Chinese” traditions).

In the “encyclopedia of Russian life” – the novel “Eugene Onegin” tea is represented as an integral element of Russian life: tea and tea drinking are included in the daily routine and correlate with some everyday foundations (“lunch”, “tea”, “dinner”) and with the “everyday” aspect of life as a whole (it is no coincidence that in two of the three episodes of the novel where tea is mentioned, the drink correlates with just a few “down-to-earth” and “housewifely” Olga).

In the second half of the 1820s–1830s tea began to be interpreted as an iconic image of the material world, and tea drinking as one of the events that the writer closely associates with the development of the plot. In the novel by M.P. Pogodin “The Black Nonsense of a Young Man” (1829), the tea party becomes the background of the development of the plot, correlated with the plot, climax and denouement of the text, emphasizing the antithesis of the opposition of the romantic hero to the established way of life and conservative family traditions. In O. Somov’s story “Matchmaking” (1931), the tea party correlates with the climax of the plot – the failed engagement of the hero. In the same period, the concept of “tea” was included in the conceptual fields “house” and “friendship” being the most important for Russian culture of the first half of the 19th century: for
example, in the “friendly message” of I. Kozlov “to I.A. Turgenev” (1832), the mention of the drink emphasized the contrast between the “wandering” and the native refuge (“corner”).

In the works of N.V. Gogol, tea most often appeared in situations when it is necessary to show the material wealth and estate of the heroes, demonstrate the socio-economic situation and, as a rule, also organically associated with the plot emphasizing its most significant moments, as if “pushing” the plot to further development. In “Petersburg Tales” (1832–1842), tea drinking is shown as an integral part of the life of the main street of St. Petersburg: it is drunk by both wealthy citizens and less affluent segments of the population ( Nevsky Prospekt); the mention of tea is paired with the most significant events in the fate of the main character-artist (“Portrait”); Akaki Bashmachkin, entering the path of saving for the sake of acquiring a new overcoat, primarily refuses tea (“The Overcoat”); tea acts as an “indicator” of the special “aristocratic” position of one of the dogs (“The Diary of a Madman”). In “Dead Souls”, the representation of the concept of “tea” traditional for Russian literature of the first third of the 19th century “as an element of luxury” acquires an ironic and even grotesque sound to emphasize the contrast between the flashiness and reality.

New versions of representations of the concept of “tea” appear in Russian literature and culture of the mid-19th century.

In the plays of A.N. Ostrovsky (“It’s a Family Affair- We’ll Settle It Ourselves” (1849), “The Marriage of Balzaminov” (1861), etc.), the concept of “tea” symbolizes the traditional way of life, and the image of the tea ceremony becomes the most important attribute of Moscow merchant life.

In the “geographical novel” by I.A. Goncharov “Frigate “Pallas”” (1852–1858), the analysis of tea addictions becomes a way of penetrating national traditions. The concept of “tea”, in accordance with the tradition coming from the “Letters of the Russian Traveler” by N.M. Karamzin, is associated with the situation of intercultural communication. For example, the description of the “international” tea party on the Cape of Good Hope in the British Cape Colony is presented in the context of depicting the traditions, language and culture of the local population, and the “overseas” drink itself is revealed through the “prism” of tea that is drunk at home, when describing the completion of the trip, the author summarizes the experience of acquaintance with tea cultures of different countries, showing the relativity of human preferences [10].

In the novel “Oblomov” (1847–1859), the concept of paradise is found in many representations (“element of life”, “part of a meal”, “part of alcoholic culture”, “attribute of calm life”, “attribute of secular reception”, etc.): this attribute of landowner life occupies one of the central places in the consciousness and life of the hero, becoming a constant companion of the hero (including in a dream) and losing in this regard, perhaps only to the sofa.

Representations of the concept of “tea” constantly appear in the works of F.M. Dostoevsky. In the novel “Notes from a Dead House” (1860–1861) this is one of the key concepts of the work: due to the ability to drink tea and treat others, the hero acquires special respect in the eyes of prisoners, and drinking tea together allows him avoiding loneliness. References to tea arise when describing a special state of life in hard labor – on the border of freedom and non-freedom, life and death, luxury and poverty, and these states are associated with different invariants of the concept: tea as an important component of the life of prisoners, tea as a measure of prosperity, tea as a commodity (including for the purpose of natural exchange), tea as an indicator of relative freedom [11].

In the novel “Crime and Punishment”, the concept of “tea” included both traditional representations (tea as an element of life, tea as part of a meal, tea as an attribute of friendship and communication) and new ones formed by the writer himself – tea as a means of stimulating reflection, tea as a medicine and a source of strength. The most important climax events of the novel were most often associated with episodes that described the use of tea.

The concept of “tea” was associated with new representations during the last third of the 19th century. In the play by L.N. Tolstoy “The Power of Darkness” (1886), love for tea correlates with the physical and spiritual state of the hero, and a joint tea party not only symbolizes the warm relationships of the characters, but also expresses sacred meaning: tea is drunk only by like-minded people, conflicting characters cannot sit together at a samovar, since tea drinking at an unworthy host desecrates the guest. In the plays of A.P. Chekhov (“Uncle Vanya” (1889), “Three Sisters” (1900), etc.), tea already acts as an attribute of intellectual work and intellectual recreation, i.e., the “embedded” elitism of the drink is emphasized.

Thus, during the 19th century as tea gradually became an organic part of the national order the concept of “tea” was associated with ideas about national life and the national specifics of culture, it became a “travel companion” and “a sign of special comfort” accompanying a friendly conversation, a way of characterizing the owner and his house.

The Russian version of the concept of “tea” gained a certain literary content: on the one hand, it included some representations related to Eastern culture (tea drinking as a process of obtaining aesthetic pleasure; tea drinking as a process of health promotion, etc.); on the other hand, it correlated with the western tradition that came from Britain, according to which tea was primarily a commodity associated with a certain social policy; the concept of “tea” was often used to organize the plot of the work, reflected the emotional state of the hero, became the “background” for the unfolding conflict and the idea expressed in the text, an ambiguous symbol.

One of the most interesting phenomena of Russian culture in the first half of the 20th century is the literature of Russian emigration. On the one hand, the literature of the Russian abroad perceived itself as an organic part of Russian literature and consistently focused on following
the traditions of Russian culture of its “classical period” and the conceptual framework associated with it; on the other hand, it was inevitably to one degree or another to focus on the culture and features of the political situation in the country that gave shelter to Russian wanderers – France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Serbia, the United States of America, Brazil, China and other states.

In terms of the history of the formation of the studied concept of “tea”, Russian literature of China is of particular interest, the main centers of which were Russian “cultural enclaves” – the cities of Harbin, and then Shanghai. The Russian literary history of these cities was reflected both in the works of Harbin and Shanghai writers (their novels, short stories, essays, stories, diary entries, memoirs) and in the studies of historians (for example, E. Taskina and G. Melikhov, who lived in China in the 1920s–1930s). The life of the Russian Far Eastern emigration became the subject of a “secondary” literary image in a number of works of modern Russian writers published in the 2000–2010s – B. Akunin, V. Davydov, L. Drozdov, A. Orlov and some others. In this sense, E. Antashkevich’s novels “Harbin” (2012) [12] and “33 stories about the Chinese police lieutenant Sorokin” (2013) and E. Baryakina “White Shanghai” (2017) [13] are distinguished. They present a very accurate description of the social and cultural life of the Russian emigration based on documents and on fiction, historical and journalistic literature [14].

The functioning of the concept of “tea” in these works is interesting: on the one hand, tea and the motives associated with it turn out to be precisely Chinese in their characteristics (“Boiling water gurgled in a mint bucket, Nina Vasilievna made tea – green, Chinese. Klim showed card tricks and removed the seven of hearts from the sleeve of Colonel Terekhov, and in place of the queen of spades – from Madame Panova’s hat”; “They have a palm tree and a revolution there, and we have a kettle on alcohol and dried bread” [13]; “Anna wiped tea and dessert spoons with a napkin, Alexander Petrovich swung in his chair and, as it seemed to Kuzma Ilyich, listening to his reading...” [12]), on the other hand, the concept is represented in the spirit of the traditions of its functioning in the Russian culture of the 19th century – as an organic part of Russian everyday life and goods (the heroine makes and drinks tea, the hero serves in a tea company, the hero sells an old samovar to survive; gives tips to the Chinese) and at the same time tries to understand the features of the tea ceremony and what role tea plays in Chinese culture. We can conclude that the trends of Russian realistic literature of the 19th century in fact developed in these works, and the concepts used in the texts of the representation of the concept fully fit into the traditional conceptual framework of this period.

During the 19th century, tea, originally an exotic and expensive “overseas” drink, became an organic part of national life and even its symbol, as well as one of the central concepts of Russian literature. This qualitative characteristic of the concept was retained during subsequent periods of the development of Russian culture, which reflected the Russian literature of subsequent periods.

Thus, in the 1980s a modern writer V.G. Sorokin created a novel with the ambiguous name “Roman” (published in 1994) recreating the stylistic and plot features of the texts of Russian literature of the 19th century, as well as ironically playing their motives. The novel by V. Sorokin realizes the traditional metaphor for the writer of “murderous reading” (“Dostoevsky-trip”, “Feast”, “Concretneye” and other works) – reading understood as a “thanatological event”, which kills by its act not only the author, but also the hero, and the reader, and the text, and the genre.

As literary scholars note, the main part of this work “consists of stylistic allusions to the work of L.S. Turgenev, L.N. Tolstoy, A.P. Chekhov, and F.M. Dostoevsky” [15]. On the other hand, the novel is not at all a “reconstruction” of traditional national life, but a postmodern “deconstruction” of Russian classical culture of the 19th century. Representing the “worldview shift of the individual’s consciousness”, the writer achieves a similar “shift” in the reader’s mind, seeking a breakthrough “into terrible, chaos and absurdity”; which, in turn, contributes to the “destruction of metatext”: the scrap “already built, reality familiar to everyone” [16].

To achieve the genuine compliance with the “Russian world” of the works of these writers, V.G. Sorokin turned to key concepts of Russian classical literature contained in the texts of source works, such as “hunting” and “alcohol”, as well as eternal themes of art, especially vividly embodied in the writings of writers of the studied century: “non-reciprocal love”, “social inequality”, “relationship of person with God”, “place of person in the world”, “the confrontation of the city and the village” and others.

Already on the first pages of the novel “tea” becomes one of the most important concepts of the text: “Soon Roman drank odorous, tightly flavored mint tea from a low Chinese cup, and instead of salinity there were vases with jam and honey on the table” [17]. The concept of “tea” is accompanied by motives traditionally associated with it in Russian literature (“pigweed” – paradise in the “Russian” version, copper samovar, kettle, Chinese tea porcelain dishes, cookies, jam and honey) and situations (peaceful conversation) and corresponding representations (tea as an element of life, an important part of a meal, an attribute of friendship and communication, a source of strength, a means of stimulating reflection, a way of intellectual rest, a means of dialogue of cultures, etc.). Similar representations of the concept can be found in the works of many writers of the 19th century – for example, the representation of “tea as an attribute of the bath” can be found in the “Marriage of Balzaminov” by A.N. Ostrovsky.

Tea and tea ceremony are depicted in the text of the work again linking, in accordance with traditional ways of representing this concept, its “key” plot-compositional moments: in the beginning of the main plot of the novel – the first breakfast in the house of “uncle” and “aunt”, in the climax of the work – the wedding scene and in its finale – the murder scene: “Anton Petrovich began to fall close and hit his back hard on the side of the billiards, which is why his head leaned back, destroying a stack of tea dishes” [17]. In the same room, a dialogue between
the main characters – Roman and Tatyana – takes place after the wedding, and the “background” of the conversation between the newlyweds turns out to be the same tea dishes: “There was no one here, and stacks of plates and numerous tea dishes were crowded on billiards. Tatiana took Roman’s hand, pressed it to her chest and, looking into her husband’s eyes, said...” [17].

At the same time, the time of representation of the concept of “tea” in the novel also becomes a means of deconstruction of the “Russian world”. Thus, the novel describes an unusual way of drinking tea – “water tea”, which occurs after a bath right in the river [17], during which the characters drink tea “diluted with rain” (making tea on water obtained from rain or snow is a custom dating back to ancient China). During the wedding, Uncle Anton Petrovich makes a significant toast about the Russian samovar (and not about the parents of the bride or groom – as it was supposed to be according to the mentioned “Georgian traditions”), revealing its “national specifics”.

3 Conclusion

The description of the “wedding feast” ends with a series of sayings about tea (“Drinking tea with pleasure isn’t working without measure!”, “If you don’t drink tea, you’ll never get stronger?”, “Tea cures drunkenness!” and “Tea is strong with brewing!”), “The way you drink tea is the way you will party!”, “Drink tea, and do the things!” – both real and “authorized”) [17], which in the context of this work draws its “foundation” into the context of the destroyed art world – folk culture presented through the folklore genre.

Thus, the postmodern allusion to the work of I.S. Turgenev, N.S. Leskov, F.M. Dostoevsky, L.N. Tolstoy, A.P. Chekhov created at the end of the 20th century is also associated with an appeal to the concept of “tea”, which has become one of the main symbolic attributes of Russian culture of the 19th century occupying a central position in the novel by V.G. Sorokin. At the same time, the concept of “tea” in the considered text performs a function aimed at destroying the “artistic myth” created by the Russian culture of the classical period.

The literary concept of “tea” was correlated primarily with the everyday, social and economic aspects of the life of Russian people and with the rhythm of everyday life. At the same time, this concept in Russian literature turned out to be associated with a number of cultural contexts: tea as part of a home environment, a friendly feast and an important component of friendly communication, an element of a dialogue, a way to solve fundamental routine and philosophical issues discussed at tea. It was this feature that contributed to the fact that this concept in the works of Russian literature of the 20th century (both realistic and postmodern) began to serve as one of the potential symbolic “substitutes” of the culture of the “classical” period. Besides, “tea” formed conceptual fields associated with other concepts most important for Russian literature – “house”, “friendship”, communication, etc.

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