

# EISENSTEIN AS JAPANOLOGIST : THE JAPANESE LITERARY TRADITION IN EISENSTEIN'S THEORY OF MONTAGE

by Koichi NAKAMURA

## INTRODUCTION

Sergei M. Eisenstein probably influenced the film more than any other international film figure did. The circumstances of his career permitted him to complete only six films. But even so, his importance is out of all proportion to the slight bulk of his work. His films are widely regarded as perennial classics.

Eisenstein's writings were also way ahead of their time and still continue to make contribution to the academic field related to the film. He is considered to be a pioneer in the field of semiotics.<sup>1)</sup> His discoveries in the psychology of art and creative process wait for reevaluation and new treatment.<sup>2)</sup> His theoretical works are indeed a fountain of information.

Eisenstein learned all he could about everything he needed to know. He started to study the Japanese language after World War I and progressed far enough to be able to manage some three hundred Chinese and Japanese characters. His knowledge of the Japanese language did not become artistically meaningful, however, until he began to consider the theoretical basis of film as an art form. The importance of Japanese literary tradition in the formation of his art is expressed in his own essays and autobiography.

In the following pages I shall attempt to discuss the Japanese literary tradition in Eisenstein's theory of montage. The discussion will begin with Eisenstein's meet with Chinese characters and the Japanese language. His early career before going on the film will be traced and examined to show how he became acquainted with the Japanese language. The second topic of discussion is largely an account of Eisenstein's application of the Japanese literary tradition to his theory of montage. His interpretation of Chinese characters and the Japanese poetry in his essay will be analyzed and evaluated.

Much has been written about Eisenstein. He has been the subject of books, essays, and articles. But it is not my concern to follow them. This survey is, I believe, the first attempt to describe "Eisenstein as Japanologist."

## EISENSTEIN'S MEET WITH CHINESE CHARACTERS AND THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

In 1946 when he was confined at the Kremlin Hospital after suffering a heart attack, Eisenstein wrote his memoirs in the form of an autobiography.<sup>3)</sup> They provide us with plentiful information about his childhood and youth. He was, according to these sources, a precocious child with an observant eye. By the age of 10 he was fluent in English, French and German and had begun reading the classics of those languages in the original.<sup>4)</sup> The astonishing extent of his reading laid the foundation for his later encyclopaedic knowledge and for the development of his artistic ideas. But the Japanese language did not yet confer benefits on him. He had to wait until the Civil War days.

Although Eisenstein's movements during the Civil War (1917-20) are difficult to trace with accuracy, his two years on the front as a soldier of the Red Army provided a variety of experiences that were to prove essential for his future work. One of the experiences is worth mentioning here as his first contact with the Japanese language.<sup>5)</sup>

While he was in the Red Army, Eisenstein concentrated on some abstract areas of interest. His intellectual curiosity led him to the most unexpected subject. At the Minsk front, he lived in a freight car with other members of the political command. Among them was a former instructor of Japanese.<sup>6)</sup> Eisenstein decided to master the Japanese language for better understanding of the country and its art.

Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 caused the decline of Imperial Russia and the outbreak of the first Russian Revolution. Since then many Russian students had shown passing interests in Japan. Yet not a student would have set himself, as Eisenstein did, to understand the nature of the Japanese language and to learn hundreds of Chinese characters.

In order to be sent from the front lines to Moscow, Eisenstein decided to enroll in the Oriental Languages Department of the General Staff Academy. To him the Academy meant "more than just Moscow."<sup>7)</sup> It meant "a possibility of learning……the magic of art"<sup>8)</sup> which, for him, was associated with Japan.

By the middle of 1920, it was clear that the tide of battle was turning in favor of the Red Army. The Bolshevik Government was now firmly established, and its attention turned toward the uprooted people and the problem of reconstruction. As part of the move towards reconstruction, it was decreed that those university students who had supported the Red Army should be demobilized. As a reward for their services they could return to their studies at the Government's expense. They could study whatever they pleased at the school of their choice.

This decree enabled Eisenstein to apply to study Japanese at the Oriental Languages Department of the Academy. After some waiting, he received his discharge papers and a pass to Moscow. From the front he returned not to Petrograd to complete studies of architecture and engineering, but to Moscow to start "something entirely new."<sup>9)</sup>

Arriving in Moscow in the fall of 1920,<sup>10)</sup> Eisenstein found that life in Moscow had reached its lowest ebb. He knew no one in the whole city. He did not know where to go and study. He could not even find food. Food was rationed and he had no ration card. The Oriental Languages Department of the Academy had not reopened. As ration cards were issued only to those who worked or to students, he was not eligible for one. Hopelessly he walked the unfamiliar streets. Suddenly he realized all his ties with the past were broken. There was nothing in his future except the thought that he knew some Japanese and that the Academy must open soon.

Then chance directed him in the way of his childhood friend, Maxim Strauch, who took him home to share his room. That night not only were his immediate problems solved, but his life turned into another channel. Eisenstein set out with Strauch to try to join one of the new workers' theaters. Eisenstein would paint the scenery for the Proletkult Theater until the Academy opened; this work would entitle him to a ration card, and a room. The next morning Eisenstein went to see the Chairman of the Proletkult Theater, who immediately gave him a job.

Despite the shortage of both food and heating facilities in Moscow that winter, the general thirst for culture and the enthusiasm pervading artistic circles gave the city a new-warmth and creative fire. On joining the Proletkult Theater, Eisenstein had no very clear ideas about the theater. But he worked with passion, was bursting with ideas, and was constantly in a state of excitement. He forgot his hunger along with his plans to major in the Japanese language at the Academy.

In his later year when Eisenstein was working on *Que Viva Mexico*, Masaru Kobayashi, who had just graduated from the Aesthetics Department of Tokyo University, sent to Eisenstein his definitive book, *Kabuki Kumadori Gaikan (An Introduction to Make-Up in Kabuki Theater)*, which was based on his graduation thesis. Several weeks later, Kobayashi received a letter from Eisenstein who was staying at Imperial Hotel in Mexico City :

December 14, 1931

Dear Mr. Kobayashi !

I just got your marvelous book on "Kumadori" and am absolutely delighted by its contents and charmed by the taste and fine artistry of the edition as such--another proof of the profound artistic feeling of the people of your country I love so very much.

It makes me twice as much regret that 11 years ago I did not continue to study the Japanese language after working four months on it! I feel that I lose a lot in not being able to read the text, which I suppose is even more brilliant than the pictorial material you so finely gathered together.

.....

Yours truly,

Sergei M. Eisenstein<sup>11)</sup>

Regretably for us as well as for Eisenstein, his study of the Japanese language stopped after working four months on it. However, his knowledge of the Japanese language was certainly what led Eisenstein to his discovery of the principle of montage and his later theoretical works, which will be analyzed and evaluated in the next section.

### EISENSTEIN'S APPLICATION OF THE JAPANESE LITERARY TRADITION TO HIS THEORY OF MONTAGE

Eisenstein's discussion of Chinese characters in his essay, "Beyond the Shot," begins with tracing their origins to "the first 'contingent' of hieroglyphs"<sup>12)</sup> invented by "Ts'ang Chieh in 2650 BC."<sup>13)</sup> Chinese characters are originally pictorial. But, while Egyptian hieroglyphics express in concrete pictures the ideas that provided the basis for the conception of each character, Chinese characters rarely do. In their earliest extant category — what Eisenstein calls "symbols of *hsiang-cheng*"<sup>14)</sup> — Chinese characters have already undergone a fairly complex process of abstraction. They are conceptualized images, not "pictures."

Eisenstein's real interest begins with the second category — "the *huei-i*, or 'copulative'."<sup>15)</sup> The *huei-i* characters were created to meet the needs of a social life growing more complex, and they reveal a very subtle development. They are something more than two simple figures placed side by side. Eisenstein writes that the combination of two simple figures is

.....regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e. as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to a *concept*. The combination of two 'representable' objects achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented.<sup>16)</sup>

After citing famous examples — the picture for water and that of an eye signifies "to weep"; the picture of an ear near the drawing of a door, "to listen," etc. — Eisenstein concludes:

But — this is montage !!

Yes. It is precisely what we do in cinema, juxtaposing representational shots that have, as far as possible, the same meaning, that are neutral in terms of their meaning, in meaningful contexts and series.<sup>17)</sup>

There are some other examples of characters of this type: a woman under a roof means “peace” (安); a woman beside a child means “good” or “to like” (好); and a woman beside the character for “to give birth to” means “surname” (姓). The meaning of each part of these characters contributes to the meaning of the whole, but here the signification of the whole is a synthesis, not a joining, of the meanings of the components. This method, Eisenstein thinks, could be applied to film editing because by joining together two separate images, the result is a third image which is greater than the sum of the original two.

Eisenstein’s statement that the combination of two hieroglyphs is the “ideogram” is extraordinarily close to Ezra Pound’s. The “ideogram” is for Eisenstein a “depictive-intellectual” sign, strongly recalling Pound’s definition of the image. Pound defines in his early essay, “A Few Don’ts,” the image as “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”<sup>18)</sup> He projects this definition onto Chinese characters, and then finds poetic potentialities in this ideogrammic writings.

“Eisenstein shares Pound’s misconception of the written character as an ideogram,”<sup>19)</sup> Earl Miner writes in his book, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*. Miner does not mention Eisenstein’s misconception any further, but he gives two reasons why Pound is wrong. We find:

To begin with, anybody who has attained any fluency at all in reading and writing Chinese or Japanese can verify the fact that, while using the language, one has no more consciousness of the ideogrammic aspects of words than one has of Greek or Latin roots in using English. Second, if we consider the nature of language, we see that the Chinese characters are arbitrary symbols for words, that language consists, in another sense, of “dead” metaphors and that one of the jobs of the poet is continuously to refresh old idiom. The semantic problem of language, especially poetic language, would be unbearably complex if understanding the language involved apprehending every dead metaphor or written component to a character in its primitivistic freshness. Pound sees this and he does not see this.<sup>20)</sup>

These two reasons, however, do not support Miner’s supposition that Chinese characters are not ideograms. As Miner points out, native writers do not necessarily have pictorial significance in mind as they write. But, when Japanese pupils (perhaps

Chinese, too) start to learn Chinese characters in their school, a teacher always provides them with the evolution of the Chinese characters ; the process whereby the basic hieroglyphs become increasingly abstract and complex, and the interesting way in which one character with one meaning is combined with another character of different meaning to produce a new character — exactly what Eisenstein puts in his essay. The ideogrammic significance of Chinese characters is not dead but still alive (though not apparently seen) in both Chinese and Japanese culture. Therefore, no one can conclude that Eisenstein's definition of Chinese characters is a misconception.

Eisenstein treats the principle of Chinese characters as a vehicle for condensation and direct presentation of meaning ; it is the key to “a cinema that seeks the maximum laconicism in the visual exposition of abstract concept.”<sup>21)</sup> Moreover he extracts two essential qualities from the principle of Chinese characters. They are “denotation” and “depiction,” each of which seems a wheel of the vehicle that helps him reach the depths of Japanese art.

*Tanka* and *haiku* are, to Eisenstein, little more than hieroglyphs transposed into phrases. The method of their resolution is completely analogous to the structure of the ideogram. As the ideogram provides a means for the laconic imprinting of an abstract concept, the same method (in its denotative aspect) gives rise to an identical laconism of pointed imagery when the method is transposed into literary exposition. Eisenstein writes :

The method, reduced to a stock combination of images, carves out a dry definition of the concept from the collision between them.

The same method, expanded into a wealth of recognised semantic combinations, becomes a profusion of *figurative* effect.<sup>22)</sup>

Eisenstein's approach to *tanka* and *haiku* is almost purely scientific. The principles he treats here have wide application beyond *tanka* and *haiku* to many other art forms — in some aspects to all. Like the laws formulated by scientists, they are fully simplified and highly intellectualized. Therefore, Eisenstein, like a scientist, avoids emotional insight into the principles by performing an intellectual analysis. But Japanese art stands far from intellectualism. The value of Japanese art lies more in aesthetic and intuitive aspects than in intellectual and logical ones.

What Japanese poets have most often sought in *tanka* and *haiku* is to create with a few words, usually with a few sharp images, the outline of a work whose details must be supplied by the reader, as in a Japanese painting a few strokes of the brush must suggest a whole world. In this, one may detect the influence of the philosophy of Zen

Buddhism, which taught, among other things, that enlightenment was to be gained by a sudden flash of intuition, rather than by the study of learned tomes of theology, or by the strict observance of monastic austerities.<sup>23)</sup> It was the anti-intellectual Zen Buddhism that furnished a significant influence on Japanese poetry.

In his analysis of *tanka* and *haiku*, Eisenstein writes :

Whereas the finely honed edges of the intellectual formulation of the concept produced by the juxtaposition of hieroglyphs are here blurred, the concept blossoms forth immeasurably in *emotional* terms.<sup>24)</sup>

Eisenstein is aware that “the intellectual formulation of the concept” is blurred in *tanka* and *haiku*. Yet he is unaware that “the concept” has vanished in the “*emotional* terms” created by the intuition. The (intellectualized) principle of denotation can be hardly found in this intuitive expression of Japanese poetry.

The principle of the hieroglyph provides Eisenstein with a means of giving intellectual and emotional coherence to his art. But the principle of the hieroglyph is not applicable to every art form. The principle of denotation does not function fully in *tanka* and *haiku*. Yet Eisenstein’s discovery of the cinematographic method in Japanese poetry is rich in originality. He extracts these cinematographic methods by purely intuitive “film sense.” His grasping of the Japanese expression is surprisingly precise.

### CONCLUSION

Chinese characters obviously take a great deal of time and effort to master. Many characters are extremely complex, some being made up of more than twenty-five strokes. At least two to three thousand characters must be memorized before one can read even simple texts.

In the Japanese writing system, most of the Chinese characters are employed without change in form or meaning, only they are pronounced differently. But the Japanese use two other subsidiary characters, *kata-kana*, and *hira-gana*. However, these two do not constitute alphabets but are syllabaries, in which the symbols represent whole Japanese syllables. They require a minimum of forty-seven different symbols. Moreover, they include many variant forms. Thus, *kata-kana* and *hira-gana* constitute a less simple and flexible system than an alphabet. The mixed style of writing in both *kana* and Chinese characters is complicated, yet Eisenstein tried to master this discouragingly difficult language.

In his 1945 article, “How I Became a Film Director,” Eisenstein traced the beginning of his study of Japanese language that led him to Eastern thought :

How many nights I spent memorizing words of an unknown tongue, so completely different from any of the European languages!

How different were the mnemonic methods I invented to memorize these words!

Senaka-back

How to remember that?

Senaka-Senaca.

On the following day I check myself : covering the Japanese word with one hand I read the Russian :

Back?

Back?

Back……

Back-Bacon!

And so on, and so forth.

Japanese is unusually difficult.

And not because there is a complete absence of sound associations with the languages we know, but because the manner of thinking resulting in a word is entirely different from that in European languages.

Memorizing words is not the most difficult thing about the Japanese language. The most difficult thing is to master this unfamiliar method of thinking which determines the Eastern nuances of speech, structure of sentence, order of words, writing, etc.<sup>25)</sup>

It is fascinating to a great degree for me to know how desperately he studied the Japanese language. Fortunately, all his efforts were not in vain. He goes on to say in the same source :

How grateful I was to fate for having subjected me to the ordeal of learning an oriental language, opening before me that strange way of thinking and teaching me word pictography. It was precisely this “unusual” way of thinking that later helped me to master the nature of montage, and still later, when I came to recognize this “unusual,” “emotional” way of thinking, different from our common “logical” way, this helped me to comprehend the most recondite in the methods of art.<sup>26)</sup>

The Japanese language played a leading role in the formation of the theory of montage. Eisenstein’s theory of montage can be identified as the basic element of the Japanese language. Moreover he realized the value of the study of Japanese language in helping him to understand the most recondite in the methods of art. It is to my utmost delight to find his depth of understanding of the true value of the Japanese literary tradition. He is a Japanologist who deserves the name.

## NOTES

- 1) For further details about this subject, see Juri Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1976) and Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1969).
- 2) Eisenstein's discoveries were recently published in English for the first time as *The Psychology of Composition*, ed. and trans. Alan Y. Upchurch (London : Methuen London Ltd., 1988).
- 3) Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories : An Autobiography*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983).  
Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, trans. X. Danko (New York : Dover Publication, 1970).
- 4) Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, pp. 11-19.
- 5) The account of Eisenstein's career during the Civil War is based largely on biographical documents written by Marie Seton in *Sergei M. Eisenstein : A Biography* (New York : A. A. Wyn, Inc., 1952) and Yon Barna in *Eisenstein*, trans. Lise Hunter (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1973). There is only scant record during the Civil War in his autobiography.
- 6) Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 37.
- 7) Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, p. 10.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) Eisenstein, "Autobiographical Note," in Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 479.
- 10) The informations relating to this period in Eisenstein's autobiography and Seton's book are contradictory in many cases. So, the materials used here are mainly dependent on Barna's research based on the recently published and the unpublished materials.
- 11) "Eisenstein to Masaru Kobayashi" in *Eisenstein 2 : A Premature Celebration of Eisenstein's Centenary*, edit. Jay Leyda and trans. Alan Y. Upchurch (Calcutta : Seagull Books, 1985), p. 10.
- 12) This essay was formerly translated by Jay Leyda as "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" in *Film Form* (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1949), pp. 28-44.
- 13) Eisenstein, *S.M. Eisenstein Selected Works*, vol. 1 : *Writings, 1922-34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London : BFI Publishing, 1988), p. 138.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 15) *Ibid.*
- 16) *Ibid.*
- 17) *Ibid.*
- 18) Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London : Faber and Faber Limited, 1954), p. 4.
- 19) Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 221.
- 20) *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.
- 21) Eisenstein, *Writings, 1922-34*, p. 139.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 23) Donald Keene, *Japanese Literature* (New York : Grove Press, Inc., 1955), p. 39.
- 24) Eisenstein, *Writings, 1922-34*, p. 141.
- 25) Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, p. 10.
- 26) *Ibid.*