CHAPTER TWO

MURAKAMI HARUKI AND THE WAR INSIDE

Jay Rubin

Early in his career, Murakami Haruki was dismissed as a lightweight purveyor of pop fiction. But once his novels began to include harrowing reflections on Japan’s tragic wartime history, it became easier to observe the presence of a concern for the country’s dark legacy even in some of his breeziest early fiction. And when such themes did emerge full-blown in Nejimakidori kuronikuru (The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, 1994–95 [1997]), Murakami’s handling of them differed markedly from more conventional, fact-based war novels written by people who had experienced the Asia Pacific War first-hand. This essay will touch briefly on an early story and examine the meaning and perception of the war in The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle.

“A Slow Boat to China”

Even as a high-school student, Murakami had a deep interest in history. One multi-volume set he claims to have read and re-read at least 20 times was an unabridged world history published by the Chūō kōron company (Murakami 1994a: 244). Both from his reading and from stories he heard at home, Murakami grew up with ambivalent feelings regarding China and the Chinese. These emerged in the very first short story he ever wrote, “Chūgoku-yuki no surō bōto” (A Slow Boat to China, 1980 [1993]), a delicate, strangely touching account of how the narrator came to harbor feelings of guilt toward the few Chinese people he had met.

Searching in the deepest, most undefined areas of memory after an injury to the head, the story’s first-person narrator, Boku, comes up with the totally inexplicable words, “That’s OK, brush off the dirt

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1 Adapted from Jay Rubin, Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words (London: Vintage, 2005), Chapter 11.
and you can still eat it”. In themselves, the words mean nothing, but their very lack of logical connection to anything signals that they have emerged from his unconscious.

“With these words, I find myself thinking about... Death... And death, for some reason, reminds me of the Chinese” (13; 220).²

Following three brief episodes illustrating his ill-defined awkwardness toward the Chinese, the narrator of “A Slow Boat to China” declares, “I wanted to say something... I wanted to say something... about the Chinese, but what?... Even now, I still can’t think of anything to say”. He continues in an epilogue,

I’ve read dozens of books on China... I’ve wanted to find out as much about China as I could. But that China is only my China. Not any China I can read about. It’s the China that sends messages just to me. It’s not the big yellow expanse on the globe, it’s another China. Another hypothesis, another supposition. In a sense, it’s a part of myself that’s been cut off by the word China (38–9; 238–9).

In this way, the story stops short of explaining what it is that causes the narrator to have such odd feelings toward China and the Chinese, just as Murakami’s first novel, Kaze no uta o kike (Hear the Wind Sing, 1979 [1987]) offers only a one-liner on the stupidity of an uncle who blew himself up by stepping on a land mine that he himself had planted in the soil of Shanghai. One of the last images in The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, however, is that of “a young moon, with a sharp curve like a Chinese sword”, by which point in the book China has come to stand for the horrific slaughter perpetrated by Japanese soldiers in the war.

Commitment

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle is a sprawling work that begins as a domestic drama involving the disappearance of a couple’s cat, ranges to the Mongolian desert, and depicts the protagonist’s encounter with political and supernatural evil on a grand scale. Far longer than anything Murakami had written before, it is clearly a turning point for the

² The first set of numbers refers to the location of the story in Murakami Haruki zensakuhin, volume 3. The second set refers to Alfred Birnbaum’s translation. See Murakami 1993.