

Undivided Attention: Scholarship and Life in Sapporo

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At the top of Mount Monbetsu

Part way through my all-too-short stay at the Slavic Research Center, I posted two pictures on my Facebook site—one on the top of cloudy Mount Monbetsu, the other in sunshine by a Noguchi pyramid in Moerenuma park—with the caption, “Two views from my happy life in Japan.” A former graduate student responded, “Jane, this requires an explanation, for me at least.” In this short essay, I’ll try to explain what has made me so happy here.

First, of course, all the conditions are fulfilled for scholarly creativity and, if you work at it, productivity. In my view, a fellowship at the Slavic Research Center is best used for the creativity part: you have time to think and rethink what you were working on, to mull over papers your colleagues draw your attention to, to wander

around in the fabulous library stacks, to read the articles you received by email but didn’t have time for earlier. I made only slight progress on a book manuscript, but I wrote three separate pieces that helped me see where my bigger projects—two books in fact—are going. This was made possible by the SRC—its astounding staff, its library, its faculty and students, its visitors, its building, and its special location at Hokkaido University and Sapporo.

I don’t want to draw a sharp contrast between creativity and productivity; they should work together. Scholars tend to draw contrasts, divisions, to come up with categories, to divide people, activities and cultures into types—Asian/Western, rural/urban, professional/personal. One effect of my time in Sapporo was help me develop a challenge to these classifications in my writing on Russian law and governance. Some of my inspiration came from seeing these divides as not descriptive of daily Sapporo life, either—to my delight.

As for the classifications that obfuscate rather than clarify research and writing, my favorite candidates for questioning this summer were “bureaucracy” vs. “personal” ways of rule. I was working on a study of Russia’s “land captains” (*zemskie nachal’niki*)—officials who were supposed to oversee peasant affairs in most provinces of the empire. While doing research in Kazan earlier, I had found a set of inspections conducted in 1909 of these officials. My stay at the SRC gave me the time to construct a data base using these reviews



At the top of Mount Fuppushi (with her spouse, etc.)

of intermediaries of imperial government and to look at it systematically. I did not want to rely on my impressions of what was salient in these documents. A statistical approach, while it took time to attain, let me have a better look at the qualities of *zemskie nachal’niki*’s performance of their tasks, in the eyes of their reviewers. These internal reviews, designed for other officials to read, give us insight into how the inspectors themselves wanted to represent the qualities of a good or a bad administrator.

What turned out to matter to the state’s inspectors were both bureaucratic and personal factors. The most important topics of the reviews of the *zemskie nachal’niki* were record-keeping, supervision of township institutions and officials, promotion of a complicated land reform, speed and completeness of work, accuracy in applying the law, and oversight of the regional economy. But the inspectors also cared about the individual qualities of these civil servants—were they interested in their work, were they energetic, were they trying to learn how to improve their performance? This analysis provoked me to challenge both the usual myths about Russian governance—arbitrary, lawless, backward, etc.—but also to think how we misuse Weberian categories. They do not describe two distinct modes of government: modern bureaucracies vs. personalized old regime power. Governance can be both bureaucratic and personal. In fact, how can you have a “bureau” without a “bureaucrat” to run it?

How does thinking such thoughts relate to the Slavic Research Center and life in Sapporo? Well, there are other dichotomous categories that we use regularly to describe everyday life. East/West and rural/urban are examples of classifications that can become challenged if you live and work in Sapporo. For one thing, where is the east really? How do we get our sense of direction here in Japan? Especially when most of us are working on Russian empire, where both east and west are used, but differently and with their own multiple meanings. My sense in Sapporo was that neither scholarship or daily life could be described in east/west terms: everywhere there were creative blends and takes on insights and inventions from all over the globe. Connections, diversity, pleasure in differences, easy appreciation of tradition and novelty, kimonos and the coolest socks, not to mention so many delicious cuisines—all these defy classification and all of them belong to Japanese culture in its many expressions.

Rural/urban is a divide that has irritated me for a long time, both in my work as a historian of Russia and as a person who grew up in the countryside. Perhaps it’s one reason I write about peasants: I want to show that they are individuals, not just a backward collectivity. Before coming to Sapporo I lived in New York and Paris, both places where people can’t



In Moerenuma Park in the Sapporo suburbs

together, in ways that made me, a historian of Russian peasants, once a girl who grew up with a garden and mountains in the background, very happy.

Finally, art and sport. Here is another pairing that people in Sapporo put together with verve. The stunning aesthetics of both daily life and civic architecture (Kitara concert hall, the Museum of Modern Art) can be enjoyed in the same city, even on the same day, where you can climb a mountain. Tonai-san, the SRC librarian with his fabulous collection led me up three impressive peaks. I listened to extraordinary performances of Mahler and Brittain in Sapporo; I learned to adore volcanoes. I will not even mention the culinary arts, the quality of products that Hokkaido's citizens produce and prepare. I will not allow myself tears about not being around for the snow and the skiing. I will bicycle home through the mobs of student runners and think that here life comes together in happy variety. It doesn't deserve categories, just love.

understand why anyone would live elsewhere than in the best city... Set against this relentless urbanism, life in Sapporo and work on the Hokkaido campus offered the best medicine: country and city were blended. Corn grew in urban backyards! I planted and harvested tomatoes outside the foreign residents' apartments. The air smells deliciously of the fields, spring, summer, fall. The laundry can be hung up in the sunshine. The campus has its streams, fields, even cows! So here country and city, academy and farm were put together, lived