

## THE ROMANIAN VERSION OF *CHŪSHINGURA*: *SIGNA PROPRIA* AND *SIGNA TRANSLATA* IN GHEORGHE BĂGULESCU'S *SUFLET JAPONEZ (JAPANESE SOUL) (1937)*

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**Abstract** The present study is a hermeneutical analysis of the primary meanings (*signa propria*) and the secondary meanings (*signa translata*) in the novel *Suflet japonez (Japanese Soul)* (published in 1937 and republished in 2004), written by General Gheorghe Băgulescu (1890–1973), an interwar diplomat and a writer with an impressive reputation. Given the fact that the hermeneutical mechanism can define the aesthetic value of a text, by trying to capture a final meaning (if there is one), the present study wishes to explore the cohesion of the narrative unity in this historical novel, which was well known at the time but has now been forgotten. My interest was for the Romanian author's motivation for his choice of a subject, for the first time in Romanian, of the Japanese legend (*chūshingura*) of the 47 *rōnin* (wandering samurai with no lord or master) who end their lives after they had avenged their master who had been condemned to death through cunning schemes, a theme that has bestirred great interest in Japan and worldwide. The present analysis tries to explore the means through which Gheorghe Băgulescu approached this subject, by questioning whether this historical novel (published before James Cavell's *Shogun* in 1975) managed to surpass the pattern-situations, in order to create an original literary space.

**Keywords** *Chūshingura*, historical novel, literary space, primary meaning, secondary meaning.

*The Japanese spirit, Yamato Damashii, is  
 similar to Buddha with a single face  
 and a single thought and with (the goddess)  
 Kwannon with a thousand arms and a thousand faces...<sup>1</sup>*

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*If one were to say in a word what the condition of being a samurai is, its basis lies first in seriously devoting one's body and soul to his master. And if one is asked what to do beyond this, it would be to fit oneself inwardly with intelligence, humanity and courage.<sup>2</sup>*

In 1940, Japan celebrated 26 centuries from the establishment of the empire. On this occasion, the *Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai* (The Society for International Cultural Relations) from Tokyo organised an international competition for studies regarding the Japanese society. From the 500 contenders, the Romanians Ioan Timuș (1890-1969) and Gheorghe Băgulescu (1890-1963) stand out, who were among the winners. Independent from one another, the two Romanians had chosen the subject *Caracterele esențiale ale culturii japoneze* (*The essential characteristics of Japanese culture*) from the proposed themes, the award winning essays having been published in 1942 by the Japanese-Romanian Association in the volume *Caracterele civilizației japoneze* (*Characteristics of the Japanese civilisation*).

At that time, Ioan Timuș was already known among the Romanian interwar public as a Japanologist, having published certain volumes on a visit to Japan in 1917–1922. His publishing debut was in 1924 with the travel notes entitled *Japonia. Viața și obiceiurile* (*Japan. Life and Customs*), whose laudatory preface was written by Nicolae Iorga. The preface warmly recommends the “photograph” of the fabulous land of the Rising Sun through the eyes of a traveller who had taken notes on a subject he had experienced. In the following year, he published a second volume: *Japonia. Artă, femeia și viața socială* (*Japan. Art, Women and Social Life*). Both volumes were reedited in 1942 in a complete edition entitled *Japonia de ieri și de azi* (*Japan in the Past and Today*), for which the author received the award *Marele premiu Năsturel* from the Romanian Academy. In 1938, Ioan Timuș published the novel *Ogio-san/Domnișoarele* (*The Young Ladies*) in two editions, and a collection of Japanese fairy tales, after he had translated in 1934 the Japanese drama *Bushido/Calea războinicului* (*The Way of the Warrior*).

The name of Gheorghe Băgulescu was also known in the society of that time. Although he was perhaps less associated with literature and more with his military and diplomatic career, while the studies of the “characteristics” of Japanese civilisation were published, he

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<sup>1</sup> “Spiritul japonez, Yamato Damashii, se aseamănă cu [...] Buddha cu o singură înfățișare și un singur gând și cu (zeița) Kwannon cu o mie de brațe și o mie de fețe ...”, Gheorghe Băgulescu and Ioan Timuș, *Caracterele esențiale ale culturii japoneze* (*The essential characteristics of Japanese culture*). (All quotations from books by Gheorghe Băgulescu are translated by Emese Czintos. The original text of the quotations in Romanian is included in the footnotes.)

<sup>2</sup> Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure. The Book of the Samurai*, 1716.

was in the Far East, sent by the Romanian government in 1940 as a plenipotentiary minister in Japan, China and Manchukuo, until 1943. The Romanian general was actually visiting the Japanese archipelago for the second time, after a first diplomatic mission that had taken place between 1935–1939, when his role was that of a Romanian military, naval and aeronautical attaché in Japan. His trips to the Land of The Rising Sun caused him infinite spiritual delight: “I am fanatically in love with my country, but I consider Japan to be my second homeland”.<sup>3</sup>

As a writer, Gheorghe Băgulescu debuted with a collection of novellas and sketches entitled *Rânduri de la frontieră (Letters from the Frontier)*, followed, in 1918, by a collection of stories entitled *Zile de energie. Povestiri din războiul de întregire (Days of Energy. Stories from the Union War)*. Its preface was a letter signed by Nicolae Iorga. *Zile de energie (Days of Energy)* is actually a war diary which recounts the victories of the Romanian army in the “triangle of death” at Mărășești, Mărăști and Oituz. The volume *Zile triste. Schițe și nuvele din războiul de întregire (Sad Days. Sketches and Novellas from the Union War)*, published the following year with another preface signed by Nicolae Iorga represented a means for the author, who had been decorated for bravery, to express in writing his outrage regarding the *Peace Treaty of Bucharest (Buftea)*, whose conditions would have enslaved Romania. Although the novella *Dezertorul (The Deserter)*, from the latter volume, would be republished in the following years in five editions and it apparently inspired Liviu Rebreanu for his sketch *Ițic Ștrul dezertor (Ițic Ștrul the Deserter)*, the novels *Comandantul (The commandant)* and *Antiquitas rediviva*, a historical novel published in 1926, were left unnoticed.

According to the preface written by Nicolae Iorga for the volume *Zile de energie (Days of Energy)*, the historian counted on the narrative talent of the young author, who wrote in a manner “well informed and with the warmth of his heart,” confessing to be a reader “moved” by such a “noble and proud” book.<sup>4</sup> This probably explains how, at the top of his military career, General Gheorghe Băgulescu returned to writing, publishing the novel *Suflet japonez (Yamato Damashii / Japanese Soul)* in English, French and Romanian. Being for the first time in Japan on a diplomatic mission, and fascinated by the history, literature and art of this country, he felt the need to put into words, again, the “tribute of recognition” for the “heritage of emotions and knowledge”<sup>5</sup> offered by Japanese culture:

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<sup>3</sup> Băgulescu, cited in Mihai Epure, *Din Carpați până la Fuji (From the Carpathians to Fuji)* (Bucharest: Cartega–Nipponica, 2000), 160. “Fanatic îndrăgostit de țara mea, consider Japonia ca a doua mea patrie...”

<sup>4</sup> Iorga, cited in Gheorghe Băgulescu, *Zile de energie. Impresii și povestiri de pe front 1916–1917 (Days of Energy. Impressions and Stories from the front, 1916–1917)*, with a letter from Nicolae Iorga, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bucharest: Institutul de arte grafice C. Sfetea, 1919), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Băgulescu, *Caracterele esențiale ale culturii japoneze*, 38: “prinosul de recunoștință”, “tezaurul de simțire și cunoștințe.”

Spiritual unity and balance have led to cultural unity and balance. A nation with such a cultural heritage, a millenary culture carried by a soul forever young, has the future ahead of it and a right to reverence.<sup>6</sup>

The proverbial Japanese *heroism*, of which G. Băgulescu believed that it was the part of the Japanese soul that penetrated the world fast as an arrow<sup>7</sup>, attracted his attention especially through the legend of the 47 faithful *rōnin* (samurai without a master) of the region of Ako who avenged their young master (*daimyō*) of the Asano clan; their spirit seems representative for the Japanese *paideuma*:

A country is an altar, and when a foreigner steps into it, he must first of all be respectful and decent. Or in Japanese: *Ikanaru-kuni mo, hitotsu no, shinsei naru saidan de aru. Kore ni, hairo to suru gaikoku-jin wa, nani yori mo mazu, shinjin naru kei-i to, shin-ai no jo towo motaneba naranu.*<sup>8</sup>

He conceives thus in 1935 the plan of the trilogy *Suflet japonez (Yamato Damashii/ Japanese Soul)*, which he presents at a conference of the National Academy *Chuo Gishikai* of Tokyo. In the same year he also became a member of this highest scientific forum of Japan, as the only foreigner who enjoyed this privilege at that time: “The fact that you are the only stranger admitted to our Academy proves first of all your highest qualities, and second of all our affection.”<sup>9</sup>

The first book of the Romanian military attaché’s trilogy was published by Kenkyusha Publishers in Tokyo in 1936, in French and English. The Romanian edition was published by the publishing house of the *Universul* newspaper in Bucharest, between November 1937 and January 1938. The second book was printed in 1939. Each volume had a separate title: volume I: *Shoguni, daimyo, samurai (Shogun, daimyo, samurai)*, volume II, part 1: *Nedreptate, credință, răsbunare (Injustice, Faith, Revenge)*, and part 2: *Două sute de ani mai târziu (Two Hundred Years Later)*. The last volume transforms here and there into a commentary of Japanese and Chinese art as well as of the political and economic situation of Eastern Asia. Volume I begins with a motto containing the words written by Marquis Asano – the last *daimyō* alive of the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 34. “Unitatea și echilibrul sufletesc au dus la unitatea și echilibrul cultural. Un neam care are un astfel de tezaur de cultură, cultură milenară, purtată de un suflet vecinic tânăr, are viitorul înaintea și dreptul la cinstire.”

<sup>7</sup> cf. Ibid., 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15. “O țară este un altar, în care atunci când un strein pătrunde, trebuie înaintea de toate să aibă respect și bună-cuviință. Sau în limba japoneză: *Ikanaru-kuni mo, hitotsu no, shinsei naru saidan de aru. Kore ni, hairo to suru gaikoku-jin wa, nani yori mo mazu, shinjin naru kei-i to, shin-ai no jo towo motaneba naranu.*”

<sup>9</sup> Admiral Arima, cited in Gheorghe Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez, roman (Japanese Soul. A Novel)*, vol. I–III. (Bucharest: Cartega – Nipponica), 2004, vol. II, 13. “Faptul că sunteți singurul dintre streini primit în Academia noastră subliniază în primul rând înaltele Dumneavoastră calități și în al doilea rând afecțiunea noastră.”

Asano clan – for General Băgulescu at the temple of Sengakuji (the temple where the grave of the *rōnin* and their master is located) on 13 July 1936: “Performing and perpetuating their virtues as flawless samurai, the 47 *rōnin* are the mirror in which the descendents can have their consciousness projected, following their good example”.<sup>10</sup> Part 1 of Volume II opens with the author’s preface in the company of a compilation of the opinion of the personalities of the age or the media response following the publication of the first volume: “I always wonder how you could penetrate so deep into the spirit of our 47”.<sup>11</sup>

In the times when the “red danger” and the “internal chaos” in continental Asia were rising, and Japan wanted to show the world its virtues as a world leader, as a “peacemaker” and “guardian of order” in the Far East,<sup>12</sup> it came as quite natural to publish a novel on the feudal code of the honour of the samurai in French, English and Romanian. It appeared as a real media event on the Japanese literary market all the more so as it was written by a non-native, and it glorified the qualities of the Japanese spirit. Japanese high officials – and not only personalities of culture and literature, but also the press and the diplomatic corps of Tokyo – felt compelled to speak highly of this publication and honour its author. The omnipotent minister from Romania received thus several congratulatory letters sent by high members of the military (the Japanese Minister of War, the Admiral of Japan, or members of other diplomatic missions in Japan), rectors of prestigious Japanese universities, and, as a gesture of utmost appreciation, the author was also honoured with an Imperial Order offered by Emperor Hirohito himself:

His Majesty the Emperor of Japan has kindly awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure class III to Colonel G. Băgulescu, Romania’s Military, Navy and Airforce Attaché in Japan, in recognition of the eminent service that the Colonel has done to the friendly relations between Romania and Japan. Colonel Băgulescu is a deep knower of the Japanese spirit and a distinguished scholar of Japanese culture and art.<sup>13</sup>

The trilogy *Suflet japonez* has at its core the concept of *chūshingura* or the subject of the 47 *rōnin* who, for almost two years, carefully plot the means to avenge their master who was foully murdered. But *chūshingura* is, in fact, also the title of a famous Japanese drama written by Takeda Izumo (1691–1756) and his collaborators for the puppet theatre *bunraku*,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5. “Săvârșind și făcând să trăiască în viitor virtuțile lor de samurai fără pată, cei 47 de *rōnin*-i sunt oglinda în care urmașii își pot răsfrânge conștiința, urmând bunele lor exemple.”

<sup>11</sup> Hakusan Katayama, cited in Ibid., 12. “Mă întreb totdeauna cum de ați putut Dumneavoastră pătrunde atât de adânc spiritul celor 47 de ronini ai noștri...”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Constantin Bușe and Zorin Zamfir, *Japonia. Un secol de istorie (1853–1945)* (Japan. A Century of History, 1853–1945) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 265.

<sup>13</sup> Official communiqué of the Imperial House on 15. 01. 1939, cited in Băgulescu *Suflet japonez*, vol. II, 7.

premiering in Osaka in 1748.<sup>14</sup> The plot presents a historical event of the year 1701, when the fifth shogun Tokugawa Tsuneyoshi (r. 1680–1709), an eccentric nicknamed “the *shōgun* of dogs” because of passing a law that allowed a man to be killed for hitting a dog, instructed Asano Naganori, the young *daimyō* (master) of the small fief of Ako, to deal with the reception of imperial messages. However, he is not liked by Kira Yoshinaka, court official expert in ceremonies, and known for corruption. He is not pleased with the gifts received from Asano, and refuses to instruct him in court etiquette. After publicly insulting and humiliating him on repeated occasions, Kira eventually causes Asano Naganori to lose his temper and draw out his sword, lightly wounding him. The use of weapons on the premises of the shogun’s palace was forbidden at the time, so the shogun ordered that Asano be punished for breaking the law, asking for his ritual suicide *seppuku*. His estate would be confiscated by the shogun, and the 300 samurai in the service of the dead seigneur become *rōnin* or wandering samurai. Of these, Ōishi Yoshio with the other 46 decided to avenge his master and, waiting for the right moment, and in order to disperse Kira’s fears, they separated, leading a frivolous life. On 14 December 1702, the 47 *rōnin* invaded the residence of the enemy, and as Kira refused the honourable death through *seppuku*, they executed him like an ordinary criminal. Then, after placing Kira’s head on their master’s grave, the *rōnin* give themselves in to the authorities. Although their gesture is highly admired by the people, as the moral law of the *bushidō* code was still a behavioural pattern for the society, the shogun condemned the 47 to death for breaking the law that interdicted personal revenge, but permitted them to have an honourable end through *seppuku*, on 4 February 1703. The bodies of the 47 *rōnin* were buried in front of the grave of master Asano, at the Sengakuji temple.

As a staging of a real history that happened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *rōnin*’s heroism to avenge their master in the name of honour as presented in the play *Chūshingura* had soon become legendary, and the subject was shortly taken over into *kabuki* theatre, literature and later cinema.<sup>15</sup> Two hundred years after the event, in 1927, in a militarised and war-stricken Japan, the novel of Osaragi Jiro (1897–1973), *Akō gishi* (*The Faithful Samurai of Ako*), was published, returning again to the subject of loyalty and the honour of the vassals left without a master. Then, some years later, the trilogy of Gheorghe Băgulescu also appeared.

By contrast with Osaragi Jiro’s novel whose narration covers only the incident of 1701 leading to the death of Asano Naganori and the revenge of the 47 *rōnin*, Băgulescu’s historical novel relates the events beginning with 1645 and into the author’s own time. As a history of Japanese feudalism, documented through research in archives of prestigious Japanese universities and museums of Tokyo and Ako, the text presents the destiny of the Asano clan of Ako throughout several generations, ending with a commentary on Japanese (and Chinese) art, as well as the political and economic situation of the Far East. But, more than that, beyond legend and historical and cultural information, the novel also raises the problem of the code of the warriors, or *bushidō* (*bushi* = warrior, *dō* = way). This refers not only to the *way* of honour

<sup>14</sup> See Octavian Simu, *Dicționar de literatură japoneză* (Dictionary of Japanese Literature) (Bucharest: Albatros, 1994), 33–35.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Calvet, *Istoria samurailor* (History of the Samurai) (Bucharest: Herald, 2015), 228–231.

for samurai, but also the *bushidō* ritual of death, a code whose principles spring from the three beliefs that the Japanese embraced throughout history: Shintoism, based on the adoration of nature, Confucianism, based on the five moral connections between the government and the subject, master and servant, father and child, man and woman, older brother and younger brother, and Buddhism based on the fatality of human existence, with its esoteric Zen version of meditation and contemplation.

At the time of its publication, the novel seemed to gain public success. The exotic subject with its ingredients that aligned it with the author's times, meeting the reader's horizon of expectations, led to a warm welcome not only of the Japanese, but also of the inter-war Romanian audience. However, the trilogy *Suflet japonez* did not pass the test of time: the novel was forgotten. It was brought back to memory in 2004, for the celebrations of 100 years of Romanian-Japanese diplomatic relations, when the three volumes were published in an exquisitely elegant edition prefaced by the President of the Japan–Romanian Parliamentary Friendship League.

Rereading this novel today, independently from the political context that produced it, one can conclude that, although at its core the book presents a legend that travelled the world,<sup>16</sup> and guaranteed its great success, the author was more concerned with the virtues and characters displayed by the legend and often forgot the requirements of a narration, sacrificing it for more or less justified digressions:

As master Naganori looked at Oishi with questioning eyes, he answered with a bow: - This is the school of the world, master! And Oishi's lesson, that he held at Ako, penetrated deeply, imbuing not only the souls of the samurai, but also the spirit of the entire Japanese nation, all throughout the centuries that came and will come...<sup>17</sup>

The novel guides the discourse thus to a dead angle, negatively influencing the authenticity of the characters. The idealised subject of loyalty towards the master and the son's piety towards the parents runs through the whole novel, resulting in rather unnatural characters, whose heroism is narrated rather than lived, leading to a pastiche of a best-seller's stereotypes:

And this is how one of the great generals of Japan died, betrayed and lonely, at the age of thirty-one. But the people couldn't accept the news of his death. Some say that

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<sup>16</sup> See John Allyn, *Povestea celor 47 de ronini* (The Story of the 47 Ronin) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007 [1970]).

<sup>17</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 215. "Cum stăpânul Naganori privea cu ochi întrebători pe Oishi, acesta îi răspunse înclinându-se: - Asta-i școala lumii, stăpâne! Și lecția lui Oishi, ținută la Ako, a pătruns adânc, îmbibând nu numai sufletele samurailor lui de atunci, ci spiritul întregii nații japoneze, de-a lungul veacurilor ce au urmat și vor mai urma..."

he passed on to the enemy, and then he reached the shores of Korea in a boat, and from there in Mongolia, where he became the famous Emperor Genghis-Khan.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt not to lose sight of a geographically distant reader's horizon of expectations, willing to offer them factual materials about Japanese history and culture, the subject of Băgulescu's novel ultimately seems to be "to learn about Japan" and especially about the *bushidō* code, the basis of the characters' actions in the "Gospel" of the samurai from Ako. As if to exemplify the Buddhist aphorism "First intention, then enlightenment",<sup>19</sup> the author offers an old-fashioned history of Japan, seasoned with fights and revenge, diplomacy and political intrigues, religious ardour, monochromatic characters whose behaviour was merely an illustration for some character trait, so that, on a purely descriptive level, the novel seems more like a chapter in the encyclopaedia of Japanese history and culture than a chapter of a novel:

The cardboard panels called *Husuma* were moved away and turned half a house into one single room for the ceremony hall. In the back, on the *tokonoma* – a platform raised just a palm above the ground – covered in white silk, there were aligned [...]<sup>20</sup>

In an attempt to present the trilogy as a synthesis of the Japanese soul and the *bushidō* code, the author does not only present to the reader the *ways* of the warrior, but – in order to help them interiorise this ideal – he tries to familiarise them with a samurai's behaviour, dwelling lengthily on details:

Yamaga's classes always started with a deep bow that all took in the direction of Kyoto, the emperor's salute. The second salute was in the direction of the palace of the *daimyō* and his ancestors. For the third, each samurai turned to his province of origin and the house of his parents. And the last one they did in front of their own swords placed side by side: the first, the larger one, represented courage, the other one represented honour. With this, the samurai would commit *seppuku-harakiri* if his honour were touched in any way, or as a protest, even for the wronging of others.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 105. "Astfel a murit, trădat și singuratic, la treizeci și unul de ani, unul dintre cei mai mari generali ai Japoniei. Dar poporul nu se deprindea cu știrea morții lui. Unii spun că ar fi trecut printre rândurile dușmane și apoi, cu o barcă a ajuns pe țărmurile Koreei și de acolo în Mongolia, unde a devenit faimosul împărat Gengis-Khan."

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Yamamoto, *Hagakure. The Book of the Samurai*, transl. William Scott Wilson (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2012), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 250. "*Husuma*-lele, panouri din carton, date la o parte, făcuseră dintr-o jumătate de casă o singură cameră pentru sala de ceremonie. În fund, pe *tokonoma* – estradă ridicată numai o palmă de pământ – acoperită cu mătase albă, stăteau înșirate [...]"

<sup>21</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 176. "Cursurile lui Yamaga începeau întotdeauna printr-un salut adânc, făcut de toți în direcțiunea Kyoto: salutul împăratului. Al doilea salut era în direcțiunea palatului daimiului și a templului strămoșilor lui. Al treilea, fiecare samurau îl făcea înspre provincia lui de origină și



In the chapter “The Gospel of the Samurai of Ako”, the writer openly confesses his creed upon which he has built his text, revealed by his wish to “concretise” the code of Japanese feudal warriors. He lets the story slowly transform into a narrative version of the *Hagakure* (*Hidden Leaves, The Hiding of Leaves*), a collection of aphorisms which described, several hundred years before, the “way” of the samurai.

Compiled between the years 1710 and 1716, *Hagakure* is the product of seven years of conversations between an old samurai called Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1645–1716) from the Nabeshima clan of Saga, Kyushu province, and Tashiro Tsuramoto, a young samurai released from his service as a scribe. The collection was preserved for many years as a secret property of the Nabeshima clan, and it is less of a systematic philosophy than a collection of random thoughts in a rather anti-scholastic and anti-intellectual attitude, famous for the first sentence of the book: “The way of the samurai is found in death.”<sup>22</sup> As the conversations took place soon after the revenge of the *rōnin* of Ako, it was natural for Yamamoto to mention the event and formulate his opinion on it:

Concerning the night assault of Lord Asano’s ronin, the fact that they did not commit *seppuku* at the Sengakuji was an error, for there was a long delay between the time their lord was struck down and the time when they struck down the enemy. If Lord Kira had died of illness within that period, it would have been extremely regrettable.<sup>23</sup>

Since he disagrees with the way the 47 *rōnin* acted, saying that they should have had avenged their master on the spot and not wait for the right moment, we wonder if that is not the explanation for why the Romanian writer started his book with the description of the ruins of the Ako castle two generations before the events that led to the death of *daimyō* Asano and the revenge of the 47. This way the author could invoke the Buddhist *karma* and underline how the unseen threads of fate interwove in order to prepare the encounters between people whose destinies eventually make up history.

An analysis of the ways the heroes are presented in the novel *Suflet japonez*, characterised by the virtues of loyalty and honour and the traits of intelligence, courage and humanity, in harmony with the profile of the samurai outlined in *Hagakure*, reveals that Băgulescu must have read and followed as a model the “book” of the samurai for his own novel. For example, in the first part of the trilogy in which, as he confessed, the author “concretised” the spirit of the samurai, there are several principles regarding the code of the samurai, taken over from *Hagakure*, such as: “Pain is worth nothing for a samurai. In all circumstances, he must keep his smile. It is not the same to die laughing or to die crying. The

casa părinților. Iar cel din urmă îl făceau în fața săbiilor proprii așezate alături: una, cea mare, reprezenta vitejia, a doua reprezenta onoarea. Cu ea samuraiul avea să-și facă seppuku-harakiri, dacă onoarea i-ar fi fost cât de puțin atinsă, sau în semn de protest, chiar pentru nedreptățirea altora.”

<sup>22</sup> Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

smile washes away the pain and scares off the enemy.”<sup>24</sup> This teaching is semantically very close to (and much more explicit than) the *Hagakure*: “People in general all seem to be dejected. When one has a pure and uncomplicated mind, his expression will be lively.”<sup>25</sup>

Although, as any historical novel writer, Băgulescu used real names and historical patterns to legitimate the factual truth, he sometimes also added fictional elements to his characters’ biography and staged imaginary characters endowed with details of his personal life.

According to the general’s personal correspondence, during his first diplomatic mission in Japan he was involved in an extra-marital affair with a Japanese noble woman. Both of them having families of a high social status, they had to keep their love secret. Apparently, they had a son who, after the death of his Japanese parents, began to search discretely for his biological father, asking for information about G. Băgulescu at the Embassy of Romania in Tokyo... The trilogy *Suflet japonez* is, therefore, not only a historical chronicle but also a love story that hides a literary confession of a love forbidden by the canons of the time:

I admit and I thank you for enlightening and inspiring my literary quests so far. Your name and face have guided me in constructing dramatic characters, and their experiences take place in areas so dear to you. You will perhaps help me with your permanently serene thoughts to continue my writing. Their experiences are our experiences...<sup>26</sup>

If warned about it, the reader could easily identify under the mask of the character Namiko, wife of Otaka (the former flag bearer of Asano Naganori, one of the 47 loyal *rōnin*), the author’s secret lover. Raised in the spirit of the Japanese ideal of women, Namiko (‘Daughter of the waves’) was the right match for Otaka, who was the embodiment of the ideal samurai. The “model” family was completed with Yasuhiko (‘Son of the gods’), the son who revealed to his father “the mystery of life”. The young Otaka did not only have an “honest” heart, illustrating the concept of *makoto* (‘honesty’), the cardinal quality of a Japanese hero,<sup>27</sup> but he also embodied the warrior’s poetic soul which does not pass carelessly by the cherry flower and is not indifferent to the feelings of the woman he loves:

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<sup>24</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 178. “Durerea nu prețuiește pentru un samuraidu. În toate împrejurările, el trebuie să-și păstreze surusul. Nu-i tot una să mori râzând sau să mori plângând. Sursul șterge durerea și sperie pe vrăjmaș.”

<sup>25</sup> Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Băgulescu, cited in Mihai Epure, *Aproape de Soare Răsare* (Close to the Rising Sun) (Bucharest: Cartega –Nipponica, 2002), 287. “Recunosc și îți mulțumesc că mi-ai luminat și inspirat până acum rătăcirile mele livrești. Numele și chipul tău mi-au călăuzit zidirea în lacrimi de plumb a unor personaje, iar trăiri de-ale lor se petrec în zone atât de dragi ție. Mă vei ajuta, poate, cu permanența gândului tău senin să scriu pe mai departe. Trăirile lor sunt trăirile noastre...”

<sup>27</sup> See *Learning from Shōgun. Japanese History and Western Fantasy*, ed. Henry Smith (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1980), 92.

Namiko, Namiko! Plum blossom.  
 I haven't forgotten your good wishes a year ago,  
 Nor the sleeve of your kimono slowly taken to your eyes.<sup>28</sup>

And as the time of revenge is getting close, the *rōnin* Otaka parts with his family with his heart filled with the sadness of the departure, and, as a kind of testament of his affection, leaves the child the books of verses written since the day he had met Namiko, as an eternal remembrance, an obvious allusion of the author to his personal experience of love:

To Yasuhiko. He is the future. I wish him to be the happiness of his mother, to grow up quickly so he can read what a stranger wrote about him and Namiko. The stranger will leave soon, Yasuhiko will probably never know him, but the book and the kind memories will stay.<sup>29</sup>

However, the story of Asano and the 47 *rōnin* is for Băgulescu not only a way to camouflage a personal biographic detail, but also an opportunity to draw a portrait of the Japanese woman, emphasising her role in the mythical origins of the island, when the woman was considered the representation of the sun, as a direct reference to Amaterasu—o—mikami (the Goddess of the sun). The Romanian writer makes use of this spirit in his characters, who embody all the virtues of a Japanese woman, reminding through this narrative as well that in Japanese society love is replaced by duty, loyalty, honour and respect:

Entering the house of her husband, the young woman must listen to her in-laws more than to her own parents. A woman whose husband is not a daimyo must consider her husband her Daimyo. Do not go to the theatre to listen to frivolous things and do not stop in places where many people gather. Do not go to the temple too often before you turn forty. If you go quietly about your duties as a wife, Buddha will help you without you asking.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. II, 50. "Namiko, Namiko! Floare de prun. / Eu n-am uitat urarea ta decum un an, / Nici mâneca kimonoului dusă încet la ochi."

<sup>29</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. II, 139. "Lui Yasuhiko. El este viitorul. Eu îi doresc să fie fericirea mamei lui, să crească repede mare, ca să poată ceti ceea ce un străin a scris despre el și Namiko. Străinul va pleca în curând, Yasuhiko nu-l va cunoaște, poate, niciodată, dar va rămâne scrisul și duioasa amintire."

<sup>30</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. II, 243. "Odată intrată în locuința soțului ei, tânăra femeie trebuie să asculte de socri mai mult decât de propriii ei părinți. O femeie neavând un daymio drept stăpân trebuie să considere pe soțul ei drept Daymio. Nu te duce la teatru ca să ascuți lucruri ușoare și nu te opri în locurile în care se adună multă lume. Nu te duce nici prea des la templu înainte de a fi împlinit patruzeci de ani. Dacă îți vezi liniștită de îndatoririle tale de soție, Buddha te va ajuta, fără ca tu să-l rogi."

Once again, besides the model of the samurai, the ideal of the Japanese woman depicted in the novel *Suflet japonez* seems to be a direct reference to *Hagakure*:

As for a girl, it is most important to teach her chastity from the time she is a child. She should not be in the company (*sic!*) of a man at a distance of less than six feet, nor should she meet them eye to eye, nor should she receive things from them directly from hand to hand. Neither should she go sight-seeing or take trips to temples. A woman who has been brought up strictly and has endured suffering at her own borne will suffer no ennui after she is married.<sup>31</sup>

And, last but not least, Băgulescu's trilogy is a meditation on the subject of continuity and change, trying to reveal in the end how much of the value system of the Japanese feudal society can still be found in his time: "This samurai spirit mostly still exists today".<sup>32</sup> Exploring whether it was a *real continuity* of tradition or rather a *reconstruction* or a *mere illusion*, the trilogy can be read as a guidebook to modern Japan or an analysis of contemporary society. At this prescriptive level, the narrative displays the author's moralizing view by depicting the virtues of the Japanese samurai. If read as an introduction to history, sociology and cultural anthropology, the text offers the chance to analyse the historical cause and effect, the use and adaptation to the surrounding environment or the identification and examination of the values of a society. Moreover, strengthening the romantic anthropological perspective with a twofold view (then and now) may give birth to questions about the legitimacy of certain cultural-anthropological characteristics, such as: is the *seppuku* (or facing death without fear) an opportunity of a noble death, and is honour indeed more important than life? Could death as a conscious act have influenced the change of the concept of "world" for the Japanese? For Băgulescu, the answer to such questions is not in the least ambiguous:

Life for a samurai means little, and money means nothing. [...] Honour, on the contrary, means more than everything."<sup>33</sup>, and the entire novel seems like an echo overarching centuries of a poem of *Hagakure*: "As everything in the world is but a sham, / Death is the only sincerity."<sup>34</sup>

The distance in time is also relevant, having the function of refraction which represents the feudal world as the establisher of a cultural comparison. But this way the Romanian author discovers the Japanese society as a model of complementary contrasts, which lies under the sign of the "sword" and the "chrysanthemum" as well, the cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Băgulescu, *Caracterele civilizației japoneze*, 10. "Acest spirit de samurai se găsește în bună parte chiar azi."

<sup>33</sup> Băgulescu *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 177–178. "Viața pentru un samurai este puțin lucru, iar banii nu-s nimic. [...] Onoarea, dimpotrivă, face mai mult ca tot."

<sup>34</sup> Yamamoto, *Hagakure*, 131.

patterns identified some years later by the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Undoubtedly, for the stranger who wants to get close to and understand Japanese culture and history, the novel warns at a deeper level of reading about the contrasts provoking both surprise and bewilderment, outlining the Japanese *forma mentis* in which aggression and non-aggression, militarism and aestheticism, betrayal and loyalty, conservatism and openness coexist:

All these contradictions, however, are the warp and woof of books on Japan. They are true. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways.<sup>35</sup>

And thus, inevitably, for “us”, the readers from a different time, the “strangers”, “they”, the samurai, the Japanese, whether in comparison or in contrast, become the partners of a cultural “dialogue”. Or, in other words, the data and information offered by the narrative text can be used by the reader to make value judgments. “Loyalty” and “honour” are of course meaningful concepts in all cultures of the world, but the difference from the Japanese concepts lies both in their type and degree.<sup>36</sup> The honour and its inseparable corollary of duty appear implicitly or explicitly on each page of Băgulescu’s novel and the ideological message leads to a comparison or a contrast on at least two levels: a particular level between the Japanese and Romanian Middle Ages, and a general level between history or tradition and the reality of the day: “And also in our history there are wonderful deeds of manliness and sacrifice. But these lie buried in chronicles and are covered by our indifference. I hope to be able to publish a trilogy soon: *Romanian spirit*.”<sup>37</sup>

The Romanian author recognized his own ideals in the code of the Japanese medieval warriors who promoted “duty” until death and “honour” until the supreme sacrifice and also in the Japanese concept of “beauty”, and wanted to write about these spiritual virtues, believing firmly in the power of the word (ethical, aesthetic and ideological):

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1994), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Elgin Heinz, *Shōgun as an Introduction to Cross-Cultural Learning*, in *Learning from Shōgun. Japanese History and Western Fantasy*, ed. Henry Smith (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1980), 27–34, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 28. “Și în cuprinsul istoriei noastre se găsesc minunate fapte de bărbăție și sacrificiu. Ele stau însă îngropate în pagini de cronici și acoperite de nepăsarea noastră. Nădăjduiesc să pot da la iveală în curând o trilogie: *Suflet românesc*.”

Harder than the edge of the sword is the word and the word to be heard all the way to the farthest corners of Asia must be written down, and written with prudence. Words told at the right time have no death.<sup>38</sup>

The historical reality mixes in *Suflet japonez* with a fictional world; it depends on the author's narrative skills to transpose a historical event to a narration. It is perhaps here that the author considers that he failed in his endeavour, being probably aware that, if the "subject" of history had been more carefully elaborated, the novel's aesthetic value would have increased to a greater extent. Being convinced that the art of any narration, national at its basis, becomes universal in its effects,<sup>39</sup> and finding a parallel between his personal life and Japanese culture and history, Băgulescu tried to attract the Romanian readers to what makes a Japanese be Japanese. He regretted that the wretched times of his day because of the military conflicts and the "clash" of ideologies that could have stopped the past centuries, in order to start new ages for the world,<sup>40</sup> had kept him away from his target:

I profoundly regret that the cruel circumstances and the times of energy that Romanian has to pass through today gave me no time to offer to the readers a study that raises to the significance of Japanese culture and the desire of my soul. Still, the overview of Japanese History and Culture has invigorated me and brought new hope on the way of national achievements.<sup>41</sup>

The attempt to treat the trilogy *Suflet japonez* as literature is sometimes difficult, because the historical and cultural information prevails in the text over its literariness. Moreover, as the narration prioritises the signs of *explicitation (signa propria)* over the signs of *interpretation (signa translata)*, the reader only understands the primary meanings of the legend of the 47 *rōnin*, although it is possibly the connotations of the historical facts that would have created the field of literariness...

Nevertheless, despite the lack of "artistic treatment"<sup>42</sup> which deprived the narrative cohesion of its "spectacular" moment and annihilated its aesthetic use, the novel still remains a part of Romanian literary history. It is the narrative text that managed to use the subsidiary message of detachment of the Japanese proverb (coming from the world of the game of *go*),

<sup>38</sup> Băgulescu *Suflet japonez*, vol. I, 58. "Mai tare decât ascuțișul de sabie este cuvântul și cuvântul ca să fie auzit până în fundul Asiei are nevoie să fie scris și scris cu chibzuială. Cuvintele spuse la locul lor nu au moarte."

<sup>39</sup> Băgulescu, *Caracterele esențiale ale culturii japoneze*, 34–35.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Băgulescu, cited in Epure, *Aproape de Soare Răsare*, 172.

<sup>41</sup> Băgulescu, *Caracterele civilizației japoneze*, 35. "Regret mult că împrejurările vitrege și vremurile de energie prin care trece astăzi România nu mi-au dat răgazul să pot oferi cetitorilor un studiu potrivit însemnătății culturii nipone și dorinții sufletului meu. Totuși, trecerea în revistă a Istoriei și Culturii Japoneze m-a înviorat și mi-a adus noi speranțe pe drumul realizărilor naționale."

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Adrian Marino, *Dintr-un dicționar de idei literare* (From a dictionary of literary ideas), edited by Florina Ilis and Rodica Frențiu (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut 2010), 214.

mentioned in *Hagakure*: “He who sees from the side has eight eyes.” The perspective of detachment in space and time helps the author Gheorghe Băgulescu rewrite the “history” of the 47 Japanese *rōnin* in a Romanian version: “And the world, ever since there is a world, always stays the same: it glorifies past virtues and punishes present virtues...”<sup>43</sup>

Translated by Anca Chiorean and Emese Czintos

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<sup>43</sup> Băgulescu, *Suflet japonez*, vol. II, 317. “Iar lumea, de când e lume, rămâne veșnic aceeași: proslăvitoarea virtuților trecute, pedepsitoarea virtuților prezente...”