

ACADEMIC REVIEW

BY

PROF. GERGANA RUMENOVA PETKOVA, PhD

on the PhD dissertation thesis entitled

"VISUAL REVIVAL OF JAPANESE LITERATURE IN 21ST-CENTURY CINEMA"

Submitted by doctoral candidate **Maria Georgieva Simeonova**

As part of the procedure for obtaining the **Doctoral Degree (PhD)**

in the professional field **2.1. Philology,**

Doctoral Program **"Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Asia, and
Australia – Japanese Literature and Culture"**

Maria Simeonova was a full-time doctoral student in the Department of Japanese Studies at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology (FCML) from 2020 to 2023, enrolled under Order No. RD-20-75/17.01.2020, effective from 01.02.2020. This was later amended by Order No. RD-20-1956/16.11.2020 (due to a change in academic supervision from Prof. Dr. Gergana Petkova to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vyara Vassileva Nikolova). She was discharged with the right to defend her dissertation under Order No. RD-20-402/13.02.2023, effective from 01.02.2023, following the expiration of her doctoral period.

In accordance with her individual academic plan and the requirements of a full-time doctoral program, the candidate has successfully met all academic minimums. She has submitted all necessary documentation, including an abstract, the dissertation, and evidence of the required number of publications, one of which is co-authored with her academic supervisor.

Maria Simeonova's dissertation represents an ambitious and challenging attempt to analyze the revival of Japanese literature through contemporary cinematic adaptations in the 21st century. The topic is both relevant and significant as it explores the intersection of literature and film — two key cultural expressions that merge the local and global within the dynamic world of contemporary art. The dissertation presents key theoretical foundations, richly illustrated with concrete examples, while reflecting on important aspects of the cultural and aesthetic value of Japanese literature in the context of its cinematic interpretation.

The study is structured into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, ensuring clarity and logical coherence. The extensive bibliography and appendices demonstrate the breadth of the research, encompassing 189 sources and a wealth of statistical data. The well-selected theoretical framework and the balanced distribution of research material across the three main chapters serve as exemplary planning for a monographic study, for which both the candidate and her academic supervisor deserve commendation.

The first chapter presents the theoretical frameworks, drawing upon an interdisciplinary approach that includes literary studies, film studies, semiotics, and psychoanalysis. The second chapter examines the historical stages of the development of Japanese cinematic adaptations, while the third chapter provides an in-depth analysis of a specific case study — *Ten Nights of Dreams* by Natsume Sōseki.

The methodological diversity (descriptive, analytical, and comparative-historical approaches) strengthens the dissertation's argumentation. The author combines literary and film analysis with cultural and sociological perspectives, which are essential for addressing the research topic and objectives.

The dissertation's topic is particularly relevant in the context of the global dissemination of Japanese culture through cinema and as part of Japan's cultural

diplomacy strategy known as "soft power." The candidate successfully demonstrates how cinema, as a medium of mass communication, plays a crucial role in popularizing Japanese literature, adapting it for contemporary audiences, particularly in the context of its reception in Bulgaria.

The first chapter provides an overview of theoretical models underpinning the research. The selection is interdisciplinary, integrating theories from literary studies, film studies, cultural studies, aesthetics, and philosophy. At the beginning of the dissertation, Maria Simeonova conducts a necessary review of scholarly literature in the field, drawing upon Bulgarian, Japanese, and international sources that examine the relationship between Japanese cinema, literature, and culture. Her familiarity with the academic literature is commendable, although the organization of these sources lacks a clear and systematic ordering principle. Unfortunately, this review does not adequately trace the evolution of scholarly knowledge in relation to the dissertation's specific research objectives, instead summarizing titles without explicitly highlighting their contributions to the study. A more structured and critical engagement with the literature would enhance the dissertation's originality and scholarly depth.

The second chapter, titled **"Adaptation as a Visual Revival of Japanese Literature in the Early 21st Century,"** forms the core of the dissertation. The exposition follows a strictly chronological approach, which, while providing clarity, does not allow the reader to fully grasp *how* the processes of literary revival unfold. The focus of this chapter somewhat diverges from the dissertation's primary research objectives. A chronological overview may be useful as an appendix, but a more analytical and systematic treatment of the material — highlighting trends, selection criteria, and reception dynamics — would better elucidate the role of adaptation in revitalizing literature. Furthermore, the application of theoretical models from the first chapter is largely absent, raising questions about their relevance to the study. The chapter lacks a clear

central argument, as literary works and adaptations are presented sequentially without a structured discussion that aligns them with the dissertation's overarching theme.

Moreover, the dissertation does not sufficiently demonstrate *how* cinematic adaptations "revive" literature. The text primarily acknowledges the existence of adaptations, noting their general correlation with film production trends. However, it does not provide sociological data on audience reception, political insights into adaptation strategies, or an analysis of which literary works are adapted and the potential reasons behind these choices. A more detailed examination of these aspects would significantly enhance the dissertation's contribution to the field.

The third chapter, dedicated to *Ten Nights of Dreams* by Natsume Sōseki and its film adaptation, serves as the dissertation's culmination, applying the theoretical framework to a concrete example and adding a practical dimension to the study. The author examines the symbolism, narrative techniques, and philosophical aspects of both the original work and its adaptation. This chapter attempts a literary analysis combined with a visual interpretation. However, as a literary scholar, I find the analysis somewhat superficial, particularly in its treatment of cultural codes, which requires further scholarly refinement. A deeper understanding of Japanese cultural traditions, aesthetics, and philosophy is essential for conducting a nuanced analysis of Japanese literature and cinema—an endeavor that presents challenges even for experienced scholars in the field.

Despite these critiques, the dissertation has notable contributions. First and foremost, it addresses a contemporary and widely discussed topic that remains underexplored in Bulgarian academia and beyond. A significant contribution is the meticulously compiled appendices, which systematize adaptations produced in the first two decades of the 21st century. The inclusion of comparative tables summarizing the number of literary adaptations is particularly valuable, allowing

for meaningful comparisons and conclusions. These results demonstrate that Maria Simeonova is a dedicated, disciplined, hardworking, and well-organized researcher capable of processing extensive datasets.

The candidate shows great potential for descriptive research, and with further development of analytical skills, she will be able to interpret information more cohesively in the future. The dissertation's review of adaptations during the studied period is comprehensive and can serve as a foundation for future research. Additionally, the discussion of Japanese cinema within the Bulgarian context, including its reception through festivals such as "Cinelibri" and the "Panorama of Japanese Cinema," represents a significant step in the advancement of Japanese studies in Bulgaria.

Although revisions are needed to enhance coherence, analytical depth, and academic tone, the dissertation meets the requirements for a doctoral thesis in the field of **2.1 Philology**. Given the fulfillment of all formal academic criteria, I recommend the awarding of the **Doctoral Degree (PhD) in Philology (Japanese Literature and Culture)** to Maria Georgieva Simeonova.

29.01.2025



Prof. Dr. Gergana Petkova