



ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

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Annotation

In the modern world, relations between Russia and China are more and more frequently in the center of scientific and informational attention. These relations date back several centuries and, in fact, were established through the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, which was engaged in diplomatic activities for more than a century.

In modern Russia, the Orthodox Church is at the forefront and plays an important role in the state and inter-state relations. Accordingly, the relationship of the Moscow Patriarchate with modern China is a matter of special importance.

The analysis of the sources cited in the present paper does not cover only the political topic, but also refers to religious issues.

Keywords: China; Russia; Russian Ecclesiastical Mission; Autonomous Church of China.

Introduction

Relatively scant material can be found in the Georgian historical (and not only) space about the relations between China and Russia in

general, and in particular on the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in China in particular.

This work presents the thoughts of both Russian and Chinese authors regarding this issue, direct historical sources are also discussed.

The work is not limited to discussing the Mission only from a political point of view, but also deals with issues of Orthodox missiology, which makes it interesting in a number of perspectives.

Methods

The methods of comparative analysis and historical cognition were used in the research of the issue presented in this paper; Assessments of various stakeholders, general historical sources and scientific literature are critically analysed.

Results

The results of this research provide that that the missionary problems existing over the centuries were largely determined by the negative stereotypes in the Chinese society towards Russia and Orthodoxy, which could not be fully dispelled. It has been hypothesized that the further development of Orthodoxy in China may not depend solely on the Moscow Patriarchate.

Discussion

Relations between the Far East and the West date back many centuries. Radically different cultures met each other through the Silk Road, cultural and political-economic relations developed, however, the Far East still remained a kind of unknown phenomenon. The situation, essentially, has not changed even under the conditions of modern globalization. This is largely due to the peculiarities of Eastern religious-philosophical doctrines.

While Christianity is one of the main pillars of the Western world, then Buddhism analogically holds a similar position in the East. While it is true, that for China, Buddhism is not an authentic religion - it was created in India and entered China only in first century AD - under the influence of Chinese culture, it has changed and adapted to the Chinese religious-philosophical model to such a degree, that it can be freely referred to as Chinese religion (Gelashvili, 2018:100-101).

The main Chinese religions are Confucianism and Taoism, influence of which on the Chinese culture cannot be understated. It should be noted that despite the fundamental difference, these three currents are intertwined and are usually referred to by one term - "三教" ("Three Doctrines")³⁰. It is worth noting that all three of these doctrines are essentially atheistic - they deny the existence of any absolutes. Confucianism is centred around the worship of ancestors, contributing to the most important religious ritual in China (Gelashvili, 2018:80).

Christianity, with its complicated dogmas and rituals began to penetrate China relatively late. There is a story that Christianity was preached in China by the Apostle Thomas, which is based on one of the apocryphal sources, according to which the Apostle Thomas went to preach in India (Acts of the Holy Apostle Thomas. n.d.). The Dominican missionary Gaspar da Cruz in his "Tractado de China"³¹ (1569) mentions the journey of the Apostle Thomas to China. This argument was also seriously used by the Jesuit missionaries. However, Abbot Hook said in 1884 that it was caused by a kind of missionary necessity (Datsyshen, 2007: 7).

The first scientifically proven Christian settlements in China appeared during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). In 1626, on the territory of the modern city of Xi'An, Jesuit missionaries discovered the so-called temple built in 781. The Nestorian Stella, which reports that in 635, the ninth year of the reign of Emperor Taizong (598-649), the Nestorian bishop Alopen and his Syrian companions arrived from the Roman Empire, bringing with them Christian books and images. The stella is bilingual - the main part of the inscription is written in Chinese, and a small part (mainly names) is written in Syriac. It should be noted that the Nestorians achieved some success at the imperial court. Alopen received titles and the right to build a monastery. Later, the Nestorians had monasteries and had bishops in different cities. Nestorianism was named "Jingjiao" (景教) in China, which means brilliant doctrine. Alopen is credited with composing the Jesus Messiah

³⁰ Unlike the Abrahamic religions, Eastern currents are generally syncretic.

³¹ "Tratado das cousas da China"

Sutra, an ancient Chinese-language Christian work. Finally, during the reign of Emperor Wuzong (814-846), Christianity was banned along with Buddhism and Taoism. During the reign of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the Nestorians again achieved some success, but the appearance of Catholic missionaries eventually weakened and replaced "Jingjiao" (Datsyshen, 2007:17-18).

Orthodox Christianity entered China from Russia. The first contact between the Russians and the Chinese must have taken place during the Mongol dominion. The Mongols took part of the captured Russians to China creating Russian military regiment. This regiment, and Russian prisoners in general, are often mentioned in the historical documents of the Yuan Mongol dynasty, however, with the change of the dynasty, their traces are lost (Adoratsky, 1887:6). According to some opinions, their descendants joined the Catholic parishes created in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries.

The later eastward expansion of the Russian Empire obviously led to a confrontation with China. During the conquest of the Amur region in the seventeenth century, clashes with the forces of the Qing Empire became more frequent. In 1685, the Qing Empire captured the city of Albazin and exiled Orthodox priest Maxim Leontiev to Beijing along with other captives. In order to meet the spiritual needs of the Russian units, the Qing government dedicated the chapel of the god of war Guan Di, which in 1696 was consecrated by Father Maxim as an Orthodox church in the name of Saint Sophia ³² (Selivanovskiy, 2013:6).

In the Chinese sources of the corresponding period, Russians are referred to by the term Luocha (罗刹), which means a man-eating demon (Rakshasa), therefore the temple was also called the "temple of man-eaters" (罗刹庙 LuochaMiao) (Andguladze, 2022:144). The temple was destroyed by an earthquake in 1730, but it was rebuilt in 1732 and consecrated in the name of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

³² The church was often referred to as St. Nicholas because of the famous icon placed in it.

Naturally, Father Maxim could not act independently; he had the blessing of Metropolitan Ignatius of Siberia and Tobolsk, who in a letter to Father Maxim noted that this captivity was not useless and that through him (Father Maxim) "the bright of Christ will be revealed to the Chinese." With the blessing of Metropolitan Ignatius, the Chinese emperor began to be mentioned at the church service.

The preservation of Orthodoxy among the Albazianians had a significant impact on the Russian government at the time, which was trying to establish trade and economic relations with China. In 1700, Peter I instructed the metropolitan of Kiev to prepare a religious mission to China. An agreement with the Chinese Emperor Kangxi was made in 1712, and in 1715 the first mission led by Archimandrite Hilarion Lezhaisky arrived in Beijing³³.

With the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission acquired legal status, and the members of the Mission received official ranks and patronage from the Qing government. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission essentially represented the Russian embassy in China, which is why missionary activity itself could not be included in its priorities. Moreover, there was a direct instruction according to which the missionary activity should be limited so that "the preaching did not cause the anger of the Bogdikhhan officials and thus did not complicate the interstate relations." (Li, 2019:194). During the eighteenth century, eight missions were sent from Russia to China, the members of which were mainly engaged in scientific, translation, diplomatic and other activities. Clergymen performed mass for Albazianians and Russians visiting Beijing.

Most of the members of the Mission did not know the Chinese language, besides, there was frequent behaviour inappropriate for the clergy. Several members of the Mission were exposed for organizing a drunken debacle in the emperor's palace, which did not contribute to creating a positive image of Orthodoxy among the locals.

³³ China refused to accept the bishop.

The situation changed in the nineteenth century. The Mission of this period paid a lot of attention to scientific activities. The head of the ninth mission, Iakinf Bichurin, compiled a Russian-Chinese dictionary, was engaged in translation work. He and the leaders of subsequent missions are considered the founders of the Russian Sinological School.

The Opium Wars (1840-1842; 1856-1860) led to the weakening of China's central government and, consequently, to the strengthening of the influence of Western countries. This was followed by the expansion of Christian missionary activity. The Russian Empire was the first to conclude a treaty with the Qing government, which stipulated the protection of the rights of Chinese Christians and the provision of freedom of missionary activity for Russian subjects (*Traktat mezhdru Rossiey i Kitaem ob vechernii vzaimnykh ochen'sya b.d.*).

As a result of the Treaty of Tianjin, the Mission was exempted from diplomatic activities and funding from the Chinese government was suspended. It was thought that it should have acquired a completely missionary character. It was also decided to establish an episcopal cathedral in Beijing; however, it could not be done at that time.

Further missions began active translation of liturgical books. The Gospel, Psalms, various festal readings, the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete, etc. were translated. And under the conditions of the sixteenth mission (1878-1884), led by Archimandrite Flavian, services in the Chinese language began. In the same period, the Chinese Yang Ji (杨吉)³⁴, who was named Mitrofan (1855-1900), was ordained as a priest for the first time in history (Datsyshen, 2007:78).

Nevertheless, missionary work did not become the main activity of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission. Alexey Vinogradov, a member of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission and a Sinologist hieromonk, describes the Mission's activities in China as follows: "... Among the Russians, placed in the position of missionaries among the Chinese, the main attention is paid to church services, the performance of sacra-

³⁴ His Chinese name in some sources sounds like Ji Chong.

ments and other requirements and rites in accordance with the typicon and spirit of the Orthodox Church. [...] Unfortunately, these missionaries do not have a proper understanding of everything that is published and done by Western Christian missionaries for the same peoples. The Beijing mission reports only the most necessary things that are not accessible to everyone; – a big obstacle to familiarization with the activities of foreign missionaries is the lack of knowledge of their languages by Russian missionaries, as well as foreign missionary magazines and books devoted to the study of China and other countries of the East" (Vinogradov, 1889).

The leader of the eighteenth mission (1863-1931), Archimandrite Inokentiy Figurovskiy, who before coming to China, travelled to Europe and learned about the missionary experience there, tried to change the existing reality. During his stay in Japan, he also got acquainted with the successful missionary work of Bishop Nikolai Kasatkin. However, the late nineteenth century was a difficult time for Christianity in China. In the weakened China against the backdrop of Western expansion, everything foreign, including Christianity, was perceived as hostile³⁵. The West was considered the primary source of political, economic and social problems. As a result, at the end of the nineteenth century, anti-Western and anti-Christian speeches, murders of Westerners, etc. became more frequent. The culmination was the so-called "Boxer Rebellion" (1899-1901), which caused enormous damage to the Orthodox mission among them.

In June 1900, rebels raided the Mission's northern metochion. During the raid, the priest Mitrophan and other Christians hiding in his house were killed. In total, more than 200³⁶ Chinese Orthodox Christians died as a result of the raid³⁷.

³⁵ The situation was exacerbated by the fact that missionaries were often perceived as political representatives of their own countries, blatantly interfered in internal affairs and showed undue respect for Chinese culture.

³⁶ On June 24 (11), 222 Chinese new martyrs are commemorated in the Orthodox Church.

³⁷ The uprising affected not only Beijing. Rivalries in Mongolia and Manchuria were also damaged.

In 1902, Archimandrite Inokentiy was consecrated as a bishop. Reverend Inokentiy actively started restoration work. He expanded the territory of the Mission, acquired land with auxiliary buildings, rebuilt the temple, opened schools in Shanghai and Tianjin, etc. He expanded the composition of the Mission and developed his own missionary activity. He also founded a nunnery. The parishes near the Chinese military railway also came under the jurisdiction of the Mission.³⁸ New metochions were opened in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which contributed to the financial independence of the Mission.

Thus, by 1916, two monasteries (male and female), a skete in the Xishan mountains, 5 metochions, 19 temples, 3 chapels, 5 cemeteries, missionary camps in 32 points, a seminary in Beijing, 18 male and 3 female schools were under the Mission's jurisdiction (Petrovskiy, 2022: 86). The number of Orthodox Chinese reached 6255 (Selivanovskiy, 2013:41). It is important that by this time the number of Chinese Orthodox missionaries exceeded that of Russians.

The boom did not last long. The revolution in Russia in 1917 radically changed the situation. The Soviet authorities, naturally, stopped all financing of the Mission. Reverend Inokentiy managed to keep the property, however, the wave of Russian emigration greatly hindered the missionary activity, which again moved to the background.

In 1920, the mission came under the jurisdiction of the Synod of the Russian Church Abroad, and in 1922 it was transformed into the Diocese of Beijing and China, with two vicariates in Shanghai and Tianjin.³⁹ In 1931, Reverend Inokentiy died, and Reverend Simeon Vinogradov, who died soon after (1933), was appointed as the ruling bishop, but during his rule, a split between the Chinese and Russian Orthodox had already appeared.

³⁸ These parishes were soon withdrawn from the mission, as the railway management was opposed to missionary activity for political reasons.

³⁹ Harbin Diocese was established in the territory of Manchuria, which was independent from Beijing and directly subordinated to the Synod.

After the death of Reverend Inokentiy, the Chinese priest Sergiy Chang⁴⁰ appealed to the authorities of the Republic of China to appoint him as the head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission. His goal was to establish a church for the Chinese, and he believed that all the attention of the Mission was unfairly given to the Russian emigration (Li, 2019:201). The Kuomintang authorities supported Father Sergiy's initiative, although it was perceived by the Mission leadership as an attempt to seize property. The rigid opposition of the Russian clergy hindered the process of formation of the Chinese Church.

Despite everything, the Chinese clergy continued to fight. Father Sergiy decided to leave the Russian Church Abroad and joined the Moscow Patriarchate⁴¹. The Japanese invasion of China and the success of the USSR in World War II radically changed the situation. The head of the Mission, Reverend Victor Sviatin, also joined the Moscow Patriarchate (1946), therefore, he was perceived as the head of the Mission⁴².

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Mission's situation became even more difficult. At that time, there were 106 Orthodox churches in China, and the number of Chinese Orthodox believers reached 10,000 (Petrovskiy, 2022:88-89). The Moscow Patriarchate decided to ordain the first Chinese bishop. Reverend Simeon Du (杜润臣) was established in Shanghai and soon began active work. His desire, like that of the Chinese Orthodox in general, was to establish an autonomous diocese of China, although this again met with opposition from the Russian clergy. In 1954, an agreement was made between the USSR and the People's Republic of China, according to which the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was to be

⁴⁰ Father Sergi was the son of Father Mitrophan, who was killed by the Boxers, and at that time was the leading Chinese Orthodox clergyman.

⁴¹ He was called the "Administrator of the Diocese of China", and the structure under his authority was called the "Chinese Orthodox Church".

⁴² The archpriest of Shanghai, John Shakhovskoy, did not join the Moscow Patriarchate, which meant that the dioceses of Beijing and Shanghai were divided. The authorities of the Republic of China considered Reverend John to be the legal representative.

closed. The largest part of the Mission's property was given to China, and the Beiguan residence - to the USSR, for the new embassy.

Reverend Victor was forced to leave China. In 1956, the Holy Synod of the Russian Church made a decision to grant autonomy to the Chinese Church. Therefore, another Chinese Archimandrite Vasilii Shuan (姚福安, 姚双林) (1957) was consecrated as a bishop, who was supposed to head the Autonomous Church of China. But, due to disagreements with Reverend Simeon Du, this could not be done.

In 1962 Reverend Vasilii died, and in 1965 - Reverend Simeon. After his death, the last Orthodox Church in Shanghai and Harbin Monastery were closed. The Chinese Church was left without a bishop (Andreeva, 2014).

At that time, a total of 10 Orthodox priests were serving in China.

Thus, the Chinese Autonomous Church faced the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) completely unprepared and structurally defective, which led to its institutional abolition (*Kitayskaya Avtonomnaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov'*, 2019).

As a result of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, when the religious policy softened in China, Orthodoxy also began to revive. In 1984, the Orthodox church was opened in Harbin, where the Chinese priest Grigoriy Chu (朱世朴) served.

After the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Orthodox Church tried to establish contacts with Beijing. Several official visits took place. The most important of them was the visit of the Russian Patriarch Kirill in 2013. Within the framework of the visit, he worshiped in the churches of Beijing, Shanghai and Harbin (*Zavershilsya vizit Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla v Kitay*, 2013). As a result of bilateral visits of the highest rank, two Chinese Orthodox priests who received theological education in Russia were also consecrated and allowed to worship in China. Religious services are regularly performed in the parishes near the Russian embassy and consulates, although participation in them is limited for Chinese citizens.

The situation is different in the Hong Kong parish, where different laws apply than in mainland China. Hong Kong Parish has been functioning since 1933. It was led by priest Dmitry Uspensky. The parish has gone through all the difficult historical vicissitudes that the mainland Chinese church has and existed until the death of father Dimitriy (1970). After that, the church belongings of St. Peter and Paul Parish were sent to Australia,⁴³ and the church was closed due to lack of funds.

In 1996, an important event in the history of Chinese Orthodoxy took place - the Ecumenical Patriarchate established its parish in Hong Kong. In 2003, when the Moscow Patriarchate decided to send its priest to Hong Kong, at first, he had to serve in the St. Luke parish of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Since 2008, the parish named after St. Peter and Paul was officially restored, which is still led by deacon Dionyse Pozdniaev, and which is actively engaged in missionary and translation activities. He founded the first Chinese Orthodox publishing house "China Orthodox Press" (Orthodoxy in Hong Kong n.d.).

Conclusion

Although the Orthodox Church has been engaged in missionary work in China for more than three hundred years, its fruits are incredibly small compared to the fruits of other Christian denominations. The number of Catholics exceeds 10 million, and the number of Protestants, according to some data, is more than 100 million, while the number of Orthodox Christians is up to 15,000 (MEASURING RELIGION IN CHINA. 4. Christianity, 2023).

Naturally, there were objective and subjective reasons for this. First of all, as mentioned above, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was created not as a missionary, but as a diplomatic organization, which represented a part of the Russian Imperial government. In general, after the reforms of Peter I, the Russian Church was subordinated to the state and, essentially, directly involved in the imperial apparatus. In addition, Russia's Far Eastern expansion is depicted diametrically

⁴³ After the re-opening of the parish, the icon of the Apostles was also moved back.

differently in Russian and Chinese historiography. In the perception of the Chinese, the Russians were the conquerors, and Orthodoxy, therefore, was the religion of the conquerors. The Mission's primary concern for three centuries was to meet the spiritual needs of ethnic Russians, not to preach Christianity to the Chinese.

The well-known Chinese researcher of Christianity, Yue Feng, describes the reasons for the difficulty of the Orthodox mission in this way:

- Orthodox missionaries did not strive to "Chineseize" their appearance, unlike Catholic missionaries who dressed in Confucian clothing;

- they did not combine the interpretation of the Bible with the Confucian canons, unlike the Catholic missionaries who adapted their sermons taking into account the mentality of the Chinese rulers and the educated class of society;

- presented too strict rules and restrictions for believers, unlike Catholic missionaries, who allowed the preservation of traditional customs, including worshipping ancestors and Confucius;⁴⁴

- they did not pay attention to the spread of Western scientific knowledge, unlike Catholic missionaries who used this knowledge to attract the attention of the Chinese and establish friendly contacts in the interests of preaching;

- most Orthodox clergy did not want to learn Chinese and did not understand Chinese customs and morals;

- Russian Ecclesiastical Mission created an insufficient amount of church schools did not care about the upbringing of the "Chinese change" in contrast to the Catholic Church, which created a wide network of educational institutions;

- Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was not sufficiently involved in charity among the Chinese, as opposed to Catholic and Protestant religious institutions. (Li, 2019: 198-199).

⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the worship of the ancestor cult, attempts to mix Confucianism and Christianity were later condemned by both Catholics and Protestants.

Evidently, preaching was hindered by the fact that the Mission was considered a "nest of agents". Even in modern reality, it is difficult to separate the Russian state and the church, negotiations on church issues are also conducted along state lines. Secular and church researchers also pay a lot of attention to interstate relations. For example, one of the official representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate believes that the restoration of the Chinese Orthodox Church will help bring China closer to the countries of the canonical space of the Moscow Patriarchate (Petrovsky, 2018:79).

Ethno-phyletism was also an important obstacle to missionary activity in China, which was manifested in the conflict between ethnically Chinese and Russian parishioners and clergy.

Despite the above, there are some positive changes. Today, there are four Orthodox parishes in mainland China, there are also Chinese clergy, but there is no bishop, and it will not be possible to ordain such in the near future. And, without a bishop, the church will not be able to serve fully⁴⁵.

Worthy of special attention is the Metropolitanate in Hong Kong established by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, whose jurisdiction extends to mainland China since 2008⁴⁶. It is true that the Patriarchate of Constantinople does not have parishes there (in mainland China), but in the long run, the fact that the Ecumenical See is not directly connected to the government of any country may be a positive factor.

An important and historic event in this regard was the visit of the Chinese Consul General to the Ecumenical Patriarchate on October 30, 2019. Consul Cui Wei is the first Chinese official to visit Phanar. At the meeting, the conversation touched upon the Metropolitan of Hong Kong, and at the end of the conversation, the consul noted that he would be happy for the Ecumenical Patriarch's visit to China (The Consul General of The People's Republic Of China In Istanbul Visits The Ecumenical Patriarchat, 2019).

⁴⁵ The Autonomous Church of China is temporarily under the direct authority of the Patriarch of Moscow.

⁴⁶ This was followed by a protest from the Moscow Patriarchate.

A major problem for the Orthodox mission in the People's Republic of China is that Orthodoxy is not among the five traditional religions that have more freedom to operate. Today, Orthodoxy is considered an ethnic minority religion in the provinces of Xinjiang, Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia (CHINA (INCLUDES TIBET, XINJIANG, HONG KONG, AND MACAU) 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT, 2018:8).

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