

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE REVIVAL OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY MISSION IN CHINA

Sandra Knežević

Xiamen University – Xiamen, Peoples Republic of China sandranesic@yahoo.com

Abstract: Previous to the modernist social change of the XX century, China had one of the richest and most diverse religious cultures in the world. The country was influenced by fundamental anti traditionalist policies of both regimes, the Republican and Communist with additional social and historical aspects posed difficult confronts to China's religious traditions but furthermore offered innovative opportunity for renewal and novelty. The modern social, cultural and economic reforms and the coexisting lessening of religious policies offered productive position for the renewal of a extensive assortment of religious practices as well as temple festivals, divination, ancestor worship, spirit mediumism, church or mosque services, funeral rites, exorcism, pilgrimages, sectarianism, support sutra chanting, printing and sharing out many kind of ethic and morality books, etc. Simultaneously, it seems that new appearances of religious practices have materialized such as lay Buddhist preachers, Maoist shamans, and a mystifying number of qigong sects and schools. At that time also Orthodox Christianity started "new mission" era in China. In order to explain remarkable religious position of Orthodox christianity in China, that started again in the XXI century, I came to conclusion that it's return was conditioned by the operation of the Russian Orthodox Church, but the circumstances of such events were the result of a latent secularization of the entire Chinese society, which was felt more strongly in metropolises, Inner Mongolia, and areas close to Russian border line. The Orthodox Christianity in China became active again as religious practices that revived "old Orthodox Christian practices" in China and new practices for "old" religion. The old practice had to adapt to the new times and the new circumstances in which it worked. Research results shows what kind of religious innovations were possible. It shows different processes and mechanisms of China Orthodox Christianity revivals and innovations, but also historical, political, social, economic, and other factors that impact upon these processes and mechanisms. What kinds of innovation emerge that are clothed in traditional idioms or appear to be radical breaks from tradition? And more broadly, what does the China case of The Orthodox Christianity revitalization and innovation tell us about the nature of religious tradition and the larger issue of cultural continuity and change of the society. Secularization, which has been happened in China since the beginning of the XXI century, could be interpreted as an anthropological pessimism of the notion of justice and struggle for the power of different confessions in the new "multidimensional population market". By the policies of all Christian confessions missions in China, the advocacy of ultimate justice is a mask for power, and justice itself is an illusion. Today, modern Chinese society is not characterized by radical skepticism, as it existed in the past, defined by the political authorities of China. While the political authorities in China defined mind-sets towards certain religions, there was no social dilemma. Through religious bans, China fostered the cult of doubt and developed a specific form of hermeneutics doubt. The official universal perspective has correctly interpreted the invested interests of all religions that came from outside China and was not related to the perspective from which they originated. The critical attitude towards religion was originally negative, and when suspicion was not restrained, a space for the appearance of the apparitions was opened. That is, mistrust was not allowed to become the final principle of reasoning (nor personally developed or adopted), because in particular in such circumstances there is a space for secularization. Perhaps religion as a social category has ceased to be an admirable enemy of the society, and did not demand the former intensity of surveillance and suppression, and thus its removal from the People Republic of China policy, and transfered to the private sphere.

Keywords: Anthropology, China, Orthodox Christianity, Mission

1. PRELIMINARIES

Today there are about 15 000 Orthodox Christians in China³⁸, compared, approximately, with 12 million Catholics and tens of millions of Protestants³⁹. According to the natural position, the border of China and Russia has experienced the highest level of spreading of Orthodox Christianity, more than any other Christian confession. But that did not happen despite the activities of missionaries in Russia. The former Russian empire had been recognized as an Orthodox country, which played a leading role in helping the spread of Orthodoxy outside its borders. The reason for this lies in the fact that Russia and China share a common border, which facilitated the mixing of two countries' cultures, customs, traditions, and people. The logical question is why they did not succeed comparing with other Christian confessions? The answer may be the fact that the Orthodox

³⁸ Титаренко, Михаил Леонтьевич, ред. Православие в Китае, Москва, р. 196, 2010.

³⁹ Operation World reports about 75.4 million Protestants out of a total of 105.4 million Christians in China, People's Republic of China. Operation World, available on: <http://www.operationworld.org/china> Retrieved on 2016/07/17

mission in China began just three centuries ago, and before that there was not an evident, systematic, planned activity of Orthodox missionaries in China. With the beginning of this century, Russian Orthodox Church try to revive Orthodoxy in China.

2. TRADITION OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

About the beginning of Orthodoxy in China, we can speak only from the end of the XVII century, although there are earlier testimonies about the Chinese introduction of the Eastern Christianity, such as The Nestorian Stele, dating from 781.⁴⁰ The Orthodox Church in China has existed over three hundred years.⁴¹ Within it, the citizens of Russia played an important role, because the history of Chinese Orthodoxy begins with Russian spiritual mission in Beijing, but its mystical religious basis is self-important and figurative - Chinese Martyrs blood, a feat of the faith father of the current Chinese Orthodox. The first period of Orthodoxy development in China was 1715-1858, from the foundation of the mission to the Tianjin Treaty, after which in 1863 the diplomatic load was removed from the spiritual mission. The story begins in 1685 when the Chinese emperor troops captured the Russian fortress Albazin on the Amour river.⁴² About 50 prisoners of Cossacks Albazints were sent to Beijing, where soon they formed a detachment of the Imperial Guard. They were settled on a site near the northern city wall - Beiguan (northern courtyard), to them was given to married wives of Executed Criminals and all of them got Chinese names. The Orthodox Priest Maxim Leontiev, who bled together with the Cossacks, set up the First Orthodox Church. For this, he was allowed by Emperor Kangxi⁴³ to reequip the Buddhist temple of Guangi Miao, God of the War, in the northeast corner of the imperial city to be adapted for the Russian people.⁴⁴ This church of *Hagia Sophia - Divine wisdom* or Chinese "*Sheng Ni Gula*", Albazinians called also *Nikolaisky Chapel*, According to the respected icon of St. Nicholas the Wonder maker⁴⁵.

Except for Russia, no state had representatives of its own in China under the Qing dynasty until the 1860ies. Many stories about Albazints was transmitted by merchants caravans, reached the Russian Imperial Court. The Russian authorities quickly realized the political benefit from the existence of the Russian community in the neighboring eastern state. So, Peter I, having received information about the consecration of the Orthodox church in Beijing, wrote to him an approving letter, in which he warned against possible religious zeal. To strengthen the position of Russian missionaries in Beijing and meet the religious needs of the Orthodox residents of the Chinese city, Peter I decreed on June 18, 1700, to establish a spiritual mission in Tobolsk.⁴⁶ He issued a decree related to caravan trade and the missionary activity of the Orthodox clergy in Siberia and The Qing Empire. The send out of the mission was facilitated by the liberal policy of China, and just established opened port cities for trade with Europeans. The Beijing Mission, the earliest of all the foreign missions of the Russian Orthodox Church, was founded at a time when the Qing dynasty in China was conducting an isolationist policy of "*closed doors*."⁴⁷

For 250 years of official old Russian Orthodox Mission in China, there were total 20 missions, each of them was conducted for about 10 years on average in China. During this period, there were several political social circumstances that occurred during the mission, and certainly had an impact on the outcome of success: Napoleon's attack on Russia, First Opium War, *Taiping Rebellion*, *Boxer rebellion*, etc. Starting from 1915, in China the *New Culture Movement* caused by lack of expectation with traditional Chinese culture, and a call for the establishing of a new Chinese culture connected and opened for global and western standards, and values of democracy and science.

⁴⁰Ding, Wang, Remnants of Christianity from Chinese Central Asia in Medieval ages, In Malek, Roman; Hofrichter, Peter (editors). *Jingjiao: the Church of the East in China and Central Asia*. Steyler Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH. 2006

⁴¹ At 2015, 300 years of the Russian spiritual mission was celebrated in China. Four dates can equally be considered the starting point of her story: the capture of Albazin Cossacks In 1685 (Russian emigrants in China celebrated the 250th anniversary of the mission in 1935), the decree of Peter I of 1700, the appointment of the mission in 1712 and her arrival in Beijing in 1715.

⁴² Ломанов А.В. Христианство и Китайская Культура. Москва, p. 166, 2002.

⁴³ Emperor Kangxi (4 May 1654 – 20 December 1722) is considered one of China's greatest emperors, famous as responsible for the construction of the Forbidden City in Beijing.

⁴⁴ Титаренко, Михаил Леонтьевич, ред. Православие в Китае, Москва, p. 20, 2010.

⁴⁵ Кириллов А. Эпизод из жизни Российской духовной миссии в Китае/ Китайский благовестник. Москва, p. 26, 1999.

⁴⁶ Иннокентий (Фигуровский), еп. Краткая история Русской православной миссии в Китае, составленная по случаю исполнившегося в 1913 году двухсотлетнего юбилея ее существования. Пекин, p 2-3, 1916.

⁴⁷ Schirokauer C., A Brief History of Chinese Civilization, Thompson Wadsworth, pp. 234–235, 2006.

The last mission phase 1945-1956, brings time of reunion with the Moscow Patriarchate, the resumption of missionary work, an attempt to create a Chinese autonomous Orthodox Church.⁴⁸ The mission was closed in 1956, and all The Church's property was transferred to the authorities of the People's Republic of China. The spiritual autonomy of the mission was converted into the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church. However, the process of the Church reorganization in the 1950s was not completed formally. From 1956 to 1990s, the politically influential period of religious quiet within the political system, both in China and Russia, which had neither the will nor the interest to deal with issues of the Orthodox Church. Subsequent years, especially the "cultural revolution" of 1966-1976, when churches were being destroyed and death of priests became a serious test for the church, the church hierarchy was weakened by the death of bishops. The 1990s have brought kind of rebirth of Orthodoxy in Russia, and all over the worlds Orthodoxy, which is reflected in the operation in China to this day - with a strong social trend of individuality.

3. REVIVAL OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

Ethnography shows that Orthodox Christianity in China at present, is more than religious traditions practiced by ethnic minorities. While addressing dissimilar characteristics of the revitalized Chinese Orthodox Christianity landscape, it is easy find complex, forceful, ever-changing clusters of institutions, practitioners and consumers, knowledge and practices, sociopolitical relations and hierarchies fully amenable to innovations, inventions, and reinventions all the time. That dynamic relationship between reproduction and innovation is noted as a prioritized in studies of religious life in China. The previous chapter provides the larger context of history that had built "tradition" but should continued with analyze of contemporary Orthodox Church in China through overview of the major analytical issues related to four key interrelated themes:

1. The politics of the Orthodox church legitimating in China and the religion as a new field of political and socioeconomic activities;
3. Communities and networks; and
4. Transmission, reproduction, and innovation.

In some historical contexts "tradition" as a body of customary practices was tolerated and accommodated to more "modern" and hegemonic forms of governance. On the other hand, the tradition can be mobilized as a legitimizing device, as a claim of meaningful connection to the past. The "invention of traditions" literature has amply demonstrated such instrumental uses of "tradition". In China, the struggle between "the modern" and "the traditional" has more often than not spawned traditionalism as a conscious conservatives' or revivalist strategy (including most so-called fundamentalisms). Fundamentalism is related to old Chinese religions, but "tradition" additionally for other religion that came from other countries. Forms of religious fundamentalism in China are no less products of modernity and desires for renewal than forms of religious modernism.

While the above-mentioned understandings of "tradition" are important, they do not point to a theoretical analysis of how "traditions" work. For the purpose of China Orthodox church describing, it is necessary to adopt a dynamic, processual, and site-specific understanding of religious "tradition," that was existed to see "tradition" as generative and grounded. By this I mean that a particular tradition, in China case a particular religious tradition, is always in the process of being made and remade by social actors in response to changing concrete, local Chinese circumstances. This understanding of Chinese religious traditions is premised looking at the unfolding of elements of religious traditions as they relate concretely to one another in actual historical and sociopolitical contexts in China. A large part of traditional Chinese culture is quite well-matched with the Orthodox Christian humankind vision, but also there are many underlying dissimilarities. In traditional Chinese culture, social harmony is of utmost importance. A key difference of traditional Chinese culture is its pragmatic and syncretic approach to truth. It tries to incorporate what is beneficiary from various religions as long as it promotes harmony, and does not acknowledge an absolute nor personal source of Truth.

In recent Chinese history, secularism and the Cultural Revolution have rooted out much of traditional Chinese culture and religions in the name of economic progress and prosperity. Yet, traditional Chinese customs that may have been lost can still be seen practiced. Although both religious reproduction and innovation take place within the larger generative structure of tradition, "religious traditions" themselves do not do things; it is people who do things with religious traditions, though within the possibilities offered and limitations imposed by these traditions. A particular religious tradition continues to be viable or can be revitalized when three conditions are met:

1. The substantive elements of the tradition have to be available to be mobilized. These may include churches, symbols, rituals, knowledge, texts in Chinese language, ritual paraphernalia and other material culture, ritual specialists, methods of transmission, networks, etc. They might be readily accessible or are at least retrievable.

⁴⁸Титаренко, Михаил Леонтьевич, ред. Православиев Китае, Москва, 2010.

2. there are people who have the interest and desire to mobilize elements of this religious tradition, be they religious specialists who want to make a living using their religious expertise, local elites who derive authority and prestige from sponsoring or organizing local cult activities, or ordinary people who seek divine assistance from deities or ritual specialists, etc.;

3. Third, the political and socioeconomic environment is conducive to such mobilization.

Orthodox Christianity as a new field of political and socioeconomic activities, in recent years, there has been a revival of Orthodoxy in China. However, despite the successful development of Christian faiths and the democratization of society, religious and confessional issues stay politicized. Among all, the most difficult are the problems of relations between the People Republic of China and other states entities (Vatican, Russia, etc.) because China rightfully does not allow interference of other countries to its internal affairs, as well as the problems of the existence of destructive and all officially unregistered Christian sects. Thus, overcoming the resistance of the state and the public, at the present period there is a process of activating the Christianity. Christianity remains the most important factor in the development spirituality of China.

In the past, the Russian spiritual mission in China played an important role in the establishment and maintenance of Russian - Chinese relations. It was the center of scientific study of China and represented the training of the first Russian Sinologists. Over time, the Orthodox spiritual mission has become a kind of school of higher practical and scientific knowledge in all areas of Sinology.

The primate of the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church is currently His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, ex Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the head of the Department for External Church Relations. For the Russia, Holy Orthodoxy was the state diplomatic and cultural force. Christ's teaching has become an integral part of many cultures and other peoples, but also the matter of cultural influence. Therefore, Orthodoxy should get a role of spiritually uniting Russia with China. The problem of the revival of Orthodoxy in China remains intractable and urgent (for Orthodoxy and Russia) today. Because the Chinese Orthodox Church, Orthodoxy, unlike Catholicism and Protestantism, did not receive the status of an official religion, its status in China today should be equated with a sect. But in a few regions, in Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang, Orthodoxy is recognized as a traditional religion, primary in areas with Russians residence but also officially included small number of Chinese peoples.

Renovation and the return of the Orthodox Church in China, and a new era for Orthodoxy in China begin from 1984. Even the churches reconstructions were allowed, with no priest to do services, the community could only meet to pray. The Russian Orthodox Church needed many years to recover itself from the "godlessness" of Soviet era. In 1990s, it was still unable to deal with the problems of foreign congregation. As a result of that situation, at the beginning of the XXI century was a situation in which about 15 000 of Orthodox citizens of China were no recognized authorities of the Chinese Orthodox priest, as well as also contemporary Russian community living in China at present does.

Considering the rapidity of growth of the Russian-Chinese cooperation and it's increase from year to year, there is every reason to believe that the need for the Orthodox church activities in China will continue to grow, but on the other side, it can also not be expected for anything significant to happen to shift Orthodoxy in the overall share of Christianity in China. Looking back for last three centuries, Russia, compared to other countries, had all privileges for missionary activities, which unfortunately were never realized.

The current image of Orthodox community in China today, is reflected through the preservation of the community, the struggle for the return of church property to a decent purpose, eagerly awaiting the Chinese priest, the everyday life of the believer, and several relevant actors. The Chinese government, starting from 2004, allowed to Russian priests to visit churches, to do confessions in both Russian and Chinese and serve Holy Liturgy on the most important Orthodox holidays. Generally, the new Orthodox networkings in China can be viewed in two different perspectives. The first one is to spread of religion through the apostolic role succession, which was not essential idea, but through a new form, as a trend that comes from the West, and enters the sphere of self-identification and individual prestige, not tradition or spirituality. The second one is related to keeping the unity of already believers and Russians, preservation and fostering of religion within the Russian community, the community of already believers in big cities with Orthodox tradition Beijing, Shanghai, etc., territory of Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and area close to Russian border. Visiting priests usually have to work within the supervision of the State Administration of Religious Affairs if they do not wish to encounter any obstacles, and for the most are only allowed to hold services for foreign compatriots working or residing in China. Such services are normally held in an embassy and are off limit to Chinese believers.

Chinese Orthodox Church neither has its Chinese hierarchy leader, nor Chinese Orthodox priests. In some regions, Chinese authorities also do not prohibit Orthodox religious activity of their citizens, but this is almost not due to the absence of any significant Orthodox Chinese community, Chinese clergymen and opportunities for the performance of the cult. An interesting phenomenon of Orthodoxy today, is the kind of believers gathering for pray without a priest, typically almost only for China, considering that the purpose of the Church is

community and the Liturgical life, which is a prerequisite priest who performs the services. The Chinese government is usually flexible with small group prayers in private homes, but they will start noticing if there is more than a handful gathering together. About the topic of the formalization of the Chinese Orthodox Church, the major step that should be taken seems to be the official recognition of the Church. There are Chinese priests now in training in Russian seminaries, for who do hope to return back to China to serve the Orthodox faithful. But also, this is a sensitive subject and requires the blessing of the Chinese government and their future is uncertain. In 2001, at the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary was opened Far Eastern Center, with the main objective of establishment of missionary base preaching Christianity in the Far East. From the first days of existence of the Far Eastern Center, it became clear that it faces enormous challenges in scope, because China represents an important strategic goal of Orthodox beliefs. About 20 Chinese were studying in religious educational institutions of Russia (including 11 students from China), many of whom were motivated to receive priestly dignity.

Significant step and attempt at a new and innovative missionary approach took place at last a few years, when essays were made to grow the church through cyberspace, and made a new era of transmission. There needs to be a creation of a supportive strategy in the social and cultural field, e.g. literature, music, and painting as civil arts, but grounded in Orthodox spiritual roots. Minimally an educational system for catechism about the Orthodox Church is required.

4. CONCLUSION

The recent history of China radically changed the socio-cultural structure of the people, transformed public consciousness. Atheistic ideology and the period of rigid nihilism in relation to one's own culture during the Cultural Revolution, the pagan foundations of society were undermined, which also affected the nature of missionary preaching. During the reformation years in China, interest in Orthodoxy, as well as in Christianity in general, among the Chinese population were large due to the weakening of the dominant ideology in the country, the search for new ideas and worldview systems. But if Protestantism was equated with kind of europeanization, by way of material success, Orthodoxy equated "in search of spirituality."

China has a multifaceted commitment to protecting its culture and traditions through a multitude of elements such as the Chinese writing letter, the Internet control, the preservation of own cultural values and the protection of national interests by not allowing external factors to interfere with China's internal affairs. This approach is not disapproval, but a unique example of the preservation of one's own culture and the country's interest. Nevertheless, a significant critique that could be pointed out is the orientation of the Orthodox Church to the Russians in China, and not primarily to the Chinese, from the beginning of the mission to the present. If the same mistake as before happens, and focus of church dominantly directs to the Russian in China, then there would be complete shutdown of Chinese Orthodox Church. The appearance of many Chinese to Orthodoxy is quite untypical. Despite these problems, at present Orthodoxy in China exists and develops. At present, there are no Orthodox clergymen-Chinese in the People's Republic in China, in connection with which the divine services are performed by a worldly rank. Thus, in modern China, the legislative base on religious and confessional relations is being improved.

LITERATURE

- [1] Титаренко, Михаил Леонтьевич, ред. *Православие в Китае*, Москва, 2010.
- [2] Operation World reports about 75.4 million Protestants out of a total of 105.4 million Christians in China, People's Republic of China. Operation World, available on: <http://www.operationworld.org/chna> Retrieved on 2016/07/17
- [3] Ding, Wang, *Remnants of Christianity from Chinese Central Asia in Medieval ages*, In Malek, Roman; Hofrichter, Peter (editors). *Jingjiao: the Church of the East in China and Central Asia*. Steyler Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH. 2006
- [4] Ломанов А.В. *Христианство и Китайская Культура*. Москва, 2002.
- [5] Титаренко, Михаил Леонтьевич, ред. *Православие в Китае*, Москва, 2010.
- [6] Кириллов А. *Эпизод из жизни Российской духовной миссии в Китае/ Китайский благовестник*. Москва, 1999.
- [7] Иннокентий (Фигуровский), еп. *Краткая история Русской православной миссии в Китае*, составленная по случаю исполнившегося в 1913 году двухсотлетнего юбилея ее существования. Пекин, 1916.
- [8] Schirokauer C., *A Brief History of Chinese Civilization*, Thompson Wadsworth, 2006.