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## **The Establishment of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking as an Example of a Long-Term Cooperation between the State and the Church: A Historical Review**

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### **Abstract**

The idea of the Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking was created at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Tsar Peter the Great as a joint project of the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church. Besides the official religious aim – to guarantee a pastoral care for Orthodox Albanians in Peking – political, diplomatic, commercial and scholar interests were intended by the Russians. After the Chinese authorities agreed to accept a group of priests and students in Peking and the first Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking was established in 1715, it started to play a very important “strategic” role in the political relationships between Russia and China. It became both the first

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foreign mission of the Russian Orthodox Church and the first foreign long-term "embassy" in China. For 150 years the Mission in Peking had a dual structure, being subordinate to both secular and spiritual authorities, and implementing their missionary as well as political interests.

In this article, a historical review of the project of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking, jointly implemented by the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church will be presented. Their cooperation, mutual support and successes will be analysed and evaluated together with their interferences, problems as well as deficits resulting from the partly counterproductive interests and activities of the Church and the State

### Streszczenie

Idea Prawosławnej Misji Duchownej w Pekinie została stworzona na początku XVIII w. przez cara Piotra Wielkiego jako wspólny projekt Imperium Rosyjskiego i Rosyjskiego Kościoła Prawosławnego. Oprócz oficjalnej religijnej motywacji - zagwarantowania opieki duszpasterskiej dla prawosławnych „Ałbazyńców” w Pekinie - Rosjanie mieli również inne polityczne, dyplomatyczne, handlowe i naukowe cele. Gdy władze chińskie zgodziły się przyjąć grupę księży i studentów w Pekinie, w 1715 roku powstała pierwsza Rosyjska Misja Duchowna w Pekinie, która zaczęła odgrywać ważną „strategiczną” rolę w stosunkach politycznych między Rosją a Chinami. Stała się ona zarówno pierwszą zagraniczną misją Rosyjskiego Kościoła Prawosławnego, jak i pierwszą zagraniczną rosyjską „ambasadą” w Chinach. Przez 150 lat Misja w Pekinie miała podwójną strukturę - była podporządkowana zarówno władzom świeckim, jak i duchownym oraz reprezentowała ich polityczne i misyjne interesy.

W artykule przedstawiono krótki rys historyczny powstania Rosyjskiej Misji Kościelnej w Pekinie, organizowanej wspólnie przez Imperium Rosyjskie i Rosyjski Kościół Prawosławny. Przeanalizowana została współpraca Państwa i Kościoła oraz ich wzajemne wsparcie Misji, jak również problemy i deficyty, wynikające z miejscami przeciwstawnych interesów oraz działań Państwa i Kościoła.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Prawosławna Misja Duchowna w Pekinie, Imperium Rosyjskie, Rosyjski Kościół Prawosławny, Stosunki Państwo-Kościół, Piotr I Wielki.

### Introduction

"In the eyes of the Chinese people<sup>2</sup>, our (Orthodox) Mission has - as you know - no political character, but, nevertheless, it is desirable that it become, so to speak, a link connecting the two (Russian

<sup>2</sup>The article is a revised version of the paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University. Conflict, Coexistence or Symbiosis? Religion and Politics, Past and Present March 13-14, 2020.

and Chinese) governments, so that through it, if possible, misunderstandings between the two governments might be eliminated and more and more mutual trust strengthened” (Feklova, 2016, p. 152-153). This instruction of the Russian Foreign Minister Count K.V. Nessel’rode<sup>3</sup> to the head of the 13th Orthodox Mission in Peking – Archimandrite Palladius – describes both: the expectations of Russian political authorities from representatives of the Orthodox Church in Beijing and the real status of the Peking Mission, as a kind of Russian Embassy in China: a diplomatic, economic, scholarly, in a certain sense intelligence but also religious centre. In fact, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking was an institution controlled by both church and state authorities and can be an example of a long-term – though unequal – cooperation between them. Only since 1861, as the first official Russian Embassy could be open after the Opium Wars, the Orthodox Mission partly lost some of its political functions and could engage more intensively in pastoral work.

The political context of the mission in Beijing, the history of its development and its main activities on behalf of the state and the church will be presented in the article. Achievements, deficits and significance of the Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking will be analysed for both: for the Russian state and for the Orthodox Church. Main sources include official documents of state and church authorities, works written by members and historians of the Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking (Adoratskij, 1997, p. 14-164; *Kratkaâ istoriâ...*, 1916) and the available secondary Russian, Chinese and Western literature on the activities of the mission and its relevance for the state and the church (Pozdnâev, 1997; Dacyšen, 2010; Zhang Sui, 1986; Yue Feng, 1999; Widmer, 1976; Glazik, 1954). The context and development of the Mission as a kind of “joint project” of the state and the church will be discussed in four parts: the relationship between the state and the church on the eve of the mission in Beijing; the role of the conquest of Siberia and the Russian Cossacks resettled to Beijing at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – the so-called Albazinians; the origin of the idea of the Orthodox Mission in Peking, its political backstage, and its real establishment in cooperation between the state and the church; and the development and implementation of the cooperation, as well as various activities of the Mission in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, until its diplomatic functions were handed over to the newly established

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<sup>3</sup>The transliteration of Cyrillic characters into Latin characters is according to the international standard ISO 9.

Russian embassy. Finally, an attempt will be made to evaluate gains and losses of both “cooperation partners” and to assess the significance of the mission for the state and for the church.

### **1. The Relationship between the State and the Church on the Eve of the Mission in Beijing**

The turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – the time when the idea of the Orthodox Mission in Peking was born – was a period of great changes in Russia. The new and strong Russian Emperor (the Tsar) Peter the Great (1682-1721) went for his famous 18-month journey “incognito” through Germany, Holland, England and Poland (the so-called “Grand Embassy”), and after returning he initiated extensive reforms aimed at modernizing the state. The reforms implemented for many years concerned the army, state administration, economy, but also education, culture and religion, especially the quite powerful in that time Russian Orthodox Church (cf. Lebedev, 1937). The Orthodox Church played a very important role in the history of Russia and remained for centuries the centre of spiritual power and the stronghold of stability in a country torn by wars and conflicts. Since the year 1589 a lifetime Patriarch was the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, who had the highest church-wide administrative power and a very significant impact on Orthodox believers. Needless to say, that in that time almost everybody in Russia was Orthodox. It was thinkable that the Moscow Patriarch could become a kind of the “Orthodox Pope”, quite independent of state power.

Upon becoming Emperor Peter the Great was often confronted with criticism and opposition of the Patriarch Adrian (1690-1700), who was rather conservative and opposed partly to the reforms of Peter. As the Emperor got stronger he decided to neutralize this opposition and to subordinate the church to the emperor. As the Patriarch Adrian died in 1700, Peter demonstratively did not attend his funeral, prevented to choose a new patriarch, and allow only the Metropolitan Stefan to act as a temporary substitute (so called “custodian of the patriarchal throne” or “locum tenens”) for the administration of the Orthodox Church. In fact, as it turned out, the patriarchate was permanently abolished. In the next over 200 years until 1917 there was no other patriarch in Russia. Later in 1721 the Most Holy Synod was established, modelled after some European Lutheran synods controlled by state (like in Prussia or Sweden), closely linked to the state authorities and subordinated to them. This Most Holy Synod was

composed partly of Orthodox bishops, and partly of laymen appointed by the Tsar. Also its head – the Chief Procurator – was a lay official and a member of the Emperor's cabinet. The First Chief Procurator of the Most Holy Synod (Barsov, 1896; Babkin, 2017, p. 522–544) became the Colonel Ivan Vasil'evich Boltin (Иван Васильевич Болтин).

According to the Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire, The Most Holy Synod was a supreme conciliar authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, established by Russian Emperor and acting on his demand in the church administration (*Polnoe sobranie zakonov...*, 1830, p. 316). It became the highest administrative and judicial body of the church. Only it had the right – after the approval of the Emperor – to open new churches, to appoint bishops, establish church holidays, proclaim saints, and censor publications related to the church. Apparently in the beginning of the 18 century the Russian Orthodox Church became fully subordinated to the Russian state.

## **2. The Conquest of Siberia and the Russian Cossacks in Beijing at the End of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

From the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Russian conquest of Siberia began. Within 100 years, the army of Cossacks raised by the influential family of Russian merchants Strogonov conquered an enormous territory between the Ural Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Russia, so far de facto limited to the area of Eastern Europe, became territorially the biggest country in the world. The settlers followed the Cossacks, and the Orthodox missionaries followed the settlers (cf. Turaev, 2012). Soon Siberia became the most important „mission“ of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Cossacks reached also the borders of China – the Amur River – in 1643. They clashed frequently with Manchus, and a number of them was taken into captivity. Subsequently some of them were enrolled in the Chinese Army, gathered in the so called “Russian Rota” – a part of the Bordered Yellow Banner (*Russko-kitajskie otnošenîa...*, 1969, p. 417; Ríajansky, 1937, p. 73). A few embassies to China were sent from Russia, as this of Petlin 1608, Bajkov 1654-57 or Spafarij 1675-78, no one of them, however, could succeed and establish stable diplomatic or commercial relations with the Middle Kingdom.

In the year 1665 an unexpected incident took place – trivial but very significant for the future. A Polish noble Nikifor Černigovskij (d. 1675), exiled to Siberia after Polish-Russian war, killed the governor of Ilimsk Lavrentij Obuhov who raped Černigovskij's daughter.

He had to run away and went together with a group of other prisoners to the Chinese border, where they founded a small fortress Yaxa or Albazin (that is why they were called Albazinians) on the Amur River in no man's land. An Orthodox priest - Maksim Leont'ev (Максим Леонтьев) - was present in the fortress, too. After 20 years Russian authorities pardoned Albazinians and incorporated the Albazin fortress to Russian Empire. This annexation was, however, not accepted by China. In 1685 the Qing army captured and destroyed Albazin. A part of its inhabitants was sent back to Russia, but circa 45 Albazinians were allowed to enroll the Chinese army. They were settled in Peking in the today's Dongzhimen District in the North-East of the City, married with Chinese women, and could continue to practice their orthodox faith, too. A former Buddhist temple was rebuilt into the Orthodox Church, and the priest Maksim Leont'ev, who came with Albazinians took the pastoral care of them (Adoratskij, 1997, p. 32). This relatively small group of captives became a turning point in the history of Russian-Chinese relations and also in the real beginning of the history of the Orthodox Church in China.

### **3. The Idea of the Orthodox Mission in Peking and Its Establishment**

As the news about the "Russian district" in Peking reached the Emperor Peter the Great, the idea of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking arose. Peter saw the necessity for permanent representative of Russia in Peking taking care of diplomatic and commercial relations with China. Since the other direct attempts so far failed, he hoped to take advantage of the presence of Albazinians in Peking. And he was successful. As he needed the help of the Orthodox Church in his undertaking, as early as in the year 1700 in his decree he ordered the Metropolitan of Kiev to appoint young educated seminarians for studies of Chinese language, in order to organize later the mission in China. Already at the beginning, he also clearly set the goals of the future mission, combining political and religious duties: supporting relations between Russia and China, maintaining Orthodox Christianity among Albazinians (as far as possible also spreading faith among Chinese), as well as interpreting and translating for political and commercial needs (Miazek, 2002, p. 78). In fact in the following years a group of clerics was prepared for the intended new mission, and this cooperation between state and church has borne fruit a few years later.

As in the year 1712 the only orthodox priest of Albazini-ans – Maksim Leont'ev – died in Beijing, and they asked the Russian Orthodox Church for a new one, the Emperor Peter the Great could react immediately and take advantage of this opportunity. Already in 1713, the First Russian Ecclesiastical Mission was completed with two priests, one deacon, eight seminarians and four students and it was officially approved by the state and church authorities. The head of the first Mission was Archimandrite Ilarion Ležajskij. It became a dual structure, being subordinate to the secular Russian authorities and to bishop of Tobolsk as its church superior (Widmer, 1976). After a long journey the Mission could reach Peking in 1715 and was after some hesitations accepted and welcome by Chinese authorities, who understood the goal of the Orthodox Mission primarily as caring for spiritual needs of Albazinians.

But in fact, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission had from the beginning numerous other aims designated by the state. One of the main goals was to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the Chinese language, Chinese culture, but also to learn more about the Chinese army and administration. Missionaries were encouraged to record and to reports all kind of useful information. Another aim was representation of Russian diplomatic and commercial interests in Beijing and a support of Russian officials coming to China. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, with so various aims, can be called therefore the first foreign embassy in China. It was expected by Russian authorities that also the religious activity of the Mission should exceed significantly the "care on Albazinians". As we learn from the "Statement of the stages of work of Mission's members in Beijing", issued by Holy Synod in 1756 as an instruction for missionaries in China, three main areas of their work were demanded: "the popularization of the uniqueness" of the Orthodox faith among the Beijing officials, the spread of the Orthodox Christianity between the middle class, and the social work with the poor population of Beijing and its environs (Osmakova, 2014, p. 63-65). Even if real activities of the Orthodox missionaries and its effects were very limited, we can presume that at least in this point the expectations of the church and the state were identical in this point.

After the first Mission in 1715 many subsequent ecclesiastic missions came to Peking in the next two centuries (one in 10 years on average) and they played an important role in the diplomatic, economic, scholarly and religious relations between Russia and China.

## 4. Various Activities of the Peking Mission

### 4.1. Diplomacy

The Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking was the only Russian institution in China for 150 years and was intentionally and continuously used by Russian government for diplomatic purposes. The supporting role of Orthodox missionaries in Peking for the Russian diplomacy was significant. Also, the supervision of the mission was provided by Russian authorities. In fact, in the years 1744 to 1864, all prescriptions, appointments, and transfers in the Peking Mission were carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and were approved by the Emperor. The Most Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church was only informed about these decisions.

The duties of the Russian resident (*de facto* the ambassador of Russia) in China were performed by the head of the mission, usually an archimandrite. According to the instructions, he had to be familiar with the mode of operation of the Chinese government, to provide any information about the current state of affairs of the Chinese state, about incidents and events both in China and in neighbouring countries, about trade, he had to provide extracts from important Chinese newspapers with the necessary explanations, and to inform about everything that he finds worthy of attention (Trigub, 2015, p. 62).

A head of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking had a special responsibility towards the Russian authorities but was also generously awarded after coming back to Russia (usually after 10 years), if he fulfilled his mission well (Šubina, 2010, p. 190). However, all members of the mission in Peking had the obligation to collect information of a political, economic and military character. Especially physicians and artists included sometimes in the mission were encouraged to provide various services and favours to Chinese dignitaries, as they could mutually expect the same (Trigub, 2015, p. 62). Various methods were used for to obtain the needed information: acquaintance with influential people and officials, and even bribery or intelligence. It is known, for example, that the students of the 6<sup>th</sup> mission (1771-1782) Aleksej Agafonov, Fedor Bakšeev, and Aleksej Paryšev wrote a kind of journal about their secret actions, intentions, incidents and changes in China from 1772 to 1782 (Šubina, 2010, p. 190). Even if the Chinese authorities surely knew about this “dual role” of the Orthodox Mission, they accepted it apparently as it became an important channel for contacts between the Russian and Chinese governments, the most acceptable for both parties, as it allowed to avoid some delicate diplomatic issues.



The members of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking were used as translators in the negotiations between Russian and China, for preparation of Russian-Chinese treaties, and for translation of official documents. Back in Russia, the former missionaries often continued to serve as translators for the Asian Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

#### 4.2. Cultural Exchange

The Orthodox missionaries in Peking played also a very important role in the cultural exchange of two countries. The Russian academic tradition of sinology (China studies) had its roots in the Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking. Its development was related to the practical interest of the Russian state. According to the results of research of members of the Mission we can fix following two periods of the scholarly activities of the Mission:

The preliminary period of the Mission in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was generally the period of translations, preparing of dictionaries, and learning about Chinese culture, Chinese history and Chinese reality. Numerous members of the Mission like Rossohin, Leontev, or Agafonov collected and translated quite a number of Chinese works. Usually they dealt with historical topics interesting for Russia: general history of China, Mongols and Manchus in China, geography and history of national groups in North and West China and in the borderland of Siberia. In the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century missionaries started to specialize in concrete topics: some of them were linguists or historians, made an immense work preparing dictionaries (unfortunately, however, all they were not published, because of still small interest for China in Russia and problems with Chinese prints). The result of this first period were many translations but only a few self-written works.

The second period of methodical research started in the Mission in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the explanation of sources became more and more important in Russia. Especially the leader of the Ninth Ecclesiastical Mission (1807-1821) - the orthodox priest Iakinf Bičurin (1777-1853) - became a famous scholar and a founding father of Russian Sinology (Walravens, 1988; Koshin, 1938, p. 628-644; Tihvinskij & Peskova, 1997, p. 165-196). In Peking he studied Chinese language, literature and history, and he continued his research after coming back to Russia, translated numerous Chinese classical works and published many volumes on Chinese history, geography and religion (Standaert, 2001, p. 367-373). His "Kitajskaâ grammatika" (Chinese

grammar) gave a beginning of methodology in the learning of Chinese language in Russia and his other publications made the Russian sinology famous in the world.

However, in the religious aspect, the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking cannot be considered as successful. Before the mid-nineteenth century Russian missionaries could not spread the Gospel among the Chinese and the orthodox community in Peking until 1860 never exceeded 100 members. Even the pastoral care for the small Orthodox community left much to be desired. Some of missionaries (as aforementioned Iakinf Bičurin) neglected the work with Albazianians.

### **Conclusion: The Importance of the Orthodox Mission in Peking for the State and the Church**

The Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking as a long-term cooperation project between the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church was surely not of an equal nature. The activities of the Mission were subordinated to the goals pursued by the state and brought tangible profits for Russian diplomacy – such as first-hand information about China or help in contacts with Chinese authorities. Also, the cultural and scholarly exchange between Russia and China, started by Russian missionary sinologists, is an obvious benefit for the Russian state. But what about the Orthodox Church? Did the cooperation with the state bring more profits or losses for the Church? The answer to this question is not unambiguous.

Regarding the spread of the Orthodox faith in China, the Russian Church was surely not successful in the 18 and 19 centuries. Partly busy with state affairs and their own problems, partly limited by Chinese restrictions in the missionary activities, the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Peking focused until 1861 only on the small community of Albazianians – descendants of the Russian Cossacks. And even this limited pastoral work was during some periods of the mission very inadequate and unsatisfactory. As already said, until the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian missionaries did very little for evangelization of China. They did not spread the Gospel among the Chinese and the Russian Orthodox Church played a very minor religious role in China until 1860. Only later at the turn of the centuries and in the 20th century, under the leadership of Bishop Innokentij Figurovskij, the Mission in Peking started an organized mission work between Chinese. Admittedly, he didn't have to start from scratch, but could use the foundations laid by the former Orthodox missionaries.

On the other hand, the very significant political and especially academic role of the Orthodox Mission in Peking, brought the Russian Church a wide recognition by historians and other scholars. This academic and cultural contribution of the unique long-term “foreign embassy” in China, including priests, scholars, artists and students is now rightly identified with achievements of the Orthodox Church, and is a result of cooperation between the state and the church in this matter.

Thus, in general, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries can be seen as an example of rather successful long-term cooperation between the state and the church. Surely this cooperation was not of equal power and profit. In the political situation in Russia of that time, the Orthodox Church was used by the Russian state, was subordinated to its interests and had to follow its orders. The religious interests of the church were considered as important by Russian authorities only if they corresponded with the interests of the state. Finally, however, also the Orthodox Church benefited from the cooperation with the Russian state and the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking remains for ever an unprecedented contribution to the religious, cultural, academic and political exchange between Russia and China.

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