"Unworthy to Be Quoted among the Believers – Worthy to Be Quoted among the Martyrs" Women in the Orthodox Church in China

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The history of the Orthodox Church in China, as presented in the literature on this topic, is predominantly the history of Orthodox men. However, in many periods – usually incidental – mention of Orthodox women can be found, remarkably often at crucial moments for the Church. In this article, references to Orthodox women in China in selected sources are presented and – if possible – they are "called by name." From this point of departure, an attempt at evaluation of the role and of the contribution of women to the Orthodox Church in China during the more than 300 years of its history is made. In this way a preparation of a base for future research is aimed for and the raising of awareness of the important presence of women in the life of the Orthodox Church in China, both in history and today.

Main sources for this topic are (mainly Russian) historical works, such as Adoratskij's *Pravoslavnaâ missiâ v Kitaj*[1] (The Orthodox Mission in China, Kazan 1887) – translated into Chinese in 2007 as *Dongzhengjiao zai Hua liangbai nian shi* 东正教在华两百年史, and Kratk*aâ istoriâ Russkoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvii v Kitae* (Short History of the Russian Orthodox Church in China, Beijing 1916), as well as the Journal of the Orthodox Church in China *Kitajskij blagovestnik*, published in Beijing in the first half of the 20 century. The literature in Western languages on this topic is quite limited; among others articles of Claudia von Collani and Alexander Lomanov about the "Russian orthodox Church" in both volumes of the *Handbook of Christianity in China* can be mentioned.

1. Historical Context of the Orthodox Mission in China

Before turning to Orthodox women in China, a short introduction into the historical context of the Orthodox Mission in China is useful. As is known, in 1685 the Chinese Army

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1 The transliteration of Cyrillic characters into Latin characters is according to the international standard ISO 9.

captured the fortress Albasin on the border of Russia and China, and a group of Cossacks – residents of the fortress (called Albasinians) – decided not to go back to Russia but went to Beijing. In the North-East of Beijing they were able to establish their own community, the "orthodox district," with a church and an Orthodox priest.[2]

As the news about the Orthodox community reached Tsar Peter the Great, the idea of a Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Beijing was born. The official aim was to guarantee pastoral care for the Albasinians (as the first Orthodox priest died in 1712), but also to study Chinese language and customs, and to pursue political, diplomatic and commercial interests. After initial hesitation, the Chinese authorities agreed to accept a group of priests and students in Beijing – all of them were *men* – and thus the first Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Beijing was established in 1715.[3]

In the next more than two centuries, twenty ecclesiastic missions subsequently came to Beijing – all consisted exclusively of men. They played an important role in the religious, scholarly and political relationships between Russia and China. Most of them are known by name and many became famous. Some were educated men, such as the father of Russian sinology, Iakinf Bičurin,[4] the translator of New Testament Gurij Karpov,[5] or the artist painter Anton Legašev.[6] On the contrary only little is known about the Albasinians, who in the course of time lost their Russian language and became "Chinese," but preserved their Orthodox faith.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission started to spread the Orthodox faith in other parts of China (Shanghai, Henan, Hubei, Xinjiang, etc.) and by 1916 there were 32 mission stations, 19 churches, 20 schools with 700 students. The number of Chinese believers amounted to more than 6,000,[7] under the leadership of Bishop Innokentij Figurovskij.

This missionary development was stopped when several hundred thousands of predominantly Orthodox Russian refugees escaped to China because of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), among them many Orthodox priests. The Orthodox Church in China had to help them and became so involved in works of charity and pastoral work for the Russian refugees that it neglected the work among the Chinese.[8] It was only after the end of the Second World War and the founding of the People's Republic of China, when most of the Russians left China, that the Orthodox Church remembered its Chinese believers. New Chinese priests and two bishops (Simeon Du and Vasilij Shuang) were ordained (all these important men are called by name), and in 1957, the Russian Orthodox Church bestowed independence on the Chinese Church: the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church was created, with a Chinese bishop as the head.[9]

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2 For more information about Albasin and Albasinians see von Collani – Lomanov 2001, pp. 368f.; Baker 2006, pp. 80-88; and Widmer 1976, pp. 13-19.

3 For a description of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Beijing in the 18th century see Widmer 1976.

4 Cf. Walravens 1988.

5 Baker 2006, pp. 127f.

6 Nesterova 2000, pp. 359-427.

7 Bays 2012, p. 212.

8 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 47; and Lomanov 2010, pp. 553-563.

9 Baker 2006, p. 195.

However, this came too late. Shortly after, in 1962 and 1965, both Chinese bishops died and all churches were closed. During the Cultural Revolution many priests and believers died and the Orthodox Church in China practically disappeared.[10] In the last 25 years, the Orthodox Church in China experienced a kind of "resurrection," which can be seen in four dimensions: old Chinese communities reappeared, new communities of foreigners were established, furthermore the Patriarchs of Moscow and of Constantinople became very interested in the Chinese Church, and last but not least, the Orthodox Church is now a topic in the diplomatic relations of Russia and China.[11] In all these dimensions of the Orthodox Church today, names of important men feature prominently, such as, e.g., the last active Chinese priest in Harbin Grigorij Zhu, who died in the year 2000, the Russian priest Dionisij Pozdnâev who started pastoral care for foreigners in Mainland China or the Greek bishop Nectarios from Hong Kong.[12]

This is the "standard" history of the Orthodox Mission in China, i.e., the history of Orthodox *men*. But what about Orthodox women? Were there any Orthodox women in China? And if so, which role and contribution did they have within the Orthodox Church in China?

2. Women in the Orthodox Church in China

Even if references to Orthodox women in China are very scant in the literature on this topic, we can state that Orthodox women were and are present in every period of the Orthodox Church in China from the very beginning, even if they hardly had any leading positions.

The first Russian Orthodox believers, among them women, came to China probably as prisoners during the Mongolian time in the 13th century. The Mongols had dominated Russian territory for about 200 years. Especially Russian craftsmen and other Orthodox people were brought to Mongolia and partly to China, which was under Mongolian rule, too.[13] There is no evidence about their religious practice, comparable to Russians coming to China voluntarily or by force in the following centuries.

The actual history of Orthodoxy in China started – as already said – with Albasin, a small fortress on the Amur River (on the Sino-Russian border). After Albasin was conquered by the Chinese army in 1685, part of the residents together with an Orthodox priest of the fortress were taken to Beijing. Accompanying the 45 Orthodox men were also "a few Orthodox *women* and children,"[14] a fact often neglected in the literature. Furthermore, sources keep silent about their names and lives. In Beijing, the Albasinians intermarried with Chinese women – wives of prisoners sentenced to death.[15] Even if these Chinese

10 Lomanov 2007, p. 348; and Baker 2006, pp. 211f.

11 For more about the four dimensions of the Orthodox Church in China today, see Adamek – Malek 2008, pp. 27-32.

12 Updated news about Orthodoxy in China can be found on the website: www.orthodox.cn.

13 Adoratskij 1997, pp. 15f.

14 *Ibid*., p. 40; and *Kratkaâ istoriâ* 1916, p. 11.

15 Adoratskij 1997, p. 47.

women are often condemned because of their origin, we know that they converted to the Orthodox faith,[16] and we can say that in fact these women were the first known Chinese Orthodox believers in history.

In the next two hundred years sources focused on the pastoral, diplomatic and scholarly work of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission and say little about the Albasinians nor the women among them. Apparently the chroniclers of the Orthodox Church in China found nothing noteworthy about them. The only concrete name I could find was the one of a widow Fu from Tongzhou, apparently a descendant of the Albasinians, whose property was bought by the Mission in 1728 and therefore noticed.[17] We read also that in the 1760s four Russian prisoners of war were settled in Beijing and married "Chinese baptized virgins" there.[18] The Orthodox life in the community of the Albasinians was, however, very limited – at the end of the eighteenth century there were only four women going to the church.[19]

When the Orthodox Church started missionary work among the Chinese and other nationalities of China in the second half of the 19th century, the number of believers started to grow. In 1889, the first Orthodox school for girls was opened in Beijing.[20] According to the report from the Orthodox Mission for the year 1899, besides male believers there were also 68 Orthodox "Albasinian" women, 52 Manchu, 31 Mongol and 25 Chinese Orthodox women[21] in China (about half of the believers). All of them stayed nameless, however.

3. Martyrs

In the summer of 1900, the Orthodox Church in China suffered a nearly fatal blow. During the so-called Boxer Uprising or Yihetuan Movement (June 10–11), about three hundred believers (from a total of 450)[22] were killed in Beijing and environs – all of them Chinese. 222 victims were later proclaimed as martyrs, they were called by name, their biographies were published,[23] and until now they are venerated in the Church. Slightly more than half of them – 113 – were Orthodox Chinese women. Before, they were deemed unworthy to be quoted among the believers, but among the martyrs they became worthy to be quoted.

16 Adoratskij 1997, p. 127.

17 *Kratkaâ istoriâ* 1916, p. 32.

18 Dacyšen 2010, p. 75.

19 Collani – Lomanov 2001, p. 372. At the same time, Archimadrit Ioahim Šiškovskij saw only two women attending the church during big feasts (Dacyšen 2010, p. 106).

20 Dacyšen 2010, p. 221.

21 *Ibid*., p. 241.

22 Bays 2012, p. 212.

23 "Skazanie o Mučenikah Kitajskoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi, postradavših v Pekine v 1900 godu," in: *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 1917, No. 12, pp. 8-15; Nos. 13-14, pp. 5-8; reprinted in: *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 2000, No. 1, pp. 5-21. German translation: "Die im Jahr 1900 in Beijing ermordeten Märtyrer der Chinesischen Orthodoxen Kirche," in: *China heute* 2008, Nos. 4-5, pp. 177-186.

I would like to introduce a few of them, to call these Orthodox women by name:

- Tatiana Li (44 years old), the wife of the first Chinese priest Mitrophan. She helped her husband with his pastoral service and later during his illness. She was caught, taken to the camp of the Boxer insurgents and beheaded.[24]
- Ia Wen (56 years old), a teacher in the mission school for girls. She was a widow for many years and greatly helped in the Church. As a Christian she was tortured and finally killed, however, without denying her faith.[25]
- Maria (19) was a courageous young woman. During the slaughter on June 10, she encouraged many people and helped them to flee. As the insurgents came, she accused them of injustice and at first they did not dare to kill her. She stayed near the Church of Our Lady and was later murdered there.[26]
- Katharina (62), mother of the catechist Paul Wang. After having been captured by the Boxers and accused of well-poisoning, she was stripped and thrown into a swamp, where she drowned.[27]
- Sophie Fang (9) and ten other girls were among the children that burned to death in the house of Fr. Mitrophan, where they sought refuge.[28]
- Helena Shi (49), wife of a teacher in the mission school. She escaped together with two daughters and fled to her relatives, who betrayed them to the insurgents. The Boxers forced Helena to worship "idols" and when she refused, she was beaten until she passed out and died.[29]
- The family of the sacristan Klemens Kui Ling: his wife Barbara Zhun (35) and their daughters Maria (14), Olga (11), Ija (9) and Irena (4) hid at the cemetery, where they were caught and killed.[30]
- Irene Gui (54) was a simple woman, who came to the church every day. As the insurgents looked for Christians and asked her if she was an *ermaozi* 二毛子 (i.e., a helper of the Russians, who were called *damaozi* 大毛子), she answered innocently: "No, I am not an *ermaozi*, I am a Christian." She was killed on the spot.[31]
- Family Fu: mother Irene (35), pregnant, her daughters Anna (17), Athanasia (10), Eupraxia (8) and Natria (3) – all killed in the camp of insurgents near Andingmen.[32]

There are many other martyr stories published in the journal of the Orthodox Church in China, *Kitajskij blagovestnik*. Suddenly we can see a wide spectrum of figures of Orthodox Chinese women. Some of them were found in leading positions: one of them is a teacher, another the wife of a priest or sacristan. Most of them are simple women, noticed as daughters, wives and mothers, from newborn children as, e.g., Maria Zhang (1), to the

24 *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 1917, No. 12, p. 10.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
27 *Ibid.*, pp. 11f.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
29 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
31 *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 2000, No. 1, p. 18.
32 *Ibid.*

oldest, Anna Lin (81 years old).[33] In the tragic time of the Boxer Uprising, however, many of these women showed courage and strong commitment to Christianity. They rescued other people and bore witness to the faith. And they make us see: yes, there were concrete Orthodox women in China and they had names.

4. Orthodox Women at the Beginning of the 20th Century

"The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church," this famous sentence of Tertullian can be applied to the Orthodox Chinese martyrs of 1900, too. In the following years the number of Chinese Orthodox Christians increased from the 200-300 survivors of the massacre to over 6,000 in the year 1916, half of them being women. However, only a very limited number of the women of this period is known by name.

One of them is the nun Fiva Ming, of Albasinian origin. Her mother Anna Rui and her two sisters were murdered by the Boxers. Thereafter she became the first Chinese nun (in 1905, she received the veil),[34] and her brother Mihail became a priest. As a nun she stayed in the monastery in Beijing, where she also worked for many years as a teacher in the Girls' School.[35] Later (about 1950) she headed the Women's School for handicraft. She died about 1962.[36] There were a few other Chinese sisters in the nunnery (Pokrov Monastery) in Beijing (we know, e.g., about a novice called Feodora Heng).[37]

The nunnery in Beijing was established in 1902/1903 by Russian sisters (the first superior was sister Eupraxia, who came here from Krasnoyarsk with four novices).[38] In 1909, there were already 10 sisters. They had various works in the church and at the farm (raising livestock). In addition, they also headed the mission school for girls – where they taught reading, writing and catechism for girls, as well as tailoring, handicraft and candle-making. In 1916, there were already three such schools for girls.[39]

5. Russian Emigration in China

In the 1920s and 1930s, as already mentioned, the attention of the Orthodox Church in China focused on thousands of Russian believers who had fled from Russia, whereas Chinese believers were neglected. We know a number of Russian Orthodox women, playing an important role in this period, especially in education, charity and spiritual life. Let us call a few of them by name:

– Prioress Rufina Kokoreva (died 1937), from Perm in the Ural Mountains. Together with another nun, Ariadna, she fled after the October Revolution to Vladivostok and later to Harbin, where she established the Our Lady of Vladimir-Nunnery in 1924

33 *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 2000, No. 1, pp. 17 and 20.

34 Dacyšen 2010, p. 267 (here called Pelagia Markovna Rui).

35 *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 1915, Nos. 9-10, pp. 56f.

36 Pozdnâev 1998, pp. 128 and 159.

37 Dacyšen 2010, p. 372.

38 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 32. See also *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 1907, Nos. 7-8, pp. 8-9; and 1914, Nos. 1-2, pp. 7, 17 and 20.

39 Dacyšen 2010, pp. 281f.

– the first nunnery in Harbin. The nunnery, in which about 50 sisters lived, played a very important role in the religious (prayer and education) and social life (material and spiritual help) of Russian emigration in China and later in the USA.[40]
– Prioress Ariadna (1900–1996), also from Perm. After Rufina's death in 1937 she became the prioress and organized among other things the evacuation of sisters to Shanghai (1937–1938), the Philippines and San Francisco in 1948.[41]
– Sister Olimpiada (1880 – about 1967), nun and famous painter of Orthodox icons, born near the Ural Mountains. She came to Harbin in 1930 and became the superior of the Nunnery of Our Lady "Joy of All Who Sorrow," also called "the Charity House," as the sisters especially took care of children and old people. There she also directed the School of Orthodox Icons. At the end of the 1950s she went to France.[42]

Various other names of women are known from this "Russian period" of the Orthodox Mission in China, e.g., Anna Lušnikova – teacher for singing and diction in the Chinese-Russian school in the 1930s, who taught among others Bishop Ioann;[43] prioress Matrona – head of a nunnery in Shanghai (a branch of the Beijing Pokrov monastery which opened on 20 March 1936). Together with fifteen sisters she took care (in a spiritual and material way) of poor female Russian emigrants;[44] Elizaveta Nikolaevna Litvinova – head of the Church committee for charity and education in Hankou;[45] Sister Zinaida (Briddi), who was arrested together with the bishop of Harbin in 1948 and deported,[46] and others.

In the time of the Cultural Revolution all churches were closed and the Orthodox life seemed to disappear. It was an Orthodox woman from Harbin – Svetlana Všivkina – who passed the news about the death of the last Orthodox bishop in China in 1965 to Russia.[47] Another woman – sister of the last Russian bishop Viktor Svâtin – O.V. Keping – described the Orthodox Mission in China in her memoirs.[48] There are no available sources about the Orthodox faith of men and women in the 1960s and 1970s.

6. Women and "Resurrection" of the Orthodox Church in China

As it became possible to practice religious life again in the 1980–1990s, women were often the first who gathered people for prayer. One of them was Galina Merkulova. She organized the Orthodox community in Yining (Xinjiang) and led prayers regularly, a long time before the first Orthodox priest could come there. For many years she was the senior

40 *Pravoslavnye hramy* 1931, pp. 21f; and Pozdnâev 1998, p. 58. See also Abbess Ariadna, "The Life of Abbess Rufina: Royal Path of a Great Struggler," in: *The Orthodox Word* 1994, No. 115, pp. 48-70; and www.orthodox.cn/localchurch/rufina (accessed Nov. 19, 2017).

41 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 159; and www.orthodox.cn/localchurch/index_ru.html (accessed Nov. 19, 2017).

42 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 159; and www.orthodox.cn/localchurch/harbin/houseofmercy/olympiadbolotova_ru.htm (accessed Nov. 19, 2017).

43 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 78.

44 *Ibid*., p. 76.

45 *Kitajskij blagovestnik* 1935, p. 119.

46 Pozdnâev 1998, p. 112.

47 *Ibid*., p. 159.

48 *Ibid*., pp. 83 and 89.

of the parish until she died in 2008.[49] Many other Chinese women and men gathered together in Harbin, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and other places and started their religious life anew.

There are also foreign women of various nationalities present in the new communities of foreigners, e.g., the Russian woman Kira Pozdnâeva – the wife of the Orthodox priest in Hong Kong, who is supporting the Orthodox community in the everyday affairs as well as in the liturgy (singing in the Church choir).

For many other Chinese Orthodox women, however, the contact to the Church was more complicated and their religious practice stayed limited. Luo Qin 罗琴 (Russian name: Anna Romanova), an Albasinian woman born in 1929, can be named as an example of this. She was interviewed by Zizevskaya in 2005 in Tianjin. Her grandfather was murdered in the Boxer Uprising, and later her father moved with his whole family to Tianjin, where he died when Luo Qin was 8 years old. She went with her brother to Shanghai then, where she attended the Andreevskaâ Orphanage School for a few years. She was also baptized there. During the Cultural Revolution Luo Qin lived in Beijing and was ransacked by the "Red Guards," who threw away all her Orthodox icons and pictures and tortured the family. Her children could not be baptized because of the opposition of her husband, who was an atheist.[50]

Summing up, in every period of the history of the Orthodox Church in China, women were present and made their contribution to the life of the Orthodox community. Usually they had no leading positions and were "only" Orthodox believers: mothers, wives and daughters. However, many of these women played important (though not always apparent) roles in the family, education and small Church works, and quite a number of them deserve to be called "nameless heroes."

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49 Adamek – Malek 2008, p. 28.

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