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Chinese Students Facing Christian Culture in Russia: Cross-Cultural Practice in Educational Process

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Abstract

Chinese students while studying at Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University are in the world of Christian values, so that students' personalities enter to a new cultural process. Traditional Chinese philosophical and religious syncretism now includes orientation towards Christianity in the form of Protestantism. Besides the traditional values current generation of Chinese youth as well inherited and continues to some extent convey stereotypes, myths and values of Soviet ideology and atheism, received from the old school teachers (often taught in the USSR). The purpose of the study is to reveal features and mark the outlines of Chinese students' entering the world of Christian (Orthodox) values in the context of cross-cultural education in Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University. Comparative and typological, axiological and systematic methods allow us to put together Christian and Confucian cultural traditions and offer cross-cultural pedagogical technologies for the development of an individual's empathy to another culture. Analysis of the texts and the written works techniques, focus group interviews in cross-cultural educational process show common ideas of Chinese and Russian students about good and evil, freedom of conscience and responsible action. The study results that acquisition of Christian values by Chinese students widens their views on global world and offers such an ideological paradigm, in which a man can be transformed spiritually and expand his understanding of the cultural universe. The authors conclude that the growing interest to the Christian world of today's Chinese students is due to the search of spiritual ideals, renewed identities and new worldview discoveries along the way, which demonstrates high adaptability of the Chinese. Interaction of Russian and Eastern cultures on the basis of Christian values offers broad-based opportunities for personal development, which is an important issue in the context of cross-cultural education.

Keywords: Russian literature; Chinese students; Russian Christian Orthodox culture; Russian cinema; cross-cultural education;

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1. Introduction

In a globalizing world, the intensity of contacts between representatives of different cultures is increasing, and their success and effectiveness depend on the level of mutual understanding and readiness for a positive perception of *other*. The current global challenges, including “an increase in the cultural diversity of the work force <...>, the growth in international business, the emergence of many more multinational companies; mergers and acquisitions across national boundaries” (Silverthorne 2005) intensify cross-cultural communications, in the sphere of education as well. Educationalists pose the question of forming new pedagogical techniques for international students. Voronchenko, Klimenko & Kostina (2015) propose the “ideas of freedom and equality, openness and international security – all those things which determine Global World ethics and issues to develop global culture communication principles and work out educational strategies to teach students to learn to live in contemporary global world”. Ryan (2000) emphasizes a need to be “prepared to explore ways of changing your teaching and learning practices in order to value and respond to the differing cultural practices of students in the classroom”. Robinson-Pant (2005) suggests that “adopting a cross-cultural perspective involves analysis of research as a social practice within the culture of higher educational institutions” that helps us approach educational process of international students (Chinese) as cross-cultural practice within the higher education institutions (Transbaikal State University, Irkutsk State University).

Drawing on the authors’ experience, in the last five years, students coming from different cities of China in order to study in Russia (Chita and Irkutsk) have active interest in Russian culture and Christian Orthodoxy¹. That kind of interest may be important not only for Russian-Chinese cross-cultural communications, but also for the whole global world as well. Taking into account possible willingness of the Chinese students for successful cross-cultural education, we rely on the works confirming the spiritual parallelism and akin basic moral and ethical values of Russian and Chinese. Priest, sinologist and translator Dionisy Pozdnyaev, has been living in China, is sure that there comes a time when Russian Orthodox culture meets Chinese philosophy and art as ancient thought and culture once met the Old Testament, and Greco-Roman philosophy once met the New Testament – and it bore fruit in forming great Western European culture (Pozdnyaev & Vinogradov, 2013). There is an approval of Dionysius Pozdnyaev’s words in the interview with sinologist Lomanov about Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ Kirill visiting China. Lomanov says that the communist ideology leaves the cultural space of China, that these ideas do not attract young people no more (Lomanov & Vinogradov, 2013). Here comes another, more open ideology, including the ideas of cultural and confessional diversity. Lomanov stresses that interaction of civilizations and harmony of cultures take place in present-day China, people quote Confucius about unity without imposing uniformity. Lomanov believes that there is a place for Russian Christian Orthodox culture in this palette (Lomanov & Vinogradov, 2013).

Russian and Chinese scholars and researchers from other countries cover the chronology of Western and Russian Christianity convergence with Chinese Buddhist-Confucian-Taoist culture (Bays, 2012; Ching, 1977; Covell, 2004; Ivanov, 2005; Lomanov, 2002; Ng, 2015; Pozdnyaev, 1998; Shatalov, 1993; Standaert, 2001; Tang, 1991; Vasilyes & Furman, 2011; Weihong, 2004; Whyte, 1988; Wickeri, 2015).. Russian Christian Orthodox Mission was established in China in the 17th century for the Albazians – Russian Cossacks descendants from Albazin (Russian fort on the Amur River), which were captured after the Chinese army attack and relocated to Beijing in 1685. The 9th mission of Iakinf Bichurin, the 13th mission of Palladius Kafarov and the 18th mission of Innocent Figurovsky are the most successful Russian Orthodox missions in China in terms of Russian Sinology development. There already were several tens of Christian Orthodox churches, a seminary, Orthodox newspapers and magazines published in Chinese in the 9th century in China. The academic book “Christian Orthodoxy in China” (Dionysius Pozdnyaev is among the authors) published with the participation of the Russian Academy of Sciences give the details about Russian Orthodox Missions in China (Patsyukov, Koshlyakov, Eccher & Obukhova, 2010). For 13 years of his stay in the Chinese world father Dionysius studied present-day China and he believes that the Chinese people are very kind, sensitive, friendly, and eager to fill the spiritual vacuum formed during the communist regime.

¹ Christian Orthodoxy (Russian Orthodox Church) – is the largest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the world, the largest and most influential religious organization in Russia, the first Christian community in Russia.

In the 1990s the term “cultural Christianity” becomes especially popular in China. Scholars Fomichyova and Ivanov point to the contemporary Chinese researcher Liu Xiaofeng, professor at Renmin University of China, whose academic field is Sino-Christian Theology, as the author of the term “cultural Christianity” (Fomichyova, 2013; Ivanov, 2005). Chinese cultural Christianity becomes the subject of the mass cultural industry, the ethno-labeling factor of China in Russia, Europe, and America, the commercial brand and the investment vehicle. For example, ink wash painting with traditional Chinese motifs of water, stones, plants, insects, birds, as well as ink wash painting with Christian motifs, such as “The Annunciation”, “Christmas”, “Baptism”, “Christ at Martha and Maria”, etc. are widely spread in China and abroad (Kamedina, 2015). Pozdnyaev being in China supposes that China is planning to develop the Chinese Christian theology, which will be compatible with socialism (Pozdnyaev, 2013). In August, 2014 the director of the state administration for religious affairs of China Wang Zuoran said that Christian theology will be adapted to the national characteristics and culture of China (“Christianity in China,” 2014). Lomanov calls such a form of mission “culturological missiology,” which, in his opinion, is designed to explore and to combine cultural and intellectual contact of Christianity and Chinese traditions (Lomanov, 2002). According to the data of 2015, the number of Christians in China has reached 100 million (Vala, 2015).

Discussions on problem of the Chinese adaptation to Western European and Russian world have been conducted since the mid20th century. As Lomanov underlines Chinese set forth Christianity according to their own Chinese categories and concepts (Lomanov 2002). Chinese scholar Ng delineates the extensive development of Chinese Christianity in the 20th century, “there was a significant move, from ‘Christianity in China’ to ‘Chinese Christianity’, and the development of ‘Christianity with Chinese characteristics’” (Ng, 2015). We draw on the Lomanov’s position (2000), such that the study of cultural adaptation of Christianity in China is the key to understanding the China-Russia and the China-world interactions. The fact that Chinese leader Xi Jinping invited the Patriarch Kirill to Beijing in 2013 is significant. It was the first visit of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church head in China in the history of Russian-Chinese relations. In May, 2016, in turn, Patriarch of Moscow hosted the descendants of the Albazinians with families. At his invitation, they visited not only churches and monasteries of Moscow, but also St. Petersburg, Tver, Novgorod. There were many young people among the group of Christian Orthodox Albazinians (“Patriarch Kirill met,” 2016). In the regard of the wide interest in Christian Orthodoxy in present-day China, we see our educational task in giving Chinese students at Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University wider access opportunities to the values of Russian Christian Orthodox culture.

While studying in Russia Chinese students enter a new cultural process being in the world of Christian values. The design of the study is to reveal features and mark the outlines of Chinese students’ entering the world of Christian (Orthodox) values in the context of cross-cultural education in Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University. 10 study groups (about 150 people), among them students, undergraduates and graduate students, are the objects of this research project.

2. Methodology

Methodology of comparative and typological, multidisciplinary and systemic approaches makes it possible to study the problem through a comparison of general and at the same time typical for each culture concepts of good and evil, self-improvement, the worship of ancestors, harmony with nature. Smith (2005) considers the worship of ancestors the basic concept of the Chinese social organization: “When the Church established itself in China, it had to come to terms with a central unifying value of Chinese society, the concept of filial piety as expressed in the worship of ancestors within the context of the basic social organization of Chinese society”. The interdisciplinary approach helps us trace variety of cross-cultural technologies, which include knowledge of philosophy, theology, cultural studies, linguistics, history, psychology, and to build project based on culture of dialogue in the field of religious and philosophical values, to develop cross-cultural techniques for Chinese Confucian-Taoist world to enter Christian culture in Russia. A systematic approach to the implementation of the project on revealing features of Chinese students’ entering the world of Christian Orthodox values in the context of cross-cultural education in Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University helps us take into account the historical background and present-day conditions of China-Western Europe and China-Russia Christian relations.

According to the rating of Pew Research Center of 2014 year 66 % of Chinese feel sympathy for Russia ("Opinion of Russia," 2015), for Russian president V.V. Putin, "think that Putin is capable head of state, under his leadership Russia has already achieved major successes" (Li, 2009), they want to learn Russian language and Russian literature (Petukhov 2014), to learn more about Russia and its Christian Orthodox culture (Zhang, 2014). Based on interests of Chinese, teachers working with Chinese students in two major universities of the Baikal region in Siberia, Transbaikalian State University and Irkutsk State University actively use cross-cultural techniques, which help support social equilibrium conditions in the educational environment and to preserve common values. Drawing on the A.M. Tsyrunnikov's (2010) "method of social and cultural situation" who studies the "context of a complex contradictory relation of society and culture in their dynamics and historical development", the authors develop an educational project for tolerant entry of Chinese students in Russian Christian Orthodox culture. Results of the project are set forth according to three stages.

Materials for the classwork and extracurricular work, used in the project, are chosen or developed taking into account the concept of "adaption, not translation", given in Hambleton, Merenda and Spielberger's book "Adapting Educational and Psychological Tests for Cross-Cultural Assessment". The concept is that selection and creation of materials offered in the course of cross-cultural practice incorporate not only the differences between one language from another, but the cultural and personal differences between students of different nationalities as well (Hambleton, Merenda & Spielberger 2005).

3. Findings and Results

The project of the authors consists of three stages (2013-2016) of Chinese students' entering the world of Christian Orthodox values in the context of cross-cultural education in Transbaikalian State University and Irkutsk State University. The objects of the research project are 10 study groups (about 150 people), among them are students, undergraduates and graduate students.

I. At the first stage (2013) the authors of the article use testing technique and methods for analysis of social and cultural situations that propose teaching Russian history and Russian Christian Orthodox culture to Chinese students.

Teachers give lectures and workshops on common moral and ethical values of the Eastern and Western (Russian) cultures. There were excursions to the Holy Mother of Kazan Cathedral (Chita) and Cathedral of the Epiphany (Irkutsk) on Christmas and Easter, after that; students answer the questions of tests and focus-group interviews. Tests "What do you know about the Russian culture?" and focus-group interviews "What is Russian Christian Orthodoxy?" were conducted in 4 groups of Chinese students (60 people). Responses of Chinese students have shown the positive impact of events. They noted that they:

- Like Russia.
- Want to learn Russian language and Russian literature.
- But know little about Christian Orthodoxy.

Students were asked questions "Have you ever been to Christian Orthodox church?" and "What do you remember, what has attracted your attention in the church?" The students answered: "There is Christ in Russian Christian Orthodox Church" (at that they are confused Christian saints with the gods, and wrote "I was surprised by the number of gods"), "Cathedral is majesty and chastity", "The main symbol in Russian Christian Orthodox Church is cross." After the excursion to the cathedral, students have deepened their knowledge. Icons² arouse great interest among the Chinese, especially the icons of "St. Nicholas, they had heard about him in China". Most of the students said that they "visited the cathedral in order to learn more about Russian culture". Some students (15) wrote they were in the church at Easter and even tried to pray in a Christian way. About 1 % of students wrote that they know nothing about religion, and Christian Orthodoxy is alien to them. About 40 % of Chinese students identify common values in Russian and Chinese cultures: The kindness, hospitality, respect for parents and the importance of spiritual values. New

² Painted icons are peculiar for the Russian Christian Orthodox Church, unlike the Catholic tradition, where sculptures are common.

information about Russian Christian Orthodox culture has destroyed the usual stereotypes about the total atheism in Russia (which was in the Soviet period, when many of the older generations of Chinese had studied in Russia). The main trend in cross-cultural education of Chinese students in Transbaikalian State University and Irkutsk State University is that they try to identify similarities of Confucian ideas and Christian Orthodox spirit. We must confess that Russian Christian Orthodoxy began to recover to the full extent in 1990s in the post-Soviet period. Cognitive interest of students is stable, since it is based on personal experience.

II. In the second phase (2014), there is a system of events for a deeper entry of Chinese students in the field of Christian Orthodox culture of the Baikal region.

During this stage, the students learn Christian spiritual terminology and take part in the Christian Orthodox conference “Innocent³ Readings” as listeners. Russian spiritual culture classes presuppose viewing documentaries about the Russian Orthodox Church, its tradition of monasticism (“ABC of Orthodoxy”, “Christian Holidays”, “Orthodox Calendar”, “Christian Orthodox motifs in Russian fairy tale”, etc.). At the end of the stage students go to the excursion to the convent, located at 18 km from Chita city. Visiting the monastery, two Chinese students expressed a desire to write commemorations⁴ for the health of their loved ones and have written them in hieroglyphs.

A result of immersion into the Christian Orthodoxy the students' outlook and worldview broadens. Chinese students begin to think more about spiritual concepts of good and evil, the meaning of life, they show their awareness in Russian history, for example, they know about the Christianization of Kievan Rus'⁵, St. Prince Vladimir⁶, St. Prince Yaroslav the Wise⁷, St. Prince Alexander Nevsky⁸, Nicholas II⁹. Students could call and decode the main symbol of Christianity – the cross. Chinese students can already answer the question: Who is the head of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church? Most of them have learned the name of the Patriarch of Moscow Kirill, spoke approvingly of his missionary role for the spiritual unity of Russian and Chinese peoples. Participation in the conference, excursions, viewing the documentaries expands students' knowledge about Russian history and its main heroes. They learnt about the 400-year activity of the Russian Orthodox Missions in Beijing and the Albasinians as well. One of the students wrote a small essay about that how Christian faith helps a person to overcome the difficulties. Another student revealed his vision of hope, light and high sense of life in Christianity. Teachers offered Chinese students informative presentations about Russian-Chinese relations in culture and religion over the period of 400 years “From the mission of St. Innocent of Irkutsk to the mission of Patriarch Kirill”.

III. At the third stage (2015 - 2016 years) more complex cross-cultural practices have been developed.

Besides the traditional tests and focus-group interviews, teachers have prepared with Chinese graduate students short presentations at the Christian Orthodox conference “*Innocent Readings*”,

³ Saint Innocent Veniaminov, apostle to Siberia and America; was a Russian Orthodox missionary priest, then the first Orthodox bishop and archbishop in the Americas, and finally the Metropolitan of Moscow and all Russia.

⁴ One-time commemoration “For the health” or “For the repose”, given in cathedral at an offertory or a litany, at molebens and funeral services.

⁵ Christianity was brought to Kievan Rus' as a state religion in 988 by Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich the Great.

⁶ Prince of Novgorod, grand prince of Kiev, and ruler of Kievan Rus' from 980 to 1015, bring Christianity to Kievan Rus' as a state religion.

⁷ Thrice grand prince of Veliky Novgorod and Kiev, worshipped as Faithful Saint Prince.

⁸ Prince of Novgorod (1236-52), Grand Prince of Kiev (1236-52) and Grand Prince of Vladimir (1252-63), was canonized as a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church.

⁹ The last Emperor of Russia canonized as martyr, as passion bearer, a title commemorating believers who face death in a Christ-like manner.

for example, “*The Gospel Narrative in the Chekhov’s Story ‘Student’*”, “*Traditions of the Christian Orthodox Easter*”. On the occasion of traditional Russian holiday “Day of Slavic Written Language and Culture” the most advanced students took part in the Old Slavonic language competition. Chinese students actively use Christian Orthodox websites: Pravoslavie.ru; Patriarhiya.ru; Bogoslov.ru and website of Golutvinsky Chinese town church in Moscow, where Christian Orthodox Chinese people are given guidance: <http://st-nicholas.ru/>.

While visiting a cathedral, Chinese students already can make up a story about the icons’ images, they specially distinguish “Trinity” by Andrei Rublev, and the icon of 222 Chinese martyrs and events related to their death and canonization as saints. The students note that Confucius also called for self-sacrifice in the name of the truth. On Easter day Chinese students were allowed to climb the bell-tower and ring the bells. They are delighted to talk about it. When testing Chinese students, they can already recognize Russian writers, whose works contain Christian Orthodox motifs: Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov (workshops 2014). Petukhov (2014) describes literary education process with Chinese students. Teachers mark their special love to the Chekhov’s story “*Student*”, which they perceive emotionally and even cry – they say that they as well as the main character of the story want to come to faith, to love life, “to become open, chaste and majestic”. Some of the Chinese students say they are “atheists, but they feel the presence of the spiritual world” (workshops 2015). Three students won the Old Slavonic language contest – they think that Old Slavonic letters are like hieroglyphics. Students study Christianity through websites as well. Many of them are surprised that there is a Chinese courtyard with a cathedral in the center of Moscow, where there are liturgies in Chinese language. They are interested in the Chinese who took Christian Orthodoxy too. There are cases when the Chinese get married on Russian and Christianize, go to church and call themselves “Russian”, that promotes ethnic globalization processes. The final essays of Chinese students show that the quality of knowledge about Russian Orthodox culture and Christianity have risen significantly and as a consequence the extent of tolerance and empathy is growing.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the project show that the Chinese students studying in the Transbaikal State University and Irkutsk State University have an aspiration to acquire new, Christian, spiritual knowledge. They believe that Christianity, akin to the ancient Eastern teachings, can bring together China and Russia.

Cross-cultural practice technologies in educational process of Chinese students include the following effective activities (Table 1.).

Table 1. Levels of Chinese students’ acquisition of Russian Christian Orthodox culture

Levels	Stages	Activities
Beginner level of acquisition	I stage (2013)	Lectures; workshops, organization of joint national and religious holidays.
Medium level of acquisition	II stage (2014)	Learning Christian spiritual terminology; taking part in the Christian Orthodox conference; viewing documentaries about the Russian Orthodox Church; excursions to the spiritual places.
Advanced level of acquisition	III stage (2015-2016)	Presentations at the Christian Orthodox conference; taking part in the Old Slavonic language contest.

The study results reveal that the cross-cultural practice in the Chinese students’ educational process enables to:

- Expand the knowledge about other culture in order to obtain new understanding of present-day Russian Christian Orthodox world.
- Promote positive and tolerant attitude to Christian Orthodoxy.

- Overcome the difficulties of social and cultural life of foreign students.
- Improve the personality of the students, expanding their worldview.

The authors conclude that the vivid interest to the Christian world of today's Chinese students and their readiness to perceive basic Christian Orthodox values demonstrates not only high adaptability of the Chinese but also profound spiritual parallelism of the whole mankind. Christian values become the basis of interactions between Russian and Eastern cultures in the context of cross-cultural education that contribute to personal intellectual and spiritual development of international students.

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