

CHINESE MARTYRS

George Emmanuel Piperakis
Assistant Professor of University of Athens

APOSTOLIKI DIAKONIA

Dedicated to His Eminence the first Metropolitan of Hong Kong and All Southeast Asia
NIKHTAS

INTRODUCTION

Religious History of China

From the depths of History the Chinese people have displayed deep religious feelings and intense metaphysical questions which distinguish them from amongst all the other people of the East.

The religious History of China can be divided into three main periods. From the 13th century B.C. Confucianism, prevailed over the vast Chinese expanses. It held conceptions of a certain Sovereign Supreme God with variations during different periods of time.

The second religious movement which prevailed towards the end of the third century B.C. is Taoism founded by Lao - Tze who lived during the 6th - 5th century B.C. Taoism started to decline with the appearance of Buddhism the third great religious movement, Buddhism or Fu - Tzaou which was introduced to China under the Emperor Ming in the first century A.D., after a vision. It was advanced by the missionaries Kasyapa Matoga and Gobharana. The great peak of Buddhism was noted in the tenth and twelfth centuries, with the conversion of educated Chinese as well as the folk masses. A branch of Buddhism is Amidism which, with its practices (prayer and theory), displays essential elements which draw closer to Christianity. These three fundamental Chinese religions do not, it seems, divide the Chinese people amongst themselves as happens with followers of other religions. In China two or even three of the above mentioned religions may be professed at the same time. However, Islam also appeared in China after the twelfth century while the presence of Jews has been confirmed after 1000 A.D.

Christianity in China

According to an oral tradition, Christianity reached China through the Apostle Thomas. However this remains a hypothesis has not been demonstrated

scientifically. Christianity reached China in 635 A.D. through Persian Nestorian missionaries, as indicated on an inscription found in the capital of the Middle Kingdom Chagan, contemporary Xian. These Christians remained in China until the thirteenth century. The Nestorians were followed by missionaries from the Papal Roman Catholic Church in the fourteenth century with noticeable results two centuries later.

Orthodoxy in China

The entrance of Orthodoxy into China began with a chance event. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Russian rule had expanded through Siberia to the coast of Eastern Asia.

During the same period one of the most notable rulers of the Manchurian Dynasty, K'ang Chi (1669-1723) tried to curtail Russian expansion. K'ang Chi was enraged when, in 1667 the Tangusin prince Chan - Timur and 14 relatives escaped from the emperor's service and went over to the Russian dominion. They were all baptised. In 1685 the Chinese army reached the river Amour in Siberia, punishing the Cossacks by seizing their main fort, Albasin and capturing many prisoners. Forty - five prisoners, who were of course Orthodox, told the Chinese authorities that they were prepared to obey the commands of the Chinese monarch. The Orthodox of Albasin settled in the North - East sector of Beijing and were soon favoured by K'ang Chi. A Buddhist temple was changed into the Church of Saint Nicholas. Until 1712 the priest was Father Maximos Leontiev. Thus the first Orthodox Chinese nucleus was formed. Later the Metropolitan of Tobolok sent the priest Gregory Navinsky and the deacon Lavrentios I-vanov as new reinforcements.

With their inclusion into the Chinese court, the Russian prisoners married Chinese noblewomen and started to filter into the ranks of Chinese aristocracy. Many conversions to Orthodoxy were noted in these ranks. K'ang Chi was favourable towards the Christians, who continually gained ground and for a moment it was thought that he would become the St. Constantine of the Far East. These hopes were dashed, however, when the Emperor discovered the true role of the Papist missionaries, realising that the western missionaries obeyed the orders of European rulers. Thus, a new Russian mission, headed by a bishop only managed to reach the border. In the meanwhile, K'ang Chi, and even more so his successor Yung Cheng, persecuted the Christians for over one hundred and twenty years.

During this time the Orthodox were certainly treated more favourably. Thus they were able to develop some activity based on the small nucleus of Albasinians which had by now assimilated and to which plenty of Chinese and Manchurian Orthodox had been added. The persecution of the Western Christian missionaries was never extended to the Orthodox. The general conduct of the Orthodox, with regard to their

relations with the Chinese, allowed them to exert an influence in leading many prominent and distinguished people to Orthodoxy.

In 1860, after 150 years of activity, the Orthodox community numbered only 200 souls, despite the fact that about 150 missionaries had worked there. The proper foundation of the mission was completed when it was separated from Russian politics and in 1864 answered directly to the Holy Synod. Based on these principles, which serve as a model for every Orthodox Church, the Chinese Orthodox Church reached its highest point. It acquired a Chinese priest who was later to become a saint, Mitrophan Chi -Sung. Many Orthodox churches were built and the Divine Liturgy was also celebrated outside Beijing, in cities of China and Manchuria. The Orthodox Church in China acquired its greatest brilliance during the time of the missionary Innocent Figurovsky, i.e. from 1897 until 1901. That is until the time of the great trial which was also the martyrs triumph of the Orthodox Chinese Church. This happened when the Boxer Rising broke out. «Boxers» was the name given to the conservative Chinese who were against foreign influenced, western style innovation and reform.

SYNAXARION OR MARTYRION

[The persecution of 1900 and the feast of the Chinese Martyrs](#)

It is the close of the nineteenth century and we find ourselves in Beijing, the capital of China.

With the tendency for innovation and reform on one hand and the xenophobia of the Mandarins and aristocrats on the other, the Dowager Empress, together with the conservatives and those who practiced the traditional martial arts, intervened violently, thwarting the modernisers plans. The Boxer movement, as it was called by the foreigners, drowned all objections in blood. It sought to the exile of all foreigners who lived in the country, and in its opinion, were responsible for every bad thing that happened there.

The Christians were first and foremost those who suffered in the oppression instituted by the Boxers. By taking part in special rites, using ancient Chinese martial arts methods, the Boxers believed that they became impervious to the Foreigners shots. In 1899 the first English missionary was killed. In 1900 the foreigners attempt to bring more soldiers to Beijing worsened the situation. On the 10th of June proclamations were posted on walls all over Beijing, calling on the Chinese to slaughter all Christians and threatening all those Christians who tried to hide with martyrdom.

The 11th of June, 1900 became China's day of glory, for she too would offer up her share of martyrs for the Church's Triumphant purple robe.

The executioners' procession set off triumphantly with burning torches, as the idols of the traditional gods of the Chinese were carried aloft. Censers were held so that the Christians could cense the idols, and thus deny their 'alien' faith. The pressure was unbearable, the martyrdoms most terrible. The fear was great. The Orthodox Christians homes were surrounded. Threats and violence were used to forced the Orthodox to sacrifice to false gods and deny Christ.

Unfortunately, as with all oppression, many capitulated and burnt incense to save their lives, while others who were stronger in faith boldly confessed Christ. The latter, the confessors, were led out of the city to the Boxers idol worshipping temples. Here, after indescribable torture, cutting them open and pulling out their entrails and the like, they were finally beheaded or burnt to death. The martyrs houses suffered the same fate as their owners. Churches and Orthodox institutions were also given over to the flames. All the church buildings (with the exception of the one in Hankow), the Sino - Russian Library and the print - shop with its 30.000 woodcarv-ed Chinese characters were set alight and burnt to ashes. The Russian missionaries managed to flee to Chien - Chin and then to Shanghai. The whole of missionary Innocent Figurofsky's work was completely destroyed. Of the 700 Orthodox Chinese believers - 300 were martyred for their faith. Taking account of its low strength in numbers, the Orthodox Church in China gave up more martyrs than the more populous heterodox Churches.

Let us, however, describe the martyrdom of the first Chinese hieromartyr, St. Mitrophan Chi - Sung, and those with him in more detail.

St. Mitrophan was the first Orthodox Chinese priest. He was ordained by St. Nicholas of Japan and served the Orthodox mission for fifteen years. He sat among the ruins of the burnt out Orthodox Mission, enveloped by the men, women and children of his flock, when they started to hit his chest with fists. His presbytera Tatiana and his 23 year old son Isaiah were slaughtered before his very eyes, while they cut off the nose, ears and toes of his younger son John. Not only did the child martyr refuse to complain or protest but, as if by miracle, he felt no pain. The executioners taunted him, calling him a «child of demons». He answered saying, «I am an Orthodox Christian and I believe in Christ, not in demons». After father Mitrophan's execution his future daughter in law, 19 year old fiancée of now martyred Isaiah, arrived at the priest's house. She wanted to die together with the family of her betrothed. When the Boxers surrounded the house Maria helped many of the faithful jump over the garden walls. She faced her executioners with courage and reproached them for the unjust murder of so many innocent souls, who had not been tried by any court. The executioners pierced her feet and wounded her hands, encouraging her to leave and be saved. Brave Maria answered them boldly, «I was born here by the Church of the All - Holy Mother of God, I will die here too». Then the Boxers executed her.

Many descendants of the residents of Al-basin, Russia, who first brought the light of Orthodoxy to Beijing in 1685 and who had assimilated with the Chinese, are included among the martyrs. The names of some of them have been kept: Clement Kui - Kin, Matthew Hai - Chuan, the brother of Vit and Anna Chui. The many others, whose names are unknown to us, are known to Christ who crowned them with an incorruptible crown.

Of approximately one thousand people in the Beijing parish, three hundred were lost in the bloody events of June the 11th, 1900. Out of these 222 received the crown of martyrdom and constituted the glorious sacrificial beginning of the 20th century, a century of triumph for the Church just like the first three Christian centuries. A century that was soon to be turned purple by the river of blood that flowed out of the vast expanses of Russia in the decades that followed. However, the small shimmering Church of the Chinese people can also boast of her martyrs, proclaiming to the Universe that Orthodoxy is above borders, people and nations, colours and languages, it is «the Church» of all nations, peoples and languages, which is before the throne and before the Lamb, with white robes and palm - leaves in their hands, crying out to God in a loud voice. Hallelujah!

[Apolytikion. Tone one](#)

Minister to Christ, true priest of glory,
reasonable sacrifice and blameless victim,
thou gavest thyself up to the stadium
whilst thy flock, O father, Chi - Sung
in Beijing.
Therefore pray for us
who keep thy precious memory with faith»

[Apolytikion. Tone two](#)

Thou hast become a participator
in the customs
of the Apostles and a successor
to their throne
thou hast found the way of ascending
to behold God,
by thy faithful struggle unto blood
with thy flock in Beijing,
O God inspired, hieromartyr Chi - Sung
Pray to Christ our God, that our souls
might be saved.

Megalynarion

A. Rejoice, O priest of Beijing,
martyred illustriously with thy flock thou didst destroy the impious schemes
of tyrants with the strength of the Lord O Father Chi - Sung.

B. Mitrophan as a pious God speaking minister
thou didst weaken the delusions of the impious
by thy feats, with thy flock, O Father, protector from darkness and boast of martyrs

The Feast of the Chinese Martyrs

St. Mitrophan was the first Orthodox Chinese priest and was ordained by St. Nicholas of Japan. His Presbyteria Tatiana and 23-year-old son Isaiah, were slaughtered before his very eyes during the Boxer Rebellion. Still he would not deny Christ.

One of the best-kept secrets in the Orthodox world has to be the existence of the Chinese Martyrs who celebrate their feast day on June 11th. Almost everyone was unaware of the fact that not even one hundred years ago, a group of Chinese Orthodox Christians gave up their lives for Christ and His Church in the great city of Beijing. It was the time of the Boxer Rebellion, which held foreigners responsible for every misfortune that took place. The first to suffer were the Christians, and in 1899 the first English missionary was killed. On the 10th of June, proclamations were posted on walls all over Beijing, calling on the Chinese to slaughter all Christians and threatening all those Christians who tried to hide with martyrdom. On the 11th of June, China shone in glory as it would offer her share of martyrs for the Church. According to Dr. Piperakis of the University of Athens, the events are described:

"The executioners' procession set off triumphantly with burning torches, as the idols of the traditional god of the Chinese were carried aloft. Censers were held so that the Christians could cense the idols, and thus deny their 'alien' faith. The pressure was unbearable, the martyrdoms most terrible. The fear was great. The Orthodox Christians' homes were surrounded. Threats and violence were used to force the Orthodox to sacrifice to false gods and deny Christ. Unfortunately, as with all oppression, many capitulated and burnt incense to the idols to save their lives, while others who were stronger in faith boldly confessed Christ. The latter, the confessors, were led out of the city to the Boxers' idol worshipping temples. Here, after indescribable torture, cutting them open and pulling out their entrails and the like, they were finally beheaded or burnt to death. The martyrs' houses suffered the same fate as their owners. Churches and Orthodox institutions were also given over to the flames. All the church buildings (with the exception of the one in Hankow), the Sino-Russian Library and the print shop with its 30,000 wood-carved Chinese characters were set alight and burnt to ashes. The Russian missionaries managed to flee to Chien-Chin and then to Shanghai. Of the 700 Orthodox Chinese believers, 300 were martyred for their faith.

Taking into account its low numbers, the Orthodox Church of China gave up more martyrs than the more populous heterodox Churches."Included in those who received the crown of martyrdom was the first Chinese hieromartyr, St. Mitrophan Chi-Sung:

"St. Mitrophan was the first Orthodox Chinese priest. He was ordained by St.

Nicholas of Japan and served the Orthodox mission for fifteen years. He sat among the ruins of the burnt-out Orthodox Mission, enveloped by the men, women and children of his flock, then they started to hit his chest with fists. His Presbyter Tatiana and his 23-year-old son, Isaiah, were slaughtered before his very eyes, while they cut off the nose, ears and toes of his younger son, John. Not only did the child martyr refuse to complain or protest, but miraculously he felt no pain.

The executioners taunted him, calling him a "child of demons". He answered saying, "I am an Orthodox Christian and I believe in Christ, not in demons". After Father Mitrophan's execution, his future daughter-in-law, 19 year old fiancée of now-martyred Isaiah, arrived at the priest's house. She wanted to die together with the family of her betrothed. When the Boxers surrounded the house, Maria helped many of the faithful jump over garden walls. She faced her executioners with courage and reproached them for the unjust murder of so many innocent souls, who were not tried by any court. The executioners pierced her feet and wounded her hands, encouraging her to leave and be saved. Brave Maria answered boldly, "I was born here at the Church of the All-Holy Mother of God, I will die here, too." Then the Boxers executed her."

Of the 1,000 people that were in the Beijing parish, 222 received the crown of martyrdom and constituted the glorious sacrificial beginning of the 20th century, which would soon turn purple by the river of blood that flowed out of the vast expanses of Russia. However, the small Church of the Chinese people proclaim through their martyrdom that Orthodoxy has no borders and is above race, nations, and languages. The Orthodox Church is the Church of all nations, people, languages, and stands before God to offer praise and worship.