

## Article

# The Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing (XVIII–XX Centuries): Historiography, Missionary Role, and Contemporary Assessment

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**Abstract:** This historiographical study examines the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing from 1715 to 1956, revealing its historical impact on Christianity in China and Sino–Russian cultural exchanges. The research explores how the Mission functioned not only as a religious entity but also influenced diplomatic ties and scholarly pursuits, as documented in both Chinese and Russian historiographies. This study utilizes contemporary sources, exploring Chinese narratives to re-evaluate historical perspectives, and portrays the Mission as a critical mediator in Sino–Russian relations. An examination of the historical context shows that the Mission has undergone a transformation over time. It has evolved from an influential ecclesiastical presence to a cultural and diplomatic agency unobtrusively entered into Chinese society. From the mid-18th to the early 20th century, the Mission adapted to the local environment by combining the transmission of religious doctrine with engagement in China’s political and cultural contexts. The article proposes a holistic interpretation of the Mission’s function, encompassing not only evangelism but also diplomatic engagements, and adding to the multi-faceted discourse within Chinese cultural heritage. In summary, the article recommends exploring the enduring impact and historical complexities of the Russian Orthodox Mission as it is grounded in a broader framework of global movements. The research suggests that it may be beneficial to broaden the scope of historiographic narratives to encompass a diverse range of interdisciplinary studies that reflect the complexity of the Mission’s enduring impact and its role in shaping a shared global history.



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**Keywords:** Christianity; Orthodoxy; missions; history of religions; historiography; sinology; China–Russia relations; Russia–China relations

## 1. Introduction

The founding of the Russian Orthodox Mission in 1715 marked a consequential moment in the annals of Sino–Russian relations, establishing a cultural engagement that has spanned numerous fields, including religion, philosophy, language, and the arts (Xiao et al. 2016, p. 70). The Mission’s endeavors facilitated Russia’s engagement with China, which led to the development of a distinguished group of sinologists (Tao and Nie 2019, p. 13), and a significant influence on the trajectory of sinology within Russia. Notable figures from the Mission, including Illarion Rossokhin, Yakinf (Bichurin), Palladius (Kafarov), and Peter (Kamensky), were pivotal in broadening European insights into Chinese studies (Skachkov 1960b; Fedorenko 1974) and played a certain role in the spread of Christianity within China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (L. Wang 2021, pp. 52–53).

Historically, the Mission’s establishment intersects with Russia’s eastern expansion narrative (Meador 2021). In the mid-17th century, armed conflicts arose between the Qing and Russian Empires when Russian explorers encountered Chinese troops in Priamurye (Huang 2013, pp. 14–26). These conflicts were eventually resolved by the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. Although the settlement Albazin or Yaksa founded by Russian explorers (X. Zhang 2009) was destroyed, the Qing Empire finally allowed 59 Russian captives to maintain their

Orthodox faith and reside and serve in Beijing (Xiao et al. 2016, p. 71). Priest Maxim Leontiev was one of the individuals permitted to remain in Beijing. His subsequent missionary activities are regarded as the foundation of Orthodoxy in the city (Yue 1999, pp. 191–92). Leontiev’s arrival in Beijing, accompanied by religious texts and icons, initiated the formal recognition and expansion of Orthodoxy in the region, with the support of figures such as Metropolitan Ignatyi, who highlighted the significance of the effort in introducing Orthodox Christianity to the Chinese people (Abramov 1862, pp. 26–28). Over the subsequent near 250 years (Table 1), the Mission expanded through the dedication of over 200 missionaries from varied backgrounds. This underscores a complex cultural and religious diffusion, which is central to understanding Sino–Russian historical dynamics (Xiao et al. 2016, p. 88; Datsyshen 2007, p. 49).

**Table 1.** Overview of Russian Orthodox Missions in Beijing.

| Number           | Tenure    | Leader                 |
|------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| The 1st Mission  | 1715–1728 | Illarion (Lezhaysky)   |
| The 2nd Mission  | 1729–1735 | Anthony (Platkovsky)   |
| The 3rd Mission  | 1736–1745 | Illarion (Trusov)      |
| The 4th Mission  | 1745–1755 | Gervasiy (Lintsevsky)  |
| The 5th Mission  | 1754–1771 | Amvrosiy (Yumatov)     |
| The 6th Mission  | 1771–1782 | Nikolai (Tsvet)        |
| The 7th Mission  | 1781–1795 | Ioakim (Shishkovsky)   |
| The 8th Mission  | 1794–1808 | Sophroniy (Gribovsky)  |
| The 9th Mission  | 1808–1821 | Iakinf (Bichurin)      |
| The 10th Mission | 1820–1831 | Peter (Kamensky)       |
| The 11th Mission | 1830–1841 | Veniamin (Moracevich)  |
| The 12th Mission | 1840–1850 | Polikarp (Tugarinov)   |
| The 13th Mission | 1849–1859 | Palladius (Kafarov)    |
| The 14th Mission | 1858–1864 | Guriy (Karpov)         |
| The 15th Mission | 1865–1878 | Palladius (Kafarov)    |
| The 16th Mission | 1879–1883 | Flavian (Gorodetsky)   |
| The 17th Mission | 1884–1897 | Amfilohiy (Lutovinov)  |
| The 18th Mission | 1897–1931 | Innokenty (Figurovsky) |
| The 19th Mission | 1931–1933 | Simon (Vinogradov)     |
| The 20th Mission | 1933–1956 | Victor (Svyatin)       |

In addition to their religious objectives, these missionaries fulfilled multifaceted roles as cultural liaisons, diplomatic interlocutors, and historical chroniclers. They navigated between their spiritual missions and the intricate socio-political landscape of the Qing Empire. Their endeavors not only fostered the establishment of several Orthodox churches in China but also facilitated a profound cultural exchange that enriched both Russian and Chinese societies. This mutual cultural permeability enhanced Sino–Russian relations, highlighting the missionaries’ role in fostering a cross-cultural dialogue. The narrative of the Russian Orthodox Mission unfolds against a backdrop of both cooperation and tension, reflecting a nuanced interplay between isolationist tendencies and integrative efforts. By engaging with the Russian government, the missionaries played a significant role in dealing with the Sino–Russian diplomatic relations, meanwhile contributing to a long-standing legacy of cultural exchange. The historical function of the missionaries, which encompasses religious propagation, cultural diplomacy, and scholarly endeavors, invites a comprehensive exploration of their impact on the Sino–Russian relations. This multifaceted legacy demonstrates the importance of adopting a holistic perspective in understanding the identities and contributions of these religious and cultural ambassadors within the broader context of Sino–Russian historical interactions.

This historiographical examination seeks to illuminate the complex dynamics of the Russian Orthodox Mission’s influence on Sino–Russian cultural and diplomatic relations, particularly during the transformative years from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. Through a com-

parative analysis of Chinese and Russian historiographical sources, this study will explore several vital questions:

1. What narratives have Chinese and Russian records constructed regarding the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, and what novel interpretations emerge from these accounts?
2. How is the Mission perceived as a driving force in the evolution of Sino-Russian relations, especially in terms of cultural and diplomatic engagements?
3. What role did the Mission play in shaping the landscape of interpersonal exchanges between the peoples of China and Russia?

By scrutinizing historical narratives from both Chinese and Russian perspectives, the research aims to uncover nuanced understandings and fresh insights concerning the Mission's intricate role in the bilateral relations between Russia and China and the historical development of Christianity in China. This investigation will not only provide a critical analysis of the historiographical representations of the Mission's contributions to Sino-Russian cultural and diplomatic ties but also examine its broader implications on people-to-people interactions. This research offers a distinctive new perspective to the existing body of knowledge, filling gaps and opening up avenues for further academic inquiry into this particular history.

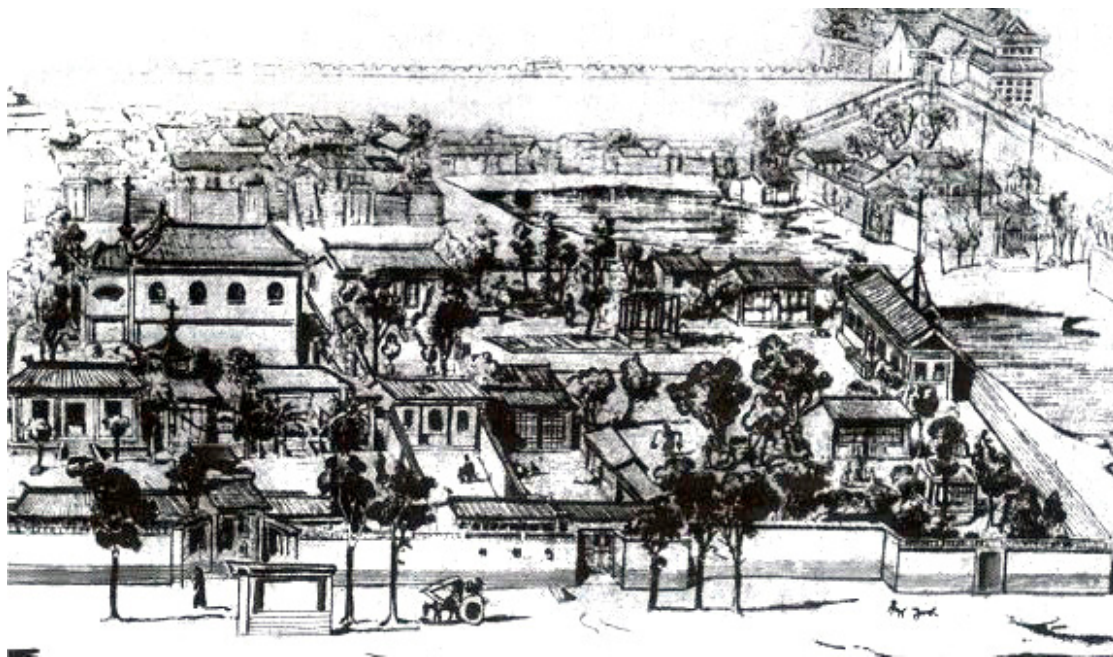
## 2. Historical Context of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing

According to Chinese and Russian sources, the Mission's activities went beyond religious propagation and became a means for a significant exchange of knowledge, humanitarian interactions, and cultural integration between the two nations.

### 2.1. *The Limited Adventures in 1715–1860*

The perception of the Orthodox Mission by the local Chinese was shaped by the Mission's activities, its interaction with Chinese administrators, and the tangible results of its efforts. In 1713, the Metropolitan Ioann of Tobolsk and Siberia authorized the establishment of the inaugural Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, consisting of ten individuals. Archimandrite Illarion (Lezhaysky) was designated as the leader of the 1st Mission (1715–1728) (Pang 2000). From the Chinese perspective, the Mission was a symbol of foreign presence but blended unobtrusively into the local society. It was perceived not as an alien entity but as a part of the city's northeastern neighborhood where it was located, known as Bei-guan (Figure 1), the northern yard (Yue 1999, p. 194). The Chinese Emperor demonstrated his investment in the welfare of the Mission by implementing routine visits (S. Zhang 1986, p. 198). This royal interest attests to the Mission's status and influence within the local Chinese socio-political landscape. The Russian Mission's exclusivity sparked intellectual curiosity among the Chinese citizens who interacted with the missionaries, leading to the formation of a growing Orthodox community.

The Russian Orthodox Mission's operations in Beijing during the mid-18th century, as depicted in Chinese sources, offer valuable insights into intercultural exchange, language acquisition, and the growing influence of the Orthodox faith among the Albazinians (X. Zhang 2009). During this phase, Archimandrite Anthony (Platkovsky) led the 2nd Mission (1729–1735) and succeeded in obtaining official recognition of his mission as permanent in Beijing. The Qing government played an active role in facilitating the missionaries' integration into Chinese society by providing facilities such as language tutors for the first Russian students (Xiao 2003). The decision by the Qing authorities to provide financial support for the construction of new facilities for the Orthodox Mission, such as the Nan-guan or southern yard, after the Treaty of Kyakhta, indicates the local recognition and support that the Mission received within the Chinese administration (Titarenko 2010, p. 34; T. Tan 2015). Furthermore, the hiring of Illarion Rossokhin, a Russian student, by the Lifan Yuan (Qing's Court of Colonial Affairs), suggests both cross-cultural exchanges and the Mission's impact on Chinese administrative functions (Xiao 2008c).



**Figure 1.** View of the Northern Yard of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. From an album by K. A. Skachkov (1850)<sup>1</sup>.

However, local Chinese perspectives and reactions were not static and evolved over time. As the Missions continued into the 18th century, interactions became more complex. By the time the second Mission was established, the Orthodox faith had made inroads into Beijing's religious landscape. This progress is evidenced by the growing Orthodox community of 50 households and a reported 25 new Chinese Orthodox converts, with 8 more in the process of embracing the faith (Ouyang 2016b). In 1736, the 3rd Mission arrived in Beijing under the leadership of Archimandrite Illarion (Trusov) and consecrated the Church of the Presentation of the Lord. The decision of the Holy Synod in 1742 to enhance the benefits related to the position of the Mission chief further indicated the Mission's importance to the local Chinese authorities (Xiao 2013). The transfer of oversight of the Mission to the Russian Collegium of Foreign Affairs in 1745, and its subsequent connection to 1864, highlights the institutional recognition achieved by the Mission (Xiao 2005).

During the 4th Mission (1745–1755) led by Archimandrite Gervasiy (Lintsevsky), the Russian Mission strengthened its ties with local officials and Jesuit missionaries (Xiao 2010b). This led to the absorption of valuable local knowledge, enriching the Russian Mission's work and subtly impacting the perceptions of the local Chinese officials towards the Russian presence. Notable advancements in language study were made by Alexei Leontiev (Pogosyan 2016; Skachkov 1960a) and Hieromonk Feodosiy (Smorzhevskii 2016; Zhou 2018). The 5th Mission, under the leadership of Archimandrite Amvrosiy (Yumatov), prompted a phase of active missionary activities. The establishment of a school was a symbol that the Mission constructively transcended religious propagation and encompassed intellectual exchange. Although the claim that 220 Chinese were converted to the Orthodox faith during the 5th Mission period is contested (Samoylov 1993, p. 23), the mere presence of this figure in the records indicates the deepening influence of faith in the community. With the ascension of Catherine II, the 6th Mission (1771–1782) was ratified, with Archimandrite Nikolai (Tsvet) at the head, focusing primarily on missionary activities. However, over a span of a decade, it only led to 24 humble baptisms. According to Chinese records, the limited activity can be attributed to various contextual factors. One of these factors is the active engagement of the Jesuit order with Chinese officials in an effort to limit the spread of Orthodoxy in China (Li 2005).



From 1781 to 1795, Archimandrite Ioakim (Shishkovsky) led the 7th Mission. The Holy Synod issued new instructions during this period based on reports and knowledge from previous missions, which governed the operation of the 7th and subsequent missions. Although the centenary of Orthodoxy in China occurred during this time, no events were organized to commemorate the milestone. The 8th Mission (1794–1808), with Archimandrite Sophroniy (Gribovsky) as its head, continued the function and mission of its predecessors. However, Sophroniy's lack of proficiency in Chinese and Manchurian languages was seen as a shortcoming (S. Zhang 1986, pp. 217–18), again highlighting the increasing importance of language competence. The 9th Mission, which took place from 1808 to 1821, was led by Archimandrite Iakinf (Bichurin), whose advanced linguistic abilities allowed him to master the Chinese language (Yue 1999, p. 196). Iakinf's immersion in Chinese culture was evident, as he chose to adopt a Chinese name—"He Xiansheng" (S. Tan 2002). Despite his efforts, the missionary endeavor dwindled significantly, culminating in minimal Orthodox presence by 1813 (Aleksandrov 2006, p. 66). However, his expertise in Oriental studies attracted the attention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, leading to his election as a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences in 1828 (Bing Zhang 2022; Miasnikov and Popova 2002).

The 10th Mission (1820–1831), led by Archimandrite Peter (Kamensky), not only marked an era of productive collaboration but also set a new trajectory with a clear focus on intellectual pursuits. Drawn from historiographical accounts, Peter's tenure is highlighted by his impressive language competencies and his significant contributions to sinology. This led to his election as a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences in 1819 (Khokhlov 1970), which demonstrates the high regard held for him in academic circles. In addition to his remarkable scholarly pursuits, Peter concentrated on converting local Chinese and Albazianians to the Orthodox faith (Titarenko 2010, p. 48; Archimandrite Peter 1823). The Mission's activities underwent an important shift due to his contribution in translating literary works from Mongolian, Manchurian, and Chinese into Russian. Additionally, he gathered valuable information on Chinese agriculture and medicine at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Yuan 2019).

The 11th Mission (1830–1841), under Archimandrite Veniamin (Morachevich), had a mixed experience, facing internal administrative challenges while also achieving successful diplomatic exchanges. Veniamin's management style was perceived as stern and autocratic, which caused tension within the Mission. However, he was successful in establishing friendly relations with Qing officials and Jesuit missionaries. The 12th Mission (1840–1850), guided by Archimandrite Polikarp (Tugarinov), continued to prioritize language studies and scientific research (Hu and Wu 2015). Polikarp's detailed reports provided valuable information about China, which was highly appreciated by officials back home (Ovsyannikov 2014; Ipatova 1991). The 13th Mission (1849–1859) led by Palladius (Kafarov) occurred during a turbulent period in Chinese history that demanded strategic information gathering and increased correspondence with the Russian Foreign Ministry. His critical role as an advisor during the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin (Chen 2010; Titarenko 2010, p. 58) underscores the shift from solely religious and cultural missions to those involving diplomatic and political exchange (Chen 2008).

Chinese sources provide a nuanced perspective of the Russian Orthodox Mission as a social and cultural phenomenon that had a profound impact on Beijing's society (Ouyang 2016a, 2016b). The 13 Missions of this period were not just outsiders promoting a foreign religion but participants in the city's everyday life. Local records thus provide a rich narrative of the history of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing during these missions. These sources reveal changes in local perceptions and reactions, as the Mission shifted from missionary activities to language and cultural exchange (Xiao 2007). The Mission eventually became a source of intellectual activity, as evidenced by their recognition of Iakinf's expertise in oriental studies. The local perceptions and reactions to the Mission are influenced by various factors, including the nuanced changes in the Orthodox faith, fluctuations in baptism rates, competition from the Jesuits, and the growing importance of language com-

petence (Xiao and Yan 2020). While the initial missions were recognized primarily for their religious and cultural outreach, later ones added new dimensions with their focus on intellectual pursuits, diplomacy, and deeper engagements with local society. These factors shaped and often complicated the local history with foreign participation. The changing roles and responsibilities of the Mission heads further testify to this evolving socio-political landscape in a complex historical setting.

## 2.2. The Rapid Growth in 1858–1917

The records of later Missions reflect China's perceptions and reactions towards the Russian Orthodox Mission, indicating a shift from simple religious propagation to more complex and rapid contributions in diplomacy, literature, and scientific knowledge.

The 14th Mission (1858–1864), under the leadership of Guriy (Karpov), was marked by political settlement such as the signing of the Treaty of Aigun and the Treaty of Beijing (*Izdanie Ministerstva inostrannyh del* 1889; Bolgurtsev 1996). Guriy's contribution reflects the expanded role of the Mission, as he used his profound knowledge of Chinese and Manchurian languages, history, and traditions (Dmitrievskiy 1909; Xiao 2005) for mediating conflicts between China, Britain, and France (Titarenko 2010, p. 75). Guriy translated the *New Testament* into Chinese for the first time, along with other Orthodox literature (Bartenev 1893; Xiao 2006; Yue 1999, p. 198). The 15th Mission (1865–1878) saw Palladius (Kafarov) return as the head of the Mission, chosen for his diplomatic abilities, which were strategically aligned with Russia's interests. Palladius carried out diplomatic responsibilities alongside engaging in scientific work (Palladius (Kafarov) and Popov (1888); Kafarov 1902; S. Zhang 1986, p. 240), an example of the diversifying role of the Mission heads (Cheng and Li 2008).

For the 16th Mission (1879–1883), led by Flavian (Gorodetsky), there was a shift towards expanding the Orthodox community in several major Chinese cities. The missionaries translated, corrected, and edited liturgical literature to conduct divine services in Chinese (Khokhlov 1996; Xiao 2006; Zhao 2018). Hieromonks Nikolai and Alexei contributed significantly to the understanding of the Russian Orthodox Mission and the spread of Orthodoxy in China (Nikolai 1887). Their work had an implicit influence on local perceptions. The 17th Mission (1884–1897), directed by Amfilohiy (Lutovinov), also brought further contributions to language and literature. Amfilohiy's linguistic skills and publishing works on the history of Christianity in China and Chinese colloquial speech (Amfilohiy 1898a, 1898b) highlighted the importance of cultural exchange and scholarly achievements in shaping these Missions.

The 18th Mission (1897–1931) was the final one approved by the Holy Synod of Russia (Palladius (Kafarov) (1872)) and was led by Archimandrite Innokenty (Figurovsky). Chinese records suggest this Mission's tenure was greatly affected by the hostile socio-political climate of the late 19th century, particularly the rise of the Boxer Movement (Yue 1999, p. 200). This resulted in the destruction of the St. Sophia Church and various mission premises and the Mission members sought refuge in the Russian Embassy (Avraamiy 2016, p. 132; Afonina 2017). Despite the chaotic changes, this period also marks the Orthodox Church's significant expansion into Northeast China, facilitated by Russia's military intervention post the Boxer Movement's outbreak. As a result, the region saw a rapid development of the Orthodox Church's places of worship (Wang and Wang 2022). The Mission under Innokenty also saw him becoming the first-ever bishop sent to China. The Russian Tsar allocated funds from the Boxer Contribution to reconstruct the destroyed premises of the Mission and other Orthodox Churches in China (Pozdnyaev 1998, pp. 30–31; Skachkov 1977, p. 200). From the Chinese perspective, this Mission period is noteworthy for the spread of Orthodoxy among the Chinese population (Xiao 2008a). The Orthodox Church has established a presence in various regions of China—including Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shenyang, Dalian, Harbin, Changchun, Qiqihar, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Hubei. According to Yue, by 1909, the Orthodox community in China had grown substantially, with nearly 5587 baptized Chinese residents (Yue 1999, p. 201).

Chinese records show a change in local attitudes over time, from mere curiosity to awareness of the Missions' contributions to education, cultural exchange, scientific research, and diplomatic relations (Zheng 2015). While religious teachings remained a cornerstone of the Missions, their broader roles exemplify how they were able to subtly shape the local social and cultural landscape, thereby influencing Chinese perceptions. Chinese sources portray the 18th Mission as a complicated period of challenge due to social unrest yet marked by considerable propagation of Orthodoxy in China (Z. Wang 2015). The Mission's resilience in response to the adversities of the Boxer Movement, followed by the Orthodox Church's rapid development (Xiao 2013; Ye and Yu 2021).

### 2.3. *The Unexpected Shifts in 1917–1956*

The Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing underwent substantial developments in the early 20th century. Drawing from sources, the Mission just prior to 1917 was a significant entity, possessing 37 churches, over 40 parish premises, and several educational and vocational institutions. Its estimated value was around 1.5 million roubles (Yue 1999, p. 200; Titarenko 2010, p. 106), signifying its considerable footprint.

Nevertheless, the political turmoil in Russia presented challenges (Xiao 2013). Following the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the separation of Church and State led to the Soviet government's control over the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. Consequently, the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing became disconnected from its mainland counterpart. The Mission in Beijing faced financial difficulties and had to rely on its own accumulated property. They sought guidance from the Russian Church Abroad in Serbia, which marked a new stage of development (Zhu 2023). In 1928, the head of the Mission, Innokenty, decided to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox Church. The Chinese Orthodox Church was formed as an affiliate of the Russian Church Abroad, with its headquarters in Beijing and dioceses in other Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, Harbin, and Xinjiang.

Bishop Simon (Vinogradov) and Metropolitan Victor (Svyatin) were appointed by the Russian Church Abroad to lead the 19th (1931–1933) and 20th (1933–1956) Missions, respectively. The Mission's activities expanded in multiple directions, including missionary, monastic, cultural, economic, and charitable endeavors. The Mission aimed to maintain its operation through various business activities (Dai 2018; Pozdnyaev 1998).

The rapidly changing political climate during the mid-20th century had significant implications for the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, as conveyed through Chinese sources. After the completion of the Chinese Eastern Railway and the October Revolution in Russia, there was a large influx of Russians into Northeast China, with many seeking refuge there. This influx of immigrants significantly impacted the landscape of the Russian Orthodox Church in China, almost turning it into an emigrant church by the 1920s (Wang and Wang 2022). This transformation is evident in the substantial numbers of Orthodox churches established in Harbin and across China.

In the following decades, the Russian Orthodox Church in China experienced a series of changes in leadership. It initially came under the leadership of the Moscow and All-Russian Patriarchate of the Soviet Union after 1945, followed by Victor's Mission, and then severed ties with the Russian Church Abroad. By 1949, Orthodox Christianity in China had spread significantly across China, with over 100 Orthodox churches and several monasteries (Lukin 2013). However, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, new religious decrees were implemented that led to further reorganizations. In 1954, the Russian Orthodox Mission in China was abolished by a decision of the Holy Synod and replaced with the East Asian Exarchate under Nikandr (Victorov). In the mid-1950s, a significant turning point occurred with a series of departures by key figures, including Nikandr and Victor. This culminated in the closure of the East Asian Exarchate, which was announced by the Russian Orthodox Church (Dai 2018; Wang and Wang 2022). Attempts to establish an autonomous Chinese Orthodox Church were unsuccessful, resulting in the conclusion of the history of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing.

In summary, the Chinese perception of the Russian Orthodox Mission throughout this period reflects a transition of the Mission from an entity closely tied with mainland Russia to an independent Church entity that navigated significant political turbulence while still maintaining its presence and impact in Chinese society. The transformations and challenges experienced by the Russian Orthodox Mission during this period reflect a complex interplay of historical and political changes (Z. Wang 2015). As indicated by Chinese sources, the Church transitioned from growth and expansion to closure, shifting local perceptions over time.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. *The Russian Narratives on the History of the Russian Mission in Beijing*

The history of the Russian Orthodox Missions in Beijing has been predominantly narrated from the Russian perspective. In these narratives, the Orthodox Mission in Beijing was considered inward-looking until the October Revolution of 1917 (Veselovskii 1905, pp. 1–45, 65–71; Nikolai 1887). Limited publications in the early 20th century provided some insight into the Mission's activities (Avraamiy 1916). Soviet-era studies of the Russian Orthodox Mission in China have been contextualized within the larger history of Chinese studies by numerous researchers, including Alekseev (1982), Bartol'd (2014), Skachkov (1977), Khokhlov (1970, 1978, 1979), and Tikhvinskii (1988, pp. 163–82.). The History of Russian Oriental Studies up to the Middle of the 19th Century (Kim and Shastitko 1990) represents a comprehensive edition that marks the culmination of the Soviet period in the Mission's research.

In the early 1990s, the study of the Russian Orthodox Mission in China entered a novel phase, marked by an integrated historical methodology (Samoylov 1993; Tikhvinskii 1997). This more holistic approach considered the Mission from various perspectives, including its ecclesiastical relationships, complex history, and cultural relationships within China. A significant contribution to this renewed exploration was S. Shubina's PhD thesis, which provided a comprehensive overview of the Mission's activities (Shubina 1998). Other Russian scholars also made valuable contributions during this period, with T. Pang's work examining the historical and religious elements of Orthodoxy in China, including the interaction between Russian and Manchu cultures (Pang 1998). A noteworthy source of knowledge during this period was the Russian Orthodox Church itself, which published several works that contribute to the understanding of the Mission and its historical interplay (Pozdnyaev 1998; Titarenko 2010; Selivanovskii 2013). Further insights into the activities and contextual nuances of the Mission were offered by detailed studies conducted by Russian historians, particularly the works of V. Datsyshen and S. Golovin (Datsyshen 2007, 2010; Golovin 2013).

It is also worthy of note that the research of Professor N. Samoylov merits particular attention. His long-term research provides fundamental insights into the theoretical dimensions of various aspects of the Russian Orthodox Mission (Samoylov 2016, 2020; Huang and Samoylov 2018). The author's work discusses Russian academic schools that focus on the Mission, noting that "the study of the Russian Mission is broad, encompassing not only church ministers but also historians, orientalist, philologists, and art critics" (Samoylov 2021). L. Afonina's work reveals the life and fate of Chinese Orthodox believers in the early 20th century (Afonina 2017, 2021), in which the newly discovered and interpreted materials have offered fresh insights into the activity of missionaries during their service in Beijing. While A. Lomanov provides a comprehensive summary of the Russian Mission in China (Lomanov 2007), other scholars contribute to the evolving historical and socio-cultural narrative with a variety of perspectives (Dmitrenko 2017; Pang 2000).

Despite a focus on the Russian Mission's wide-ranging aspects up until 1917, research initiatives by global scholars in Christian history have broadened understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church in China. Widmer (1976) and Kim and Zhou (2021) are two examples of such scholarship. For instance, G. Afinogenov's studies place the Mission in the context of Russian imperial history and its foreign intelligence activities, emphasizing



the Jesuits' roles in the Qing and Russian Empires (Afinogenov 2015, 2020). Akulich's work underlines the Mission's growth before and after the Boxer Movement, focusing on its festivals' impacts on locals (Akulich 2022).

Although the Mission has been extensively analyzed from the Russian standpoint, a significant academic gap exists in understanding it from the Chinese perspective. This is particularly evident regarding its archival-material impact, religious propagation, asset management, the historical identities and roles of missionaries, and the remaining Orthodox architecture in China. Further research is therefore required to enrich the narrative.

### 3.2. *The Chinese Narratives on the History of the Russian Mission in Beijing*

Until the 1980s, the history of religion in China, including Orthodoxy, received only marginal attention in Chinese scholarship. However, there was an increase in the study of Orthodoxy and its spread in China in the 1980s and 1990s, with notable studies by scholars such as Zhang S. (S. Zhang 1986), Yue F. (Yue 1999, 2002), Xiao Y. (Xiao 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010b, 2013), Yan G. (Xiao and Yan 2020; Nikolai 2007), and Zhang B. (Baichun Zhang 2017) being particularly influential works in this field. These publications provide detailed accounts of the history of Orthodoxy and the Russian Mission to China, the fundamental doctrines of Orthodoxy, its spread, and its associations with governing bodies and other Christian denominations.

A distinguished contributor, Professor Xiao Y., notably shaped interpretations of Sino-Russian cultural exchange, focusing on the Russian Orthodox Mission's history, missionary efforts, and influence (Xiao 2008a, 2008b, 2010a). Xiao's research covers education, medicine, and art (Xiao et al. 2016, p. 68), and her monograph *Russian Spiritual Mission and Cultural Ties Between China and Russia During the Qing Dynasty* (Xiao 2009) offers an in-depth look at the Qing era's Sino-Russian cultural ties using diverse sources, including novel archival materials. She also examined the first Russian students in Beijing, Orthodoxy in Zhili Province, and the fates of Russian bannermen in the capital city.

Other Chinese scholars have also addressed the literature gap in analyzing mission endeavors. Ouyang Z. examined the specific activities, assets, and management of Missions (Ouyang 2016a, 2016b), while Tang G. explored the largely forgotten Orthodox churches in China left by the Russians, providing much-needed insight into this overlooked aspect (Tang 2001, 2003). Although the number of researchers in this field is relatively small, Zhou N. (Zhou 2018) and Zhu X. (Zhu 2023) have made notable contributions. They paid tribute to the diplomatic history between China and Russia by engaging Russian missionaries in China (T. Tan 2015), explored the scientific and educational function of the Russian Mission, and the emergence of sinology in Russia (S. Tan 2002).

To advance our understanding of the Russian Orthodox Mission's influence, scholarship should merge these historical accounts into a coherent narrative by embracing a meticulous comparative approach to better represent Chinese perspectives. The field stands to gain by incorporating narratives of Chinese Orthodox believers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, exploring the Russian diaspora's enduring cultural impact. A comprehensive examination of the experiences of these immigrants, particularly in Harbin, and their enduring influence could significantly contribute to current research theme (Zheng 2010, 2015; Z. Wang 2015; Rong et al. 2011). The overlooked Orthodox Church history in the Xinjiang region also warrants attention, with explorations into the Russian Orthodox Mission's role adding depth to this marginalized aspect (Hu and Wu 2015). Ding M. explores the complex identity of ethnic Russians in China by revealing the presence of Russian communities in China's northern border regions, including Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. Her research demonstrates the historical links of these peoples to the Soviet Union and their migration to Australia in the second half of the 20th century. It deconstructs Chinese Russians' identification through historical, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives (Ding 2015). A potential direction for future study is the re-establishment of the Orthodox Church in China (Jiang 2008).

Additionally, Wang's comparative study of Orthodox and Protestant churches in 20th-century Harbin sheds light on their development against diverse sociocultural backgrounds (L. Wang 2021). Li W. differentiates Russian Orthodox missionaries from their Western counterparts, analyzing their mission strategies and impacts in China (Li 2005). This area of study bears further development and could reveal valuable insights into the distinct characteristics of Orthodox Christianity's dissemination in China versus other Christian denominations. Significant research on individuals like Palladius (Kafarov) deepens our understanding of missionary role in propagating Chinese culture among the Russian people (Chen 2006a, 2006b, 2010).

### 3.3. *The Narrative Gap in the History of the Russian Mission in Beijing*

A comprehensive examination reveals that integrating narratives from Chinese and global historiographies significantly enhances our comprehension of the Russian Orthodox Mission's evolution in China. This multifaceted approach uncovers unique insights into the Mission's influence, fosters critical discussions across cultural boundaries, and illuminates the complex layers of historical development. However, to strengthen this understanding, a detailed analysis is essential, focusing on the distinctive research methodologies employed by scholars in the Chinese and Russian research communities.

While the synthesis of Chinese and global perspectives enriches the narrative, it potentially exposes a reliance on Russian-dominant narratives, which may result in the sidelining of alternative cultural and scholarly viewpoints. It is essential to recognize the profound contributions of Russian scholarship, yet incorporating a broader spectrum of scholarly insights is crucial for an all-encompassing historical analysis of the Mission. The transition towards a more integrated historical methodology during the 1990s–2000s marks a significant evolution in the scholarship on the Mission. However, this evolution necessitates a deeper evaluation of how Soviet-era philosophical leanings may have perceived historical narratives. The exploration of how political and socio-cultural frameworks shaped scholarly interpretations during this period could unveil intricate shifts in the historiographical landscape. Moreover, this analysis merely touches upon the interactions and potential conflicts between global and Russian perspectives, underscoring the necessity for a comprehensive investigation of how various scholarly communities navigate and reconcile divergences in their interpretations of the Mission's history, particularly from the Chinese perspective. This investigation should encompass the archival impact of the Mission, its religious propagation, asset management, the historical identities and roles of missionaries, and the historical Orthodox architecture in China.

In terms of Chinese records, the scholar examinations cover a wide range of historical issues related to the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. These include its detailed chronological development and functional studies of the Missions. Chinese historians have paid great attention to address the origins of Russian sinology associated with the Mission. At the same time, their enlarged research has deeply discovered the political role performed by some Russian missionaries in China to serve Russian overseas interests. The Chinese discourse also touches on common key thematic areas of research, such as the experiences of Orthodox believers in China and the Mission's endeavors during pivotal historical moments, including the bilateral treaties process, conflicts, and massive movements. In the meantime, a more profound examination of unique explorations from the perspectives of Qing's history and Sino-Russian civilization exchange is required for Chinese historiography of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. This examination should be performed by a range of methodological and theoretical frameworks and would benefit the field of world mission history studies.

Finally, the initial overview serves as a foundational insight into the historiography of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. However, a comprehensive critical analysis, which addresses biases and the interplay between diverse scholarly narratives, is imperative. Such an expanded critical engagement allows for the clarification of the varying scholarly approaches within the Chinese and Russian academic spheres, as well as the ini-

tiation of a broader, more inclusive dialogue conducive to future research. This approach advocates for a historiography that is as dynamic and multifaceted as the subjects it seeks to understand. It paves the way for a theoretically grounded and critically assessed exploration of this significant aspect of Chinese, Russian, and global history.

### 3.4. Methodological Approach

The scholarship on the Russian Orthodox Mission in China is a diverse blend of Chinese and global narratives. Chinese scholarship, in particular, stands out due to its unique thematic focus, although there are various parallels with other research. Chinese researchers such as Xiao Y. and her contemporaries emphasize the practical and cultural contributions of the Russian Orthodox Mission, in addition to the predominant diplomatic, scientific, religious, and intelligence aspects covered primarily by Russian and Western literature. This opens avenues for exploration into less-charted regions like the Chinese north-east and north-west, contributing to a more comprehensive account of the Mission's historical influence.

The methodology proposed in this article involves a comparative historical analysis of the various narratives. To better understand the development of Orthodoxy in China, the Mission's history needs to be segmented. This segmentation aligns with significant historical events in modern Chinese and Russian history, such as the Treaty of Tianjin, the Boxer Movement, the October Revolution, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It is important to note that this alignment is independent of the models proposed by various scholars.

Different scholars use various models of periodization. For example, Yue proposes a six-phase approach that spans from 1665 to 1956 (Yue 1999, p. 205), while Xiao divides the history into three periods (1715–1858, 1858–1900, and 1900–1917) based on the goals and expansion of missionary activity (Xiao 2007, 2008a; Xiao et al. 2016, p. 87). Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church also follows a similar periodization, with the exception that they consider the Boxer Movement as a distinct stage of development. They add a fourth stage (1917–1945), which is referred to as the “emigration period” (Selivanovskii 2013, p. 10). Other Russian scholars, such as S. Shubina, frame the periodization around the scientific endeavors undertaken by the missionaries themselves (Samoylov 2021).

While each approach varies, they commonly rely on significant historical events occurring in 1858/1860, 1900, 1917, and 1956. These events illustrate the profound influence of such historical events on many facets of society. This article follows a three-stage principle: the first stage (1715–1860), the second stage (1860–1917), and the third stage (1917–1956). This text chronicles the Mission's arrival in Beijing and its growth amidst complex historical events such as the Second Opium War, the Boxer Movement, and the October Revolution. It also covers the emergence and strengthening of Sino-Soviet relations and the eventual closure of the Russian Orthodox Church in China. The stages allow for a concise summary of the Mission's evolution and its historical evaluations in the literature.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. Redefining Identity Myths in Historical Context

The activities of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing went beyond its religious mandate and had a dual identity that became intertwined with the framework of Sino-Russian relations. This section analyzes the inherent duality of the missionaries' roles and its impact on the historical orientation between Russia and China.

Here, the narratives long associated with the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing are explored and the “identity myths” that have defined the missionary narrative in Chinese and Russian scholarship are dissected. In this article, the term refers to a framework for understanding or interpreting the role and functions of Russian Orthodox missionaries in China. These narratives or ideological constructs shape our perception of the missionaries and their activities. The “myth” here does not deny the authenticity of these identities, but rather speaks to the simplistic, reductionist nature of these narratives. “Identity myths” in this context are created and perpetuated through historical, religious, and cultural dis-

course over time. They have been constructed and reified by scholars, contemporaries, and even the missionaries themselves in order to explain their work and influence in simple, digestible terms. This study seeks to deconstruct these myths and provide a more nuanced perspective on the identities of Russian Orthodox missionaries. It challenges the one-dimensional “myth” of the Orthodox missionary as a purely, literally religious entity and reveals the many hats they wore—as diplomats, scholars, and cultural mediators, among others. Missionaries often wielded a dual identity that included facilitating Russia’s geopolitical agenda through scholarly engagement in Chinese studies. These roles have been either underemphasized or overlooked in historical accounts, resulting in mythologized perceptions of their identity.

According to scholars like Xiao (Xiao 2021), the Mission had a dual identity as both a spiritual representation and a channel for Sino–Russian cultural exchange. To fully understand its nuanced operations and multifaceted engagements, it is important to appraise this dual identity within its historical context. Prior to the formal establishment of the Russian embassy in China in 1861, the Russian Orthodox Mission served as a diplomatic intermediary (Xiao 2005; Dai 2014). Chen emphasized that the Mission “was not an embassy in name, but an embassy in fact” (Chen 2008), engaging in knowledge gathering and strategic information collection that served Russian national interests.

The operational dynamics of the missionaries reflected a nuanced relationship with the Qing officials (T. Tan 2015). The Mission’s objectives evolved from religious duties to diplomatic and scholarly pursuits, representing a dual identity that was long unrecognized. As Widmer’s assertion that the Russian Orthodox Mission “never functioned as a full diplomatic service” (Widmer 1976) and Xiao’s evidence (Xiao 2005) show, while it did not operate as a full diplomatic service, it wielded considerable influence due to the moral and conductive leverage the missionaries possessed. Although the Mission’s assignments had diplomatic undertones, the members held a strategic position. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire showed an increasing interest in the activities of the missionaries. Their directive emphasized the importance of maintaining commendable morals and conduct to earn the respect of Qing officials. The Ministry also advised waiting for an opportune moment to establish close ties (Yue 1999, p. 195; Xiao 2013). The Mission’s activities sharpened their focus on researching economics and culture, providing timely reports about significant events in China’s political landscape. This practice continued until the official establishment of consulates between the two countries.

There is a discrepancy in the historiographical interpretation of the Mission’s roles. Gu argues that the Mission’s slow development in China can be attributed to its emphasis on diplomatic and intelligence roles rather than purely missionary work (Du and Xie 2016). However, Ye and Wang offer a more restrained view of their unofficial diplomatic status (Ye and Yu 2021; L. Wang 2021). The task was to balance the religious needs of the local Orthodox community with the geopolitical ambitions of the Russian state.

The concept of “identity myths” thus serves as the theoretical foundation for our re-assessment of missionary activities and allows for a multidimensional understanding of Sino–Russian history. This shift reflects an evolution in the methodology and lens through which modern historiography approaches the subject, offering a more complete picture of their contribution to Sino–Russian cultural fusion. In sum, the re-evaluation of “identity myths” breaks down misconceptions and provides a revisionist perspective that is more in line with the reality of the Russian Orthodox Mission’s multifaceted significance in historical Sino–Russian relations.

#### 4.2. *The Cultural Diplomacy in Bridging China and Russia*

Examining the scholarly discourse presents contrasting narratives about the Mission’s unofficial diplomatic status. Despite differing historiographical interpretations, there is consensus on the missionaries’ intricate engagement with local intelligence and perceptions. These interactions contributed significantly to the missionaries’ research, education, and translation efforts and fostered cross-cultural exchange. The dual identity of the Rus-



sian Orthodox Mission facilitated a complex and layered cultural diplomacy that intertwined religious roles with political, scholarly, and diplomatic functions—thereby forging a unique and enduring bond between Russia and China.

Reflecting on the Mission's broader mandates, some of the missionaries were involuntarily involved in cultural and scientific research, deeply immersing themselves into the body of Chinese knowledge and becoming notable scholars and educators in their own right, e.g., Rossokhin, Leontiev, Yakinf (Bichurin), Palladius (Kafarov), Peter (Kamensky), and Vasiliev (Cheng and Li 2008). A noted expert in Chinese studies and a member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Vasilij Alekseev viewed Palladius as:

the greatest Sinologist of Russia and the entire European world of the nineteenth century; he was the first scholar to apply to Sinology the method of working only with sources, rather than relying on stereotypical information from Chinese encyclopedists. (Skachkov 1977, p. 286)

These multifunctional roles extended beyond the religious to the political and academic spheres. Besides the ecclesiastical responsibilities that anchored them, the prominent members of the Mission were committed to the advancement of sinology and influenced the development of European knowledge about China through translations and research (Xiao 2009; Zhao 2018). This scholarly work served as a cultural bridge, promoting an early and increased mutual exchange of Russian and Chinese literature and knowledge. By engaging in diplomatic practices and strategic information gathering, the Mission contributed to the strengthening of bilateral relations at a time when formal diplomatic channels were scarce. Therefore, the missionaries transformed to the cultural intermediaries who introduced Russian language, art, and religious traditions to China. Through the translation and dissemination of texts, and by embracing and engaging with local customs and languages, missionaries as a whole had fostered mutual cultural understanding and appreciation.

The mission's presence paved the way for Russia to conduct indirect diplomacy and maintain a dialogue with the Chinese Empire. They had a unique position within the Qing government, which allowed them to influence the negotiation of treaties such as the Treaty of Aigun and the Treaty of Beijing. Mission leaders such as Archimandrites Innokenty, Palladius used their knowledge of Chinese language and customs in important negotiations alongside Russian representatives, demonstrating the Mission's advisory and mediatory role on behalf of Russian imperial interests in China (Dai 2014; Chen 2008). Meanwhile, sustained efforts to translate liturgy and establish churches played an important role in making the Orthodox faith more visible and influential in China, especially among the Russian community and the local Chinese population (Cao 2021; Li 2005). It facilitated intellectual exchange between Russia and China, notably through the education and training of Russian and Chinese scholars and clergy in the Mission's schools and seminaries. The translation and educational endeavors undertaken by the Mission members contributed to the insights into China that were shared throughout Europe.

#### 4.3. Comparative Analysis of Mission Strategies and Western Counterparts

The results and consequences of Christian missionary activity in the second half of the 19th century are as significant as they are contradictory. (Datsyshen 2007, p. 83)

The missionaries' religious roles intertwined with their political presence in the signing of key treaties, making their involvement an integral part of Russian–Chinese communication, notably before the formal establishment of consulates. The Mission's identity adapted to the needs of the state—particularly in the use of missionaries such as Palladius in the signing of important bilateral agreements. This highlights the adaptability and relevance of the Mission in broader state affairs beyond its ecclesiastical purpose.

On the other hand, Orthodoxy became widely known among the Chinese only after waves of Russian emigrants arrived in the Far East following the Russian Revolutions. This led to the spread of Orthodoxy in various regions of China, especially in the north-

east. As a result, there was a need for priest training, church services, and the construction of parish churches. Thus, the strategy of clergy indigenization adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century represents a significant step in the localized development of Orthodoxy in China (X. Zhang 2009). The efforts of the translation committee led by Innokenty (Figurovsky), which translated more than 20 Chinese texts in six years (Zhao 2018), are evidence of a commitment to localization to make Orthodoxy accessible to a wider Chinese audience.

Moreover, the missionaries' localized efforts, which paralleled those of the Western Jesuits, suggest a broader range of activities than simply Orthodox indoctrination. The Russian Orthodox Mission in China was distinct from other religious missions, such as Jesuit efforts, both in its approach to cultural assimilation and in its structural organization. Scholars have analyzed the Jesuit missionaries who entered China at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. Scholars have used a language acquisition model to study the missionaries and have found that after nine years of academic training at Jesuit colleges, Jesuits typically undergo two years of internship and two or more years of practical training in teaching before entering the Chinese mission, according to Cao:

The academic and practical experiences provide a strong foundation for learning Chinese language, adapting to the culture, and performing missionary work in China. (Cao 2021)

This, in comparison to the long preparation for Western Jesuits before their missionary work, reveals both the strengths and limitations of the Russian missionary strategy. Despite arriving a century after the Western Jesuits, the Russian Orthodox Mission benefited from special policies granted by the Qing government, underscoring a preferential treatment that helped establish a sustained Orthodox presence in China. This provided a unique advantage in spreading Russian influence, in contrast to the more localized approaches of the Jesuits. According to Li, St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, believed that the use of non-Christian classics was justified as a means of exploring cultural adaptation (Li 2005). The localization of the missionary activity by both Orthodox missionaries and Jesuits has been a puzzle for centuries. Only a few Western missionaries were able to introduce the Chinese people to European literature in various fields of scientific knowledge. This gave them insights into Western countries and increased the visibility and spread of the Church. Russian missionaries also tried to share knowledge about Russia with the Chinese people and vice versa.

But the missionaries' push for monotheism clashed with the polytheistic tendencies inherent in traditional Chinese religions. Baptisms were often performed for pragmatic reasons, such as business deals with Russians, suggesting that conversions were not driven purely by spiritual desire but by socioeconomic circumstances (Tao and Nie 2019, p. 11). The researchers explain that:

As for the reasons why the Chinese joined the church, the vast majority of Chinese practiced Orthodoxy not to save their souls but to solve real-life problems. The Russian missionaries were aware of this from the outset, and while they continued to receive baptisms, most were clearly motivated by material rewards. (Xiao et al. 2016, p. 99)

This is largely due to the presence of indigenous religious movements such as Taoism and Buddhism, which have been reinterpreted and revitalized in China. Additionally, Dai G. notes that Russian Orthodox culture represents a heterogeneous culture for the Chinese that is not easily assimilated. According to her, Russian Orthodoxy has not been as integrated into Chinese multiculturalism as Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity (Dai 2018). Datsyshen argues that:

Until the end of the 19th century, the Russian Orthodox Mission was not actively engaged in missionary activity in China. The missionaries themselves did not believe in the possibility of a wide spread of Orthodoxy and Christianity in general in Chinese society. (Datsyshen 2007, p. 79)

Nevertheless, the unique religious festivals and customs of Russian Orthodoxy contributed to cultural pluralism within China. For example, following the Boxer Movement, the Russian Mission in Beijing established All Saint Martyrs Day to commemorate the Chinese victims. This feast became the “Mission’s best attended event”, with various local participants, although not all of them were Christians. Furthermore, the celebrations “also presented Orthodox Chinese Christians with the opportunity to confirm their communal belonging” (Akulich 2022). This diversification, as argued by scholars like Wang Z., has counteracted the pervasive influence of Western values rooted in Catholicism and Protestantism and helped to preserve traditional Chinese culture (Wang and Wang 2022). Researcher Wang L. also agrees with this provision:

Orthodox and Protestant churches have significant differences that have led to Christian schism. In parallel, they have developed their own distinctive styles of choosing and using external manifestations of communication media, subjects, and targets. (L. Wang 2021)

By synthesizing these findings, this section highlights the complex and evolving representation of the Russian Orthodox Mission. This examination emphasizes its lasting impact on cultural diplomacy, scholarly works, and the historical, cultural, and philosophical interactions between Russia and China. By considering the nuances found in scholarly interpretations, the complexities of missionary identity, and the interplay of historical events, we gain a more complete understanding of the Russian Orthodox Mission’s influence on the field of intercultural exchange and its representation in the scholarship.

## 5. Conclusions

This article presents an analysis of the various accounts of the Russian Orthodox Missions by Chinese and Russian scholars, revealing dimensions that go beyond its traditionally perceived role. Rather than a purely religious entity, the Mission was an important channel of cultural and early diplomatic exchange between Russia and China. A comprehensive analysis of Chinese historiography helps to reconceptualize the Mission as a mediator in Sino-Russian relations and a sustained advocate of Russian interests. This effort serves to emphasize the importance of cross-cultural exchange in a religious context and to highlight the indispensable role of religion in the broader exchange and mutual appreciation of world civilizations. By critically analyzing existing Sino-Russian accounts, this study illuminates the complex narrative and historical footprint of the Mission in bilateral history.

In addition, the study emphasizes the need to incorporate local perspectives and narratives into the historiography of the Mission. By adopting a perspective informed by Chinese scholarship, it is possible to gain insight into how local beliefs, traditions, and religious practices influenced and sometimes reshaped Mission activities and perceptions. This approach not only promotes scholarly discussion but also advocates for the continued exploration of this complex history. Finally, it is worth noting several potential avenues for further research that could contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted history of the Russian Orthodox Missions in Beijing.

First, a thorough deconstruction of “identity myth” research. There is an acute need to explore the multiple identities of Russian Orthodox missionaries beyond their religious roles, and the study of their nuanced identities as cultural diplomats, educators, and mediators could provide a deeper understanding of their historical roles and contributions. In this regard, empirical methods can provide new perspectives for understanding the scope and impact of Sino-Russian cultural exchanges promoted by the Missions.

Second, we need more interdisciplinary studies. Combining insights from history, sociology, anthropology, and religion can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the role of Russian missionaries in China throughout history and the impact of the Missions on local culture and religious practices; an explanation of the interactions between the Missions and local communities, including more in-depth research on opposition–adaptation–confrontation; and even more extensive research on the Orthodox Church buildings in

China throughout history, with a focus on exploring the architectural styles of the Orthodox Church and its distinctive features in China during the immigration boom of the early 20th century. Nevertheless, the Russian migration flows to China at this time also deserve detailed research in connection with the development of the Orthodox Church in Chinese regions.

Third, a comparative study of the history of Orthodox missions in China with other Christian missions is needed. This comparison should include the Russian Orthodox Church with other missions in China during the same periods. Such a study would provide the opportunity to gain comparative evidence on their respective strategies, impacts, and legacies. In addition, it would uncover archival and recent historical research to study quantitative data on the number of exchanges, missionary activities, and conversion records between Russian and Western missions.

This study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of historical events and contribute to the complex historiography surrounding the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. By addressing existing historiographical gaps and proposing new research perspectives, this study seeks to stimulate further scholarly discussion. Our research transcends temporal, cultural, and symbolic boundaries to provide an understanding of shared historical experiences, cross-cultural exchanges, and the dynamic construction of history through a range of narratives, interpretations, and perspectives.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.orthodox.cn/images/1850beiguan.jpg>, accessed on 25 April 2024.

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