



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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“I WAS BORN IN AN ORTHODOX WORLD...”

Early Memories of a Chinese Christian

Subdeacon Papiy Fu, now studying theology at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra in Russia, reflects on his sixty-five years as a Chinese Orthodox Christian.

I was born in an Orthodox world, in the Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. My parents were Orthodox and my father was the bell-ringer for the mission. Mother passed away when I was six years old and I lived with my father and an aunt.

I was chosen by St. John Maximovitch to study in Shanghai. He had already left when I was brought to Shanghai, but I lived below his room. He had lived on the second floor, and I lived on the first. I was there with Fr. Elia Wren¹, during Bishop Simeon's² time.

My elder sister, Gavriilia, was a nun at the mission in Beijing. This was the Convent of the Dormition, on the mission grounds. There were two Chinese nuns and three Russians there. After the mission was closed in 1956, she moved to another town.

My younger sister, Maria, was adopted into the monastery when she was one year old, after our mother died, where she lived with my older sister, Nun Gavriilia. Maria also became a nun when she was fourteen. She didn't speak Chinese until after she was a nun. She'd only spoken Russian before because she lived in the Mission. She is still in China.

RTE: What do you remember of Orthodox life in China before the mission was closed?

¹ Fr. Elia Wen: later emigrated to the U.S. and served as a priest in the Russian Church Outside of Russia, Joy of All Who Sorrow Cathedral in San Francisco.

² Bishop Simeon (Du Run Chen).

SUBDEACON PAPIY: What I remember most from my childhood are the church-bells ringing the whole day on Pascha. The kulichi and pascha....

I was born Orthodox, I grew up in Orthodoxy, and I was an altar attendant and later a subdeacon, so I know a lot about the liturgical practices. I never left the Church, and of course, I have many feelings about this



Fr. Elias Wen of Shanghai, and later Joy of All Who Sorrow Cathedral, San Francisco.

In 1956 everyone left Beijing and in 1958 everything closed and I had to go to Shanghai to work for the government.

When I had to leave the church I always dreamed about these things: Pascha, the services, the ringing bells, the feasts. Coming to Russia is like these dreams coming alive. Two bishops in the altar, many priests.

RTE: What did you do about services after the churches closed?

SUBDEACON PAPIY: I was alone. We were all separated, but my whole life was in the church. When the churches were closed, I lived outside the church. When the church in Harbin reopened, I went back.

I never left. There was one priest at that time, Fr. Grigory Chiu. Now, because of Fr. Dionisy Pozdnyaev, I've come to Russia to study theology.

Now I read the sixth hour in church here in the Lavra. I've spoken Chinese, Russian, and read Slavonic from when I was young. I wanted to do these things so much from childhood and during the time the churches were closed.

RTE: Did you use any Chinese in the services before the churches were closed, or was it all in Slavonic?

SUBDEACON PAPIY: There were some books about Orthodoxy in Chinese. Sometimes the Russian priests tried to use Chinese in the services, but it was a transliteration, and they didn't always understand what they were reading. There was a Chinese priest, Michael Lo. He never used a word of Slavonic in services. Everything was Chinese.

RTE: Do you hope to become a priest?

SUBDEACON PAPIY: If God wills. I hope that my sister Maria can come to my ordination if I become a deacon or a priest.

RTE: You know, you are a bridge for us from the East to the West.

SUBDEACON PAPIY: I am. From the 17th century, many of the Chinese Orthodox were Albazianians³, and it was mostly Albazianians who became priests. Then, as their numbers decreased, other Chinese became priests and deacons as well. I am not Albazianian. I am pure Chinese. I am proud to be one of the first non-Albazianians, but at the same time I feel a very great weight on me. I hope to help reopen the Church in China.

We have a great work to do in China because the old generation has passed and the new generation doesn't know anything. I am someone in between. It will take the students here at Sergeev Posad five or ten years to catch up with Orthodoxy because the liturgical cycle is so complex, and they need to learn Russian and Slavonic first to study theology. There is nothing of Orthodoxy left in China and it is hard to learn because they don't have a living faith; they can't be immersed in the Church as I was. If I live for ten more years, they will catch up with me.

I welcome you to China, whenever you want to come. ✝