

## A Brief Overview of the Current State of the Orthodox Church in China

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### Introduction

In the context of China, where the actions of the Church are restricted by political and cultural factors, it is important to realize that the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church is primarily oriented towards the personal and spiritual growth of believers. Spiritual practice, based on prayer, worship services, and spiritual study, is the foundation of faith and spiritual development, regardless of social conditions or external constraints. However, while the spiritual practice is focused on the inner world of believers, its expression in the form of religious rites and traditions is intrinsically linked to society. The creation of religious traditions and communities within the Church is a way to embody spiritual values in the external world, which in turn contributes to society and generates interest and demand for spiritual life development from both believers and society at large. Thus, while the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church focuses on internal spiritual growth, its influence and significance are manifested through religious communities and traditions, promoting the development of spirituality under the constrained conditions of the Church's actions in society.

### Current State

The Orthodox Church in China, despite its long and rich history, is currently represented on the Mainland by only a few parishes with official status: in Harbin, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. These parishes are served by two Chinese priests. The parishes are not structurally united, and the Xinjiang parishes do not have priests. The formal canonical status of the Church in China is an Autonomous Church; however, it can be considered more as a model rather than the actual form of the Church in China. Besides the official parishes, there are active unofficial Orthodox communities served by foreign clergy. Notably, the Orthodox communities in Beijing and Shanghai are primarily open to foreigners and

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led by foreign priests. The Orthodox Church in China is also connected with parishes in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

## **Challenges Faced by the Orthodox Church in China's Socio-Political Context**

The Orthodox Church in China faces serious political restrictions due to state control over religion. One of the main problems is the lack of clergy, which weakens the Church's ability to serve its believers. The weak institutional structure is also a significant challenge, hampering the development and coordination of activities. Limited opportunities for Church events and clergy education exacerbate the Church's problems in the country. Cultural differences between China and the Orthodox Church and different approaches to religion create additional challenges, complicating the Church's adaptation and growth in this environment.

## **Social and Cultural Context for the Spread of Orthodoxy in China**

The social and cultural environment in China presents the following features: the Church demonstrates potential for creating local culture and inculturation, allowing it to adapt and influence local culture. Many believers prefer unofficial forms of religious activity, providing greater freedom, although limited in access to material resources. The use of Chinese alongside Russian is not an obstacle, requiring only resources for translations and adaptation. The lack of information and propaganda about Orthodoxy among Chinese citizens creates a primary issue in understanding the faith due to the absence of informational feedback. The distorted perception of Orthodoxy as a religion exclusively of Russian culture leads to biased attitudes and social pressure on believers from society and authorities.

## **The Role of the Church as an Institution Representing Spiritual and Religious Traditions**

Maintaining the spiritual identity of Orthodox believers in China not only ensures a strong connection with the traditions and community of the Church but is also a key factor for their potential growth. Upholding their spiritual identity can foster personal growth, inspiring them towards self-development and active participation in public life. To maintain Orthodox identity in the Chinese context, the following methods can be employed:

1. Development of educational programs about Orthodoxy aimed at locals to increase awareness of the Church's faith and traditions.
2. Organization of cultural exchange events between Orthodox and Chinese communities to promote understanding and respect for differences.
3. Conducting worship and educational events in local languages to attract more believers and keep them involved in Church life.

4. Organization of exhibitions, conferences, and other events dedicated to Orthodox culture and faith to promote them in Chinese society.
5. Facilitating the formation of spiritual communities and supporting mutual aid among believers to strengthen Orthodox identity in China.

## Political Restrictions and Their Impacts on Church Life

The Orthodox Church in China faces serious restrictions that are part of the government's general policy of controlling religious activities in the country. The main goal of the government is to maintain stability and prevent external influence through religious organizations. As a result, the Church faces several types of political restrictions:

1. **Control over religious practices:** The state establishes strict regulations for conducting religious rites. All official religious events must receive permission from government bodies, significantly reducing the number and frequency of worship services and other Church events.
2. **Licensing and registration:** Orthodox parishes must undergo a complex process of registration and licensing to gain official recognition. This bureaucratically complex process can be used to control and limit the number of officially operating parishes.
3. **Censorship and self-censorship:** Government authorities can interfere with the content of sermons and educational programs, imposing censorship on any statements that may be perceived as politically sensitive or undermining the state's authority. This leads to self-censorship among Church leaders seeking to avoid conflicts with authorities.
4. **Persecution and pressure on believers:** In some cases, especially for unofficial or non-registered parishes, government bodies may take repressive measures against religious leaders and active parishioners. This can include arrests, criminal prosecution, surveillance, and intimidation, creating an atmosphere of fear among believers and limiting their activity.

These restrictions significantly impede the normal functioning of the Church. Restrictions on holding worship services, registration and licensing requirements, and the threat of censorship and repression create an atmosphere of instability and uncertainty. All these factors limit the Church's ability to support its believers, hinder spiritual development, and reduce the Church's visibility and accessibility in the eyes of Chinese people.

## Internal Challenges: Lack of Personnel and Fragmentation of Parishes

A major internal problem for the Orthodox Church in China is the acute shortage of clergy, catechists, and administrators. This directly affects the Church's ability to effectively serve its believers and grow.

1. **Lack of priests:** Only two Chinese priests serve on the Mainland, and some parishes, such as those in Xinjiang, have no clergy at all. This means many communities

- cannot hold regular worship services and other religious rites, negatively affecting the spiritual support of believers.
2. **Limited training opportunities:** Opportunities for training and preparing clergy in China are extremely limited. The political environment does not support the creation of seminaries and religious educational institutions, and sending students abroad for training is often fraught with difficulties, including visa restrictions and political suspicions about foreign religious ties.
  3. **Overburdened existing personnel:** The small number of clergy in current parishes is often overburdened, as they bear a huge load in serving large areas and numerous believers. This leads to a decline in the quality of pastoral care and spiritual support.

### Fragmentation of Parishes

There is a problem of structural fragmentation of parishes, making coordination and support at the Church level challenging.

1. **Lack of a unified organizational structure:** Parishes are not united into a single organized structure, so many operate independently, complicating coordination and collective decision-making. Each parish operates in isolation, leading to discrepancies in practice and understanding of Orthodoxy.
2. **Isolation due to geographical distances:** Parishes are located at significant distances from each other, making regular interaction and maintaining connections difficult. This is especially true for remote regions such as Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

### Impact on Church Life

Internal challenges, such as the lack of personnel and fragmentation of parishes, negatively impact the Church's ability to provide spiritual support to its believers. The shortage of clergy limits the holding of regular worship services and other Church events, weakening the faith and spiritual growth of believers. The fragmentation of parishes complicates the Church's management at the national level and hinders the development of a unified strategy to overcome external and internal problems.

For the Orthodox Church in China to effectively address these challenges, it is necessary to focus on developing personnel potential and strengthening the Church's internal structure. This includes approaches to training and educational programs for clergy, establishing closer ties between parishes, and developing strategies aimed at strengthening institutional resilience and effectiveness.

## Development Opportunities for Orthodoxy in China

### Growing Interest in Religious Life among Chinese People

There has been a growing interest in religious life in Chinese society recently, particularly among the youth. This phenomenon provides opportunities for the spread and establishment of Orthodoxy in China.

1. **Search for spiritual fulfillment and moral guidance:** Young people in China, like many others worldwide, face high levels of stress and pressure due to intense educational and professional competition. In this context, religion becomes an important source of moral and spiritual guidance. Orthodoxy, with its deep spiritual traditions and emphasis on personal and spiritual growth, can provide the sought-after comfort and support for youth in their search for life's meaning and moral values.
2. **Cultural enrichment and identity strengthening:** Youth also seek cultural enrichment and identity. By participating in religious life through Orthodoxy, young Chinese can feel connected to a rich spiritual heritage, thereby strengthening their cultural identity and enriching their personal experience.
3. **Social networks and the internet:** Modern youth actively use social networks and the internet to seek information and communication. These platforms can be used to promote Orthodoxy among the youth, providing access to religious texts, lectures, webinars, and online services. This creates an opportunity for the successful inculturation of Orthodoxy and attracting new believers.

### Support from the International Orthodox Community

The international Orthodox community plays an important role in supporting the development of Orthodoxy in China. This support manifests in various forms:

1. **Exchange of experience and resources:** The international Orthodox community can offer material and intellectual support to Chinese parishioners. This includes translating and publishing Orthodox literature in Chinese, sending teaching materials, and providing access to online resources. Expertise and experience from foreign Orthodox Churches can help Chinese Church leaders manage and develop parishes.
2. **Training and preparation of clergy:** Developing and supporting programs for training Chinese clergy abroad in Orthodox seminaries and theological institutes. Further development of such programs will help overcome the shortage of personnel and ensure the return of trained clergy to China to serve local parishes.
3. **Intercultural exchange and cooperation:** International Orthodox organizations can organize cultural exchanges, visits, and joint events involving believers from different countries. This promotes strengthening intercultural ties, mutual understanding, and broadening the horizons of Chinese believers.
4. **Moral and spiritual support:** The international community can provide moral support, expressing solidarity with Chinese Orthodox believers facing political and social challenges. This can include prayers, awareness campaigns, and advocacy for religious rights at international forums and through diplomatic channels.
5. **Financial support:** Financial aid in the form of grants and donations can be directed towards financing necessary initiatives to strengthen and expand the Orthodox presence in China.

## Conclusion

Coordinating efforts from the international Christian community to support the Orthodox Church in China is crucial. Efforts aimed at training, cultural exchange, moral and financial support will help Orthodox believers in China overcome existing challenges and create conditions for the sustainable growth and strengthening of the Church in the country.