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The Chinese Baptists: an Example of a Twofold Minority in Serbia Today

A more massive migration of Chinese to Serbia can be traced back to the 1990s. The Chinese in Serbia represent the first generation of migrants who came out of economic reasons. This work deals with the role of their religious identity in the gathering of those members of the group who practice Baptist Christianity. Baptist Christians are a religious minority both in China and Serbia. Therefore, the members of this group represent a double minority: both in the reception country (religious and national) and in their own country, compared to the religious orientation of the majority of their fellow countrymen. Apart from this, their church services are marked by certain characteristics by which they can be distinguished from other Baptist groups. The role of the religious factor in the community's life is being viewed here, as well as the affirmation and making connections between the members.

Key words:

Chinese in Serbia,
Baptists, migrants,
minorities

Chinese in Serbia represent the first generation of migrants who came out of economic reasons. However, few works were dedicated to the research of the Chinese population in Serbia. The reasons for this are the tightness of this community and the linguistic barrier. This work was completed thanks to the compliance and good will of the Chinese Baptist Church members and it is based on my own field research which I was conducting by doing interviews and observing the church services in the Chinese Baptist Church in Belgrade suburb Ledine on Surčin Road during February and March 2011.¹ I thank all members of this community for their cooperation during this research, especially Mr. Čan Išan and Č Če. Many thanks to Mr. Pastor of the first Belgrade Baptist Church Dane Vidović I learnt of the Chinese Baptist Church from him and he also helped me to get in contact with its members who also gave me some useful suggestions while I was writing this work. Thanks to

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his recommendation I first interviewed Mr. Čan Išan and Č Če, the members of the community, and then with their help two more female persons and one male person who wished to stay anonymous. The interviews were in Serbian and English and sometimes with difficulties, but with lots of good will.

The members of the Chinese Baptist Church in Serbia are a religious minority both in their homeland, compared to the majority of their fellow countrymen, and in the reception country, because the Baptists in Serbia are a small religious communion. Therefore, the population included in this research represents a double minority both in the reception country (religious and ethnic) and in their homeland compared to the religious orientation of the majority of their countrymen.

Nowadays, Serbs learn about Chinese people mainly on the level of media information. Their knowledge is also based on contacts with members of the Chinese community in Serbia and it is manifested on the level of ethnic hetero-stereotypes (Blagojević 2009, 60). I tried to point to the function of a religious factor in the gathering of the migrants of the first generation whose ancestry, culture and language are very different from those of the reception country.

Religion in China

The oldest archeological and written sources of the religion in China refer to the 2nd millennium BC, i.e. to the period of the Shang (Yin) Dynasty. Over 100,000 bones from this period were discovered with signs of performed divinations. Traces of totem beliefs were found on them too (Vlahović 1973, 73–74). There are four characteristic religions (philosophical systems) in China: folk Chinese religion, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Krim 1990, 713). The cult of the ancestors is the main part of Chinese religious beliefs and rites (Krim 1990, 375). Confucianism is a system of philosophical, ethical and religious thought which occurred in China on the grounds of Confucius's teachings and of his disciples (Krim 1990, 381). Taoism is a collection of organized religious movements which worship Tao ('the path') and its emanations and they deal with the magic, physical, alchemical and meditative practice with the goal to achieve immortality (Krim 1990, 713). Unlike Confucianism and Taoism which occurred and developed on the Chinese ground, Buddhism came from a different soil but became equal in 5th century already. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism found their place in the masses. The Chinese equally held rites of all three systems choosing the cults which served them best given the circumstances (Vlahović 1973, 77). The Chinese folk religion is an amalgam which consists of different elements (worshipping ancestors, the fertility cults, believing in ghosts, fortune telling etc.) which merged with the Buddhist notions of Karma and Purgatory and Taoist divination and the methods of ritual restoration (Krim 1990, 375).

Christianity in China isn't as ancient as Taoism, Buddhism and the ethical and philosophical system of Confucianism. However, it has existed in China from 7th century and it has left a notable trace in the Chinese society in the past two hundred years (Tkač 2008). Protestantism appeared in China at the beginning of 19th

century. In the mid 19th century there were already thirty different Protestant communities, among which there were Baptists as well (Spence 1991, 206). During the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 the Han Chinese fought against all Europeans, Japanese and other foreigners with the one single aim to banish them from China. All Christians were targets of the rebels who attacked foreign embassies, demolished churches built by the Europeans and killed hundreds of foreigners. The Christian Chinese were left with two choices: to recant their faith in Christ or to die (Benton 1971, 587). The repressive attitude towards Christianity can be traced back during the whole 20th century, and especially from 1949 with the coming of the Communist Party to power and then also in the period of the *Cultural Revolution* (1967–1978). Foreign Christian missionaries were treated as spies who serve Imperialism due to certain political factors. However, despite all problems, there are Christian Protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox people in China nowadays. They are minor religious communities whose number is increasing (Benton 1991: 570; Tkač 2008).

The Chinese in Serbia

A more massive migration of Chinese to Serbia can be traced back to the 1990s. So far there is no official data on the number of Chinese in Serbia. According to the census from 2002, 384 Chinese people inhabit Serbia and 223 of them live in Belgrade (Popis 2003, 23). There are some very loose calculations in the media concerning the number of the Chinese in Serbia which reached as many as 100 000! In the beginning Serbia was just a transitory place for the Chinese who wanted to go to some European and other countries (Blagojević 2009, 48). Despite their large number in Serbia the Chinese do not have an official status of a national minority. They represent a certain kind of a hidden national minority (Sikimić 2004, 7; Promicer 2004, 13).

The largest number of Chinese people lives in New Belgrade near the shopping mall in Blok 70. There are some detached shops in other parts of Belgrade owned by the Chinese. The Chinese in Serbia mostly deal with trade, catering, alternative medicine and agronomy. The media picture of the Chinese community in Serbia represents something that can be brought under the notion of *urban legends*. These include various stories about their number, nutrition, immortality, fictitious marriages and the like.

One of the themes in the newspapers is the so-called ‘serbianisation’ of the Chinese. It is about Chinese people giving their children born in Belgrade some common Serbian names (Miloš, Dragan, Marko, Jelena, Nikola and the like). Chinese children who attend Serbian schools have difficulties in learning Serbian language and the curriculum. Some people think that the members of the Chinese community give their children Serbian names and want their children to be looked after by the local community because they strive to integrate into Serbian society (Đorđević 2006, 119). During the research I learnt from my examinees that the Chinese everywhere in diasporas give their children both *public names* and Chinese names for *private use*. During my research I learnt that Baptist Chinese keep their

Chinese names at baptism. Serbian names are just nicknames which they use to establish easier communication with Serbs. Thus Č Će has a Serbian nickname Čičak, Čan Išan is Josif, Sjen is Nikola and the like. I would like to stress that Baptists do not usually change their names at baptism. Pastor Dane Vidović claims that baptism for Baptists means a spiritual act which clearly accounts for what has happened in a man's heart between him and God. This is a materialisation of an invisible event of a spiritual change, i.e. formalization of spiritual revival.

Most Chinese send their children to China to school them in Chinese language. Baptist Church whose members are solely Chinese hold services in Chinese language and sing traditional Chinese melodies and by this they actually oppose to the integration into Serbian community.

The Christian Baptist Church in Serbia

The Baptist Christian Church is a branch of Protestantism. Protestantism, together with the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, is one of the three fundamental branches of Christianity. The Protestant Churches have roots in the reformation of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century Europe. Protestantism comprises a wide range of theological and social perspectives and types of organization. In 1517 Martin Luther (1483–1546) formulated 95 theses against the Roman Catholic theology and practice of indulgences. At the Council in Augsburg in 1530 he presented the basic doctrines of the Reformation: 1) the authority of the Bible (*sola scriptura*), 2) the apology by faith (*sola fidei*), 3) God's beatific grace (*sola gratia*). The path was opened to the great reformation movement throughout Europe. The Reformation went in three directions: 1) Lutheranism (in Germany, Scandinavia and Central Europe), 2) Calvinism (in Switzerland, France, Holland and Scotland), 3) Anglicanism (in England) (Krim 1992, 463).

The Reformation encouraged the forming of independent nonconformist groups since there were no unique structures either on the level of the faith or on the plan of the church organisation. These groups later separated from the newly established Protestant churches. In the following decades and centuries the Puritan movement was formed, as well as the Congregational movement (in England), the Anabaptists and Baptists (in Switzerland, Germany, Moravia, England), the Awakening movement, the Methodists and Presbyterians (in England and America), the disciples or the Religious Society of Friends Quakers, the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements (Leonar 2002, 257).

The basic ideas of the Baptist movement are the authority of the Bible and the right to personal interpretation, the baptism of adults only, the separateness of the church from the government, ecclesiastic membership and the importance of the local gatherings in faith and customs. At baptism the Baptists apply the New Testament's principle of immersing into water. This religious movement began in England. John Smith is considered to be its founder (John Smith, 1554–1612). In 1609 the Baptist Church for the first time officially appeared under this name in Amsterdam (Đorđević 2008, 47). Baptists are one of the most numerous Protestant and free

ecclesiastical communities. They are engaged in missionary and humanitarian work all over the world. According to statistics there are over 90 million Baptists on all continents. The Baptist Church is developed the most in the USA (Barišić 2007, 131).

Many Baptists are connected with some important political events in the 17th century. They were the pioneers of the fight for the freedom of conscience and religious freedom. In this period many of them went to America where they founded settlements and churches. The Seventh Day Baptists separated then as another branch of the Baptist community. For the basis of their learning they took the fourth God's commandment, and they worship not on the first, but on the seventh day of the week, i.e. on Saturday (Boisset 1985, 147).

Baptists have lived in Serbia, especially in Vojvodina, since the 19th century. Owing to the missionaries from Germany and Hungary one of the first baptisms recorded in the history of the Novi Sad Baptist Church was performed in 1875 on the Danube. The faithful have been multinational from the beginning. In the Kingdom of SCS Baptists had 810 baptised members (Bjelajac 2002, 164). The Association of Baptists in Yugoslavia was formed in 1922 in Bački Petrovac. In 1931 at the same place the Slovak Association of Baptists and the Alliance of Slovak Baptist Youth in Yugoslavia were formed. The Association of Yugoslavian Baptists split into national associations after the falling apart of SFRY. The Association of Baptist Churches in Serbia was formed in 1992. This association is a member of the European Baptist Federation and the World Baptist Alliance (Barišić 2007, 131). Today there are several Baptist communities in Serbia, especially in Vojvodina, but also in Belgrade, Nis, Vrnjačka Banja etc. One of the elementary characteristics of the Baptist Church is that the communities of the faithful are locally independently organized. There is a mutual cooperation, but it is not obligatory (Barišić 2007, 132). As for the ethnic belonging today in Serbia Slovaks make the largest group of Baptists. However, in the First Baptist Church in Belgrade the ethnic structure is various, they are mostly Serbs, then Slovaks, Czechs, Croats etc. (Barišić 2007, 133).

The Chinese Baptist Church in Serbia

Baptists started their work with the Chinese population in Serbia about ten years ago through the missionaries from America and South Korea. The contact of the Baptist Chinese mission was accomplished through the Baptist World Alliance, BWA. Before they started to gather at worship services they had contacted the Serbian Baptist Alliance which helped them to legalize their work. The Chinese pastor James Chen is their first missionary. He is a member of the organization called the Global Improvement of Life Global Life Enrichment Center (www.glecenter.org). It is a Chinese missionary, evangelical organization which acts among the Chinese all around the world.

Now they have two churches, one in Pančevo and one in New Belgrade and also a community in Leskovac. The locations for the gathering of the communities

to worship were chosen in those parts where most Chinese live and work. Therefore, in Pančevo the church is near the nylon market (flea market). In New Belgrade they gather in a rented house on Surčin Road (suburb Ledine) known by the local name of *the Chinese church* (Moravek 2008, 131).

The community in Ledine has about forty older and twenty young people. As for the sex structure I could not get any precise information on the exact number of either female or male members. I was only told that the numbers are approximately the same. Some of the church members are relatives, whole families come, too. However, this is not a rule since there are single members who come alone. In Pančevo it is a smaller community of about forty regular members. In Leskovac there are twenty regular members. This community has not been registered as a church yet and it is noted as a group of believers. All three communities communicate mutually. The members of Pančevo's and Ledine's church visit each other at Christmas. Apart from believers, sometimes friendly nonbelievers also attend the services.

I could not get the answer to the question about the initial religious orientation of the members of the Chinese Baptist community in Belgrade, i.e. before they received Baptist Christianity. Apart from this, so far nobody has done a research on the denominations of the Chinese non-Baptists in Belgrade. This is an important issue which deserves a special research.

In Ledine they gather to worship three times a week (on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday). The interior of the room where the services are held is clean and scarcely furnished, no decorations. During services believers sit on chairs. The services start after work, mostly at six or seven o'clock in the evening. The main gathering of the believers is on Sunday evenings. Then they also have religious education for children. On Tuesdays fewer believers come because it is work day.

The service starts with greetings followed by the initiatory prayer. All present sing worshipping God in this way. The singing is usually led by one person who also plays an instrument at the same time. In this community they play the synthesizer and the guitar. Sometimes the singing is led by a smaller group of believers or even a choir. They sing songs from a songbook in Chinese. Melodies are traditionally Chinese or American. The Bible in Chinese is the basis of learning. Further on there are prayers for the individual needs of believers, and then a sermon inspired by the Bible. The sermons are held by different members of the community, mostly those who have been in it for a long time and who are recognized as true believers by others. Thursday evenings are for young people. After the communal prayer the young stay to spend some time with each other and play different agile games (for example the Thailand game "The wind is blowing").

As for the professional structure, most members of this Baptist community are in trade. They mostly work at the shopping mall in Blok 70 in New Belgrade. Those who can afford it give away a part of their monthly wages. They use these common savings to help those who get into financial crisis.

One of the examinees I interviewed, Josif (this name is used in the Serbian community), has lived in Serbia for ten years. He became a Baptist in China thanks to the testimony of faith which he had received from his grandmother.² His mother is also a Baptist, but his father is not. When asked which denomination his father belongs to, if any, he answered that his father *believes in money*. Sometimes this leads to delicate disagreements because his father disapproves of his dedication to Baptism. According to Josif most Chinese people in Serbia are dedicated only to work and making money.

A Religious Community as a Family on an Example of the Chinese Baptist Church

A question arises: why did one (smaller) part of the Chinese in Serbia choose to belong to the Baptist Church? If we take into consideration the assumption that the Chinese wish to integrate into Serbian community, one would expect that they would baptize in larger numbers in the major Orthodox Church. However, this does not happen because there is a strong language barrier. Orthodox priests in Serbia do not speak Chinese language. On the other hand, Chinese do not speak Serbian well. The examinees who I have interviewed attended the Serbian language course at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. However, despite that, our conversation was occasionally impeded. When asked why they did not learn Serbian better, they answered that the knowledge they had was quite enough for the job they did (trade). They rarely make closer, friendly contacts with Serbs. They communicate only with Serbian business partners and with landlords to whom they pay the rent. From all this we can conclude that the Chinese in Serbia are more interested in economic than in social and cultural integration.

The Chinese stick together and mostly they live in the neighborhood, though some of them live in Blok 70, too. Within the Baptist Chinese community its members gather not only on the religious but also on the national basis. They are a religious minority both in the society they live in and their homeland. The Chinese from the Christian Baptist community in Serbia keep in touch with each other, but also with other believers in Serbia, China, America, etc. According to pastor Dane Vidović, cooperation with the Chinese Baptist Church happens mostly in the sphere of the church services. The examples of this are the visits of the believers of the Chinese church to the Serbian Baptist Church and vice versa (especially during certain solemn church services). Sometimes they worship together, at Christmas for

² According to the pastor of the first Belgrade Baptist church Dane Vidović, the phrase *testimony of faith* is a discourse on faith between two (or more) people, believers and nonbelievers in which the believers talk about their own spiritual experience, the experience of their personal relationship with God through reading and comprehending the Holy Bible, prayer (especially the granting of prayers), repentance and converting (i.e. spiritual and moral change), and about their own world view after this spiritual rebirth. The goal of the testimony of faith is to present one's own spiritual experience with God.

example. They help each other in the material sense (help in some project). During these various forms of cooperation sometimes personal friendships and connections occur, which in turn create new forms of cooperation. Thus, for example, a Serbian woman – a member of Belgrade Baptist Church found a job in a Chinese shopping mall through a businessman from the Chinese Baptist Church. Therefore, the forms of cooperation differ from the religious to the business and personal ones.

It needs to be pointed out that in the Baptist doctrine there is no tendency towards making national churches. However, when viewed from the outside, the Chinese community in Belgrade may seem as a national church because there are great linguistic and cultural differences compared to the vicinity.

The Christian Chinese Baptist community in Serbia for its members means a kind of enlarged family. They call each other *brother* and *sister*. This psychological moment of belonging, the sense of safety, is a relevant factor which influences people to join this community. Apart from this, there is economic help for the poor believers. This community gives its members support and safety.

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