

Different Ways to Become a Soviet Sinologist: A Note on personal choices

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Abstract

It is and always was an uneasy path for a Western scholar to become a sinologist. In the current research there were included interviews of 33 Russian sinologists. To analyze the value of different components in the process to become a sinologist there were chosen few major factors in the family and social background, early years and education. In half of the cases decision to go for Chinese studies was taken under the temporary circumstances during admission or studies at universities, and wasn't a result of strong personal interest. This situation was tightly connected with the politics in the USSR, when in late 1940-s and early 1950-s it was decided to prepare big number of sinologists to help Chinese modernization.

Keywords: Russian Sinology, oral history, People's Republic of China, USSR

It is and always was an uneasy path for a Western scholar to become a sinologist. Big difference between spoken and written languages, elaborated and complicated traditions and society, technology and religion in China – all of it make Chinese studies a difficult task even now, at the age of abundant information and widespread access to Internet. So obviously it was by times harder in the middle of the XX century, when most of the interviewed in current project started their studies.

We also shall not forget that all the interviewed managed to build a successful career, as in the project participated only those scholars, whose achievements significantly changed the science in Russia. As success in sinology generally finely correlates with application of constant efforts for many years, it is quite logical to expect strong interest in China as a necessary motivation for all interviewed.

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Materials and Methods

In the current research there were included interviews of 33 Russian sinologists¹; we can very well call all of them former Soviet sinologists, as all of them were born and studied at the time of the Soviet Union. To analyze the value of different components in the process to become a sinologist there were chosen few major factors in the family and social background, early years and education. Here is a brief description of the reasons for every title. **Year of birth** gave us necessary information about general political and economic situation in the USSR; **Place of birth and early years** opened up more precise information of the surroundings of the future scholar, and whether there were early visits to China or nearby areas; **Parents and/or inner circle** gave information, where possible, about social background and possible ties to China; **Early memories about China** is a highly emotional part about first deep impression, connected to China, and where possible, there were given a translation of it²; Higher education describes successful or unsuccessful attempts to enter institute or university and the course of the education, where it is important for the research; last field, Major factor(s) concludes, which of the components was essential for the decision to become a sinologist.

Family background and/or early years in China

One of the interviewed was born in 1918; 5 – in 1920s; 15 in 1930s; 8 – in 1940s and 4 – in 1950s; so they represent at least several generations with very different circumstances during the childhood and teenage. Most of them spent their early years in big cities: 18 in Moscow; 3 in Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg; 3 in Vladivostok; by 1 from Baku, Kiev, Lvov (small number of sinologists from St. Petersburg and Vladivostok may be explained by the fact that the “Sinology: Oral History” project was located in Moscow). High number of successful sinologists from big cities is not a wonder: obviously there are always more educational chances for those who live there.

Education

Most of the interviewed remember their early impressions about China: many are connected with the World War II, Communist Party in China and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; others – with Chinese goods and souvenirs, sometimes with books and movies about China.

¹ Several interviews from the international project “Sinology: Oral History” in Russia there were included into this study, as there were not enough of information for the research.

List of the interviews can be found at <http://politics.ntu.edu.tw/RAEC/act02.php>.

² All translations were done by the author of the article.

But there is also rather surprising information: in half of the cases (17) decision to study China was made under the temporary circumstances, and not because of constant interest to this country. In most of cases these circumstances were connected with admission or education in universities and therefore with the political relationships between the USSR and China. In late 1940-s and 1950s, when the USSR started to send specialists to China, it was decided to increase the number of students in Chinese groups in many universities. It resulted in favorable situation to attend studies: if a student didn't manage to enter the faculty he desired, still he had good chances to go for Chinese specialization. Generally further careers were also strongly effected by political situation, but it will be a topic for another research.

From those of interviewed, whose choice to study China was connected with strong personal interest, there is only a limited number of cases, where it was due to family reasons (Chinese parents (1), early years in China (1), marriage to a Chinese (1)). In many situations interest to China started because of the news about the Communist Party in China, heard from the radio, newspapers or talks of elders.

Conclusion

From 33 interviewed Russian sinologists in half of the cases decision to go for Chinese studies was taken under the temporary circumstances during admission or studies at universities, and wasn't a result of strong personal interest. This situation was tightly connected with the politics in the USSR, when in late 1940-s and early 1950-s it was decided to prepare big number of sinologists to help Chinese modernization.

But even though the choice was coincidental, all of them applied constant efforts and managed to become significant specialists in Chinese studies.

	Year of birth	Place of birth and early years	Parents and/or inner circle	Early memories about China	Higher education	Major factor(s)
Alexey Bokschanin	1935	Moscow, Ashgabat and Sverdlovsk (evacuation during WWII)	Father was a professor of Moscow State University, faculty of history, department of the ancient world. Godfather fought in Manchuria	"I knew about China and where it was situated from the early childhood. But I didn't have any special attention to it"	Oriental department, faculty of history, Moscow State University (MSU).	Circumstances during admission to the university.
Nina Borevskaya	1940	Moscow	Father was an economist, mother was a French teacher	"After school I've decided to be a translator, and my father's friend advised me to study Oriental literature"	Chinese philology, Institute of Oriental languages, MSU Instead of her wish to study Indian literature, she was accepted to Chinese department. Only because wonderful teachers and success in studies appeared interest in China and its culture.	Circumstances during admission to the university.
Yury Chudodeev	1931	Moscow, Tomsk (evacuation)	Father was an engineer.	"In middle school I knew that China is a big county near the USSR, and there is struggle between the Communist Party of China and the Kuomintang (the Chinese National People's Party)".	Oriental department, faculty of history, Moscow State University (MSU). Exam results were not enough to enter, but that year due to political reasons was increased Chinese group, so one could enter it with lower results.	Circumstances during admission to the university.

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Lev Deliusin	1923	Moscow, Chelyabinsk (evacuation), participated in WWII.	Father was a communist party member, in 1930s he was expected to go to China, and many times discussed it with the family.	<p>“Most likely the first time I’ve heard about China at school, during lessons of geography”.</p> <p>“In 1930s I’ve read ‘bio-interview’ ‘Deng Shi-hua’ by Sergey Tretyakov. Also very attractive for me was constantly growing importance of the Communist Party in China.”</p>	After WWII – Moscow Institute of Oriental studies; instead of Indian department the director of institute advised to enter Chinese department.	Circumstances during admission to the university.
Boris Doronin	1928	Karachev (near Bryansk), Leningrad, Kirov’s region (evacuation).	-	<p>“I’ve read a poem about Chinese Red army in a local library’s poetry contest.”</p>	Faculty of Oriental Studies, LSU	Circumstances during admission to the university.
Yury Garushyanz	1930	Baku	Father was a Communist Party propagandist.	<p>“I’ve learnt about China from the Ancient world’s history textbook at school.”</p> <p>During school years: “Chen Yun’s book about The Long March of the Chinese Red Army... I knew by heart, although didn’t understand where and what had happened in it”</p>	After unsuccessful attempt to enter faculty of philosophy, MSU, entered Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies.	Circumstances during admission to the university.

Vilya Gelbras	1930	Moscow	Father and mother worked in the Communist University of the Orient; decision to become an orientalist was inspired by the father, who died during WWII.	-	First they refused to take him to the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies; later it was decided to have a big group of Chinese studies (150 students)	Circumstances during admission to the university.
Lidia Golovatcheva	1937	Tambov, Sevastopol (from 1945)	Father was an architect. Husband was from China, together they lived in China for many years.	“At the age of 5 I’ve read an old children’s book, “Small Lang from China” by Jack Altausen. “During WWII we looked for Nanjing and Chongqing on the map with my grandmother.”	Leningrad Institute of Civil Engineering; 1970 – Faculty of philosophy, Leningrad State University (LSU).	Strong personal interest and connection via marriage with a Chinese citizen.
Svetlana Gorbunova	1949	Moscow	Father was interested in Japan and its culture; mother’s researches were connected with Iran. Aunt was a geologist, worked in China	“I liked very much Chinese fancy toys, especially velvet parrots, and my aunt’s stories about this wonderful country”	Indian studies, department of the ancient world, faculty of history, MSU.	Circumstances during further studies in the Institute of Far East, and shift to study contemporary China.

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Zoa Katkova	1932	Moscow	-	-	Friends advised to enter Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies. In 1954 this Institute was disbanded due to political decision making, and she changed to graduate from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.	Circumstances during admission to the university
Artem Kobzev	1953	Moscow	Father was a poet, mother was a French teacher. In 1963 father went to China for one month. Aunt's husband also worked in China.	"I remember some exotic Chinese things, like a robe with dragons, from my aunt's family. I've heard from my father, that Chinese is a beautiful language, and people in China are very nice."	Chinese group, faculty of philosophy, MSU. Chinese group was created after the border conflicts between the USSR and China.	Circumstances during admission to the university
Lyudmila Kondrashova	Second half of 1930s	Moscow	Father was a laborer.	"My interest in China and Chinese studies was connected with the Chinese revolution in 1949".	Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies	Personal interest in China and international relations.
Pavel Kozhin	1934	Moscow, Harbin (1935-1937, mother's mission), Tashkent (evacuation).	Father and mother were Bolsheviks, Red Army commissars. Godfather, also a Red Army commissar, worked in China.	"My earliest memories are from Harbin's hospital. Interest in China appeared very early, and was constantly present in my life."	Unable to enter the Chinese department of MSU (due to medical reasons), in 1954 entered Faculty of history MSU	Personal interest in China

Stanislav Kuczera	1928	Lvov (Poland, USSR)	-	<p>“In primary school I already knew that there was a big country China, and where it was situated”. At the time of his studies at the University of Warsaw, there were only two orientalist (after WWII), and one of them was Witold Jabłoński, who was very fond of China and Chinese culture.</p>	Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw	Circumstances during education at the university
Evgeny Kychanov	1932	Sarapul (Udmurt Republic)	Parents remembered many of the Chinese workers at the construction of the Sarapul’s bridge during WWI.	<p>“I’ve read books by Pearl Buck, and translations of Chinese novels made by Alekseev. I thought that China was a very poor country”</p>	Department of Chinese history, Faculty of Oriental Studies, LSU. Major reason was that the students of the Faculty of Oriental Studies were granted a right to live in a hostel. After graduation, there was a chance to go for a PhD, though not for Chinese, but Tangut studies.	Circumstances during admission to the university
Zina Lapina	1934	Moscow	-	<p>“In early childhood I liked to sing a song, where instead of the right words I was singing “Blue smoke of China”</p>	Chinese department of the faculty of History, MSU; in 1956 many students were transferred to the Institute of Oriental languages.	Personal choice during admission to the university

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Alexander Larin	1932	Moscow, Ural region	Father was an agronomist, mother was an engineer, stepfather was a journalist, and advised to study China.	“I’ve never seen a Chinese character, and never have heard Chinese language before I started to study at the university.”	Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies	Personal choice because of an advice from stepfather.
Victor Larin	1952	Vladivostok	Father was a construction worker.	“I remember a black textbook with Chinese characters, which belonged to my brother’s friend.” “Chinese post-cards, which were sent to my cousin sister by her Chinese friends.”	Friend advised to enter to Japanese philology department at the Far Eastern University in Vladivostok, but was unable to enter it. He became an extern at the Chinese studies department of the same university.	Circumstances during admission to the university
Vladimir Malyavin	1950	Moscow	Parents were chemists, and brought interest to science.	-	Unable to enter Japanese philology (few vacations were already distributed), he entered the department of Chinese history, the Institute of Oriental languages.	Circumstances during admission to the university Personal choice to build a career as an orientalist.
Georgy Melikhov	1930	Harbin, Changchun	Grandparents came to work at the Chinese Eastern Railway; father was an engineer.	“I was probably born with the word ‘China’ on my lips. China was always near”	Few years of studies in Harbin Polytechnic Institute; in 1961 entered the Institute of Oriental languages in Moscow	Early years in Harbin, personal interest in Chinese language.

Vladimir Myasnikov	1931	Moscow	Father was a lawyer, mother was a gynecologist.	<p>“There were a lot of Chinese in the center of Moscow during my early years: Chinese laundry, Chinese children in the neighborhood.”</p> <p>“I was impressed by the foundation of the People’s republic of China in 1949”</p> <p>“I became interested in China at 7th class of school. China seemed to be a far poor country. I have bought a textbook of Chinese language and started studying it.”</p>	Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies. There already studied brother and cousin brother.	Personal choice connected with family ‘tradition’ to study Orient.
Boris Nadtochenko	1940-s	Kiev, Tashkent (university)	-	<p>“The event, which impressed me, was The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.”</p>	Entered department of Chinese and Uyghur philology, Tashkent State University; later managed to transfer to the Moscow Institute of Oriental languages.	Strong personal decision in spite of all difficulties.
Andrey Ostrovsky	1949	Moscow	Family of a geologist.		Chinese department of the Moscow Institute of Oriental studies. Chinese specialization was one of the priorities, though it wasn’t completely his choice.	Circumstances during admission to the university. Personal choice to build a career as an orientalist.
Leonid Perelomov	1928	Vladivostok, Moscow, Ufa, Bashkiria	Father was Chinese, worked in The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs in the USSR.		Entered Military Institute of Foreign Languages, soon moved to the Moscow Institute of Oriental languages,	Personal choice, in many ways chosen because of the Chinese nationality of the father.

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Aleksandr Pisarev	1950	Vladivostok, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Kalinin, Rzhnev, Moscow	Father was on military service.	“I saw a movie about a small boy Li, who was growing rice from a very young age. That story alone with the pictures of rural China impressed me and made me interested in this country.”	Chinese history, Chinese department, Institute of Oriental languages.	Personal choice, an attempt to understand Orient.
Vladimir Portyakov	1947	Novgorod region	Father worked as a head of a cultural center, mother was a geography teacher.	-	Department of regional geography, faculty of Geography, MSU.	Circumstances during education at the university
Svetlana Serova	1933	Moscow, Tashkent.	Father was a teacher of Chinese culture.	“As a baby, I was crawling between my father’s textbooks and vocabularies with Chinese characters, and got a high interest for them”	Institute of Oriental studies.	Personal choice, connected with profession of the father.
Elvira Sinetskaya	1939	Moscow, China (with father)	Father was an official, for several years and worked in China.	“First deep impression I received in China, when I was travelling and saw the same mountains covered with the mist, exactly like on those Chinese paintings that I’d seen before.”	Language courses in Beijing University; faculty of economics, People’s University in Beijing; department of regional economics, faculty of economics, MSU.	Personal choice, connected with a long stay in China with father.
Sergey Tikhvinsky	1918	Petrograd	Father was a doctor.	“Our neighbor during summer vacations was academician V.Alekseev, and I remember how my father discussed about China with him.”	Chinese department, faculty of philology, Leningrad State University	Personal choice.

Sergey Toroptsev	1940	Leningrad, Engels (evacuation), China: Beijing, Stan (father's work in 1954-56)	Father was an engineer; uncle was a professor of the Leningrad State University	<p>"I remember beggars in Xi'an. My schoolmate in the USSR embassy school in Beijing was a son of a white immigrant, and he told me many things about politics in the USSR, mass arrests etc."</p> <p>"Lectures of Egyptian and Far Eastern art in MSU were very late in the evening, and Chinese landscapes appeared like they were from dreams."</p>	Unable to enter faculty of philology or journalism, MSU, he entered department of Chinese philology, the Institute of Oriental languages.	Circumstances during admission to the university
Nadezhda A. Vinogradova	1923	Tarusa (140 km from Moscow)	Father was a writer; mother was translator of French literature.	<p>"In 1956, when my mother died, I entered Chinese boarding school."</p>	Faculty of Arts, MSU	Personal choice during education at the university
Viktor Usov	1943	Moscow	Father was a military officer; mother worked in a publishing house.	<p>"First wonderful stories about the Chinese language I heard from my father's colleague, Lev Menshikov. Within and around Leningrad there are many wonderful places, connected with China, its culture and arts, and many of those I loved since my childhood"</p>	Unable to enter from the first time, managed to enter Chinese history, Chinese department, Institute of Oriental languages after one year.	Personal choice, connected with circumstances as a teenager.
Olga Zavyalova	1947	Leningrad.	Father and mother were orientalists, father studied Kurds, and mother – Iranian languages.		Department of Chinese philology, Faculty of Oriental Studies, LSU.	Personal choice.