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## CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE IN ACTIVITIES OF RUSSIAN SINOLOGUE N.YA. BICHURIN

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### *Abstract*

The paper studies the role of the Russian Sinologue and Nikita Yakovlevich Bichurin in acquaintance of European with Chinese culture. Rapid and in-depth study of Chinese and Manchurian languages by Bichurin during his first months in Beijing as the Chief of the 9<sup>th</sup> Russian Spiritual Mission, as well as continuous collection of unique documents and materials on history, economics, ethnography, philosophy, religion, and other aspects of Chinese life that has been under the rule of the Qing dynasty since 1644, was important in forming a reliable view of Asian countries. Bichurin was not satisfied with the Qing semiofficial information about Chinese people. His works and judgements were based directly on Chinese chronicles, legislative documents, statistical and reporting materials related to economic, educational and cultural life of the country. Objectively accurate description of events, documentary confirmation of judgements and conclusions about the state of Chinese society and neighboring countries earned deep respect and trust of the readers in Russia and abroad. Already in the second half of the 1820s the name Bichurin became known in Europe, soon after he was recognized as an outstanding sinologist of the world. In December 1828 Bichurin was elected as the corresponding members of the Russian Academy of Sciences in literature and antiquities of the East. The fact that from November 1826 until his death Bichurin was in the service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (in the Asian Department) contributed to widespread appreciation of Bichurin's research in his homeland and in Europe.

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**Keywords:** Bichurin, sinology, Manchurian, Chinese, Sino-Russian communications.



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## **1. Introduction**

Within modern conditions of historical experience the relevance of the problem under study is caused by the importance of using the intellectual elite in establishing the dialogue, mutual understanding and cooperation between the peoples of Russia and abroad, increasing efficiency and social importance of scientific research of humanities scholars. In science, great value is given to the methodological example of academician N.Ya. Bichurin, who developed unique approaches to identification, translation into Russian, analysis and generalization of a huge array of primary sources and objective description of events and phenomena. The omnisciently diverse range of research objects covered by Bichurin (as cited in Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1828a) presents interest to specialists of many profiles: historiography, philosophy, economics, geography, ethnography, cultural studies, etc.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The paper defines the scientific problem related to filling the gap in the study of the role of scientists of Russia, in particular, orientalist and sinologist Bichurin, in establishing and, in the future, developing the intercultural communication in the world. The transcivilization study of multifaceted activities of Bichurin has special significance in popularizing his humanistic ideas on potential equivalence of peoples, need for their interaction, equal relations and cooperation in different spheres of life: trade, economy, science, learning and education, etc.

## **3. Research Questions**

The study covers the main directions of research activities of Bichurin (as cited in Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1828a) in the field of Chinese and Oriental Studies, his main scientific ideas and factors of raising the level of awareness of Western communities about culture, rich history and civilizational achievements of Asian peoples; Bichurin's vision of common features and characteristics in the development of the East and the West; level of perception by Western elites of intellectual products offered to the world by the sinologist Bichurin.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to define the role of the Russian science and one of its outstanding figures – academician Bichurin (1845) in building the first sociocultural links of a civilizational bridge, a dialogue in the activity of the countries of the East and the West.

Objectives:

- to study historiographic base and sociocultural prerequisites of profound analysis of historical destiny, culture and everyday life of the Chinese society by N.Ya. Bichurin;
- to determine innovative features in scientific research and conclusions of N.Ya. Bichurin on sinological and oriental studies;
- to identify the main reasons and factors of positive impact of research activity of N.Ya. Bichurin on certain scientists and scientific communities of western countries;

- to define the all-humanitarian and scientific value of activities of N.Ya. Bichurin for a comprehensive study of China, features of its development and common features with the countries of other civilization types.

## 5. Research Methods

The complexity of the problems of civilizational relations, the multifaceted nature of research activities of N.Ya. Bichurin make it necessary to study his work on the understanding of sociocultural phenomena, historical events in Eurasia from antiquity to his modern times. Life and scientific discoveries of Bichurin (as cited in Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1828a) are studied systemically taking into account his original cognitive approaches in science and the requirements of the social environment of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to objectively cover biographical facts, scientific approaches of N.Ya. Bichurin and his attitude to foreign scientists, this paper considers modern historiographic conclusions within Bichurin Studies (Grigoryev, 2017); utilizes historical and comparative, system and logical approaches in classification and generalization of the studied material.

## 6. Findings

One of the most ancient civilizations in the world is the Chinese civilization, which declared itself even during the transition of the mankind to a Bronze Age: for example, between III and II millennia BC the Erlitou culture was present near Luoyang. The interest of Western and Russian travelers, merchants and researchers in commercial potential and original culture of China was increasing from one century to another. The Russian, the native of the Chuvash region, the first of Chuvash people to become the member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the honorary foreign member of the Parisian Asian Society N.Ya. Bichurin (1777–1853) became the founder of system and scientific study of history and diverse factors of culture, economy, statehood of Celestial Empire. During his stay in China as the Chief of the 9<sup>th</sup> Russian Spiritual Mission in Beijing (1807–1821) he revealed, redeemed, collected hundreds of manuscripts, rare books, separate copies of cultural artifacts, which in transit to Russia made 6 tons in weight and later served as primary sources for writing about 200 scientific works and for other scientists also became a source base for numerous research works.

An important aspect of scientific and creative activity of N.Ya. Bichurin was the study and comparative analysis of cultural and historical parallels and civilizational features of Asia and Europe. This laid the foundation for overcoming future mistrust, alienation between the countries of the East and the West. In the first journal papers published on his return from China and the Valaam reference Nikita Bichurin stated that Chinese civilization had been created for 40 centuries and had much in common with the world culture and achievements of other civilized countries (Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1828b; Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1845). Continuing the raised topic Bichurin (2002) wrote in the 1840s: "... to the surprise of European politicians China has existed for more than 4,000 years as an empire, and while the most monuments of existence of many ancient-strong kingdoms have long been expelled from the face of the earth, since time immemorial to the present day this state has constantly held its original language and letters, ancient religion and customs, its regulations, which change in time in a small but unchanged way"

(para. 05). Accordingly, Nikita Bichurin focused the attention of his readers on positive and little-known aspects of Chinese culture, history and social life, which have not yet been the subject of research in enlightened Europe. The scientist appealed to Europeans to end the underestimation of the culture of the East and neglect of Russia's spiritual values.

Noting the 'perennial ties of eastern countries with western countries, Bichurin (2002) relied on his translations of Chinese historical chronicles revealing the awareness of Chinese elite of Rome and the Persian monarchy. He believed that the elements of culture of interrelated peoples, especially those living in the neighboring states, were mutually transmitted and therefore "with the description of one nation he replicates the concept on others with which he had connection" (Scholarly Notes, 1954). In the preface to his book *China's Civil and Moral Aspects* Bichurin (2002) notes:

*At present – [in conditions] of continuous innovations in the life of people both in Europe and in the west of Asia – there is a state in the east of Asia, which [...] constitutes a rare occult phenomenon in the political world. – This is China where we see the same that we have and at the same time we see that all this is not the same ... There is also writing, but they do not write in letters, but in conditional symbol [...], there are a lot of things that we have, but everything there is in a different form. [...] The Chinese have their words and sciences and think they are more enlightened than all peoples in the world. (para. 09)*

Based on objective-positive assessments of the place and role of China in the history of world civilizations, N.Ya. Bichurin considered it necessary to establish equal cooperation with the Celestial Empire. This opinion of the Russian orientalist ran counter to perceptions and appeals of many of his contemporaries in Russia and abroad. Thus, the Polish-Russian writer Senkowski (Baron Brambeus) believed that for the benefit of China it would be right to replace the domination of the Qing dynasty with English, and the Opium War that broke out in 1840 would take this stagnant country on the path of civilization (Senkowski, 1859). The Russian press of that time also proposed such a method of China's civilization as forced mixing, crossing of the natives of this Asian country with the conquerors from Europe and obtaining a new kind of creole (The Contemporary: Literary Journal, 1848).

The devoted work of N.Ya. Bichurin on the history and culture of China convinced him of the injustice of his predecessors' assessments towards Asian countries and peoples. In the methodology of biased xenophobe judgements Bichurin (2002) saw a passion for exotic, ulcerative examples of low level of culture, economic management and social relations in Asian societies. For example, he wrote with indignation about the vicious fictions of traveling scientists that in native China the tobacco is very strong because the local population waters tobacco seedlings with the "urine of dissolute women". The conclusions in Bichurin's studies and the definition of the circle of primary sources he selected for translation from Chinese relied on deep knowledge of everyday concerns and lives of ordinary Chinese, the centuries-old traditions of the Eastern peoples, and encyclopedic awareness of the content of the studied materials.

The object and subject of any of his studies Bichurin (2002) defined and disclosed through consistent and specific presentation of the history of appearance and development of studied phenomena

and events. At the same time, he did not reject the achievements of other scientists, including European scholars, who produced genuine scientific results in the study of Asian peoples; helped them gain new knowledge of the East through the transfer of Russian and Chinese publications to European countries and the Asian Society in Paris and by the compilation of scientific and constructive reviews of publications by foreign orientalists. Bichurin (2002) approved the principle of historicism in sinology, a specific-historical approach in the study of peoples and countries. He believed that patriotism and pride of the representatives of Asian peoples is based on knowledge of history and modern situation of their countries: “they know their country well in both ancient and present state and judge some things quite thoroughly [...] It is time for us to leave prejudice towards the education of Western Europe and the ignorance of Asians ...” (Bichurin, 1845, p. 101). European scholars followed Bichurin’s work quite closely and gradually became convinced of the validity of his conclusions, conceptual provisions and recommendations. It was no coincidence that the translations of his works, reviews and critics were rapidly spread abroad. Realizing the interest of foreign scholars in valuable information about Asian countries, in 1825 the St. Petersburg newspaper about unpublished manuscripts of N.Ya. Bichurin, who at that time was in the monastery confinement on the island of Valaam. In order to familiarize the scientific community with new information and sources in sinology in October 1837, in the bulletin of the Russian Academy of Sciences Nikita Bichurin published an abstract in French on his research on statistical description of China (Adoratsky, 2007). With the beginning of quite frequent publication of Bichurin’s manuscripts the interest in his works increased ever more. The list of works written by N.Ya. Bichurin and given by him to Kazan Ecclesiastical Academy includes translations of Bichurin’s books *Description of Tibet in its current state*, *Notes on Mongolia* illustrating the map of Mongolia and different national costumes by the French historian Fløri into French (Gorokhova, 2010).

Prompt translation of *The Description of Tibet* into French performed in an abbreviated version by the German orientalist Yu Klaprot indicates great popularity of the book in the West. Bichurin’s books *Notes on Mongolia* and *The Description of Beijing* with the plan of its capital shot in 1817 were translated not only into French, but also into German. The collection of materials compiled and translated by an academic monk, and extracted Chinese records entitled *The History of the First Four Hans from the House of Genghis* was widely used in research papers by Western scholars, including Baron d’Osson’s fundamental work *The History of the Mongols* dated 1834 and subsequent editions. To facilitate the perception of Chinese scientific sources and in order to help Western European researchers Nikita Bichurin in his book *China, its inhabitants, mores, customs, enlightenment* (1840) placed an annex with a list of transcription of Chinese sounds into French and English.

The originality and novelty of N.Ya. Bichurin’s scientific works attracted the attention of the academic circles of Western countries, so popular abstracts were written for many of his works. Detailed abstracts about the first series of his books (1828–1829) made by the famous French orientalists A. Rémusat, E. Burnouf, Lasteyrie were read in March, 1831 at the meeting of the Asian Society in Paris, where N.Ya. Bichurin received its membership as the recognized Russian orientalist and sinologue (Adoratsky, 2007). The journal of the Paris Asian Society published reviews of N.Ya. Bichurin’s works, which contributed to relatively rapid awareness of the scientific community of the West about modern scientific achievements and topical Bichurin’s works.

N.Ya. Bichurin rendered much practical assistance to Western European scholars in their scientific affairs. In 1833–1835 he gave Chinese lessons to the English researcher staying in St. Petersburg, the agent of the British bible society G. Borrow (and also practiced English with him). With the support of Nikita Bichurin and his friends (P.L. Schilling von Cannstatt and S.V. Lipovtsov) G. Borrow in St. Petersburg published *The Bible* in Manchurian (as cited in Skachkov, 1977). In the early 1840s, when the leadership of the Russian Academy of Sciences specifically invited Professor of Chinese M. Brosset from Paris to translate and compile a register of the Chinese Library of the Asian Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences and he failed to do the job (he admitted his incomplete knowledge of “Chinese puzzle”), Nikita Bichurin helped his French colleague and made cataloging of Chinese literature for him. Based on the catalogue of Nikita Bichurin and some other scientists, M. Brosset compiled a consolidated register, and for this he was awarded the Russian Order as a representative of France and became the member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (as cited in Bichurin & Hyacinth, 1845).

A famous German natural scientist, one of the founders of geographical science Alexander von Humboldt (younger brother of the distinguished philosopher, philologist and statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt) highly appreciated the scientific works of N.Ya. Bichurin. In Nikita Bichurin he saw “not only a scientist-sinologist, but also an inexhaustible treasure trove of geographical documents”; professionally defined the civilizational achievements of the Chinese and noted: “The people who had previously enjoyed the compass had invaluable advantages over the Greeks and Romans for their orographic descriptions” (Humboldt, 1962, p. 83). N.Ya. Bichurin maintained friendly relations with many other foreign scientists and travelers, contributed to their creative development by writing reviews and critics of their works thus promoting and developing mutual understanding between the intellectuals of different countries and nations.

## 7. Conclusion

Noting the important scientific and transcivilization value of N.Ya. Bichurin’s efforts, the French *New Travel Chronicles* journal enthusiastically argued: “It is impossible to understand how one person could write as many works as a whole scientific community would hardly have had time” (Denisov, 2007, p. 101). With his scientific works N.Ya. Bichurin laid a spiritual and communicative bridge between civilizations of the West and the East. By promoting new knowledge on the Asian countries and the people he enriched world oriental studies, provided western researchers with reliable sources about history, culture, civilization in the countries of the East and fostered encyclopedic education of European orientologists, including scientists of France – the world Cradle of Enlightenment.

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