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### Front cover:

**Plate 1.** Bridal *saukele* headdress. Velvet, silk, silver, carnelian, corals, glass, otter fur, felt, broadcloth, calico, silk thread, passementerie (galloon), pearls, gilding; rigid cylindrical part 34.0 cm in height, height on the back — 45.0 cm, upper circumference — 34.0 cm, lower circumference — 60.0 cm, length of mantle — 145.0 cm, length of straps — 55.0 cm, length of rows of beads — 56.0 cm, nape flap — 85.0 cm, length of beaded tassels — 67.0 cm. Turgay region, around 1850s. MAE RAS, call No. 439-21. Photo by S. Shapiro. Courtesy of the Museum.

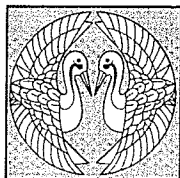
### Back cover:

**Plate 2.** *Menshen* (Door God). Paper, 118.0×56.0 cm. China, Lianghing, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call No. Д-2712-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.

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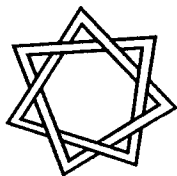
PETER THE GREAT MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY  
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



# Manuscripta Orientalia

*International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research*

Vol. 22 No. 1 June 2016



**Thesa**  
**St. Petersburg**

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## ACADEMICIAN V. M. ALEKSEEV'S METHODS OF STUDYING CHINESE POPULAR PRINTS: CASE OF COLLECTION FROM THE STATE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

**Abstract.** The paper discusses methods of ethnographic field work applied by future leading Russian sinologist V. M. Alekseev (1881—1951) to a large collection of Chinese popular prints *nianhua* (年畫) that he acquired during his graduate traineeship in China (1906—1909). Being a pioneer of field work in China Russian sinologist faced paucity of reference materials and referred to unique methods of accumulating materials on Chinese popular culture and their interpretation, Alekseev had a wide circle of informants, among whom his language mentors, more or less well educated *xiansheng* (先生), and literate artisans from printing shops offered the biggest help by writing down explanations and comments for about three hundred popular prints. A part of these notes has been preserved at the archive of the State Museum of the History of Religions. The paper presents several examples of *xianheng's* notes interpreting pictures with Door Gods *menshen* (門神) (there is total of 360 prints with Door Gods at SMHR collection) translated into English and offers detailed analysis of their importance for the current scholarship on late imperial Chinese popular visual culture.

**Key words:** V. M. Alekseev's collection, sinology, popular print *nianhua*, hand-written explanatory notes, Door God *menshen*, Chinese popular religion

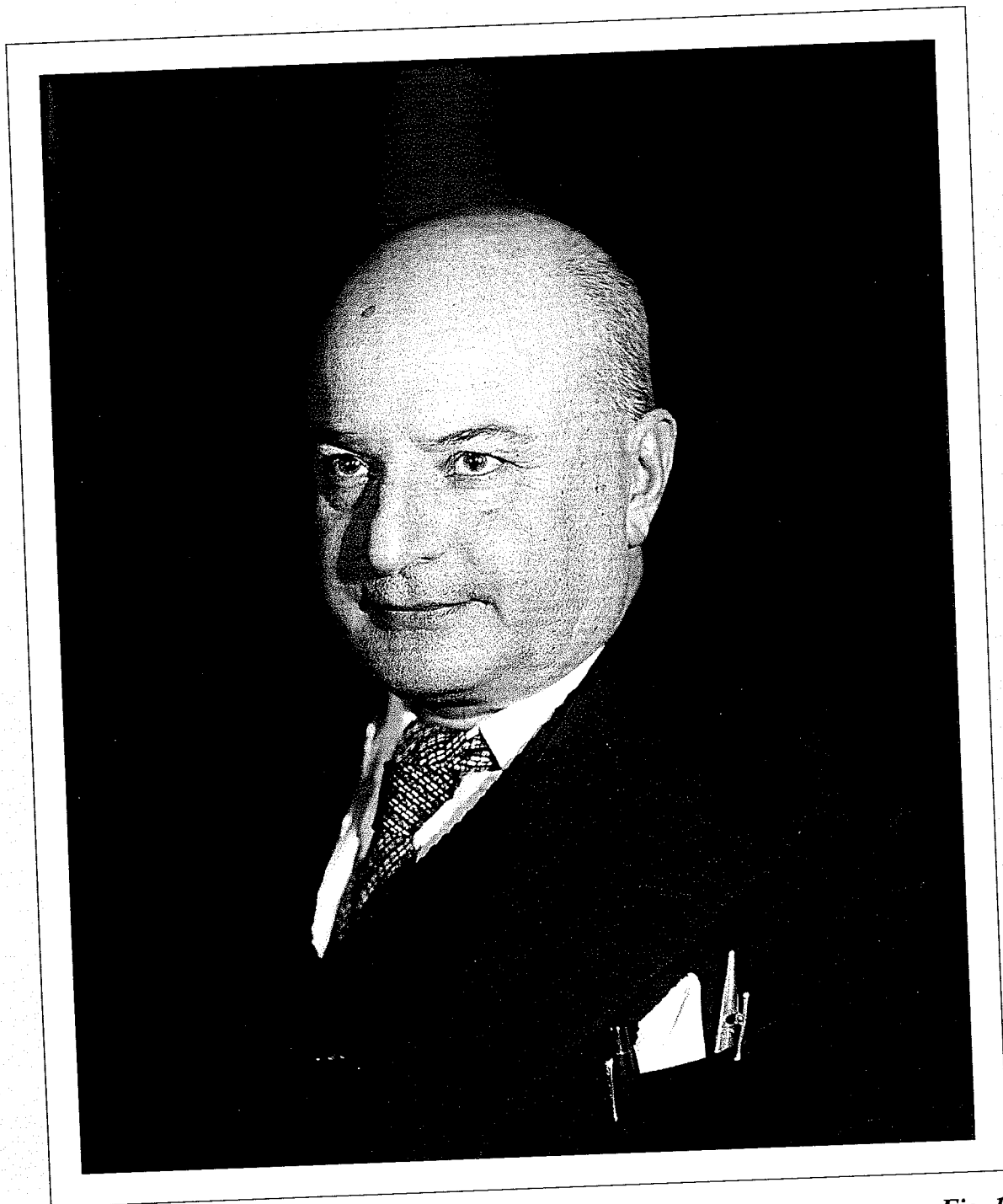
### V. M. Alekseev and His Collection

asilii Mihaïlovich Alekseev (*fig. 1*), a young and promising master's student of the Chinese-Manchurian department of St. Petersburg Imperial University, who was about to become an academician, with excitement and enthusiasm completed his travel diary with an entry dated 7 October, 12 of 1907:

Travel around China, contemplation of its original form, acquisition of the spoken language as means of more thorough acquaintance with its people, analytical research plus mastering intuition of an educated Chinese, study of literature, folklore, religion — all of it has unfolded a majestic picture of the Chinese culture in front of me. I want to be a sinologist, who is also a culture expert, basing on the principle of wide coverage of the best in the Chinese culture. With all of my future work I want to widen the channel that connects Chinese culture to our own, to show

and promote vast and beautiful world, which is unfamiliar to us. I will refute Kipling's pessimistic motto: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". On the contrary, I am convinced that the meeting of "the twain" will take place and will open a great perspective to the whole humankind. The reaction of the Western soul to the Eastern one and vice versa will create new life, new people, new culture [1].

After leaving Beijing on May, 30 V. M. Alekseev made his first trip around the North China as a member of an expedition organized by his teacher from an internship at the Collège de France, a brilliant French researcher of classical China Édouard Chavannes (1865—1918). Their route ran through Tianjin, Dezhou, Yangliuqing, Taianfu, Jinanfu, Qufu, Weixian, Zouxian, Jin-



*Fig. 1*

ing, Kaifeng, Zhuxianzhen, Zhengzhou, Sishuixian, Dengxianfu, Luoyang (Henanfu), Longmen, Lingbaoxian, Xi'an, Qianzhou, Taiyuan. Young scholar viewed his experience acquired during this expedition as a "school of significance hard to be overestimated" [2]. On the pages of his travel diary Alekseev, while writing down the results of the expedition, noted:

I thought over and partially prepared papers on the following subjects: "The phonetics of the Peking language and the theory of its tone system", "The Chinese phonetic anthology", "Chinese popular prints", "Chinese charms", "Anthology of ancient Chinese language", "Poetry of greeting in Chinese epistles", "Spells in Chinese religion", collection of popular prints, everyday epigraphy (shop signs, advertisements, inscriptions), rubbings from ancient artifacts, Chinese books.

But already in 1907 he thought that the main result of the expedition were "the handwritten notes in Russian and Chinese, that is to say — materials for articles and research" [3].

Interest in collecting traditional Chinese prints rare for the European Sinology of the day was dictated by Alekseev's intention to "seek for things little known in Europe" [4]. After an internship in Europe, where Alekseev attended, among others, lectures by É. Chavannes and studied in the National Library in Paris and the British Museum in London, he faced the task of

deciphering the inscriptions and images found on metal plates, which are in most cases made in the shape of a coin and express wishes for wealth, either directly from a person to person, or through intermediary of a spirit (a demon). This wish is often pointed at a spirit thus transformed into a spell [5].

Completing this task meant "obtaining direct, significant, truthful explanations" and confirming them "by parallel examples" [6]. It was the task of searching "for parallel examples", which led Alekseev right after his arrival to China to "supplement ongoing research with folk prints depicting the same motifs as those on metal plates". In Europe they were called "coin charms". Thus, this is how the basis of famous Alekseev's collection of popular prints was laid. New pieces were added during the trips in 1912 and 1926, later it was divided between the collections of leading museums in St. Petersburg: The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Oranienbaum State Museum Reserve, the State Hermitage Museum and the State Museum of the History of Religions. B. L. Riftin (1932—2012) estimated the number of popular prints brought by V. M. Alekseev to Russia to be around four thousand pieces [7].

Alekseev began collecting popular prints *nianhua* in 1906. The first batch of approximately 500 sheets was purchased by him in Tianjin and Shandong workshops. It became a fruitful source for studying "images, hitherto strange and impossible to interpret". Nevertheless, it was Chavanne's expedition, which gave impetus for interest in popular prints to grow into a life-long passion. During this journey Alekseev had a chance to visit the produc-

tion centres of Chinese folk woodblock prints *nianhua* in Yangliuqing, Weixian, Zhuxianzhen, Lingbaoxian in five northern provinces Hebei, Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi. He managed to double the collection and win the support of some locals, who became Alekseev's good acquaintances and turned into his "agents", authorized henceforth to purchase and send him interesting exemplars. Young scholar hoped, that

in this case the collection, that required some effort to acquire, would spur a number of complex and consistent works on Chinese folk tales and their iconography [8].

For a more in-depth study of traditional Chinese iconography Alekseev collected not only *nianhua*, but also the prints called in his diary "bofyr" (Ch. *bai fenr*, 百分兒, an icon with an image of "hundred deities", the pantheon). Modern scholars call them "paper horses" *zhima* (紙馬), they are crude prints intended to be burned after the offerings to the gods are finished.

In the Report after the first year in China (30 October 1906 — 3 October 1907) V. M. Alekseev wrote: "having this all in my hands I can consider my work ready for detailed analysis, which I will do undoubtedly by parts". He had high hopes for "the diary he was writing... in particular, on its documentary part" [9]. However, in spite of all his enthusiasm, Alekseev pointed out that he would have to "spend a very significant amount of time on obtaining the explanations" for the prints he already had, as well as for "the exemplars yet to collect". The previous experience showed "how difficult it is to get necessary explanations to such things even with help of a very smart native" [10]. Indeed, as we can see from the Report after the second year (1 October 1907 — 1 October 1908), it took Alekseev almost eight months of daily work to preprocess the materials, which he brought back from the journey with É. Chavannes, and "obtain necessary information in a format that seemed satisfactory to him". The problem of scarce reference materials was particularly acute, leading the scholar to "surveying many a man" [11]. The subject of the enquiries included questions "written on separate pieces of paper" in the course of the journey. These questions were connected to everything

unclear, odd, interesting... mostly inscriptions on temples, shops, houses, government offices and other institutions, their meaning, source and application..., many things concerning statues of gods, paintings, details of cults, historical instructions that could not be explained by ones surrounding me in the hours of exploring [12].

The last quotes are particularly interesting on account of mentioning "a smart native" and "surveying many a man", as they reflect the methodological principles that V. M. Alekseev developed during his first trip to China, and which he exercised throughout his life. They include special attention to collecting field data as a basis of the work of a "sinologist, specializing in culture studies"; study of the living spoken language as an essential tool for the collection of field data; written fixation in the travel diary for further desk review and em-

ployment of local informants who possessed knowledge, traditions and beliefs and could explain the findings and clarify questions. The scholar had a deep belief, which has been proven numerous times afterwards, that in China “the folk art in its highest forms adjoins the ‘big’ art” [13] and that the study of Chinese culture should be carried out only with the consideration of the unity of the components of its high and popular cultures, whereas the Chinese art

is a world art, capable of influencing the Western as a powerful novelty, because despite its many differences from the Western art, it is equally deeply humane and universal [14].

### V. M. Alekseev's Methods of Researching Popular Prints

So what kind of explanations did he have and why were they “preliminary”?

The answer to this question can be found in museum and archive collections of St. Petersburg, in the academician's diary and the last book of Alekseev's daughter M. V. Ban'kovskaia about her father. She says, that in order to understand auspicious sayings encoded in Chinese popular prints with the help of numerous symbols Alekseev would always resort to what he called “book erudition corrected by a living tradition” [16]. In order to do so, Alekseev made the figure of the artist who produced popular prints the subject of separate research. He wrote about them in his diary and engaged in dialogs with salesmen and ordinary workers. He also used the services of “professional consultants” — *xiansheng* (Chinese teachers), who were hired by him to “decipher” the images on the prints. V. M. Alekseev's student L. N. Menshikov (1926—2005) recalled later:

While still in China, he together with his Chinese friends composed explanations to these symbolic images on prints. The “Explanations to Coarse Pictures” are stored in the Hermitage and serve as a basis for every work on Chinese popular prints [17].

Riftin also noted, that

five hundred prints of V. M. Alekseev's collection are provided with comments, made either by professional artists, who worked in popular print workshops, or by Chinese teachers — *xiansheng* [18].

In Alekseev's words there were “rare Chinese scholars able to understand importance of ethnography and open-heartedly giving truthful answers” [19]. Unfortunately, V. M. Alekseev could not process and publish those materials. The vast majority of them have not been translated into Russian during the scholar's life. The notebooks preserved in archives of the Museum of History of Religion constitute a rare exception. They contain scarce translations of separate pages with explanations, made by V. M. Alekseev's three students, in particular, by already mentioned L. N. Menshikov and by I. S. Gurevitch. However, these translations were made for

As we can see from the Report of year 1908, by the end of the second year in China, Alekseev's collection of popular prints has significantly grown and contained more than 1500 pieces. The scholar attached great importance to it, because he considered it to be an extension and addition to the previously mentioned “collection of casts from coin amulets and coins with all kinds of auspicious inscriptions”. The number of “bofyr”, “deities, worshipped in China — painted and printed”, reached 500 pieces. Collection of amulets — “spells in figures and inscriptions from delusions of various sorts and types” formed the third independent part of the collection. As was noted by the researcher, he already got hold of “preliminary explanations to this material in two editions” [15].

V. M. Alekseev's so-called “Chinese diary” and did not include *xiansheng*'s explanations on popular prints.

Nonetheless, these explanations of prints made by *xianshengs*, written down in clear characters and put in separate envelopes by Alekseev himself, make this collection important and truly unique. These notes constitute its distinct feature distinguishing it among other collection in China and other countries. B. L. Riftin, a Russian researcher of Chinese popular prints, noted that

when Alekseev was gathering his collection, no one in China and outside of it, had any interest in Chinese folk art, no one collected neither popular prints nor post papers, nor artistic envelopes, not to speak of doing it consciously, skilfully and with intention to provide them with possible scholarly description or explanations of their symbols [20].

V. M. Alekseev was the first in the world sinology to take a keen interest not only in Chinese antiquity, but also in folk culture. His research on popular prints showed that even in its minor forms folk art can come close to perfection. He wrote:

the mere shape of images, their firm and distinct lines, the result of possibly three thousand years of uninterrupted tradition, excellent paints, complexity of elaborate design that makes the image completely incomprehensible to a viewer unfamiliar with the Chinese culture cannot but astonish. ...What passes before our eyes when we look at those images are animate old times of China in their fanciful diversity, everything that originated from the ancient springs of spiritual culture, history, literature, legends, and has been transformed to a form, comprehensible to the mind of a common Chinese man [21].

During his first visit to China V. M. Alekseev has already clearly articulated elevated and profoundly humanistic purpose of his research: study “everything exotic, unusual, funny” and transform it into “comprehensible and bound by reason”, to “destroy prejudices and labels”, “exceed the experience of journeys of a sighted man”, “destroy white spot on the map”, “debunk ‘the original’ and turn it into universal” [22]. The desire of transformation the observed things into “comprehensible

and bound by reason" led the future academician to addressing the problem of interpreting the Chinese popular prints, as he noticed their rebus nature earlier during his studies at the St. Petersburg University.

After realizing, that even an "experienced Chinese scribe" cannot always decipher the meaning of prints, Alekseev found the only possible solution. He started questioning peasants, who could only explain the most common auspicious formulas, and then resorted to help of his educated Chinese friends and teachers — *xiansheng*. Explaining the images was also not easy for them, and they could only do it by making inquiries. Thus the scholar approached the workshop artists themselves, and with their help clarified many motifs. According to Alekseev, a technician artist Zhang Haoru (章浩如) (other name Binghan (炳漢)) was especially helpful. More than a hundred explanations were issued by another *xiansheng* Tian Ziru (田子如).

Thus, during the very first years of the first trip as a result of this ethnographic method V. M. Alekseev's collection "as if gained eyesight" [23], acquired not only its commentators, but first-hand comments, which later were to lay basis for articles and monographs.

As pointed out above, popular prints from V. M. Alekseev's collection have been divided over the years and entered collections of four museums in St. Petersburg. Academician's manuscripts have suffered the same fate. The notes made in clear characters contain information unique for sinology, they are housed in the State Hermitage Museum, in the archives of the St. Petersburg branch of the Academy of Sciences and in the archives of the Museum of History of Religions. They have not been published. A rare exception is a stitched notebook from the State Hermitage Museum stored together with a collection of prints, it is called *Cuhua jieshuo* ("粗畫解說", "Explanations to Crude Pictures"). It contains notes by Meng Xijue (孟錫珏) (1870—1938) and other Alekseev's teachers. Meng Xijue was born in Wanping county (宛平縣) of Shuntianfu prefecture (順天府), north-east of Beijing, received *jinshi* (進士) degree at court examination in 1898, until 1912 he filled positions of an editor in the Hanlin academy, secretary of a governor-general in Jiangbei (江北) (modern Chungking (重慶)), secretary on the Tianjin Pukou railroad (津浦鐵路). These notes are interpretations of stories and symbols of 458 images, which were purchased before the expedition with Chavannes in Northern China [24].

These interpretations were partially used by M. L. Rudova in her catalogue of the Alekseev's collection of popular prints from the Hermitage [25] and in the publication *Nianhua* coauthored by N. G. Pchelin and M. L. Rudova (descriptions Nos. 1, 2, 43, 54, 57, 75, 77, 204, 206, 212, 222, 341, 413, 417).

Explanatory comments of *xiansheng*, made on V. M. Alekseev's request and now stored in the archives of the Museum of History of Religion, have become a subject of close study of a Russian-Taiwanese research team in the recent years [26]. All of the descriptions are written in characters with ink on thin rice paper sized ~10×10 cm and sorted into envelopes. Each of those, in turn, is marked with V. M. Alekseev's stamp and signed by him personally. For example, the archive contains *xiansheng's* comments on talismans, popular prints for the occasion of the Dragon Boat Festival *duanwujié* (端午節), prints with Stove God *zaowang* (竈王) and explanations of Chinese pantheon. The most numerous group consists of comments on images with Door Gods *menshen* (門神). They are sorted into two envelopes, one of which refers to prints bought in Beijing during the New Year (1909) and acquired in Hankou, Suzhou and Shanghai.

The first stage of the research included their consistent translations into Russian made by E. A. Zavidovskaia (translations into English by Marianna Zor'kina) and collation with the Chinese numeration on the prints, collection of the Museum of History of Religions has around 360 *nianhua* prints with images of *menshen* and about 250 sheets with descriptions of those images made by *xiansheng's*. Close study revealed direct correlation between some of the prints and their handwritten descriptions thus opening new possibilities for the research on their iconography, symbols and function in Chinese traditional culture. A remarkable feature of these notes made by *xiansheng* is that some of them have not only the explanations, but also V. M. Alekseev's remarks, underlining or questions also written in Chinese, but with a blue pencil instead of ink. This fact sheds some light on V. M. Alekseev's methods of working with his Chinese informants. All of the comments made by his request were not just sorted into envelopes, but went through preliminary proofreading and analysis on the spot. The notes with blue remarks were returned by V. M. Alekseev to *xiansheng* for a more detailed commentary.

### Examples of *Xiansheng's* Descriptions from the Museum of History of Religions Archives

*Menshen*. Call No. Д-2712-VII (plate 2)

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 207. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the images numbered 204—209.

## Text

二百零四頁至九頁

此三付乃通天大門或各等衙署之所用也。俗呼之為功令頭號門車。又名為通天大門神，平等人家及舖戶未有用之者。乃因無此大門也。名軍者，乃以身代令旂，首上有一將字也。亦不皆然，或有無此者。

(鉛筆畫通天大門、功令頭號門軍問：皆未詳)

二百零四至二百九頁(續頁)\*

言通天大門者，乃因其門高大極云上通于天之謂也。夫功令者乃云遵勅令而建功也。頭號門軍者，即云頭等護門將車也，亦言其形之大耳。

Visual inspection of the print and *xiansheng's* explanation allows to conclude that this print contains an image of a Door God *menshen* as a military officer. With both hands he holds a tray which has a civil officer's hat and *jue* (“爵”, “title, rank”) goblet on it. There is a servant boy on the right side. The picture expresses a wish to attain an official position. Such images are called “general guard the gates of the first rank”, and recommended to be hung on the gates of the official institutions and orders. The description was composed by *xiansheng* Tian Ziru.

Above the left shoulder of the *menshen* there is the name of the workshop, *Xu xinli hao* (“徐信立號”, “Shop of Xu Xinli”), which makes it possible to connect the

*Menshen*. Call No. Д-2870/1-VII (fig. 2)

Number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 151. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the images numbered 144—153.

## Text

百四十四至五十三

此數頁皆大門之雙門神也。俗人皆呼之為神荼鬱壘二神將。傅休奕賦云：擋百鬼之妖惡兮，列神荼鬱壘以司奸。即此意也。言有此二神守門，一切鬼邪皆不能入也，故用以守大門，即外門也。

(鉛筆問：然則百五十頁以下，似有別解，未知是否)

## Translation

Pages 204—209

These three pairs of pictures can be used for a central gate or for a government office *yamen*. This type is called among common people “a cart (?) a decree on merits on the first gate”. It is also called “the great good who penetrates through the main gates”. Ordinary households and shops do not use these, because they do not have big gates. He is also called “the warrior”, he carries a flag of command [it is a substitute for a commander's tally to pass information with a messenger — E. Z.] and has a character *jiang* (“將”, “general”) on his head, sometimes there is no such sign.

[Question in Chinese characters written with blue pencil]: “penetrates through the main gates”, “a decree on merits on the first gate”, I do not understand.

Pages 204—209 (continued)

[The answer]: By saying “penetrates through the main gates”, one means that the gates are high and pierce the sky. “Decree in commemoration of service” means “following the imperial edict perform a feat”, words “warrior of the first gate” mean “first rank general guarding the gate”, this shows that he is very big.

print to its producing workshop. There are reasons to believe, that it was located in the Liangping (梁平) county in the eastern part of Sichuan province. According to local chronicles, the local production of *nianhua* flourished during the Qind period. Multiple generations of the Xu family engaged in the production of prints depicting Door Gods. In the early years of the Republic (1911—1949) that area had around 13 workshops, one of which was called *Xinli hao* (“信立號”). Production declined with the beginning of the Anti-Japanese war. It is important to note, that the route of Alekseev's expedition did not pass through Sichuan, he could have obtained such prints while staying in Xi'an or with help of his acquaintances.

## Translation

144—153

On these pictures there are paired Door Gods *menshen* for the main outer gates. Common people call them “two heavenly generals Shen Shu and Yu Lü”. An ode by Fu Xiuyi says: “to stand on the way of one hundred cunning demons, Shen Shu and Yu Lü were assigned to control the evil”. This explains the meaning. It is said that these two gods guard doors. No demons or evil spirits can enter. Because of that they are used to guard the main outer gate.

[Question in Chinese characters written with blue pencil]: it seems that after the page 150 there is another explanation, I am not sure.





Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Figs. 4—5

From the explanation of the *xiansheng* we learn that this type of prints with images of a pair of legendary warriors Shen Shu and Yu Lü was used to scare away evil spirits. They were hung on the entrance gate of a house. These warriors were first mentioned in the *Shan hai jing* (“*山海經*”, “*Classic of Mountains and Seas*”, ca. 4th century BC). Citation from the ode: “to stand on the way of one hundred cunning demons, Shen Shu and Yu Lü were assigned to control the evil” — is an inaccurately recited line from the *Tao fu* (“*桃賦*”, “*Ode to a Peach*”) by Fu Xiuyi (傅休奕) (another name Fu Xuan (傅玄), 217—279). The original line says:

御百鬼之妖惡兮，列神荼以司奸

to stand against the maleficent plans of one hundred demons, Shen Shu was assigned to control the evil.

This ode is preserved in the Tang dynasty *Yiwen leiju* (“*藝文類聚*”, “*Collection of Different Arts and Writings*”), (*juan* 88). Fu Xiuyi lived in Niyang (present-day Shaanxi province), he was a scholar, writer, politician skilled in writing odes *yuefu* (樂府). This description with citations from the classical literature characterizes the level of education of the declining imperial era. The description was composed by *xiansheng* Tian Ziru.

This type of images of Door Gods, en-face and with a round pole-axe is characteristic of a famous *nianhua* workshops in Taohuawu (桃花塢) near Suzhou [27]. Character *su* (“蘇”) in the right upper corner of the print confirms its originating from the area around Suzhou.

*Menshen*. Inv. No. Д-2870-4-VII (*fig. 3*)

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 154. It corresponds to a *xiansheng*'s description for the images numbered 154—163.

### Text

百五十四至六十三頁

此十頁雖大小不同，亦皆大門之神像也。俗人呼之為大金彩、二金彩、三金彩，乃以俱用華紙金裝而分紙章之大小也。又名為四相金門神，乃以此等門神皆宜用木框鑲邊而帖于其上之故耳。

On the print, intended to be hung on door leaves of residential houses during the New Year season, is an image of a white faced Tang dynasty (618—907) general Qin Qiong (秦瓊) as a Door God *menshen*. Qin Qiong is famous as one of the 24 heroes who have founded the Tang dynasty (618—907). He is dressed in a rich and colourful military attire and a helmet. Behind his back there is a bow and a quiver with arrows, on his side there hangs a sword. With both hands he holds a handle of the weapon of the guard of honour — a golden club *jinchui*

### Translation

Pages 154—163

Although sizes of these ten pictures are different, they all depict Door Gods of the main outer gate. Common people call them “big, painted and gilded”, “second painted and gilded”, “third painted and gilded”, because the paper used is ornamented and gilded, but the sizes are different. They can also be called “gilded Door Gods of four directions”, *menshen* of such rank are put in a wooden frame and glued to it.

(金錘). *Xiansheng*'s attention was caught by an unusual dark blue background with a white cloud ornament and gilding on the print, that was a sign of the high quality and price. This is an example of so-called *lü yun menshen* (“*綠雲門神*”, “*door guardians on the background with green clouds*”). The background was printed after the main picture. Its auspicious meaning is: “*menshen* among auspicious clouds protects the house”.

The description was composed by *xiansheng* Tian Ziru.

Paired *menshen*.

Call Nos. Д-2870/38-VII and Д-2870/39-VII (*figs. 4—5*)

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 190. It corresponds to a *xiansheng*'s description for the image numbered 190.

### Text

百九十頁

此頁亦雙扇門之門神也。俗人呼之為雲箋加官。乃以綠紙印白雲也。上有冠鹿五福。旁有一童持燈，吉語可謂之加官進祿，福位高登之二句也。

### Translation

Page 190

This is a Door Good for a two-leaved door. Common people call the picture “cloud letter granting a promotion”, because there are white clouds printed on the green background. There are an official's hat, a deer and Five Blessings [*viz.* old age, wealth, tranquillity, virtue and natural death—E. Z.]. Beside him a child holds a lantern. The auspicious

(鉛筆問：鹿口出氣，氣內有冠，其理何在)

無別意，亦無非祿上加官官中得祿之意也。

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 191. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the image numbered 191.

### Text

百九十一頁

此頁相連百九十為一付。上所畫者，手托一麟，上有五蚨一桃，旁有一燈，吉語可云麟子獻瑞，福壽同登之句。甚合。上云五福捧壽，加官進祿二句，亦可，不甚完全也。或改云五福捧壽，麟子兆祥借照字切燈字意。

(鉛筆問：請以前言而復問之)

愚不明此言之意，且以前言而復問之先生也。

As can be seen from the explanation of Chinese teacher, the depicted figures are civil Door Gods, the images contain wishes for a promotion at office, high salary, male children and longevity. Common people call the picture "cloud letter granting a promotion", because there are white clouds printed on the green background. On the breastplates of the officials there are images of cranes — an attribute of a Qing dynasty (1644—1912) civil official of the first rank. There are also two circles with a "double happiness" character (a wedding attribute) on the attires. One of the officials holds a tray on top of which stands a deer that emits a cloud with a picture of five bats and an official's hat ("complete happiness and an official post"). Another one holds a tray, on top of which stands a *qilin* ("gifted son") that emits a cloud with a picture of a peach

saying consists of two phrases: "get a promotion in official post and salary raise", "happiness and high official post".

[Question in Chinese characters written with blue pencil]: there is a cloud with a hat inside coming out of the deer's mouth, what does it mean?

[The answer]: There is no special meaning, except for "salary will be raised, there will be a promotion at office".

### Translation

Page 191

This picture is in pair with page 190. The idea of an image: he holds a *qilin* in his hand, there are five bats above [*xianshen* made a mistake in homonym characters: it should be *fu* ("蝠", "a bat"), not *fu* ("蚨", "a water beetle") — E. Z.] and a peach above. The auspicious saying is "*qilin* brings an auspicious sign [about talented son]", "happiness and longevity rise together". These two pictures if put together compose the following meaning: "offer longevity and complete happiness with two hands", "get a promotion in official post and salary raise". Taking into account characters on the lantern it can be said "offer longevity and complete happiness with two hands", "the son, brought by *qilin*, betokens happiness".

[Question in Chinese characters written with blue pencil]: I would like to ask once more about the previous phrase.

[The answer]: Being not bright enough could not understand the meaning.

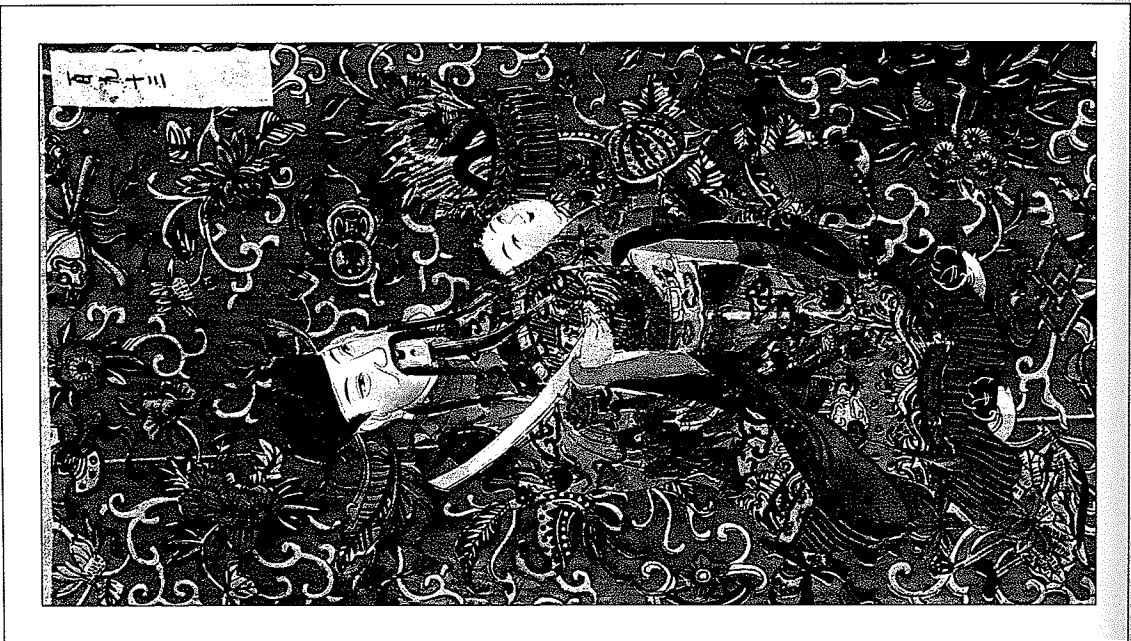
and five bats ("longevity and complete happiness"). On the left side of the first official there is a boy, who stands holding a lantern with pendants, ornamented with characters *jia guan jin lu* ("加官進祿"): "get a promotion in official post and salary raise". To the right side of the second official there is a boy holding a lantern. On pendants attached to the lantern's body it is written *wufu fengshou* ("五福捧壽") "offer longevity and complete happiness with two hands".

This pair of images is particularly interesting, because it represents Door Gods not as military, but as civil officials, who hold auspicious attributes. Prints in this style were produced in Yangliuqing (楊柳青) near Tianjing, the largest centre of popular prints production. The description was composed by *xiansheng* Tian Ziru.

### Paired menshen.

Call Nos. Д2870/40-VII and Д-2870/41-VII (figs. 6—7)

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 192. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the image numbered 192.



Figs. 6—7



Figs. 8—9

## Text

## 百九十二章

此頁亦單片子雙加官也。上畫一童捧馬，又有二錢以及四圍各等花彩吉語，可云祿馬前行，榮華連生之句，或云走馬上任，榮華連綿亦可。

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 193. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the image numbered 193.

## Text

## 百九十三章

此頁同上頁為一付。惟所畫者少有不同，此乃于群花雙錢之外，又有一童頂龍盤，吉言可云：雲龍獻瑞，榮華雙全之二語也。

(鉛筆問：疑其錢龍寶馬之句)

二句所疑者，亦有情理，但如此說來，則即不能完全耳，故拆句以成吉言也。

Distinct feature of this pair of Door Gods dressed as civil officials is abundance of auspicious symbols. The gods can be identified as civil, because of cranes on their breastplates, an attribute of a Qing dynasty civil official of the first rank.

The auspicious objects on the first print are as follows (from top): lucky knot (Buddhist charm), lotus flowers ("unity"), *mei* plums ("gentleman"), golden and silver ingots ("wealth"), pomegranates ("many sons"),

Paired *menshen*.

Call No. Д-Д2870/46-VII and Д-2870/47-VII (figs. 8—9)

The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 194. It corresponds to a *xiansheng's* description for the image numbered 194.

## Text

## 百九十四頁

此頁乃二彩金雙扇門神也。俗為之雙金花板加官也。上有二桃一童持燈，以及群花雙魚四寶等件，福壽雙全貴子連登四寶兆瑞榮餘終生之句也。甚吉祥。

## Translation

## Page 192

This is one of a pair pictures with an official to be promoted. There is a child on the picture who holds a horse with both hands, there is also a pair of coins and ornament with auspicious meaning on four sides. The saying can be: "career and destiny are advancing" "fame and prosperity arise continuously", it is also said: "ride a horse towards a promotion", "fame and prosperity are continuous like a silk thread".

## Translation

## Page 193

This picture is in pair with the previous one. They are slightly different. Here, except for many flowers and a pair of coins there is a child, who has a tray with a dragon on his head. The auspicious saying in two phrases says "dragon surrounded by clouds brings an auspicious sign", "completeness of fame and prosperity".

[Question in Chinese characters written with blue pencil]: I think, the phrase here is "money dragon, treasure horse".

[The answer]: Both phrases can be doubted, and they both make sense, but in this case the saying is not complete, because we split it to get an auspicious wish.

a butterfly ("happy union"), two coins ("double completeness"), a peony flower ("wealth and noble rank"), a *ruyi* scepter ("everything according to your will").

The auspicious objects on the second print are as follows (from top): lucky knot, *mei* plum flowers, pomegranates, a butterfly ("happy union"), two coins, a peony flower, a hat ("official career"), a silver ingot ("wealth").

This pair of prints also originates from Yangliuqing. The description was composed by *xiansheng* Tian Ziru.

## Translation

## Page 194

This is a paired gilded Door God *menshen* on painted background for a two-leaved door. The common name is "the official to be promoted on a painted and gilded plank". There are two peaches and a child holding a lantern. On the background there are many flowers, a pair of fish, four treasures and other objects. Auspicious sayings: "paired happiness and longevity", "precious sons raise (in rank) one after another", "four treasures bring auspicious sign", "fame and prosperity for the whole life". These are the auspicious sayings.



The number on the picture (written with Chinese characters) is 195. It corresponds to a *xiansheng*'s description for the image numbered 195.

### Text

百九十五頁

此與百九十四相連為一付。以上所畫亦同。惟加官手托雙石榴，童持雙喜燈，吉語可云雙喜臨門，名流千載，貴子登科，萬華結彩之四句也。上寫四字，不甚完全，故易之。

As well as in the previous case, closer scrutiny of the commentary by a Chinese teacher shows that this pair of prints contains images of Door Gods dressed as civil officials on a coloured background and surrounded by numerous auspicious signs. The gods can be identified as civil, because of the images of cranes on their breast-plates. The auspicious objects on the first print are as follows: four treasures of the study: scroll, books, checkers and scepter; treasures of Buddhism: wheel, conch-shell, vase, umbrella, pearl ("wealth"), pair of fish ("abundance"), peony flower ("wealth and noble rank").

### Translation

Page 195

This picture is in pair with picture on page 194. The things depicted are similar. Here the official to be promoted holds a pair of pomegranates, a child holds a lantern with a character "double happiness", the auspicious saying in four phrases is: "double happiness at the door", "fame will remain for centuries", "precious sons raise (in rank) one after another", "ten thousand prosperities in a colourful knot". At the top there are four characters, but this is not all.

The official holds a tray with peaches ("longevity") in his right hand. Above them there is a cloud with characters *fu shou* ("福壽") "happiness and longevity". On his left side there is a boy who holds a lantern with a character "double happiness" used at weddings. The second print has an image of an official to be promoted. In the right hand he holds a court tablet, in the left — a tray with pomegranates ("many sons"). Above them there is a cloud with characters *shuang quan* ("双全") "double completeness". On the left side there is a boy who holds a lantern with a character "double happiness".

## Distinct Features of *Menshen* Print Descriptions from the Collection of the State Museum of the History of Religions Archives

The archives of the State Museum of the History of Religions have two envelopes with explanations of Chinese teachers on *nianhua* depicting Door Gods *menshen*. Calligraphy styles, level of literacy as well as differences in the methods of description lead to conclusion that they were made by two different authors. They have also used different methods of numbering the notes, that match the marks on the prints.

The envelope, called by V. M. Alekseev as "門神 album" (i. e. album with *menshens* — *aut.*) and with a note "+送子娘" ("+ fertility goddesses") at the bottom, contains explanations to around 90 prints. The author of these commentaries is writing with a neater handwriting. He describes the image on the print, but does not give interpretations of auspicious signs on each of them. We can assume that this part of the descriptions was compiled by the *nianhua* artist Zhang Haoru (章浩如). According to B. L. Riftin, Zhang Haoru (章浩如) (courtesy names Binghan (炳漢), Weihai (維漢), b. 1870, was an artist at a print workshop, specialized in landscapes and images of people) helped V. M. Alekseev in 1908 to sort pictures Nos. 434—815, which have been acquired during the trip with É. Chavannes and in Beijing, this portion includes images of the Door Gods and pantheons. *Xiansheng*'s explanations Nos. 434—452 have not been fully preserved, some of them have been lost. According to V. M. Alekseev's diary, Zhang Haoru has not only made amendments to the earlier records (in most cases written by Meng Xijue), but has also written new notes for icons of trade patrons and marriage divination calendars [28].

Another *xiansheng* gave explanations to two hundred prints sorted into an envelope without a stamp and signed by V. M. Alekseev as "門神 [*Menshens*] bought in Beijing during the New Year (1909) and brought from Hankou, Suzhou and Shanghai". His calligraphy is less skilful, a lot of characters are written in simplified forms. This *xiansheng* does not provide descriptions of the images, rarely notes what is being depicted (there are more descriptions of this kind towards the end), what the figure wears or holds. Instead he focuses on the auspicious meaning of each of the prints. This *xiansheng* has professional knowledge on them, enlists characteristic names of the prints in northern and southern China, as well as the rules of their usage. This set of notes ends with a conclusion *zonglun* (總論) signed by Tian Zirui, which helped to identify their authorship.

Among the *menshen* prints those from Yangliuqing constitute the largest portion in the collection of the State Museum of the History of Religions. These were the prints most easily accessible to V. M. Alekseev in Beijing, as many Yangliuqing workshops had retail shops in the capital. Among them are *nianhua* with images of civil and military officials, whose functions were different: warriors were blocking the way for the evil spirits, bureaucrats brought wealth, offspring and official ranks. A typical stylistic feature of the Yangliuqing prints is either white, ornamented azure-green or grey background with auspicious objects on it. However, the examples discussed in this article, do not exhaust the diversity of the *nianhua* collection of the State Museum of the

History of Religions. As one can see from the first example, the collection also contains prints from Sichuan,

Suzhou, Xi'an, Yizhoufu (modern Linyi, Shandong province) and Beijing.

### History of Studying Door Gods in Russia

As can be seen from the explanations written by *xiansheng* during Alekseev's first trip to China, the future academician did not limit himself only to collecting artifacts and oral information. According to his belief, "the folk art in its highest forms adjoins the 'big' art" [29], and the study of Chinese culture should be carried out only with the consideration of unity of high and popular cultures, therefore he faced a task of understanding of the semantics of Chinese popular prints.

The comments of *xiansheng* on *menshen* prints, which have been preserved in the State Museum of the History of Religions archives and first published in this article are particularly interesting and important, because, despite the long-time research on Chinese folk art and attention given to its most common and popular characters and motifs, V. M. Alekseev has not dedicated any article to most widespread images of Door Gods. Moreover, they are only mentioned twice in his seminal work "Chinese Popular Prints: The Spiritual Life of Old China", 1966. There V. M. Alekseev wrote:

Popular prints are not just household items. They are put up in shops, taverns, and even on the doors of government buildings. For example, in 1907 I have always encountered two huge figures (one for each of the door leaf) at the entrance to the governor's yamen. Dressed in armour of ancient Chinese generals, holding halberds in their hands and with faces full of anger these spirits *menshen*, who protected entrances from the invasion of evil spirits, have become in general the official emblem of government [30].

Another important observation of Alekseev is that for a simple Chinese man this icon-print is transformed into a spell-print:

The simplest way to cast a spell is to put two images of warlike and terrible generals (these are mentioned before *menshen* spirits) on both door leaves of the entrance. One of them is Chinese, another is a foreigner. Both generals have conquered numerous lands for China during a brilliant period of Chinese history — the Tang dynasty. Therefore, the superstitious thought probably goes as follows: the embodied generals were menacing their enemies. i. e. those who were ordered to be beaten by the emperor. Thus, in the invisible and imaginary state they can menace those, who go against the current ruler, i. e. the owner of the print [31].

As one can see, the scholar sought to understand the way of thought of those who believed in those deities, as well as means to use their powers.

Russian researchers of Chinese popular prints refer to V. M. Alekseev's work and principles and contribute to the further study of the subject. All of the studies on *menshen* cite a story, where 7th century generals Qin Shubao and Hu Jingde were deified to serve this role.

According to the legend, they guarded the door of a Tang dynasty emperor Taizong (599—649), who was haunted by ghosts. After a quiet night the emperor ordered painters to make portraits of both generals to hang them on the palace doors. B. L. Riftin points out the ancient origin of *menshens*:

In the "Book of Rites" (4th—2nd centuries BC) there is a mentioning of sacrifices in honour of door and gate spirit, who were respectively associated with light and dark elements [32].

The ancient origins of this cult are also proved by the fact, that the images of *menshen*

...can be also seen on the doors of burial sites from the beginning of the Common Era (in the form of reliefs of guards of the entrance to the tomb) [33].

Images of *menshen* are mentioned in written records starting from the 12th century. In a work, dedicated to the history of Chinese art, M. E. Kravtsova explains the features of their iconography. She writes:

Door Gods are usually depicted as warriors, in full battle armour and armed with a bow, a sword and a halberd. On the left (i. e. western) door leaf the image of Hu Jingde is put up. His appearance has distinct "barbaric" features: round bulging eyes, dark skin and a bushy beard. Qing Shubao is, on the contrary, depicted as feminine and youthful. The images of civil *menshens* derive from this iconographic style: they are dressed as bureaucrats, but have the same features of their appearance [34].

Apart from standard images of *menshens*, researchers point out some less common variants. For example, B. L. Riftin mentions a print, stored in Russian State Library, that shows a *menshen* with a lantern on a long pole [35]. The publication by M. L. Rudova and N. G. Pchelin contains an image of *menshen* in theatrical costumes with flags behind, riding fantastic lions [36]. The collection of the State Museum of the History of Religions also contains a large number of popular prints from Xi'an with *menshen* depicted in theatrical characters. Apart from that, B. L. Riftin's citing "Classic of Mountains and Seas" (14th—2nd centuries BC) indicates that the duties of *menshen* could be performed by ancient guardians of the gates leading to the spirit world Shen Tu and Yu Lü. He also mentions that generals Wen Qiong (2nd century) and Yue Fei (12th century) could play the same role [37].

Ju. G. Lemeshko in the article dedicated to images of *menshens* notes the continuity of the tradition of worship and pays considerable attention to local variants of *menshens*. Among them appears the widely worshipped and legendary general Guan Yu (?—219). In Sichuan province one can find images of a Song dynasty woman general Mu Guiying, a widow of General Yang Zong-

bao, who was killed during a battle with the forces of the Khitan. Her legendary story is often performed in Beijing opera. Another female character with the same protective function is Qin Liangyu, who commanded the troops of Sichuan. Her story is preserved in the standard history of Ming dynasty *Ming shi* (明史). The national hero Guan Yu and the two female warriors from Sichuan did not have pair images, so their mirror image with some variations in costume and attributes would be hung

on the second door leaf [38]. Ju. G. Lemesko believes, that the tendency to depict local heroes in the form of *menshen* established during the Ming (1368—1644) and Qing dynasties, and after that the cult of *menshen* gained incredible popularity. Talking about present times the author notes that during the festivals villagers glue images of *menshen*, printed typographically, to house entrance gates, while in cities they are hung on the apartment doors.

### Conclusion

Conclusion can be made about the importance of the principles of methods developed by V. M. Alekseev for the study of Chinese popular prints. These principles are based on field research, collection of artifacts, interviewing educated members of society and wide populace, thorough scientific analysis, effort to reveal the semantics of the object, to understand how an image is perceived within traditional culture. An important component of V. M. Alekseev's method was avoiding Eurocentric approach to Chinese culture, he attempted to study it from the inside in

a broad cultural and historical context, considering the period when it was created. At the same time the scholar considered the national culture to be a part of the global art heritage, capable to enrich European traditions.

V. M. Alekseev's collections and handwritten notes stored in Russian museums and archives, including the State Museum of the History of Religions, require further detailed research, not only as a part of the study of history of sinologist's heritage, but for deeper understanding of the basics of the Chinese mentality.

### Notes

1. Alekseev, 2012: 403.

2. *Ibid.*: 402.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Idem*, 1982: 272.

5. *Ibid.*: 271.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Riftin, 1991: 4.

8. Alekseev, 1982: 272.

9. *Ibid.*: 275.

10. *Ibid.*: 272.

11. *Ibid.*: 275.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Alekseev, 2012: 65.

14. *Ibid.*: 130.

15. *Idem*, 1982: 276.

16. Ban'kovskaia, 2010: 91.

17. Menshikov, 1972: 128.

18. Alekseev, 1966: 7.

19. *Ibid.*: 172.

20. *Idem*, 2012: 10.

21. *Ibid.*: 65.

22. *Ibid.*: 402—403.

23. *Idem*, 1966: 22.

24. Riftin, 1991: 3; Vinogradova, 2012: 28.

25. Rudova, 2003: 235.

26. Teryukova & Zavidovskaia, 2015a: 73—90; *eadem*, 2015b: 78—104.

27. For similar images see: Wang, Shucun & Liu, Ying, 2012: 122—123; Bo, Songnian, 1998: 26—27.

28. Riftin, 2009: 458.

29. Alekseev, 2012: 65.

30. *Ibid.*: 18.

31. *Ibid.*: 42.

32. Riftin, 1990: 191.

33. Riftin, 2002: 107.

34. Kravcova, 2004: 530.

35. Riftin, 2002: 107.

36. Pchelin & Rudova, 2008: 103.

37. Riftin, 1992: 191.

38. Lemesko, 2014: 83.

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## Illustrations

### Back cover:

**Plate. 2.** *Menshen* (Door God). Paper, 118.0×56.0 cm. China, Lianghing, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call No. Д-2712-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.

### Inside the text:

- Fig. 1.** Vasilij M. Alekseev (14.01.1881—12.05.1951), full member of the Academy of Science of the USSR. Source of the photo — official web-site of the Russian Academy of Science: <http://российская-академия-наук.рф>.
- Fig. 2.** *Menshen* (Door God). Paper, 87.5×46.5 cm. China, Suzhou, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call No. Д-2870/1-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 3.** *Menshen* (Door God). Paper, 56.5×34.0 cm. China, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call No. Д-2870-4-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Figs. 4—5.** Paired *menshens* (Door Gods). Paper, 56.0×29.0 cm. China, Yangliuqing, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call Nos. Д-2870/38-VII and Д-2870/39-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Figs. 6—7.** Paired *menshens* (Door Gods). Paper, 50.0×29.0 cm. China, Yangliuqing, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call Nos. Д-2870/40-VII and Д-2870/41-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Figs. 8—9.** Paired *menshens* (Door Gods). Paper, 73.0×49.0 cm. China, early 20th century. Purchased in 1938. The State Museum of the History of Religion, call Nos. Д-2870/46-VII and Д-2870/47-VII. Courtesy of the Museum.

## Acknowledgements

This publication has been supported by the Russian Humanitarian Research Foundation scientific grant No. 15-21-10001.