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# Vincentian Footprints in China: The Lives, Deaths, and Legacies of Francis Clet, CM, and John Gabriel Perboyre, CM

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**VINCENTIAN FOOTPRINTS IN CHINA:  
THE LIVES, DEATHS, AND LEGACIES OF FRANCIS CLET, CM, AND JOHN  
GABRIEL PERBOYRE, CM**  
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The American poet and essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), once wrote that, “The mass of men worry themselves into nameless graves while here and there a great unselfish soul forgets himself into immortality.” And in this vein Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) said that, “Love is inventive to infinity.” I would like to begin my comments about the Vincentian footprints in China by acknowledging that, based on my research, the Lazarist footprints there were at their root directed toward the goal of charity. And while I will necessarily recount instances of conflict, both cultural and religious, I acknowledge that much of the confluence that transpired between Vincentian missionaries and Chinese natives was facilitated by the motives of friendship and altruism that inspired the Vincentians to travel to the Asia. I shall confine my remarks to three general topics: a brief sketch of the lives of Francis Regis Clet, CM, (1748-1820) and John Gabriel Perboyre, CM, (1802-1840); an account of their imprisonments and executions; and finally, a discussion of the legacies these two missionaries left behind during and after China’s imperial era. I shall also share a few anecdotes regarding my recent encounters with Vincentian footprints during my last few trips to Beijing, Tianjin, and Wuhan.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The research conducted for this study was made possible by the generous support of the Vincentian Studies Institute grant, administered by DePaul University and the kind Fathers of the Congregation of the Mission.

## Lives and the Context of Persecution:

The Vincentian footprints in China in reality began with the first footprints of young Vincent, who made tracks in the French soil of Gascony along with his four brothers and two sisters. After graduating in theology at Toulouse, Vincent was ordained a priest in 1600, and later captured by Turkish pirates in 1605 and taken to Tunis, where he was sold into slavery.<sup>2</sup> While enslaved in the Mediterranean, Father Vincent arguably became the first Vincentian missionary, converting his owner to Christianity and then escaping back to France in 1607. It was, however, in 1625, when he at last founded the Congregation of the Mission, from which the present usage of the word “missionary” is derived, that missionary priests began to be trained and dispatched to foreign places. The early Vincentian missionaries took with them their motto, taken from the Vulgate rendering of the gospel of Luke, which exclaims, “*Evangelizare pauperibus misit me,*” or “He sent me to preach the gospel to the poor.”<sup>3</sup>

Vincent’s tracks led into the most impoverished areas of France, and the Vincentian footprints in China likewise strode into China’s rural and urban destitution. Writing to one of his confreres, Francis Regis Clet recalled that:

Nearly all of our Christians are poor. Most of them live in wretched huts that afford but slight protection against cold and rain. At least two-thirds of them lack sufficient clothing to keep them warm during the long, intensely cold winters that we have here

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<sup>2</sup> There are several sources of information regarding the life and apostolate of Vincent de Paul, principally the materials held in the Archives of Maison-mere des Lazaristes, in Paris. Also see M. Collet, CM, *Life of St. Vincent de Paul, Founder of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Sisters of Charity*, trans. by anonymous priest (Baltimore: Metropolitan Press, 1845).

<sup>3</sup> See the Vulgate, Luke 4: 18-19.

in the mountains. They own neither blankets nor mats, and can make themselves comfortable enough to sleep only by burrowing in the straw of their beds.<sup>4</sup>

Also writing home from China, John Gabriel Perboyre wrote that not only were the Chinese he encountered, “the poorest of the poor,” but the Vincentians themselves were, “half nourished, living on rice and herbs.”<sup>5</sup> The poverty of China was, as they witnessed, more intense even than in their native France.

Interestingly, it was a Jesuit who inspired Vincent to send missionaries to Asia, and it was later the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 that stirred the Propaganda Fide to send large numbers of French Lazarists to China to occupy the now empty Society missions. As Pierre Coste, CM, (1873-1935) has recounted in his long study of Saint Vincent, it was the popular reports of the Jesuit missionary to Asia, Alexander Rhodes, SJ, (1591-1660) that motivated Vincent to submit a letter to Rome in 1653, requesting permission for Lazarist priests to establish a mission in China. Vincent wrote:

Having learned of the surprising progress of the Christian faith in the kingdom of . . . China, we have felt our hearts burn with an ardent desire to go to the relief of those people who are buried in the darkness of error and are now beginning to hear the call of Jesus Christ the Sun of Justice.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in G. de Montgesty, *Two Vincentian Martyrs: Blessed Francis Regis Clet, C.M., Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.*, trans. by Florence Gilmore (New York: Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, 1925), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in G. de Montgesty, 145.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Pierre Coste, CM, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, Vol. 3 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1953), 286-7.

Typical of Vincent's famous pragmatism, he mentions that the Congregation of the Mission already has, "in Paris at present three chosen priests, of well-known probity and utterly devoted to this hard and difficult cause, who are ready to undertake for Christ's sake a journey full of dangers, and to labor all their life without respite in distant lands."<sup>7</sup> I quote from Vincent's letter because there is no better description of the motives and experiences of those later Vincentians who at last made their way into the Middle Kingdom.

The first Vincentian did not arrive in China until 1699, but due to internecine conflicts between Catholic Orders in China, largely related to the unfortunate Rites Controversy, a collective Lazarist presence was not established there until 1785.<sup>8</sup> It was in the immediate wake of this era of tension and uncertainty that Clet and Perboyre fashioned new missionary tracks on Chinese soil. When I imagine these two French missionaries I picture them couched between two unfriendly cultural contexts; behind them, in their native France, was the fanatic anticlericalism of the French Revolution (1787-1799), and before them, in China, was an increasingly anti-foreign government that had already illegalized western missionaries and their religion. Emperor Yongzheng's 雍正 (r. 1722-1735) edict of 1727 is one example of official rhetoric condemning Catholic teachings, which he rebukes as, "without regard for the truth," "injurious to the ways of the world," and "heterodox."<sup>9</sup> It

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Coste, 287.

<sup>8</sup> For a general account of the Rites Controversies, two sources render disparate views: for an account sensitive to the Jesuit perspective see George Minamaki, SJ, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986), and for a work more attuned to the Dominican view see J. S. Cummins, *A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism, 1860-1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 13.

must be noted also that Clet and Perboyre were in deliberate violation of Qing 清代 (1644-1911) law when they entered China, and the local officials were surprisingly tolerant of their long and very apparent presence in the culturally conservative provinces of Jiangxi, Henan, and Hubei (then known as Huguang). It is quite remarkable that Chinese officials turned a blind eye to illegal foreign missionaries for as long as they did; Clet was in China for twenty-eight years, and Perboyre for five.

In the late-eighteenth century, the Buddhist millenarian White Lotus Sect had 白蓮教 reemerged in northern China (especially in Shandong), and led an anti-Qing rebellion; Christianity's eschatological message appeared suspiciously similar to these rebels, and thus the court turned a more apprehensive eye toward foreigners who brought this apparently "heterodox" teaching.<sup>10</sup> After the successful suppression of the White Lotus Rebellion (1794-1804), a Chinese Catholic was arrested in Beijing in 1811; he was carrying western-language documents for the local bishop. The court suspected the Catholics of anti-Qing espionage, and an imperial edict was published that both reasserted legal prohibitions against foreign missionaries and commanded, "all [Chinese] Christians to denounce their religion before the end of the year."<sup>11</sup> It was into this political climate that Clet and Perboyre continued to administer the sacraments, preach, and catechize new believers. There is little

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Chinese millenarian movements see Jean Chesneaux, ed., *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), especially pages 24-25 for a brief account of the White Lotus Sect and its connection with Maitreya Buddha's future coming.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Yves Ducourneau, CM, "To the Extremes of Love," transl. by John Rybolt, CM, *Vincentiana*, vol. 49, issue 1 (January-February 2001): 27-28.

mystery, then, as to what precipitated the arrests of these two Vincentians in 1819 and 1839, respectively.

### **Deaths and the Tradition of Miracles:**

A severe anti-Christian persecution began in 1818, and Francis Regis Clet was forced to hide in caves, wooded areas, and finally in the home of a Chinese Catholic family in Hunan province, where he remained for about six months.<sup>12</sup> On June 16, 1819, Clet's location was revealed by an apostate Catholic, and a group of Qing troops seized him, placed chains around his wrists, neck, and ankles, and placed him in prison. He was then subjected to a series of difficult court trials. As was normal procedure, Clet was compelled to *beijiao*, 背教 or apostatize by stepping on a cross; and refusing this he was made to kneel on chains while his face was beaten with a leather strap until his jawbone was dislocated and his forehead was severely cut.<sup>13</sup> Later, Clet was transferred to prisons at Kaifeng and Wuchang, where he was further interrogated and tortured. On the journey between Kaifeng and Wuchang, he was so badly beaten that a witness recorded his condition: his "clothes were stained with blood from cuts and wounds caused by the blows and ill usage to which he had been subjected during the journey."<sup>14</sup> At last, on February 18, 1820, Clet was executed by slow strangulation by the emperor's order, and as was customary for "criminals" of his kind, a placard displayed beside him that read, "*Chuanxie jiaoshi*," 傳邪教士 or "Transmitter of heterodox teachings."

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> See de Montgesty, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in de Montgesty, 82-83.

The circumstances of John Gabriel Perboyre's martyrdom, only two decades later, are remarkably similar to Clet's. After living in China under considerable anxiety regarding consistent anti-Christian persecution, Perboyre was finally arrested after being betrayed by a Christian member of his small mountain community in a village near Wuhan. He was, like Clet, transferred from city to city, where he underwent numerous interrogations, during which Perboyre was also charged to trample on a crucifix and reject his faith. As severe as Clet's tortures had been, Perboyre's were even more relentless. The former bishop of Ningbo, China, François-Alexis Rameaux, CM (1802-1845), recounted that Perboyre was, "interrogated and endured all the sufferings reserved for the worst criminals: he was made to kneel on iron chains, on pieces of broken crockery, and beaten in all sorts of ways, with the result that his flesh fell off him in strips."<sup>15</sup> He was transferred to his final prison at Wuchang near the end of 1839, where his foot was fastened by iron shackles to his cell wall; the resulting lack of circulation caused a portion of his foot to rot away.<sup>16</sup>

In a letter written in 1840, Rameaux mentions that during one of his examinations Perboyre was lashed with a bamboo stick 100 times on his body and seventy on his mouth.<sup>17</sup> In addition, he was forced to drink steaming dog's blood, a popular Chinese remedy against magic, dressed in his vestments and ridiculed, and the characters "*chuanxie jiaoshi*" were

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Thomas Davitt, CM, "John Gabriel Perboyre, *Vincentiana*, vol. 6, issue 2 (October 1986): 223.

<sup>16</sup> See André Sylvestre, CM, *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre: Prêtre de la Mission, Martyr en Chine* (Moissac, 1994), 190-191.

<sup>17</sup> See Ferdinand Combaluzier, CM, Vincentian letters related to John Gabriel Perboyre, in *Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire* (1953): 253-254.



inscribed onto his face with an iron stylus.<sup>18</sup> At last, on December 11, 1840, the emperor ratified Perboyre's decree of punishment, and he was escorted to the execution ground where he was strangled with a chord that was tightened and released three times to prolong his agony. Chinese hagiographies note that his death occurred on a Friday, from noon to three P.M., to connect his death to Christ's Passion.<sup>19</sup>

Among the more curious aspects of the hagiographical narratives attached to Perboyre are the miracle accounts, and especially how his martyrdom miracles recorded in Chinese sources acquire a noticeable patina of ancient Chinese cultural tropes. In the anonymous biography of Saint Perboyre, *Life of Blessed John Perboyre*, published in 1894, we find quoted a Lazarist missionary's letter quoted, who writes that, "When the servant of God was martyred, a large cross, luminous, and very distinctly formed appeared in the heavens," and we are informed, presumably in anticipation of a formal cause for beatification, that this luminous apparition was witness by both "Christians and pagans."<sup>20</sup> This account appears in nearly all western accounts of Perboyre's death, including the Vatican's *Processus* and *Positio* compiled for his possible canonization, and several French hagiographies. The appearance of a luminous sign in the sky also figures in other Catholic martyrdom accounts in Chinese

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony E. Clark, *China's Saints: Catholic Martyrdom During the Qing (1644-1911)* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 163.

<sup>19</sup> Taiwan Roman Catholic Bishops Committee 天主教臺灣教區主教團, Eds. *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan* 中華殉道聖人傳 (Biographies of China's Martyr Saints) (Taipei 臺北: Tianzhujiao Taiwan jiaoqu zhujiaotuan 天主教臺灣教區主教團, 2000), 136.

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, *Life of Blessed John Perboyre, Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyred in China, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1840* (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1894), 256. Also see *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan*, 136.

sources; indeed, such signs already existed in Chinese lore long before Christianity had entered the Middle Kingdom.

Just before four Dominican missionaries were executed in 1747 for “disseminating heterodox teachings,” we are told in various sources that an apparition of light appeared in their prison cell.<sup>21</sup> The miracle happened while four Spanish friars were awaiting final news of their sentence from Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735-1796). Hagiographical accounts include an alleged witness of the phenomenon:

有一天，白主教和德神父，華神父三人；在念經的時候；監獄屋頂，忽然敞開，射出幾道火光；光雲一朵朵的徐徐下降，直到主教和神父的床邊；然後就升上。且自床邊透出一道光線，可以望見天空，真真美妙非常。

One day while Bishop Peter Sanz, OP, Father Francis Serrano, OP, and Father Joachim Royo, OP, were reciting their prayers, the prison roof suddenly opened. Rays of lights shot through and a brilliant cloud slowly descended down beside their beds. Then it rose up and turned into a beam of light that rose from beside their beds and could be seen in the sky. It was truly remarkable.<sup>22</sup>

In later Chinese narratives of Christian massacres during the Boxer Uprising (1898-1900), similar miracle accounts appear.

While twenty-six Catholics were being executed on July 9, 1900, in Taiyuan, the provincial capital of Shanxi, a group of nearly 200 faithful were gathered in prayer at a nearby church. A Chinese Catholic named Jia Luosa 賈羅撒 reported that:

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<sup>21</sup> See Clark, 78-81.

<sup>22</sup> *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan*, 78.

7月9日下午約四，五點鐘，我們正在念經，忽聞空中有美妙的秦樂聲，這樂聲從未聽過。在樂聲之處，出現了一潔白雲帶，由西南方向而來，漂往動方向。

On July 9, at around 4 or 5:00 pm, we were reciting our prayers when we suddenly heard a magnificent sound of music that came out of the sky, such that has never before been heard. A pure white stream of light shone forth from where the music was heard, which cam from the southeast and drifted toward the northwest.<sup>23</sup>

The recorded apparitions of light connected to the martyrdoms of the two Vincentian martyrs of China, and those of the Dominicans and Franciscans – who were also canonized in 2000 – conform to a long Chinese history of validating the distinctive significance of important persons. We see that as early as the second century B.C., Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145-186 B.C.) *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) contains similar examples. In his biography of Emperor Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 206-195 B.C.), Sima Qian writes that, “The First Emperor of Qin, repeatedly declaring that there were sings in the southeastern sky indicating the presence of a ‘Son of Heaven,’ decided to journey east to suppress the threat to his power.”<sup>24</sup> Beams of light and curious emanations in the sky frequently appear in Chinese

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<sup>23</sup> Testimonial of Jia Luosa 賈羅撒, quoted in Qin Geping 秦格平, *Taiyuan jiaoqu jianshi* 太原教區簡史 (Concise History of the Catholic Diocese of Taiyuan)(Taiyuan 太原: Catholic Diocese of Taiyuan 太原天主教教區, 2008), 321.

<sup>24</sup> Translated in Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty I*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 54. The original Chinese account can be located in Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) (Beijing 北境: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1982), 348.

texts before missionaries entered China during the Tang dynasty 唐代 (618-907), and Catholic hagiographies during the Ming 明代 (1368-1644) and Qing perpetuate this trope.

Perboyre's fellow Vincentian missionary in China, Jean-Henri Baldus, CM, (1811-1869), who was made a bishop five years after John Gabriel's death, voiced skepticism regarding the authenticity of the luminous cross report. In 1851, Baldus wrote of his doubts in a letter, wherein he notes the credulity of uneducated Chinese Christians, and adds that even European hagiographies share a, "taste for the wonderful and miraculous" that often "leads to exaggeration."<sup>25</sup> But in the end, Baldus doubted his own doubt enough to allow mention of the miraculous apparition in the narratives prepared for Perboyre's cause for beatification. Despite some persisting questions related to the accuracy of historical sources regarding Clet and Perboyre, their holiness and genuine concern for China and the work of the mission there is generally accepted. John Gabriel Perboyre was canonized a saint on June 2, 1996, and Francis Regis Clet was canonized on October 1, 2000.

Beyond recounting the lives and deaths of these two martyrs, my principal aim here is to trace the later footprints of those Catholic missionaries and pilgrims who followed in their tracks, and locate what signs remain today of Clet and Perboyre's Vincentian legacy in the Middle Kingdom. When the Maryknoll father, James A. Walsh, MM, (1867-1936), made his first tour of China in 1918, one of the highlights of his experience was his visit to the place where Clet and Perboyre were executed in Wuchang, near the banks of the Yangze River. In his lengthy memoirs, Walsh describes how an American Franciscan, Father Sylvester Espelage, OFM, (1877-1940) escorted him to the Qing dynasty execution ground (*shachang* 殺場) where the two Vincentians were strangled. He wrote: "Here on a slight

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<sup>25</sup> In Davitt, 227.

hillock we found the place where Blessed Perboyre was crucified, a place still used at times for executions.”<sup>26</sup> During a recent trip to China I learned that neither the Vincentians in Beijing nor the local Chinese priests of Wuhan/Wuchang were able to note the precise location of the old imperial execution ground where they died; I shall return to this problem shortly.

### **Vincentian Footprints Today:**

Only twelve years after Perboyre’s death in 1840, Vincentian missionaries were filing into China in increasing numbers. By 1852 twenty-five Lazarists served in China, and the Vincentian seminary in Beijing was training thirty-six seminarians, many of whom were native Chinese who were very aware of Clet and Perboyre’s examples of sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> The Congregation’s commitment to training native clergy, which largely distinguished it from other Catholic Orders, resulted in a large number of Chinese Vincentian priests and brothers who were placed throughout China just prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. According to statistics for 1936-1937, there were by then 260 major seminarians and 875 minor seminarians in China; 637 priests had been educated by the Lazarists in China, 450 of whom joined the Congregation.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, by the early-to-mid twentieth century the Vincentian presence in China had grown to considerable size, with three major centers: Beijing, Tianjin, and to some extent, Wuchang, where their was a growing Catholic sense that Clet and Perboyre were important local saints.

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<sup>26</sup> James A. Walsh, *Observations in the Orient: The Account of a Journey to Catholic Mission Fields in Japan, Korea, Manchuria, China, Indo-China, and the Philippines* (Ossining, NY: Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, 1919), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Maloney, CM, “Vincentians in China” (unpublished manuscript, 1999), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Noticeable Vincentian footprints remain in these three regions today, and more effort is needed to preserve what is left after the destructive Maoist era, from 1949 to 1976. In Beijing, the most eminent Vincentian person was the portly bishop of the North Cathedral, Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier, CM (1837-1905), who famously survived the brutal attacks against his church during the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and became an important local historian of Beijing.<sup>29</sup> The other Vincentian center in Beijing was the Lazarist seminary dedicated to Saint Vincent at Zhalan Cemetery, 柵欄墓地 where Matteo Ricci's, SJ, (1552-1610) tomb is located. Today all that remains of Saint Vincent's Seminary are two of the cloistered buildings, that are beside Ricci's tomb and the remains of a Marist convent. The old Vincentian seminary is called the "mouth" building, as its plan is shaped like the Chinese character *kou*, or 口 "mouth," and the Marist convent is identified as the "mountain" building, since it is shaped like the graph *shan* 山.<sup>30</sup> The Jesuit cemetery, Marist convent, and Vincentian seminary all now comprise the Beijing Communist Party School.

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<sup>29</sup> Favier maintained an active writing schedule while serving as Beijing's ordinary; indeed his book on the history and culture of Beijing remains one of the most useful scholarly sources available in this city's late-imperial past. See Alphonse Favier, CM, *Pékin: Histoire et Description* (Lille: Desclée, de Brouwer, 1902). His most famous published work, however, is his journal, which he kept during the Boxer siege against the cathedral from June to August, 1900. See Alphonse Favier, CM, *The Heart of Peking: Bishop A. Favier's Diary of the Siege, May-August, 1900*, ed. by J. Freri (Boston: Marlier, 1901).

<sup>30</sup> Two works provide a good summary of the history of Zhalan Jesuit Cemetery and associated Catholic building. See Lin Hua, ed. 林華, *Lishi yiben Li Madou ji Ming Qing xifang chuanjiaoshi mudi* 歷史遺痕利瑪竇及明清西方傳教士墓地 (Historical Traces of Matteo Ricci and the Ming-Qing Dynasties Western Missionary Tomb) (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe 中國人民大學出版社, 1994); and Beijing Administrative College,

As an historian what interested me most while tracing the Vincentian history of Beijing was the question of what happened to the materials of Saint Vincent's library during the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1966, Red Guards from a nearby architectural school attacked the cemetery and buildings with the intention of destroying all of the historic tombstones and structures, but according to official accounts an employee, "came up with the idea of burying the tombstones deeply under the slogan of 'forever buried, never stand up again'."<sup>31</sup> The Red Guards were assuaged, and the tombstones were buried beneath the ground and the buildings were left standing. After the Cultural Revolution, the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs ordered that the cemetery and buildings be restored, though the contents of the Vincentian seminary library were already gone. It is widely known that the Vincentian library at North Cathedral was relocated to the National Library of China, where they are still inaccessible without special permission; the library of Saint Vincent's Seminary, however, was divided and the location of its contents was mostly forgotten. After some inquiries I learned that a portion of the previous western language collection of the seminary has survived the Maoist era, and is now located in the new library of the Catholic Seminary of the Diocese of Beijing, 北京教區神哲學院 which began construction in 2001. Unfortunately, the old Lazarist books are not well catalogued and are rarely used, as the seminarians do not read French.<sup>32</sup>

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Eds., *History Recorded by the Stones: The 400 Year Story of the Cemetery of Matteo Ricci and Other Foreign Missionaries* (Beijing: Beijing Administrative College, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Beijing Administrative College, 89.

<sup>32</sup> For a concise history of the present Beijing seminary see, *Catholic Seminary of Beijing Diocese*, 北京教區神哲學院 (Beijing 北京: Diocese of Beijing 北京教區, 2004).

The second center of Vincentian activity before 1949 was the coastal city of Tianjin, where the famous Xikai Cathedral 西開教堂 (A.K.A., Saint Joseph's) was built by French Lazarists in 1913. Tianjin is where the celebrated Vincentian missionary, Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe, CM, (1877-1940), lived, and formed a small movement to liberate the Catholic community in China from foreign control. Lebbe and his Maryknoll friend, Anthony Cotta, MM, (1872-1957) were outspoken critics of European dominance in the China mission, and Frédéric became himself a Chinese citizen to better advocate for a more indigenous hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> The bishop's residence beside the church held one of China's finest western and Chinese-language Catholic libraries, and I visited Tianjin to verify rumors that much of the Vincentian library there remains intact.

In my most recent trip to Tianjin I met with the rector of Xikai Cathedral, Father Leo Zhang Liang, 張良神父 who, after some persuasion, granted me permission to conduct preliminary research on the history on what remains of the Vincentian library there, and produce an initial catalog of the library's present contents. By 1951 the European Vincentians were exiled from China as "imperialist counterrevolutionaries," and in haste they left behind their most precious books; the Chinese priests who remained had little time to attend to the rare books, photos, and documents of the library and archive. The bishop's residence was protected, however, until 1966, when Red Guards stormed the cathedral library and carried the most accessible books out onto the street and burned them in front of

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<sup>33</sup> See Jacques Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958). Father Anthony Cotta was a former Vincentian. The anonymously written and published Chinese work, *Lei Mingyuan yu Zhongguo* 雷鳴遠與中國 (Vincent Lebbe and China), is widely read today in northern China, and serves to inspire many Chinese Catholics.



the cathedral while chanting Maoist slogans. The radicals only took the first few shelves of books, however, which consisted mostly of bibles, which are less rare than the works they fortunately left behind.<sup>34</sup>

With the exception of the Red Guard destruction in 1966, the Vincentian library and archive at Tianjin has remained mostly locked and untouched since the foreign missionaries left in the 1950s, and the materials have suffered from dust, vermin, and mildew, and most of the shelves are beginning to collapse from long neglect. Based on a preliminary estimate of the library's contents, there are nearly 500 linear feet of books, more than 5,000 volumes, rare maps, and scattered documents left by the Vincentians in 1951. The library remains located on the original two floors of the bishop's residence, and is monitored by the cathedral's rector and the chairman of the Tianjin Catholic Patriotic Association. Among the materials still held there is a complete series of *Le Bulletin Catholique de Pékin*, a series of the *Annales des Franciscaines Missionnaires de Marie*, the annuals from the former Tianjin Vincentian school, Saint Joseph's, and a large number of books related to the Vincentian mission in China. Also of significance is the library's collection of Chinese-language Catholic materials, some dating to the late-imperial era.

Bearing in mind that Clet and Perboyre's memory still influences Catholic culture in Beijing and Tianjin, I also visited Wuchang, where Clet and Perboyre were martyred in 1820 and 1840. While in Wuhan, which now includes the former towns of Wuchang and Hankou, I was provided with the vicar general/cathedral rector's car and driver, and escorted to a

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Father Leo Zhang Liang 張良神父 at Xikai Cathedral, Tianjin, China, 26 October 2011.

location “believed to be near the old Qing execution ground.”<sup>35</sup> As the priests of Wuhan no longer know precisely where the execution ground was, they routinely send pilgrims or visiting scholars to what is presently a Catholic elderly residence in Wuchang, which is actually quite distant from the location where Clet and Perboyre were martyred. I thus began to interview the older residence of that neighborhood, and was recommended by everyone there to visit a certain woman, Gan Yulan, 甘玉蘭 who, as they informed me, was alive during the closing years of the Qing, and lived near the site of the *Qingchao shachang*, or “Qing dynasty execution ground” 清朝殺場. Based on extant sources we know that the execution ground was located near Lake Sha (*shabu* 沙湖), and not too far from Big Mountain (*bongshan* 洪山: this location is mistakenly identified in Western sources as “Red Mountain” because the name sounds similar – *bongshan* 紅山), where their graves were situated.<sup>36</sup>

Gan Yulan, who was too frail to accompany me, and was still constrained by bound feet, provided the exact location of Wuchang’s execution ground where Clet and Perboyre were strangled to death; the elderly residence at the location also confirmed the precise site of the *shachang*. The old execution ground is nestled within an area called Phoenix Hill (*Fenghuangshan* 鳳凰山), and is now obscured from view behind a tall apartment building; the current address is Wuhan, 武漢 Wuchangqu, 武昌區 Zhongshan Road, 中山路 Number

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<sup>35</sup> The vicar general/cathedral rector was Father Shen Guoan 沈國安; it was also Father Shen who informed me that the precise location of where Clet and Perboyre were executed is no longer known. Interview with Father Shen Guoan, St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Wuhan, China, 24 Monday 2008.

<sup>36</sup> For an extended Chinese account of Perboyre’s execution see *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan*, 132-238. The entry is under Perboyre’s Chinese name, Dong Wenxue 董文學.

313 三十三號. The door guard of the apartment complex was indeed enthusiastic in his recollections about the executions conducted there during the late-imperial era. The second matter I was interested in was the subsequent history of Clet and Perboyre's commemorative gravestones.

As was customary, their bodies remained briefly on display – Perboyre's corpse was not removed from its gibbet until the following day – and were taken by local Catholics for funerary services, and finally buried at Big Mountain (*bongsban* 洪山) and marked with memorial stelae. Later, their bodies were removed to the Lazarist Motherhouse (Maison-Mere) in Paris, which caused considerable consternation among the Chinese Catholic community that hoped to keep their bodies in China for veneration by the native Church. The gravestones were removed to the home of a local Catholic and their whereabouts was forgotten – or deliberately concealed – until after the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese bishop of Wuhan, Bernadine Dong Guangqing 董光清 (1917-2007), conducted a search for the commemorative stelae, and commissioned their restoration and installation at the Wuchang Huayuanshan Catholic Church and Seminary 武昌花園山天主堂神哲學院.<sup>37</sup> The monuments are presently displayed in the seminary courtyard near the central stature of Our Lady, and the seminarians routinely place flowers near the stelae and invoke the

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<sup>37</sup> See André Sylvestre, CM, *John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.: China's First Saint*, trans. John E. Rybolt, CM (Strasbourg: Éditions de Signe, 1996), 32. Bernadine Dong Guangqing was the first bishop ordained without a papal mandate, and was made bishop of the diocese of Hankou in 1958 by the Patriotic Catholic Association. He was appointed president of the Patriotic Catholic Association of Wuhan, vice president of the National Administrative Committee of the Chinese Catholic Church, and was a member of the Chinese University of Catholic Bishops.

intercessions of Clet and Perboyre. In an interview with Father Joseph Peng Xin, 彭新神父 a local priest, I was informed that local authorities are comparatively “strict” regarding Catholic activities in that diocese, and he noted that any visits to the stelae, and especially the location of Clet and Perboyre’s martyrdoms, should remain discrete, and should not involve more than one or two foreigners at a time.<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The former prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), once said that, “Martyrdom does not end something, it is only a beginning.” If you talk with Chinese Catholics in formerly Vincentian areas such as Beijing and Tianjin, or in Wuchang, where the blood of two Vincentian saints was spilled, they will often conjure Tertullian’s (ca. 160-225) adage that, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity.” Beijing’s North Church, once a Vincentian cathedral, is the largest and most active parish in the capital. The Diocese of Tianjin now boasts over 100,000 Catholics, and Xikai cathedral is rumored to be the largest parish in China. Local Catholics there note that the present growth of Catholicism in the city results principally from the witness of the more than sixty Tianjin martyrs of 1870, many of whom were Vincentian priests and nuns.<sup>39</sup> When I met with the seminarians in Wuchang, I was told that Saints Clet and Perboyre are effectively the spiritual fathers of Wuhan’s Catholic community.

In a speech given at the University of Chicago in 1933, the famous May Fourth intellectual, Hu Shi (1891-1962), once asserted that, “It is true that the Chinese are not so religious as the Hindus, or even as the Japanese; and they are certainly not so religious as the

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Father Joseph Peng Xin, Wuhan, 25 November 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See Maurice Collard, CM, *Les Martyrs de Tien-Tsin* (Paris: A. Giraudon, 1926).

Christian missionaries desire them to be.”<sup>40</sup> Hu’s remark was once considered prophetic, but is now widely touted an example of misguided pessimism regarding China’s ability to incorporate Christianity into its culture. There are still Vincentians in China today. The Our Lady of China Catholic community at Beijing’s British Embassy (Kerry Center) is pastored by a Vincentian, and now and then an old Chinese priest will let you know that he is, “a priest of the Mission,” and these Lazarists continues in the footsteps of their spiritual father, Vincent. In a letter to Louis Abelly (1603-1691), vicar general of Bayonne, Saint Vincent wrote what I think best describes the legacies left behind by Saints Clet and Perboyre: “Our Lord and the saints accomplished more by suffering than by acting.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Hu, Shi 胡適, *Zhongguo de wen yi fu xing* 中國的文藝復興 (The Chinese renaissance) (Beijing : Waiyu jiaoxue yanjiu chubanshe 外語教學研究出版社, 2001), 115.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to Louis Abelly, vicar General of Bayonne, 14 January 1640. In Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, Vol. 2. (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1989).