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Hagiography & Historicity: Li Wenyu's Quanhuo ji Account of the 1900 Siege of Beitang

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PAPER TITLE:

“Hagiography & Historicity: Li Wenyu’s *Quanhuo ji* Account of the 1900 Siege of Beitang”

PRESENTER:

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PAPER ABSTRACT:

By 1879 the Shanghai Jesuit, Li Wenyu, SJ, 李問漁 (1840-1911) had distinguished himself as one of Shanghai’s leading writers and editors; he had established both *Yiwenlu*, 益聞錄 Shanghai’s third newspaper, and the *Gezhixinbao*, 格致新報 the area’s most popular scientific journal. Less famous, though habitually consulted by historians of China’s turbulent Boxer era (1898-1900), was his protracted and hagiographic narrative of Boxer violence, the *Quanhuoji* 拳禍記. Li’s meticulous collection of witness testimonies and documentary materials recounting Boxer incidents remains an often-cited source in present historical research; this paper examines the historical reliability of his *Quanhuoji*, first published in 1905. Careful scrutiny of Li Wenyu’s narrative account of the Boxer siege of Beitang 北堂 demonstrates that his narrative, which he claimed was derived from the journal of the Lazarist bishop, Alphonse Favier, SJ, (1837-1905) was either highly embellished, or was based largely on unknown – and identified – sources. Few incidents in 1900 Beijing have attracted so much attention as the attack against Beitang (North Church), and this paper seeks to sift through the prevalent textual variances and apparent accretions that are discerned when Li’s narrative is compared to other primary sources.

Paper:

[SLIDE 1: Title Slide - Beitang]

* Publically acknowledge Fr. Claude Lautissier, CM, in Paris, who allowed me unrestricted access to many of the original documents and photographs used in this presentation.

[SLIDE 2: Ricci to Acquaviva] When the Jesuit missionary and proto-Sinologist, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), wrote to his confrere, Claudio Acquaviva (1453-1615), in 1608, he disclosed one of the defining traits of the Jesuit ethos in China. Ricci wrote: “And it is for this reason that I do everything, so that our Fathers study very well the books of China and learn how to compose in Chinese; for to tell the truth – which may be hard to believe – one accomplishes more in China with books than with words.”¹ Ricci was not alone among missionaries in his sense that reading and writing books were privileged activities in China; this became a defining feature of the entire Jesuit enterprise. [SLIDE 3: Jesuit Catalog of Missionaries] In the Society’s catalog of Jesuits living in China, produced in the late seventeenth century, five details are recorded about each person: 1) his year of arrival in China; 2) his Western name; 3) his native country; 4) his Chinese name; and 5) the number of books that he wrote.² By the late nineteenth century, both European and Chinese Jesuits had amassed and published several thousands of volumes, now held in European, American, and Chinese repositories, which are still today regularly consulted by scholars working on all eras of China’s literary and historical past.

In my paper I would like to consider a single work of one Jesuit, which has become one of the most often consulted sources of information on the turbulent events of

the Boxer Movement (1898-1900). Narrowing our purview on this one Jesuit publication exposes two features that permeate all Jesuit works printed during China's imperial era: first, that Jesuit texts – written by both European and Chinese Jesuits – were extremely detailed and academically rigorous by today's expectations; and second, that they are also infused with the missiological impulses derived from the desire to convert. Jesuit works produced after the Boxer era, during which nearly 30,000 Catholics perished, were laden with hagiographical details. The work I shall consider here is the *Quanhuo ji* 拳禍記 (Record of the Boxer Catastrophe), first published in 1905 at Shanghai's active Jesuit press at Xujiahui 徐家匯.

Li Di

[SLIDE 4: Li Wenyu/Li Di] The author of the *Quanhuo ji* was the Jesuit polymath, Li Wenyu, 李問漁 better known as Li Di 李欵 (1840-1911). Li was born in 1840 at Chuansha, 川沙 in what is now Shanghai's thriving Pudong District 浦東.³ He studied French, Latin, science, philosophy, and theology from Jesuit missionaries, and entered the Society of Jesus in 1862. After being ordained a priest in 1869, Li Di grew interested, like Ricci, in the enterprise of publication. [SLIDE 5: *Yiwen lu* and *Shengxin bao*] In 1879, he established Shanghai's first Catholic newspaper, the *Yiwen lu* 益聞錄 (News of Benefit), which published both religious and scientific articles. His most famous other periodical was the *Shengxin bao* 聖心報 (Sacred Heart Messenger), which he began in 1887 to provide more devotional and theological information to Shanghai's growing Catholic community. [SLIDE 6: Tushanwan x2 & Aurora College] For more than three decades, Li Di served as editor of numerous Jesuit periodicals, worked closely

with the Jesuit Tushanwan Printing House, 土山灣印書館 was the dean of Aurora College, 震旦學院 and published several works. His most widely read and collected book was this *Quanhuo ji*, now one of the most exhaustive accounts of the Boxer Uprising available.

The Boxer Uprising and Li Di's *Quanhuo ji*

In the wake of the Boxer era, the Superior General of the Jesuits, Luis Martín (1846-1906), dispatched two Fathers, one European and one Chinese, to collect records and testimonies related to Catholics who suffered during the violence of 1900. The Chinese Jesuit who assembled this information was Li Di, probably because he already had a wide network of Catholic connections in China, and was conveniently placed as one of the directors of Shanghai's Jesuit press.⁴ While diplomats initiated a campaign of revenge and missionaries sought reparations that further crippled the court's solvency, Li Di solicited testimonies and private diaries from those who witnessed the Boxer atrocities firsthand. [SLIDE 7: Two Editions of *Quanhuo ji*] The result was his *Quanhuo ji*, first published in 1905 as one volume in two sections, and again in 1909 as two separate volumes. Only the first edition contains illustrations in both sections.⁵ In order to analyze Li's methods of weaving his distinct sources into a single coherent narrative, I will look at the first section of his second volume, which recounts the dramatic two-month siege of Beijing's Beitang (北堂) by Boxers and imperial troops, from June 14 to August 16, 1900.

[SLIDE 8: Textual Layers of *Quanhuo ji*] By means of a little textual excavation we can discern three source layers in Li Di's account of the siege of Beitang: After a brief summary of the state of the Catholic mission in the Zhili Vicariate 直隸宗座帶牧區 (*Zhili zōngzuòdàimùqū*) just prior to the Boxer incidents of 1900, Li identifies his

principal two source as the diaries of Bishop Alphonse Favier (1837-1905), the French Lazarist who designed Beitang, and Bro. Jules-André (1863-1900), a French Marist who died during the siege on August 12. From page 3 to page 26, Li Di weaves together the daily records of Favier and Jules-André; pages 26 and 27 are supposedly from Favier's journal alone, since Jules-André was dead; and Li Di added supplemental materials from a Chinese priest who remained in Beitang during the siege, Fr. Mathias Wang 王瑪弟亞. These supplementary records occupy pages 27 to 38. In all, Li Di's *Quanhuo ji* constitutes the most complete Chinese record of what happened during the siege of Beitang, and functions still as our main source of information about this siege.

Source Variations in Li Di's Redaction

Before confronting the matter of historicity and hagiography in Li Di's redaction, it will be of some utility to mention some of the complexities of dissecting the *Quanhuo ji*'s source layers. Any arbitrarily selected entry from the text exposes what is a common occurrence throughout Li's narrative. [SLIDE 9: Favier/Original Favier Diary] The Paris archive of the Congrégation de la Mission, or the Lazaristes, contains what is identified as the original copy of Alphonse Favier's diary, which he wrote during the siege of Beitang.⁶ The first thing one notices is that it is written in comfortable Chinese, though obvious duress of the siege is detected in the large number of corrections. [SLIDE 10: Sample Passage – June 30, 1900] Favier's entry for the Sixth Month, Day 4, which corresponds to June 30, 1900, in the Gregorian calendar, serves to illustrate variances. Favier's original entry for this day consists of around 150 characters that are difficult to decipher, but are clearly different from what Li Di has recorded for that day.⁷ In contrast, Li's entry consists of only 21 characters, which recount the death of a European soldier

and the bombing of Rencitang: “The captain died from a wound. As night drew near, Boxers shot 21 volleys toward Rencitang, but there were no serious calamities” 隊長因傷去世。傍晚。匪向仁慈堂放二十一鎗。無大禍 (*Duìzhǎng yīn shāng qùshì. Bàngwǎn. Fěi xiàng Réncítáng fàng èrshíyī qiāng. Wú dà huò*).⁸ This is Li’s entire account of June 30.

[SLIDE 11: *Annales CM* – Favier Diary for June 30, 1900] When Favier’s journal was edited and published in the 1901 edition of the Lazarist journal, the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, the entry had changed once again. The journal, which alleges to publish the entirety of Favier’s diary – though now in French – is much longer than both the original Chinese version from 1900 and Li Di’s redaction in 1905. The diary entry for June 30th, published in 1901 is clearly expanded.

We were saddened in the morning by the death of poor Captain Joannic; we believed he was saved, but alas, gangrene set in his wounds and took him in a few hours! There is no physician or surgeon. He died a brave Breton, fortified with all the sacraments. At half past eleven, we were again bombarded; a dozen very large caliber bombs burst in the air without hurting anyone. After a quarter of an hour the barrage of cannonballs was accompanied by very heavy gunfire, which stopped quite suddenly: what does it mean? I saw about 20 people magnificently dressed at the white dagoba on mountain in the middle of the lake, twelve hundred yards away; we believe that Prince Tuan, the Empress, and other senior figures have come here to witness the bombing as a fireworks display. Our sailors had a great desire to send a fire burst from our Lebel’s at them, but I thought I should stop them so not to excite too violent a hatred. At half past five, we buried

the captain quickly in our garden as bullets rained mercilessly around our assistants. Our brave Christians are all saddened and say, “Why are we not dead instead of the brave sailor!”⁹

In both length and details, this French version of Alphonse Favier’s journal entry is much revised, and this type of modification is also common throughout the *Quanhuo ji* and related other works.

Historicity and Hagiography

The addition or omission of details as redactions are compiled does not necessarily draw suspicion to the accuracy of the accounts described in Li Di and Favier’s record of the siege of Beitang. In fact, historians are grateful especially for Favier’s 1901 expanded and revised narrative; more details facilitate better understanding. That said, Li Di’s account is overlaid with a patina of Catholic hagiography and embellishment that mostly does not appear in his sources. When on July 10 a cannonball landed on Favier’s bed and exploded only twenty minutes after he had risen from his nap, he called it “Another miracle!”¹⁰ [SLIDE 12: July 10, 1900] Li Di, on the other hand, amends his narrative with details that are more conspicuously miraculous. Li Di recounts that after no injuries resulted from a barrage of fire arrows and bullets swept over the cathedral, “The Missionaries displayed the fire arrows, bullets, and guns they had seized in front of the Blessed Mother; they did this to express their gratitude to her” 教士以所得火箭彈丸洋槍置聖母前。用表感之意 (*Jiàoshì yǐ suǒdé huǒjiàn dàn wán yáng qiāng zhì Shèngmǔ qián. Yòng biǎo gǎn zhī yì*).¹¹ Their safety through this attack is attributed Mary’s supernatural intercession – a detail omitted in Favier’s diary.

[SLIDE 13: July 19, 1900] Throughout his narrative, Li Di also highlights the

heroism of *Chinese* Catholics during the siege, whereas Favier tends to emphasize the courage of his fellow *Europeans*. Late in the evening of July 19, Li recounts: “In the middle of the night a Chinese Christian surreptitiously went out and set fire to the buildings near the church, destroying around thirty structures. He saw three Boxers sleeping, so he took their sabers and sent them to the Yellow Springs” 夜間教友潛出。縱火於近堂之屋。焚三十座左右。見拳匪三人。方睡。取其刀送之黃泉 (*Yèjiān jiào yǒu qián chū. Zònghuǒ yú jìn táng zhī wū. Fén sānshí zuò zuǒyòu. Jiàn quán fěi sān rén. Fāng shuì. Qǔ qí dāo sòng zhī huángquán*).¹² And on the night of July 20, the following day, more than thirty Chinese Christians went out of the Beitang complex to burn more surrounding building where Boxers were hiding. Concealing themselves among the ruins of nearby homes, these men lit fires to thirty additional houses and slipped into spaces next to the Boxers to spy to their discussions, all without losing a single person. Li Di writes that after they returned, “Everybody marveled at this” 眾人異之 (*Zhòngrén yì zhī*).¹³ These Chinese Catholics, he continues, lit fires while “angels protected them” 天神佑之也 (*tiānshén yòu zhī yě*).¹⁴

A notable willingness to martyrdom is also an attribute that Li ascribes to the Chinese who appear in his description of the Boxer incidents at Beijing. Under June 17, Li Di ostensibly draws from Bro. Jules-André’s journal to tell of a Catholic woman carrying her child into one of the city gates. Boxer guards routinely derived methods of discerning whether people entering the city were Christian; the woman was asked to reverence popular deities by making a kowtow toward the southeast. She refused to apostatize by performing this gesture, so the Boxer beheaded her and her child.¹⁵ One aspect that makes these accounts particularly noteworthy in the *Quanhuo ji* is that they

are often structured into poignant dialogues crafted to emphasize Catholic piety, and even more, they underscore that Boxer violence against Christians was committed *in odium fidei*, or “in hatred of the faith.” This latter characteristic would be useful when Church authorities sought to submit these martyrs for potential beatification and canonization.

On this note, we must recall that Li Di was a Jesuit priest who was educated in Shanghai by French Jesuits who taught in French and Latin. He not only had ready access to sources in Latin, French, and Chinese, but his *Quanhuo ji* reveals that he was, perhaps, most interested in employing his sources to promote the cause for sainthood of clergy and faithful related to the Jesuit mission in China. Alphonse Favier and his Beitang cathedral were attached to the Lazarist order, and we see an even more carefully nuanced and embellished narrative when Li discusses Boxer incidents in the Jesuit vicariate of Xianxian 獻縣宗座帶牧區 (*Xiànxian zōngzuòdàimùqū*). [SLIDE 14: July 20, 1900 – Léon-Ignace Mangin, SJ] When describing the death of his fellow Jesuit, Léon-Ignace Mangin (1857-1900), Li Di recalls a superhuman example of multitasking. After being fatally shot, and while bullets flew around him in an overcrowded and panicked church, and while hearing confessions and exhorting the Christians around him to remain calm, Li writes that Fr. Mangin also managed to, “keep hold of a statue of the suffering Jesus, recite the rosary, while also intoning the Rule of the Society of Jesus” 任手執耶穌苦像。暨念珠耶穌會規 (*Rèn shǒu zhí Yēsū kǔ xiàng, jì niànzhū Yēsūhuì guī*).¹⁶ Li Di clearly wanted to credit his fellow Jesuit with the herculean qualities suggestive of a future saint; history and hagiography are woven together into a typical Jesuit admixture of erudition and piety.

Conclusion

[SLIDE 15: *Quanhuo ji*, Favier, and Beitang] So, what precisely do I wish convey here? All of us who study China's past are in large measure indebted to the scholarly spadework undertaken by Jesuit Sinologists of the late-imperial era. Jesuits are, as far as I know, the only missionary society who prioritized publication as one of the central aims of their work in China. And, I know first hand how enormous and untapped the Jesuit collections of China-related materials remain today, especially in Rome. It is also helpful for scholars to be aware of the impetus behind all Jesuit publication in China. As Matteo Ricci wrote in his private journals, "who can doubt that this whole expedition of which we are now writing is divinely directed, since it is entirely devoted to bringing the light of the Gospel to souls."¹⁷ Li Di's redacted two-volume history of the Boxer era remains one of our best sources of information about the political and religious currents that propelled northern China into one of its most turbulent summers.

[SLIDE 16: Closing Slide] By dilating on Li's anthologized, embellished, and highly literary account of the 1900 Boxer siege of Beitang cathedral, we are able to better see how important it is for scholarly scrutiny of our sources. History and hagiography is rarely combined in today's intellectual community. Historians – including me – largely identify relevant passages and extract useful information for judiciously apprehending the events and trends that fuel the historical narrative, but we all know that historians wittingly or unwittingly conform to what Hayden White has termed "the historical imagination."¹⁸ In his preface to the second section of Li Di's *Quanhuo ji*, Li expresses his hope that his work "quietly pulls the lowly upward that they may ascend" 默為援拔 俾鄙升陟 (*mò wèi yuánbá bǐ bǐ shēngzhì*).¹⁹ In other words, Li Di never intended his work to function merely as a record of historical details; and in this sense he is an

inheritor of his Chinese predecessors, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BCE) and Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE).

Notes:

¹ Matteo Ricci, SJ, to Claudio Acquaviva, SJ, 8 March 1608. Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome (hereafter cited as ARSI). Thanks are due to Fr. Antoni Ücerler, SJ, for providing me with digital images of this source for my paper and presentation.

² See the Jesuit catalog of missionaries in China, “Catalogus omnium missionarium qui hactenus fuere in imperio sinarum,” late 17th century, ARSI, Rome. Thanks are due to Fr. Antoni Ücerler, SJ, for providing me with digital images of this source for my paper and presentation.

³ For a précis of Li Di’s life and publications see Chen Minghua 陳鳴華 and Huang Huiming, 黃慧鳴 Eds., *Lishi Shanghai de Xujiahui* 歷史上海的徐家匯 (The Historical Xujiahui of Shanghai) (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe 上海文化出版社, 2005), n. p.

⁴ The European Jesuit who collected materials and published on the Boxer Uprising was Pierre-Xavier Mertens, whose two most famous books are his *La légende dorée en Chine* (Paris: Editions Spes, 1926) and *Du sang chrétien sur le fleuve juane* (Paris: Editions Spes, 1937).

⁵ See Li Di 李欵 [AKA, Li Wenyu 李問漁], *Quanhuo ji* 拳禍記 (Record of the Boxer Catastrophe), 2 sections (Shanghai 上海: Tushanwan yinshuguan 土山灣印書館, 1905 [光緒31年, 1905-6]); and *Quanhuo ji* 拳禍記 (Record of the Boxer Catastrophe) and *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji* 增補拳匪禍教記 (Supplemental Catholic Record of Boxer Catastrophe), 2 Vols. (Shanghai 上海: Tushanwan yinshuguan 土山灣印書館, 1909).

⁶ Alphonse Favier, “Journal du Siècle du Pétang,” Congrégation de la Mission Archives Historiques (Paris), Carton 10, Pétang, Folder 10-15.

⁷ See Favier, “Journal du Siècle du Pétang,” p. 8, verso.

⁸ Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 14.

⁹ Alphonse Favier, “Siècle de la mission catholique du Pé-tang,” *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, vol. 66 (1901), pp. 94-95.

¹⁰ Favier, “Siècle de la mission catholique du Pé-tang,” p. 98.

¹¹ Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 17.

¹² Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 21.

¹³ Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 31.

¹⁵ See Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Li Di, *Quanhua ji*, section 2 (1905 edition), p. 150.

¹⁷ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583-1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 4.

¹⁸ See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁹ See Li Di, *Zengbu Quanfeihuo jiao ji*, p. vi.