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China Gothic: Indigenous' Church Design in Late-Imperial Beijing

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Presentation Paper

Panel: “The Invaluable Indegine: Local Expertise in the Imperial Context”
Paper Title: “China Gothic: ‘Indigenous’ Church Design in Late-Imperial Beijing”
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Abstract:

In 1887 the French ecclesiastic-cum-architect, Bishop Alphonse Favier, negotiated the construction of Beijing’s most extravagant church, the North Church cathedral, located near the Forbidden City. China was then under a semi-colonial occupation of missionaries and diplomats, and Favier was an icon of France’s *mission civilisatrice*. For missionaries such as Favier, Gothic church design represented the inherent *caractère Français* expected to “civilize” the Chinese empire. Having secured funds from the imperial court to build his ambitious Gothic cathedral, the French bishop enlisted local builders to realize his architectural vision, which consisted of Gothic arches, exaggerated finials, and a rose widow with delicate tracery above the front portal. Favier’s episcopal coat of arms featured the dominant figure of Michael the Archangel surmounting his vanquished adversary, represented by the serpent; the implication of this imagery was not overlooked by local Chinese whose national symbol was the auspicious dragon. Beijing’s new North Church was an architectural sign of the French Catholic ideal of the “Church Militant.”

Favier’s “civilizing” vision was difficult for his native builders to visualize, however, and what resulted was an admixture of Chinese temple design and a towering Gothic structure that unsettled native literati who understood the church to be an emblem of foreign imperialism. The Beijing historian, Yang Jingjun, has described Favier’s church as a “gothic construction that could not escape being prejudiced by Chinese design.” This paper examines how the “local expertise” of indigenous “untrained” builders resulted in China’s most compelling example of an “indigenous Gothic,” a monument to French nationalism that appears almost defeated by the native sensibilities of those who erected the edifice. One scarcely finds today a Chinese description of the cathedral that does not emphasize the Chinese characteristics of the church’s design that underscore the native tropes of its built heritage.

Paper:

[SLIDE 1: Title] In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson refers to European provincialism during the height of Western colonialism as an “unselfconscious provincialism,” that was, *a priori*, “accustomed to the conceit that everything important in the modern world originated in Europe.”¹ A dimension of this Western attitude that Anderson does not allude to in his study is the self-conscious and purposeful aim of missionaries, in collaboration with statesmen, to convert non-Western societies to European-ness through a forceful ecclesial presence. This deliberate schema of political and missionary conversion shared an equally devoted religiosity, one that in the French context held that French-ness, being the pinnacle of European-ness, was the principal “civilizing” influence on any non-Western society. [SLIDE 2: *la mission civilisatrice*]

During the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, French nationals comprised around seventy-five percent of China’s missionary population, and they, like their secular counterparts, were products of the ideal of *la mission civilisatrice*, which had become by the Third Republic (1870-1940) one of the bywords of French colonial expansion. [SLIDE 3: Alphonse Favier] Perhaps the most adamant and influential proponent of France’s “civilizing mission” in China was the Lazarist prelate and architect, Alphonse Favier, CM, (1837-1905) who lived in China from 1862-1905. Favier envisioned a Catholic China thoroughly infused with French aesthetics, especially the “superior” vestiges of French architecture. Whether the French conquest of China was political or spiritual, the common ambition of French diplomats and ecclesiastics was the “Frenchification” of the Middle Kingdom.

Our Lady of Victories

Let me conjure an image of this attitude before I consider how this ideal was manifest once indigenous builders were commissioned to realize a French vision through Chinese eyes and with Chinese hands.

[SLIDE 4: Our Lady of Victories] After an angry crowd attacked and destroyed an orphanage and church in Tianjin on June 21, 1870, the French minister and Church authorities negotiated the reconstruction of the missionary edifice. This church was named after the popular Parisian monument, Our Lady of Victories, which was itself commissioned by King Louis XIII (1601-1643) after his victory over Protestants at La Rochelle. Alphonse Favier was the architect of the restored Our Lady of Victories in Tianjin, paid for with reparation funds extorted from the local Chinese officials. Protected by a muscular display of gunboats and French gendarmes, and surrounded by a colorful appointment of French diplomats and Chinese mandarins, Alphonse Favier conducted the dedication of his newly-erected symbol of French civilization, about which he later wrote: “It seems that the government and Chinese officials have finally understood that their interest lay in loyally joining us for this ceremony of supreme reconciliation.”² Throughout his account of the dedication, Favier renders effusive accolades for the glory of the French Republic and the satisfaction of the native Chinese to be reconciled with this great European nation. Favier’s architectural monument served as an emblem of the French and Catholic ability to convert China to a more “refined and civilized” society, a conversion not bereft of the conspicuous pretense of a dozen gunboats to encourage acquiescence to this ideal.³

Beijing's Church of the Holy Savior – Beitang

It was in this context that Favier designed his Gothic cathedral to be built in the heart of Beijing, Gothic because for him the very vision of such an edifice on Chinese soil was expected to convert and civilize “backward” China. *La mission civilisatrice* imbued Alphonse Favier with an attitude that was realized in his architecture; the aesthetic supremacy of French design was assumed. In a letter to a fellow Lazarist in 1866, he described China’s indigenous architecture in these words: “In Beijing all the houses are ruined barracks, and the imperial palace looks like a huge cage made of wood and paper.” In contrast, he suggests that the local Chinese marvel at the “miracle” of the newly-erected European style missionary residence, which he reassures his confrere “would be unnoticed in France.”⁴ [SLIDE 5: Moerloose & Favier] Missionary architects such as Alphonse Favier and Alphonse De Moerloose, CICM, (1858-1932) designed churches for China in largely Gothic Revival and Romanesque styles, as if the Christian Gospel and Gothic style were somehow equally important to the project of engendering a Catholic China. The preparation of Moerloose was typical of the architectural training for missionaries headed to China; courses favored the ideas of Augustus Pugin (1812-1852), whose works had inaugurated the Gothic Revival movement, in which John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a principal participant.⁵ These missionary architects under this influence advanced the Gothic style as much for its alleged organic suitability with Roman Catholic liturgy as for its visual connection to European sensibilities.

[SLIDE 6: Old & New Beitang] As a result of *la mission civilisatrice*, when Bishop Alphonse Favier designed and built his cathedral in Beijing, his plan deliberately promoted a *caractère Français*, or innate “Frenchness,” in the spirit of the Beaux Arts

tradition. Favier's Beitang was in fact the second cathedral in Beijing with that name; the first was completed in 1703 inside the imperial city using funds provided by Louis XIV (1638-1715).⁶ Favier designed the new Beitang after the Empress Dowager, Ci Xi (1835-1908), decided to reclaim the old cathedral's location for imperial use in 1886.⁷ Even larger and more commanding than its predecessor, the new Beitang was dedicated in 1888 with lavish ceremony as the rite of consecration was performed and the French Tricolor raised above the new façade.⁸

[SLIDE 7: Map of Beijing & Plan of Beitang] The new Beitang was not only located close to the Forbidden City, which was already an unpopular proximity for the emperor and his court, but it was deliberately oriented on the same north-south axis as the Forbidden City, mimicking the cosmological symbolism of the emperor's imperial prerogative. The front entrance to both the plan of the Forbidden City and Favier's cathedral complex was oriented to the south, the direction toward which only the emperor was allowed to face. Favier's cathedral design actually violated the normative east-west orientation of Catholic church construction, intended to direct the liturgy of the Mass toward the east, toward the rising sun, the liturgical representation of the second coming of Christ. It would not have escaped his Chinese neighbors that Bishop Favier's design was essentially a reconstruction of a Catholic and French Forbidden City, though on a smaller scale. Beyond this deliberate orientation, the actual construction was intended to more closely follow French aesthetic culture, which was expected to function as a "civilizing" element over the imperial city.

[SLIDE 8: Beitang – Gargoyles, Portal, & Façade] Favier's design intentionally exaggerated the Gothic elements of the previous Beitang; he made the portals and

windows more noticeably Gothic, adding lavish ornament to accentuate its French *caractère*. The new Beitang's façade – in the shadow of China's political center – included most of the common components of a Gothic church:

1. Two towers flanking a tall gable ornamented with crockets.
2. An almost excessive number of finial capped pinnacles.
3. Arcades of finial topped trifol windows.
4. A comparatively heavy-framed, spoked rose window, though the usual center window image of Christ is missing.
5. Simple, undecorated archivolt above each of the façade's three portals.
6. Several niches.
7. And gargoyle drain spouts.

[SLIDE 9: Beitang Gargoyl and Window Gables with Crockets and Finial] While these elements are easily recognized, when one more closely observes the church façade and sides, he or she discovers that the crockets, finials, and gargoyles more closely follow Chinese temple design than those found in France. In the end, it is in the details that Chinese craftsmanship is discerned in the overall Gothic schema of the church's construction.

[SLIDE 10: Exterior & Interior of Favier's Private Chapel] Bishop Favier wanted to have a private chapel attached to the cathedral, so he added an apsidal chapel beyond the apse, accessible only from outside doors. Inside his small chapel, illuminated with several tall arched windows, Favier designed an elaborate ceiling. The fantastic curvilinear vaulting appears to derive from late-Gothic lierne vaulting, which also seems

to allude to Islamic ceiling styles that France would have discovered in its colonial enterprises in North Africa. Aesthetically very French, this was Favier's privileged escape from the cultural atmosphere of the cultural Other that surrounded the cathedral complex. The final result of Bishop Favier's "civilizing" Gothic church design for Beijing's cathedral was an imposing monument of French presence in China.

Not all French missionaries, however, shared Favier's appreciation for Gothic architecture. The Belgian Lazarist, Vincent Lebbe, CM, (1877-1940) for example, condemned the architectural imperialism latent behind Beitang's imposing Gothic façade that competed with the imperial Chinese structures of the capital's Forbidden City. In a letter of 1917, Lebbe wrote: "I was walking with some missionaries on Coal Hill, which is part of the Imperial Palace grounds, and from the pavilion at the top one can see the entire city. It looks wonderful – the towers, the temples, all with their upturned roofs. But in the center of this Oriental paradise there is an enormous eyesore. Frankly, it is hideous, not at all attractive. It is Beitang, . . . which is deliberately non-Chinese."⁹ Despite Lebbe's criticism of a Gothic church rising above the skyline of China's capital city, he nonetheless was influenced by *la mission civilisatrice*. He once said, "I gave myself to God in a French Order so as to make people love France as well as God."¹⁰ In this view, to love God was to love France.

While a small number of missionaries disdained what they perceived as a Roman Catholic monument of colonial France, the local Chinese Catholic community was in fact quite pleased with Favier's cathedral, and they viewed it as an architectural tribute to cultural hybridism.

The Admixture of the Indigene

The final manifestation of the cathedral is an admixture of the French aesthetic of *la mission civilisatrice* and the craftsmanship and tastes of the indigenous Chinese who were commissioned to realize Favier's architectural vision. Favier wanted to erect an elaborate Gothic façade that presented an impressive and lavishly ornamented Gothic interior once one entered the church.¹¹ What was finally built was a Sino-Western admixture of French Gothic with Chinese temple ornamentation. It is important to remember that this hybridism derives from the fact that the actual builders of Favier's French Gothic cathedral were indigenous persons with experience at building only Chinese structures, with Chinese techniques and Chinese materials.

[SLIDE 11: Chinese Builders Constructing a Catholic Church in "Jehol"/Rehe 熱

河 Province, now divided into Inner Mongolia and Liaoning] Beitang's Gothic elements

were accomplished by Chinese workers, who, we have evidence to believe, were begrudgingly employed by the French missionaries who contracted them. In a 1926 missionary handbook on church construction published in China, *Le missionnaire constructeur, conseils-plans* ("The missionary builder: advice and plans"), native craftsmen are described with pejorative undertones. Chinese workers are capable of building a Western construction, the book informs, "on the condition that they are monitored." Even under French supervision, the book continues to note that the quality is only "more or less" well done.¹² The Chinese character, the text warns, has "a crafty conscience and is especially easy to make a promise."¹³ [SLIDE 12: Beitang & Its Two

Chinese Pavillions] What the booklet does not do, however, is criticize the skills of

Chinese craftsmen at building structures in their own native style, which the builders of Beitang did more than any other known “Western-style” church in China. Beitang is unique in its hybrid mixture of Sino-Franco design.

[SLIDE 13: Beitang’s Terrace & White Marble Balustrade] Chinese critics appreciate the presence of a traditional Chinese terrace (*yuetai* 月台) in front of the three portals and two yellow-roofed pavilions (*tingzi* 亭子) containing memorial stélé flanking the Gothic façade. The terrace balustrade (*langan* 欄杆) was made with an indigenous Chinese stone called *baiyushi*, 白玉石 or “white marble.”¹⁴ Qinghua University architectural historian, Zhang Fuhe, calls these Chinese elements a “strong contrast to the church’s Gothic form.”¹⁵ Zhang Youping, in his study of Beijing architecture, states plainly that, “. . . since Chinese materials were used and Chinese workers built it . . . when you look at [Beiting] one perceives its Chinese-ness.”¹⁶ In fact, one might argue that many Chinese scholars today view the cathedral architecture to be more “Chinese” than “French Gothic,” merely by the fact that Chinese workers erected the building with Chinese materials; the ideal of *la mission civilicatrice* is largely lost on local observers, who often see Chinese architectural mores as the more “civilizing” influence. One scarcely finds today a Chinese description of Favier’s Beitang that does not emphasize the Chinese characteristics of the church’s design that underscore the native tropes of its built heritage.

The Enduring and Awkward Legacy of *La Mission Civilicatrice*

[SLIDE 14: Shanghai's St. Ignatius & Guangzhou's Sacred Heart Cathedrals] The legacy of *la mission civilicatrice* has left China's landscape punctuated with soaring testaments of France's colonial ambitions. Secular and ecclesial forces, suffused as they were with French nationalism, arrayed themselves against China's traditional culture to transform it into an outpost of French Catholicism. Gothic cathedrals emerge from the centers of Shanghai and Guangzhou; these French monuments of the "civilizing mission" are actually now the oldest structures in areas once predominated by classical Chinese buildings. Chinese modernity has replaced France's missionary enterprise. In the wake of so many new buildings in China, buildings cheaply made that have collapsed in recent tragic earthquakes, Chinese architects have been inspired by the sturdy construction of Western church design. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) once wrote that, "We always pay dearly for chasing after what is cheap." With this in mind, church builders in China have continued to design in a predominantly Western style, although as time passes from the era of missionary architects such as Alphonse Favier, Chinese perceptions of Western church design have changed.

[SLIDE 15: Hebei Catholic Seminary - Shijiazhuang] Some might disagree with local Chinese architects who designed Hebei's Catholic seminary at Shijiazhuang; these builders identify the façade of their new seminary as "Gothic." This curious fusion of disproportionate Gothic elements, with the intended or unintended addition of four Islamic-inspired minarets, exemplifies a growing number of churches in China that represent a quilt work of architectural styles – more specters of a Gothic past than genuine re-presentations of what remains of *la mission civilicatrice*.

[SLIDE 16: End] Edward Said (1935-2003) once said in an interview that, “Every empire . . . tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.”¹⁷ Alphonse Favier, like his French confreres, held the firm conviction that the best way to “liberate” the indigenous Chinese was to erect Gothic churches high above them, to raise their gaze upward toward the Cross of the Church and the flag of France.

Notes:

- ¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), xiii.
- ² Alphonse Favier, Beijing (25 June 1897), in *AnnalesCM*, Vol. 63 (1898): 80.
- ³ See Ernest P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.
- ⁴ Alphonse Favier, Beijing (10 July 1866), in *AnnalesCM*, Vol. 32 (1867): 314-315.
- ⁵ For a study of Alphonse De Moerloose, see Thomas Coomans and Wei Luo, "Exporting Flemish Gothic Architecture to China: Meaning and Context of the Churches of Shebiya and Xunhua Built by Missionary-Architect Alphonse De Moerloose in 1903–1906," *Relicta*, Archeologie, Monumenten- en Landschapsonderzoek in Vlaanderen, vol. 9 (2012): 219–62. For Pugin's influence on Ruskin, see Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, ed., *From the Classicists to the Impressionists: Art and Architecture of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Anchor, 1966), 117–18.
- ⁶ See W. Devine, *The Four Churches of Peking* (Tianjin: The Tientsin Press, 1930), 46.
- ⁷ Zhang Fuhe 張復合, Ed., *Beijing jindai jianzhu shi* 北京近代建築史 (A History of Beijing's Modern Architecture) (Beijing 北京: Qinhua daxue chubanshe 清華大學出版社, 2008), 44.
- ⁸ Zhang Fuhe, *Beijing jindai jianzhu shi*, 44. Also see Devine, *The Four Churches of Peking*, 184.
- ⁹ Vincent Lebbe, correspondence 8 September 1917, in *Lettres du Père Lebbe*, Eds. Paul Goffart and Albert Sohier (Tournai: Casterman, 1960), 46.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe*, Trans. by George Lamb (New York: Sheed & Ward), 36-37.
- ¹¹ See Devine, *The Four Churches of Peking*, 184–185, and Joseph A. Sandhaas, S.V.D., *Catholic Peking* (Beijing: The Catholic University Press, 1937), 14–17.
- ¹² Anonymous, *Le missionnaire constructeur, conseils-plans* ("The missionary builder: advice and plans") (Xianxian Prefecture: Society of Jesus Xianxian Vicariate, 1926).

Quoted in Thomas Coomans, “A pragmatic approach to church construction in Northern China at the time of Christian inculturation: The handbook ‘*Le missionnaire constructeur*,’ 1926,” *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, Vol. 3 (2014): 101.

¹³ Anonymous, *Le missionnaire constructeur, conseils-plans*, 12 and 21. Also see Coomans, “A pragmatic approach to church construction,” 101.

¹⁴ See Zhang Fuhe, Ed., *Beijing jindai jianzhu shi*, 44.

¹⁵ Zhang Fuhe, Ed., *Beijing jindai jianzhu shi*, 44.

¹⁶ Zhang Youping 張幼平, *Beijing jindai jianzhu* 北京近代建築 (Beijing 北京:

Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe 中國建築工業出版社, 2007), 35.

¹⁷ “Blind Imperial Arrogance,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 2003.