

11-2012

Recovering China's Past: Missionary Photographs of Late-Imperial and Republican China in Western Archives

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Anthony E., "Recovering China's Past: Missionary Photographs of Late-Imperial and Republican China in Western Archives" Whitworth University (2012). *History Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 12.
<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty/12>

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**HANGZHOU SYMPOSIUM ON SINOLOGY AND SINO-FOREIGN
CULTURAL RELATIONS AND EXCHANGES**
(2012 Symposium at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou) Nov. 14-16, 2012

PAPER TITLE:

“Recovering China’s Past: Missionary Photographs of Late-Imperial and Republican China in Western Archives”

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PAPER ABSTRACT:

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, once wrote that, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” And Confucius noted: “Study the past if you would define the future.” Thus, to effectively prepare for the future, the past must be recovered, and among the most untouched sources of China’s late-imperial and Republican Era history are the many Western missionary archives, which contain large repositories of important imagistic history of Chinese persons and culture – political, artistic, religious, architectural, and scientific. This paper approaches historical questions regarding Sino-Foreign cultural relations and exchanges by exploring how missionary photographs help us better understand China’s long association with Western missionaries, especially in the realms of cultural and religious interchange. While there are an increasing number of scholars who are interested in what missionary archives provide in the area of textual history, too few have conducted an exhaustive inventory of which archives hold large collections of historical images, especially images that center on the more diurnal aspects of the lives of common Chinese. Using selected examples of historic photographs, this paper offers a preliminary overview of the photographic

collections held in six Catholic missionary archives: the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in Rome, Jesuit Archives in Rome (ARSI), China Province Jesuit Archive in Taipei (CPJA), Franciscan Archives in Rome (ACGOFM), Taiyuan Diocese Archive 太原教區檔案館 in Shanxi (TDA), and the comprehensive collection of the Maryknoll Mission Archive in New York (MMA). Aspects of the Sino-Foreign exchange narrative can be discerned from these historic photographs, foremost, that the relationship between missionaries and native Chinese appears to have been more affable than is often emphasized in scholarly works. Photographs suggest that common missionaries and common Chinese developed strong and abiding friendships, despite tensions between national leaders. Among the collections discussed in this paper are the some 600 plates produced by the Italian missionary, Leone Nani, PIME, (1880-1935) who extensively photographed aspects of late-imperial and Republican Era China: soldiers, magistrates, men, women, rich, poor, children, and the elderly. Nani's photographs were so moving that many were later published in newspapers and featured in European exhibitions. The photographic collections discussed in this paper provide an extraordinary testimony to the lifestyles of China at a time of transition.

Talk Outline:

- I. *[SLIDE 1: Title – Maryknoll Archive Photograph]* My talk today will be about the preservation accessibility of our shared history – China and the West,
 - a. The Tang emperor, Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-649), famously asserted, “Using the past as a mirror, one can understand what later arises” 以史為鏡，可以志知興替。
 - i. What better mirror of the past do we have than photographs?
 1. One of the manifest benefits of using photographs to study the history of Sino-Western, or Sino-Missionary, relations is that we can check what has been written against what has been photographed.
 - b. Some important intellectuals of the May Fourth period 五四運動 (May 4, 1919), such as Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1888-1927) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), turned to Western intellectual concepts such as Marxism during this era of transformation, while also lamenting China’s so-called “century of humiliation” under Western imperialism.
 - c. Others, such as Hu Shi (胡適 1891-1962) *[SLIDE 2 – Lu Zhengxiang]* and the much understudied Chinese representative at the Treaty of Versailles, Lu Zhengxiang 陸徵祥 (1871-1949), were less convinced by Marx’s dialectic of materialism.
 - i. Thinkers such as Hu Shi and Lu Zhengxiang sought an alternative view of Sino-Western history.

1. What all of these intellectuals shared in common, however, was an abiding realization that both China and the West were forever transformed after the Opium Wars 鴉片戰爭 (1839-1842), the collapse of the Qing dynasty 清朝 (1644-1911), and the massive influx of foreign powers into China during the Republican Era 中華民國 (1911-1949).
2. Note the little-known fact that Lu Zhengxiang became the first Chinese person to be an abbot of a Catholic monastery – in Europe.
 - a. Lu, was from Zhejiang, 浙江 and served as China's Premier twice, leading China's peace delegation to Versailles in France, in 1919.
 - i. Lu Zhengxiang was a patriotic Chinese who defended China against unfair demands made on China by Japan at Versailles.
 - b. Lu became a devout Roman Catholic and was ordained a priest in 1935.
 - i. He was appointed the abbot of the Abbey of St Peter in Ghent in 1946, and became the first Chinese abbot of a Catholic monastery.¹

¹ While some scholars seem to relegate Lu Zhengxiang's life to only his diplomatic service, his religious activities constitute a much larger portion of his life. Abbot Lu Zhengxiang once wrote: "Europe's strength is found not in her armaments, nor in her

- c. These rare photographs of Abbot Lu are held in Catholic archives in Belgium.

II. I would like to begin, however, with a modest scholarly suggestion; when we discuss the history of China's long relationship with the West, it serves to emphasize that the predominant interaction China had with the West before 1949 was less political than religious.

- a. [SLIDE 3: Zongli Yamen & PIME Missioners with Local Officials (in Shaanxi? – ca. 1910)] Both texts and photographs reveal there were far more Western missionaries in China than diplomats, and records demonstrate that the Qing's Zongli Yamen 總理衙門 interacted more with Catholic and Protestant representatives than political diplomats.

- i. I suggest that when discussing the history of Chinese-Western relations during the Qing and Republican eras we might more often be referring to Sino-Missionary relations 中西傳教交流 than more broadly, Sino-Western relations 中西文化交流.

- 1. After all, the Qing dynastic rulers were themselves profoundly religious, committed to Tibetan Buddhism.

- a. As the Qing scholar, Pamela Kyle Crossley points out in her history of the Manchus, scarcely an action was taken by the Qing court that was not

knowledge: it is found in her faith. Observe the Christian faith. When you have grasped its heart and its strength, take them and give them to China.” Dom Pierre-Célestin (Lu Zhengxiang Collection, in the Benedictine monastery of Sint-Andries in Bruges, Belgium.

accompanied by lamaist rites.²

b. In fact, Qianlong decided to make Beijing the, “spiritual capital of the lamaist realm,” and Tibetan Buddhism was “enshrined in in various temples closely linked with the imperial family.”³

ii. In any case, much, if not most, of the materials related to China’s late-imperial and Republican era Sino-Missionary history, and indeed much of its Sino-Western political history, is held in Western missionary archives in Europe and the United States.

III. [SLIDE 4: *Scope of This Paper – (L) Fr. Anselm, SVD, ca. 1910; © Catholic church at Rongxian, 1942*] I’ll focus today on the collections of historical photographs of Catholic missionary activities in China from the late-Qing (1890s) until the end of the Republican era (1949).

a. Historians regret the fact that many of the buildings, and the certainly most of the people, of this era are gone, and can only be visually seen today in historical photographs and in some rare remnants of film.

i. We have an abundance of textual sources related to China’s late-imperial and Republican periods, but images bring these narratives more vividly to life.

ii. In addition, images can sometimes function as a corrective to historical events that some historians have misrepresented. For

² See Pamela Kyle Crossley, *The Manchus* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

³ Crossley, 113.

example, photographs suggest that relationships between Western missionaries and local officials and native Chinese were more friendly and cooperative than has often been insinuated.

- b. *[SLIDE 5: List of Archives with China Photographs – (L) Jesuit Archive in Rome, St. Peter's behind]* For the sake of time, I shall only consider examples of what is held in the Photographic collections of six Roman Catholic mission archives, each one containing large numbers of historic images of late-imperial and Republican China.
 - i. Many of these missionary orders entered China long before the advent of photography, so they were among the first to take photographs of China and preserve them once the camera had been invented.

IV. PIME Archive (Rome)

- a. Tucked away in a Roman neighborhood in Italy is the Motherhouse and archive of the *[Slide 6: PIME Archive, Rome – probably a local warlord in Shaanxi after 1912]* **Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME)**, formerly called the Pontifical Seminary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul of Rome, founded by Pope Pius IX (r. 1846–1878) in 1868.⁴
 - i. The PIME mission to China began in 1885, under its older name, and centralized its work in South Shaanxi.

⁴ For a general précis of the PIME mission to China see, R. G. Tiedmann, *Reference Guide to Christian Missionary Societies in China from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2009), 36-37.

ii. In addition to historical photographs of its earliest missionaries, including the Boxer Era (1898) martyr, Alberico Grescitelli, PIME, 郭西德 (1863-1900) perhaps the most substantial collection of photographs at the PIME archive includes those taken by the Italian missionary and photographer, Leone Nani, PIME (1880-1935).

1. Father Nani lived in China from 1904 until 1914, and took several hundred photographs, mostly of southern Shanxi, where he was stationed.⁵

a. Altogether there are more than 600 plates in the Nani collection, and they provide a unique photographic record of China during its turbulent transition from empire to Republic.

b. *[SLIDE 7: Nani with camera, Republican officer, and cathedral – and the cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul]* Even though Nani was a missionary, most of his photographs of China concern aspects of daily life in China, as well as images of shifting political realities, such as the transition of imperial to Republican authorities and militaries in his area.

i. Very few people had cameras in Shaanxi at

⁵ Clara Bulfoni and Anna Pozzi, Eds., *Lost in China: The Photographs of Leoni Nani*, trans. Rhoda Billingsley and Adrian Hartley Cook (Milano: Skira, 2003), 21.

that time, so his photographs provide a visual history of people and lifestyles that would otherwise have been lost.

- ii. In this slide we see a photograph of Father Nani shortly after his arrival in China with his camera, a Republican officer (a safety pin functions as his collar button), and the PIME cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul.

c. *[SLIDE 8: Nani in magistrate's regalia and Chinese frock]* In these two images we see evidence of a very problematic custom during the final years of the Qing; Nani is wearing standard Chinese attire, as well as the regalia of a Chinese official.

- i. Catholic missionaries were often granted official rank, and thus occupied a parallel court system in Qing China.
- ii. This generated substantial tension on the local level, as foreign Catholic missionaries were viewed as privileged protectors of Chinese Christians, who were believed to sometimes rely on foreign influence to escape legal judgments.

1. The missionaries accepted official

posts for a good reason, however, since most Christians were too poor to pay the required bribes for food and bedding in prison; missionaries with titles could more easily protect Christians from having to pay bribes.

V. ARSI Archive (Rome)

- a. *[SLIDE 9: ARSI Archive in Rome – Jesuit at Zhaoqing in a Buddhist cave, where Matteo Ricci was during the Ming]* One of the larger collections of rare photographs of imperial China is housed at the **Jesuit Archives in Rome (ARSI)**, which preserves documents and images connected with the Jesuit mission to China, which began in 1583, and was among the largest Christian missionary enterprises in China in the imperial and Republican eras.⁶

- i. One of the manifest strengths of this archive is its collection of photographs from the turn of the century, especially images related to the Jesuit mission just prior to the Boxer Uprising in 1900, 庚子年的義和團運動 and photographs of the Jesuit mission at Xujiahui in Shanghai.

1. *[SLIDE 10: Andlauer; Zhujiahe images after Boxer attacks]* These are rare images of Father Modeste Andlauer, SJ, (1847-1900), who was killed by Boxers

⁶ See Tiedmann, 40-42.

while saying Mass at Wuyi, Hebei; and the church at Zhujiahe Village, Hebei, after Qing troops and Boxers attacked the village.

a. Zhujiahe was the largest massacre of Christians in China during the Boxer Uprising – 3,000 Chinese Catholics were killed and two foreigners.

i. The Jesuits took a large number of photographs to preserve this history – they are difficult to find outside of missionary archives in Europe.

1. The bottom right slide shows the human remains after the attack.

b. *[SLIDE 11: Xujiahui, Shanghai - (TL) 1933 ZKW ordinands; (BL) 1940 ordination; (R) first Mass]* Here we have images of Chinese priests at their ordination in Shanghai in 1933; an ordination at St. Ignatius church (presently the cathedral) in Shanghai, 1940; and a Chinese priest serving his first Mass in Shanghai.

i. Among the historically important details the photographs from Xujiahui reveal is the very large number of Chinese priests who were educated and ordained in Shanghai during the Republican Era, which some scholars have suggested helps explain how the Catholic Church in China was able to perpetuate itself after foreign missionaries left China around 1951.

VI. CPJA Archive (Taipei)

- a. *[SLIDE 12: Jesuit Archive in Taipei – Jesuit on the 神道 to the Ming tombs, ca. 1930s]* Another Jesuit archive containing historical images from the China mission is the **China Province Jesuit Archive in Taipei (CPJA)**, which was relocated from Mainland China to Taipei, Taiwan shortly after 1950.
- b. The largest mission in China in 1950 was the Jesuit mission in Shanghai, and when they left China they brought their photograph collection to Taiwan, where it is held today.
 - i. Thus, the Taipei Jesuit Archive contains a very large number of photographs of Catholic activities in Shanghai and the neighboring Jesuit basilica at Sheshan.
 1. *[SLIDE 13: Frs. Xu Guangrong, Jin Luxian, and a Marian Crowning at Sheshan]* On this slide we see two Chinese Jesuit priests of Shanghai, Father Xu Guangrong, SJ, and Father Jin Luxian, SJ, the current bishop of Shanghai (taken at his 50th birthday party at Shanghai); the image to the right is of a Marian crowning at Sheshan basilica in 1942.
 2. Also held in this archive are a large number of photographs of the Jesuit mission in Taiwan.

VII. ACGOFM Archive (Rome)

- a. *[SLIDE 14: ACGOFM Archive in Rome – Franciscans in Shaanxi, ca.*

1930s] My current research is on the Franciscan mission in Shanxi, so I have spent a considerable amount of time at the **Franciscan Archives in Rome (ACGOFM)**, which keeps historical photographs of the Franciscan mission to China.

- i. The Franciscan mission to China began in in the thirteenth century with the mission of John of Montecorvino, OFM, 孟高維諾 (1247-1348).⁷
 - ii. This makes the Franciscans the first Catholic order to enter China, and even in the early modern era it remained one of the largest and most active groups of missionaries in China.
- b. The archive in Rome holds a large number of historical images from remote areas in Shanxi and Shaanxi, where the friars and nuns established churches, hospitals, schools, and orphanages.
- c. *[SLIDE 15: Bishops Fogolla and Bishop Oderic Cheng]* This slide features two famous Franciscan Bishops, Francesco Fogolla, OFM, (1839-1900) (left) and Oderic Cheng Hede, OFM, (right).
- i. In the left image we see Bishop Fogolla, who was killed by Boxers in Taiyuan, with a group of Chinese Christians who travelled with him to Europe in 1897; the right image is of Oderic Cheng, a Chinese Franciscan bishop.

1. Images such illustrate well that there by the Republican era

⁷ See Tiedmann, 26-31. And for the Capuchin branch of the Franciscans see, Tiedmann 31-32.

a growing number of China's Catholic bishops were Chinese.

ii. *[SLIDE 16: Franciscan churches in China]* Also in the Franciscan archive is a number of photographs of Franciscan churches built in Shanxi and Shaanxi, most of which were either destroyed in 1900 or later in 1966.

1. The photographs of churches in Shanxi show that Shanxi Catholics have preferred Western style church architecture; the churches built in the last ten years in Shanxi have also been modeled after Western churches.

a. One recent church is a massive reproduction of the Paris church, Sacre Coeur.

VIII. TDA Archive (Taiyuan)

- a. *[SLIDE 17: Taiyuan Diocesan Archive – Taiyuan cathedral, ca. 1910-1920]* The Franciscan mission also kept archival collections in each of diocese, or vicariate, under Franciscan management, and the **Taiyuan Diocese Archive 太原教區檔案館 in Shanxi (TDA)**, which was recently discovered in old boxes at the Shanxi Provincial Archive, 山西省檔案館 is one of the very few Catholic archives that has partially survived.
- b. The principle holdings of this archive are Western-language documents, mostly in Italian and Latin, from the late Qing until 1949, but there are important images there that tell us much about the Franciscan mission in Shanxi.

- i. *[SLIDE 18: Fr. Zhao, Boxer monument, martyrs]* Among the images preserved in Taiyuan are photographs related to the Catholics who died in Taiyuan in 1900.
 - 1. This slide features Father Zhao Yuqian 趙毓謙 (possibly OFM, 1836-1900) (left), who died in 1900; a group photograph of the Franciscans in Taiyuan taken before their deaths; and the monument erected in 1901 to commemorate the Christians who died during the summer months of 1900.
- c. There are other photographs in the archive taken after 1949 (some from the time of the Cultural Revolution), but the images in Taiyuan are not well catalogued, and as Catholics in Taiyuan age and die there are fewer living people who can identify the subjects of the photographs in the collection.

IX. MMA Archive (Ossining, NY)

- a. *[SLIDE 19: Maryknoll Motherhouse, Ossining, NY; Fr. Walsh and MM missionaries in China]* The largest and best-preserved photographic archive of the China mission I am aware of is the considerable collection in America's **Maryknoll Mission Archive in New York (MMA)**.⁸
 - i. Few archives contain more images of people than the Maryknoll archive in Ossining, New York, and one of the strengths of this collection is its assembly of photographs of native Chinese priests

⁸ See Tiedmann, 22.

and nuns, though the Maryknoll archive also has many images of European and American bishops in China.

1. *[SLIDE 20: Fr. Zee and Bishop Zanin]* The Chinese priest on the left in this slide is identified as “Father Zee” (in his jijin hat), and the right photograph shows the famous archbishop, Mario Zanin, who was very well-known for his love of China and the Chinese people.
- b. *[SLIDE 21: Maryknoll nuns]* Charity and service are among the most common themes depicted in the Maryknoll photographic archive: photographs of the nuns are especially numerous because they were displayed in the United States for fundraising efforts.
- c. *[SLIDE 22: friendship – MM priest and friends]* Perhaps one of the most important historical details we can learn from the images at the Maryknoll archive is that the relationship between missionaries and Chinese during the Republican era was based more on friendship than conflict; among the most common themes in Maryknoll photographs is the theme of friendship.

X. Catholic Mission Archives and Local Chinese History

- a. *[SLIDE 23: Local History – Images of Hangzhou – Republican Era]* I would like to turn now to one last aspect of Catholic missionary archives that can be helpful to researchers – that is, images related to local history.
 - i. To take one example: within the archives I have mentioned there are scattered examples of Roman Catholic activities in Hangzhou,

Zhejiang.

1. While perusing these archives I was able to locate several rare photographs related to Hangzhou.
2. *[SLIDE 24: Sisters of Purgatory, Hangzhou]* Few historians today are aware of China's important late-Qing movement to create Chinese-only orders of Catholic nuns – this image features the Chinese convent of the Sisters of Purgatory 煉獄會會院修女 in Hangzhou (This image dates to 1913).
3. *[SLIDE 25: Fr. William Fraser & Westlake]* This slide features two images: a photograph of Fr. William Fraser taken at Hangzhou in 1909, and an image of West Lake taken at Westlake around the same time.
 - a. Many photos such as this one of Westlake at the end of the Qing were taken by Western missionaries, and can be found in Western archives.
4. The remaining challenges of locating images related to local histories in China relate to two persistent obstacles:
 - a. First, accessibility to these archives is very expensive.
 - b. Second, the historical photograph collections at these archives are still not well organized.
5. One of the urgent needs today is to locate competent

scholars who can help to categorize these images, and perhaps even help digitize them so that scholars anywhere will be able to access them online.

XI. Confronting History Through Images

- a. One of the most important goals of historical research is to represent (*re-present*) the past as unembellished as possible.
 - i. The historian must be accurate, and images often help us gain a more precise picture (pun intended) of the past than can be gained through only textual sources.
- b. One challenge historians sometimes face is understanding what some textual descriptions actually suggest, especially when they describe places or people, such as in late-imperial travelogues.
 - i. An example of how archive photos help the historical process is a passage from the travelogue of the Shanxi literatus, Liu Dapeng 劉大鵬 (1857-1943).

1. In 1902, Liu wrote of the Franciscan village, Dongergou, not too far from Taiyuan:

“The villagers all follow the foreign religion. The village lies at the foot of the hills, with the church standing on the slope of the hill, surrounded by a wall.

There are many buildings within the wall. The site is impressive and the buildings are all in the foreign style.”⁹

⁹ Liu Dapeng 劉大鵬, “Tuixiangzhai riji” 推向窄日記 (Diary From the Study for Retreat and Contemplation), in *Jindaishi ziliao yihetuan shiliao* 近代史資料義和團史料

2. As Liu continues to write it is clear that the outcropping of Western style mission buildings in Shanxi appeared imposing and intruding to some local Chinese.
 - a. *[SLIDE 26: Images and History – Dongergou Village]* Liu was describing the Franciscan seminary at Dongergou, which dominated the entire hillside.
- c. Even more dramatic examples exist of Catholic architecture dominating a Chinese landscape or village.
 - i. In Europe, when a Christian church towers over a village or city it is interpreted as God’s dominance over humanity; *[SLIDE 27: Catholic church in a Chinese village]* in China, this has been historically viewed as Western dominance over native Chinese – as a visual image of foreign colonialism.
 1. Records suggest that missionaries were mostly anti-imperialism, and that their churches were intended as forms of worship, or as they often wrote in letters, “testiments to God.”

XII. Conclusion

- a. China’s late-imperial and Republican Era history has become increasingly

(Materials for Modern History: Materials on the Boxers) (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社, 1982), 819. Translated in Henrietta Harrison, “Village Politics and National Politics: The Boxer Movement in Central Shanxi,” in *The Boxers, China, and the World*, 3.

popular in current scholarship, and historians, who have a reputation for being overly obscured in the narrow world of texts, have recently begun to realize that archival collections of photographs provide us with imagistic details that cannot be fully conveyed in narrative text.

- i. Photographs capture and convey a brief moment of the historical past that would have been lost if not for the fascinated hands of the photographer, who has given us helpful windows into the past.
- b. As the famous French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004), once said, “Photographers deal with things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again.”
 - i. His statement is ironic – because through his photographs, and those we find in the Catholic archives I have outlined here, we can in some way bring back these things that have vanished.

XIII. *[SLIDE 28: Ending Slide (+ extras)] – QUESTIONS?*

Additional Slides – Descriptions:

1. (Slide 29): Photograph of the first Chinese to be made bishops by a pope – taken in Rome. In 1926—through the efforts of Lebbe and Costantini—six Chinese priests were ordained bishops at the Vatican. Pope Pius XI himself consecrated them in St. Peter’s Basilica. One of the new bishops was the Shanghai native Simon Zhu Kaimin (1868-1960).
2. (Slide 30) Rare photographs of Shanxi province, ca, 1901-1910: (L) monument

- dedicated to the martyrs of the Boxer Uprising (destroyed 1966); Taiyuan yamen and Taiyuan Christian martyrs monument.
3. (Slide 31) Rare images of Beijing's Russian Orthodox churches, where the Russian embassy is now located. Russia was the first non-Asian country to have a religious and diplomatic mission in China. (L) Russian Orthodox cathedral at Beijing (Beiguan 北 官); (RT) Church of the Holy Martyrs of Beijing, built 1903 (destroyed); (RB) Bishop Yao Fu'an, Chinese Russian Orthodox bishop.
 4. (Slide 32) Images of Chinese Catholic priests from the late Qing and Republican Era – many of these people can no longer be identified.
 5. (Slide 33) (L) Chinese Catholic women in a procession, Republican Era; Chinese Maryknoll nuns in the 1930s-40s. Some of these women can be identified; most were forced to laicize after 1951.
 6. (Slide 34) Rare images of Catholic sites in Beijing: Beitang, Ancient Jesuit Observatory, and a graduating class from Fu Ren University.
 7. (Slide 35) Missionary archives also hold colorized photographs, such as these images from Tianjin, ca. 1920-30, of Fathers Vincent Lebbe, CM, and Anthony Cotta, MM.
 8. (Slide 36) Since one of the most active services the missionaries offered in China was the care of orphans, these archives hold massive collections of orphan children: (L) a boy delivered to the orphanage in a basket; orphan children and a Vincentian nun.
 9. (Slide 37) FINALLY – local images are numerous, such as these images in a Catholic archive of Ningbo, Zhejiang, during the late Qing and Republican Era.