



A Brief History of the Dutch Vincentians in China, especially the Apostolic Vicariate of Yongpingfu (永平府)

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Abstract:

Starting in the 19th century, the Dutch Vincentians were significantly involved in missionary work in China, particularly in the Apostolic Vicariate of Yongpingfu (永平府). Inspired by memoirs and letters from missionaries like Evariste Huc, the Vincentian priests and Daughters of Charity embarked on perilous journeys to China, beginning in 1847. Despite challenges, including piracy and political tensions, figures such as Antoon Everard Smorenburg played crucial roles in training Chinese seminarians and rebuilding the Church in Beijing. The mission faced setbacks during the Boxer Rebellion but persisted through the dedication of missionaries like Frans Wijnhoven. Over time, the Dutch Vincentians, alongside international colleagues, established significant religious and social infrastructure. The narrative highlights their resilience and contributions to the Catholic Church in China amidst adversity, culminating in efforts to foster interfaith collaboration and community engagement despite political upheavals and natural disasters.

À partir du 19^e siècle, les Vincentiens hollandais se sont engagés de manière significative dans le travail missionnaire en Chine, en particulier dans le vicariat apostolique de Yongpingfu (永平府). Inspirés par les mémoires et les lettres de missionnaires comme Evariste Huc, les prêtres vinciens et les Filles de la Charité se sont lancés dans de périlleux voyages en Chine, à partir de 1847. Malgré les difficultés, notamment la piraterie et les tensions politiques, des personnalités comme Antoon Everard Smorenburg ont joué un rôle crucial dans la formation des séminaristes chinois et la reconstruction de l'Église à Pékin. La mission a connu des revers pendant la rébellion des Boxers, mais a persisté grâce au dévouement de missionnaires comme Frans Wijnhoven. Au fil du temps, les Vincentiens néerlandais, aux côtés de leurs collègues internationaux, ont mis en place d'importantes infrastructures religieuses et sociales. Le récit met en lumière leur résilience et leurs contributions à l'Église catholique en Chine dans l'adversité, avec en point d'orgue les efforts déployés pour favoriser la collaboration interconfessionnelle et l'engagement communautaire malgré les bouleversements politiques et les catastrophes naturelles.

A partir del siglo XIX, los Paúles holandeses se implicaron de forma significativa en el trabajo misionero en China, particularmente en el Vicariato Apostólico de Yongpingfu (永平府). Inspirados por las memorias y cartas de misioneros como Evariste Huc, los sacerdotes vicencianos y las Hijas de la Caridad emprendieron peligrosos viajes a China a partir de 1847. A pesar de las dificultades, como la piratería y las tensiones políticas, figuras como Antoon Everard Smorenburg desempeñaron un papel crucial en la formación de los seminaristas chinos y en la reconstrucción de la Iglesia en Pekín. La misión sufrió reveses durante la rebelión de los bóxers, pero persistió gracias a la dedicación de misioneros como Frans Wijnhoven. Con el tiempo, los vicentinos holandeses, junto con colegas internacionales, establecieron importantes infraestructuras religiosas y sociales. La narración destaca su resistencia y sus contribuciones a la Iglesia católica en China en medio de la adversidad, culminando en los esfuerzos por fomentar la colaboración



interreligiosa y el compromiso de la comunidad a pesar de los trastornos políticos y los desastres naturales.

Keywords: Dutch Vincentians, Mission in China, Yongpingfu, Internment

1. Start of the Mission era

Throughout the 19th century, Catholic Europe was captivated by stories sent from abroad. Memoirs of travels to Tartary, Tibet, and China in 1844, 1845, and 1848 were published in 1850 by the Vincentian priest Evariste Huc. These memoirs, along with other letters from missionaries, were quickly translated into all Western European languages. After 1843, when the first of the "Unequal Treaties" between China, England, and France was signed, messages indicated that China had opened up for evangelization, prompting calls for missionaries. The Roman Catholic Church responded swiftly and significantly, chartering ships to the Far East. Marist priests and brothers sailed to Pacific islands, and in 1847, several Vincentian priests and 12 Daughters of Charity, including Sister Gabriel Perboyre, the sister of Saint John Perboyre who was martyred in Wuchang in 1840, journeyed to China. Despite knowing the risks, the Marists diverted to another island after learning that some colleagues had been killed by cannibals. The Vincentians and Daughters of Charity continued to Ningbo, China.

In 1851, Msgr. C.L. van Wijckersloot aimed to establish the Duinzigt seminary to train diocesan priests as missionaries and sought to entrust it to the Vincentians in Paris. However, he passed away on November 15, 1851, before realizing these plans. The nuncio, Msgr. Belgrado, informed Rome that the Dutch government would never permit foreign clergy to lead such a seminary.

2. Antoon Everard Smorenburg

In the context of this missionary environment, Antoon Everhard Smorenburg, a young diocesan priest, joined the Congregation of the Mission in Paris on November 24, 1852. Born in Soestdijk on January 14, 1822, he studied at the major seminary in Warmond. Following his ordination on August 17, 1851, he served as an assistant pastor in Mijdrecht for several months and then in Hoogland for five months. One year after joining the CM, he departed from Le Havre for China. On June 17, 1854, he arrived in Ningbo. Unfortunately, during the last leg of his journey, pirates stole 10,000 taels from him (1 tael equals 37.32 grams of silver). These taels were meant for missions in Beijing, Mongolia, and Hunan. Upon his arrival in Beijing on June 29, 1855, Msgr. Joseph-Martial Mouly, the apostolic vicar of Northern Zhely (now Hebei), assigned him the task of training Chinese seminarians.

3. The Church in Beijing Under Reconstruction

These years were marked by significant political tensions. Msgr. Mouly had to leave the country as English and French ships shelled Tianjin twice, failing negotiations each time. In the summer of 1860, they conquered Tianjin and marched to Beijing, where they looted and burned the emperor's summer palace. The subsequent negotiations resulted in heavy demands from the colonial powers, leaving China burdened by the Taiping rebellion that had been ravaging the country since 1854.¹ This foreign

¹ During the years 1851 to 1864 a central feature of the Chinese political scene was the Taiping rebellion.¹ This was a peasant movement led by disappointed candidates in the official examinations and unlettered men of native military and organizational genius who capitalized upon the economic distress of the time

compulsion incited deep hatred among the Chinese population, and the churches were negatively associated with the colonial powers. An outcome of the negotiations allowed Msgr. Mouly to settle in Beijing, where missionaries had been expelled 50 years earlier. The four churches from the 16th and 17th centuries, dismantled or closed since the early 18th century, were reopened or rebuilt. Shortly after, Msgr. Mouly traveled to Europe and appointed Antoon Smorenburg as provicar, his temporary deputy, in his absence.

4. Arrival of the Scheut Fathers in China

During this period, Father Theofiel Verbist, founder of the Scheut congregation (CICM), sought mission territory in China. The Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith directed him to Msgr. Mouly. They met in Paris, where Verbist requested permission to evangelize Mongolia, which Msgr. Mouly approved. The Chinese Emperor established an Imperial Language School to train officials in French and English and asked Msgr. Mouly for teachers. On April 23, 1863, Father Smorenburg, fluent in both languages, was appointed to this position, becoming the last priest to serve the Chinese Emperor. The first four Scheut fathers—Verbist, Hamer, van Segveld, and Vranckx—arrived in Xiwanzi on December 6, 1865, welcomed by 1,000 Catholics with bell-ringing and brass band music. Shortly afterward, the Vincentians left Mongolia, but Father van Smorenburg joined the Scheut fathers in October 1867 with the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith's approval. He became the provicar of the vicariate of Mongolia. In 1875, he returned to the Netherlands and the Archdiocese of Utrecht.

5. Frans Wijnhoven

During this time, the second Dutch Vincentian, Frans Wijnhoven, arrived in China. Born in Broekhuizen vorst on May 19, 1848, he initially intended to join the Missionaries of Paris after his secondary education. However, upon arriving in Paris late at night, a coachman mistakenly took him to the Motherhouse of the Vincentians. After spending the night there, Wijnhoven decided to stay and joined the Congregation of the Mission on May 12, 1867. He arrived in China in December 1871 and was assigned to Beijing. Due to his linguistic skills, he served as procurator at the Saint Louis Church in Tianjin for a long time. In the summer of 1870, during a riot in Tianjin, two confreres and ten Daughters of Charity were martyred, and the newly built Wanghailou Church was destroyed. Rumors that the Sisters used the hearts and eyes of orphans to make medicine fueled the violence. Apostolic Vicar Louis-Gabriel Delaplace left the church in ruins as a protest against the false accusations and lack of government denial. A smaller church dedicated to Saint Louis was built in the French concession, and a new Procurator Office was established. As procurator, Wijnhoven welcomed all Northern China missionaries, including Vincentians, Scheut Fathers, and Franciscans. His duties included helping new missionaries understand local customs, providing hospitality, and organizing their return trips to Europe. He managed all financial matters of the missions. Known for his discretion, Wijnhoven was praised for his ability to speak smoothly without revealing information. In 1892, he was appointed director of the Kintoung district in east Beijing but died of typhoid fever two years later on May 26, 1894. His elder brother, a priest and teacher in the Rolduc college, likely inspired students to pursue missionary work, leading some, like Alexander Waelen and Jozef Allofs, to Paris and China. Allofs died the same day as Wijnhoven while attending the second Synod of Beijing in 1892 as Msgr. Hamer's theologian.

and the declining ability of the Manchu rulers to take the principal cities of the Yangtze valley and at one point to threaten Peking (now Beijing) itself (Boardman, 1951).

6. Minor Seminary Wernhoutsburg

In 1882, the French government's measures led to the closure of the apostolic school of Looz near Lille. Teachers and students sought refuge in the Netherlands, settling in Zundert, near the Belgium-Netherlands border. The seminary was initially for French students but soon attracted three Dutch boys from Limburg. Over the years, it became an international French school with students from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Alsatia, and Germany. From 1892, Dutch students became the majority. Annually, some students went to Paris to become Vincentians. After 1903, many went to Helden-Panningen. After their priestly ordination, the Superior General in Paris assigned them to the most urgent needs until the Dutch province became autonomous in 1921. Consequently, Dutch Vincentians were active in all 11 vicariates in China entrusted to Vincentians.

7. An International Community of Priests and Brothers

Vincentian missionaries, whether priests or brothers from France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Austria, or Poland, were assigned to vicariates in Northern China (Hebei) or Southern China (Jiangxi and Zhejiang) upon arriving in Shanghai. These vicariates hosted an international group of many nationalities working alongside Chinese diocesan priests and Vincentians. Many brothers significantly contributed to building the Church in China, such as brothers Jozef Van den Brandt from Turnhout and Antoon Geerts. Antoon joined the Vincentians after learning of his elder priest-brother Jozef's death from typhoid fever in 1899 in Zhengding. Antoon was sent to the Yongping vicariate.

8. Erection of the Vicariate East-Zheli, Later East-Hebei, and Yongpingfu

Msgr. Favier became bishop of the apostolic vicariate of Beijing in 1899. He proposed creating a new vicariate in the eastern part of his vicariate and suggested Frans Geurts, a nephew of Frans Wijnhoven, as its apostolic vicar. He recommended appointing only Dutch priests and brothers to this new vicariate, hoping to attract more Dutch volunteers and financial support. The Congregation of the Propagation of Faith in Rome approved Geurts' nomination. He traveled to the Netherlands and was consecrated a bishop on February 4, 1900, in the Cathedral of 's-Hertogenbosch.

9. The Boxer Rebellion²

In the Roman Catholic Netherlands, there was great joy over the consecration of this missionary bishop. Meanwhile, in China, the Boxer Rebellion had broken out. The elderly, the young, men, women, children, and infants who fell into the hands of the Boxers were killed—sometimes immediately, sometimes after prolonged torture. All possessions were looted; churches and chapels, schools, and orphanages were destroyed. It seemed as if the pent-up hatred against foreign colonial power was completely directed against the Chinese Church. All those who identified as Catholic or Christian suffered.

² The Boxer Rebellion, which occurred in China from 1899 to 1901, was a significant anti-imperialist, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian uprising. It was led by the "Righteous and Harmonious Fists," commonly known as the "Boxers," who aimed to rid China of foreign influence, particularly from Western. Christianity played a notable role in the events and motivations of the rebellion. According to local magistrates, intimidation and oppression of the community by missionaries and believers is the fundamental cause of the anti-Christian community movement (Shouzhong, 2002: 85). There was no doubt that the Catholic suffered set back from the Boxer rebellion. The total loss of Catholic missionaries during the Boxer Uprising in 1900 was reported to be five bishops, thirty-one European priests, nine European sisters, and some 30,000 Chinese converts (Lai, 2017).

In Beijing, the repaired old church in Nantang and the newly rebuilt church in Dongtang, as well as the church in Xitang, were destroyed along with all their associated buildings. Many people living there were killed. An absolute horror was the destruction and slaughtering of children at the orphanage in Chala near where Matteo Ricci had once been buried. The Beitang (北堂) Cathedral and its surrounding buildings were besieged for a whole month.³

In Tianjin, the Boxers destroyed the Wanghailou Church for the second time in 30 years⁴, which had been rebuilt in 1898. Inside the recently erected vicariate of East-Zheli, the small mission of Yongping was destroyed. The vicariate had 3,000 Catholics; 80 of whom died as martyrs.

In the vicariate of Zhending, Frans Schraven, a second nephew of Frans Wijnhoven, had just arrived and witnessed these horrors firsthand. The mandarin's intervention saved the town of Zhending itself from these terrors.

10. Building the Apostolic Vicariate of East-Zheli

When peace was restored, Msgr. Frans went to Yongping on March 31, 1901. Alexander Waelen from Beek-Oensel, who had been working in China since 1878, became his vicar-general. Young Kees Dekkers from Rucphen, Henricus Forstmann, who had to leave Ethiopia, and Brother Antoon Geurts joined them. The annals mention: "When Monsignor arrived and personally saw the misery of his new vicariate, he felt deceived, though he had expected so little in Yongpingfu. No church, no schools, no institutions of any kind. Over the entire vicariate, there were only two little chapels. Moreover, no money, and no help came. One could have thrown up his hands in despair."

Msgr. Geurts ruled the vicariate for 40 years. Conversions increased gradually. Regularly, new missionaries arrived to strengthen the ranks. Some of them died young: Nico Dames from Lisse, 32 years old; Johan van Meerendonk from Tilburg, 39 years old; Antoon Mommers from Tilburg, 28 years old; Johan Nass from Herpen, 30 years old; Piet Romme from Princenbeek, 27 years old; Laurens Vonk from Steggerda, 33 years old. Others had to return to their country after a few years due to poor health.

11. Politically Troublesome Years

In 1911, China became a Republic. There was a widespread belief that a new era would begin, that China would be governed with a new mentality, that the persecution system would end, and that distrust towards Catholics would be replaced by a firm belief in their honesty. The name Yongping was changed to Lulong (盧龍) by governmental decree. However, it quickly became apparent that farmers were burdened by taxes and lacked protection against growing gangs' attacks and lootings.

In 1924, it was reported: "Much fighting is going on in the region of Shanhaiguan. For two days we have heard the cannon in the north of Lulong... From all sides, we receive sad news: most villages are being looted and ransomed by soldiers."

1926 was an appalling year for Lulong. The town and the mission were bombed and looted. The town was literally emptied: merchandise, wheat, horses, and cattle were all lost. Monsignor's two hinnies were taken away. Gangs of 20 to 100 robbers kidnapped

³ The siege of the Beitang began from 1 June to 16 August 1900.

⁴ The first demolition of Wanghailou was in 1870. That incident was the first missionary case after the opium war (Z. Ping & Dao-kui, 2017).

men, who would then be liberated for a high ransom. Missionaries Jacques Meys and Theo Zigenhorn also underwent this fate.

In 1933, Shanhaiguan, the town where the Great Wall of China ends in the sea, was attacked by Japanese troops. The missionaries witnessed the passage of Chinese troops, and then Japanese troops. The mission posts again became refuges for the population. By the end of the year, the entire vicariate was occupied by Japanese troops. Despite these difficult and always uncertain circumstances, the missionaries continued their work.

12. Special Incidents

The village of Huanghuagang had been entirely Catholic for years. During the Boxer Rebellion, its residents withstood numerous attacks. In gratitude, the Monsignor had the first proper church built in this village. On one of the hills in the old town of Yongping (renamed Lulong in 1911), a mission complex was constructed over the years, with the Cathedral designed by Father van Moerbeke towering above the other buildings. The bishop was particularly interested in the seminary's study program. Many English and Belgian mining engineers worked in Tangshan's coal basin, and the bishop wanted his future priests to be able to communicate with these foreigners. Thus, he decided that seminarians should study French for three years before beginning Latin, and they must be as proficient in Chinese characters as well-educated locals. He set the formation length at nine years.

People later remarked at the major seminary of Chala: "Those coming from Yongping speak better French than we do." Proficiency in French proved beneficial for at least one seminarian, who, after 1950, was imprisoned and sentenced to 'education through work.' He was placed in the 'translation company' in Baoding, where Msgr. Jin Luxian, the current bishop of Shanghai, was also 're-educated.'

Before the Boxer Rebellion, several Chinese Josephine Sisters had taken care of some orphans. With these sisters' help, the bishop founded a diocesan congregation called the "Sisters of the Immaculate Conception" with the same rules as the Josephine Sisters. By 1941, the congregation had 33 members.

In 1900, mining began in the small village of Tangshan, transforming it into a significant town. The 'Kailian Mining Administration' took an interest in miners who became disabled and in the families of those who died in accidents. Belgian mining engineer Docquier discussed this with the Monsignor and requested help from religious sisters and brothers. Consequently, in 1920, the Daughters of Charity established a center in Tangshan to care for invalids and orphans. For the boys' education and vocational training, they sought help from the Brothers of the Seven Sorrows from Voorhout, who began their mission on November 30, 1927, under Brother Ladislaus Oostermeijer's leadership.

13. Msgr. Eugene Lebouille

By the late 1920s, Msgr. Geurts' health was failing. Msgr. Eugene Lebouille, consecrated in Yongping on November 18, 1928, became his auxiliary bishop. After Msgr. Geurts died on July 23, 1940, Msgr. Lebouille became the second apostolic vicar of Yongping. In 1941, the vicariate had 8 Chinese diocesan priests, 8 Chinese and 23

Dutch Vincentians, and 10 seminarians in the major seminaries of Jiaxin⁵ (under Vincentians) and Chala near Beijing. There were also 35 Josephine Sisters, 19 Daughters of Charity (6 foreigners), 1 Chinese and 8 Dutch brothers, and an estimated 36,000 Catholics.

14. The Internment

In March 1943, all people in Northern China from countries at war with Japan, including missionaries, were interned in Weihsien. Two sick, elderly confreres stayed behind in Tangshan with brothers Ladislaus and Plechelmus, who were deemed militarily important due to their work in the professional school. Msgr. Eugene Lebouille handed the vicariate's direction to Father Jozef Xi-kui. In Weihsien, people resourcefully maintained their spirits. After five months, foreign missionaries were transferred to Beijing following the nuncio's mediation. The Vincentians and Voorhout Brothers were interned near Beitang. Food was scarce, but the inability to perform pastoral work troubled the missionaries more. They awaited liberation, which came on August 15, 1945.

15. The Period 1945-1953

Liberation arrived on August 15, 1945, with American parachutists arriving in Beijing four days later. The world had changed dramatically during the war. China, now free of foreign concessions and a superpower, gained self-confidence after enduring colonial oppression. However, national peace was elusive, with two factions vying for control. Despite early American support, the nationalists lost ground to the communists. Returning to old mission fields in Yongping was impossible as the communists controlled the area since the Japanese war. Missionaries could only access Tangshan, Shanhuaiquan, and areas along the Beijing-Mukden railway. Many Chinese priests, who had endured great difficulties, were not welcoming of the returning foreigners, a sentiment that grew when Rome established the Chinese hierarchy in 1946 and appointed Thomas Tian S.V.D. as archbishop of Beijing, displacing long-serving Vincentians.

Weakened missionaries returned to the Netherlands. Msgr. Lebouille traveled around the world in 1946, spending time in the United States. After returning to the Netherlands and 44 years of service in Yongping, he asked Pope Pius XII to relieve him of his duties in 1948. Before leaving, he instructed diocesan priest Thomas Ly to study pedagogy in Leuven, but Ly was not allowed to return to China and became a missionary in Taiwan. Post-war, few priests returned to Tangshan, where they resumed missionary work with 16 Chinese priests. In summer 1946, two Chinese priests, Pierre Lan Tianmu and Paul Liu Jinghe, went to Yongping's residence, which was occupied by communists, and were imprisoned and mistreated for a year. Dutch confreres joined them in Tianjin, with seven new missionaries arriving just before Christmas 1946. Most other confreres returned to the Netherlands. Mission superior Kees Louws noted that future foreign priests would need special assignments and work under Chinese bishops.

After Northern China's 'liberation,' only 8 diocesan priests and 8 Chinese Vincentians remained. Four Dutch confreres were confined to Tangshan, where Theodoor Zigenhorn died on May 27, 1949. With pastoral work becoming impossible and threatening for Chinese priests, Jan de Bakker and Anton Herrijgers returned to the Netherlands and later went to Taiwan. Msgr. Jan Herrijgens, the last Dutch Vincentian in

⁵ Jiaxin, (嘉興) Saint-Vincent Seminary, in Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province, known locally as the "Catholic Church" and the "Third Basilica of the Far East", was the first major seminary opened in China by the Congregation of the Mission, and was also the Provincial curia of the southern Province (L. Ping, 2024).

Yongping, left in Autumn 1953 after serving as apostolic administrator since 1948 and eventually moved to Taiwan.

16. A Profound Darkness Descends on the Diocese of Yongping

For many years, little information came from Yongping, and what did reach the outside world was bleak, indicating severe hardships for the Catholic Church, its priests, and its followers. During the Cultural Revolution, Yongping's Cathedral and other churches were demolished, with only the seminary remaining as a training center for communist cadres. Priests were imprisoned or sent to re-education camps. One priest, Sylvester Sou, reportedly died a martyr. After being imprisoned for eight years post-liberation, he returned to his village due to illness and was cared for until the Cultural Revolution. When the Red Guards captured him, he was beaten and killed in August 1966 for refusing to renounce his faith, thereby becoming a true martyr.⁶

The Cultural Revolution left a lasting impact on those who participated in the atrocities, now living with the knowledge of their actions. The town of Tangshan and the diocese suffered a devastating earthquake on July 28, 1976, killing over 243,000 people and destroying the town. Rumors suggest some priests survived by being thrown into gardens or living in re-education camps.

17. The Days of Resurrection

A new era began for the Catholic Church in China. Despite continued Communist Party influence, priests and Catholics sought ways to practice their faith freely. A clear separation emerged within the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict's words urged for unity between the "Patriotic Church" and the "Underground Church." Auxiliary bishop of Tangshan, Msgr. Fang Jianping, encouraged his colleagues to declare their recognition by the Pope. Reconciliation and forgiveness were crucial, as illustrated by a woman pointing out the head of the Patriotic Church in her diocese who had beaten the bishop decades earlier.

In the former diocese of Yongping, now Tangshan, a new Cathedral and over 30 churches have been built. Msgr. Paul Liu Jinghe, ordained in 1945 and consecrated in 1981, led the Church until recently. His successor, Msgr. Fang Jianping, was consecrated in 2000. As of 2008, there were 4 priests from the old times and 22 young priests ordained after 1989. The congregation of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception has 50 Sisters, and there are over 40,000 Catholics.

Conclusion

It has been said that miracles are necessary for beatifications and canonizations. In China, the greatest miracle of the twentieth century is that the faith was preserved through darkness and misery by dedicated men and women. This was evident during travels in China with my Chinese-speaking confrere Frans Bomers, following in the tracks of our Dutch confreres.

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⁶ The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a historical tragedy launched by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It claimed the lives of several million people and inflicted cruel and inhuman treatments on hundreds of million people.

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