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## St. John Gabriel Perboyre

### A mis en scene

*by Joseph Loftus, C.M.  
Province of Ireland*

### Introduction

*... Perboyre was a special sort. The threat of persecution and the other difficulties of missionary life deep inside China seemingly purified and ennobled him.<sup>1</sup>*

St. John Gabriel Perboyre, has often been, in this reader's case at least, a "plaster saint"; one who stared down from his cross at the moment of his death and inspired, perhaps, by his heroism, but only in a very conventional way and not so as to actually invite imitation. The letters reveal a more complex individual. What proved most interesting was not the martyrdom, which could be seen as an unfortunate accident albeit borne with extraordinary faith, but the way in which this man responds so buoyantly to the difficulties of his particular missionary life. Therefore I have chosen in this paper to focus on the situation of the mission in China at the time of the Saint's arrival and explore some of the issues of the day.

Initially I hoped to research the catechetical methods adopted by Perboyre in his work in China. However, I had too little material to hand and the letters themselves were too limited a source on which to base a study. This is an important area of research and I hope, if time affords, to look into the matter further. I chose instead to examine the mission in 1835 when Perboyre arrived in China and found there was a great deal to explore. The letters reveal a man wrestling with the challenges of a mission that was in many ways very different from what he expected. For now I have chosen to try and unravel the various strands that made up Perboyre's missionary situation. I have chosen to do this as I have found, from reading both the letters and secondary sources, that the situation in 1835 was much different from my own imagining. Also the letters are very confusing when read through the prism of ecclesial forms, which, although, part of our mental picture of the Congregation's mission in China, actually postdate the Saint's death.

One aspect of this short article may confuse the reader unfamiliar with Chinese phonetics. Studies of the Saint tend to adopt an archaic convention with

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War*, p. 102.

regard to the transliteration of both Chinese personal and place names. They either use the idiosyncratic transliterations of Perboyre himself or 19<sup>th</sup> French models. The Chinese government adopted its own transliteration standard in the 1950s (usually called Pinyin), which is now widely accepted for transliteration of Chinese terms. Thus Pékin (French) or Pe'king (Wade Jiles) becomes Beijing. For this paper I have chosen, quotes aside, to use Pinyin throughout.<sup>2</sup> Such a convention may initially be confusing for a Vincentian readership, but I believe will be more useful in the long run and will allow our researches to enter more easily the mainstream of reflections on the history of the Church in China.

A final remark would be to say this article is based on too narrow a range of research as I do not have access to the materials that would have most enhanced this study, namely the letters of the Saint's contemporaries. Also my secondary sources are quite limited. I hope however that this small attempt to insert the Saint's mission in China into its social and historical context will add to our appreciation of his holiness.

I would most like to have given more accurate details of the places where Perboyre worked, but they were impossible to reconstruct from the letters and I suspect that the information is available in secondary sources not to hand.

### ***China, the Dream and the Reality.***

*This China is so different from other countries that were one not on the spot one would never be well acquainted with its concerns.*<sup>3</sup>

Until the moment when he stepped off the "Royal George" at Macao, the Chinese Empire existed for him only as a place of heroes and devils, of blood soaked clothing and the cords which had strangled his confrere Francis Regis Clet, C.M., 15 years earlier. China was also the country his brother had died trying to reach and, increasingly, the land to which a renewed French Church looked towards as the object of its missionary zeal. A romantic notion of martyrdom, rather than a real understanding of the country that was to be his home had nurtured his missionary vocation. For the next five years he was to become acquainted with the real concerns of China while at the same time always retaining a sense of having been "sent from France." Paradoxically, it was the letting go of the rather romantic vision of martyrdom that prepared him for the martyrdom he was to endure. It could be said that his heroism was not the way in which he accepted the sentence of death on 11 September 1840 but rather in the slow reshaping of his missionary vision that took place in the preceding

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<sup>2</sup> There are a few place names such as Macao and Canton, which, because of their familiarity, do not follow this convention.

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondance*, 87, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 241.

five years. He had learned that China was different and yet in coming to terms with those differences, he was prepared when the couriers arrived from Emperor DaoGuang with dispatches confirming his fate. Generations of missionaries to China, inspired in turn by his heroism have had to make the same transition, though not all managed to do so with such inner peace.<sup>4</sup>

When Perboyre set foot on Chinese soil he arrived in a country in the last phase of less than blissful isolation from the currents that were shaping the 19<sup>th</sup>-century world order. The industrial revolution and peace in Europe was stimulating the global economy; China, were she open to it, was a natural partner in the development of commerce. The Chinese Empire's economic self sufficiency and assumptions about its place at the centre of the global political landscape bore little relationship to immersing patterns of world trade or the growing importance of European and, later, America power.

In 1835, China was ruled by the "indolent and narrow-minded"<sup>5</sup> emperor, Dao Guang. He was the sixth ruler of the foreign and unpopular Qing Dynasty. He had not only to attend to the still-insignificant incursions of the foreigners, but also to deal with peasant revolts, historically a sign of dynastic upheavals.<sup>6</sup> Despite these pressures, the imperial worldview allowed him to think that he alone was the only serious player on the world stage and that he needed nothing from abroad. As a result, he accepted only tribute from foreign emissaries, rather as a parent might accept graciously a handmade gift from a child returning from kindergarten class. It mattered little whether the tribute came from a minor principedom in Indonesia or the powerful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. As his position was incomparable with the leaders of any barbarian state, he could not even conceive of a trading "partnership" and thus resisted all attempts at a dialogue of equals. The pent-up pressures on international trade, with demand for China's goods in the West having no equivalent demand in China for Western-manufactured items, eventually led to the illegal trade in a product which the Chinese did want, opium. The results of this unregulated situation was to end China's isolation and force her, after 1840, to open her doors to the traders and missionaries who arrived at her borders. However in 1835 the Chinese Empire still preserved the semblance of its former greatness and western traders and missioners alike, lacking the military support of their governments, had to kowtow before the celestial throne or risk punishment. The arrangements the foreigners could make to their advantage were often illegal and subject to the somewhat capricious application of the law by central or local officials. So the

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Ward Fay, *op. cit.* Peter Fay notes that other missionaries were just upset by the difficulties that ennobled Perboyre. One would love to compare Perboyre's letters with those of his companions Rameaux or Baldus.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of the Christian Mission in China*, 1929, p. 286.

<sup>6</sup> These revolts culminated, in the 1850s, with the disastrous Taiping Rebellion during which 20,000,000 lost their lives.

trade in illegal opium<sup>7</sup> could continue quite openly for a time and then be suddenly stopped at huge cost to the merchants,<sup>8</sup> while missionaries could carry on their work quite publicly one day and then find themselves facing summary execution the next.<sup>9</sup> This was the China to which Perboyre came, and his death coincided with its demise.

### France and Portugal, two contrasting situations

*...while the family of St. Vincent is so seriously tested in Portugal, in France it is recovering more and more and fortifies itself in the spirit of the Lord.*<sup>10</sup>

Perboyre's missionary vocation had taken shape at a special time for French Catholicism. After the Napoleonic Wars the Church in France began to recover some of its strength. What emerged was a confident if rather self-conscious Church aware of having overcome enormous difficulties. A significant expression of the Church's resurgence was its missionary impetus. New missionary structures emerged, sometimes adapted from pre-revolutionary institutions, sometimes created *ex nihilo* in response to the changed circumstances. For example, in 1816, the newly reconstituted Missions Etrangères de Paris sent their first new missionaries to China since 1807 and, in the same period, a new association; the Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded in 1822.<sup>11</sup> The Congregation of the Mission, reestablished in France in 1820, shared in this new, self-confident attitude. The Congregation very deliberately tried to emphasise its continuity with the pre-revolutionary community<sup>12</sup> but it too was being "adapted" to suit the new missionary mood of the times. Thus, the Congregation, among all the apostolic possibilities open to it, looked to the French Mission in China, which had been only reluctantly accepted by the French Vincentians in 1784.<sup>13</sup> By 1835 there were already six French confreres on the mission, two more arrived with Perboyre and before his death seven more had joined the enterprise.

<sup>7</sup> Perboyre has only one passing reference to the trade that was to have an influence his death; he does not seem to have been aware of the issues its importation was raising for China.

<sup>8</sup> It was the destruction of 20,000 chests of opium (trade in which was illegal in China) in June 1839 that precipitated the first Opium War and may have influenced the decision to execute Perboyre.

<sup>9</sup> Perboyre is quite surprised at the flourishing and very open life of the Church in Fujian Province that he describes in letter 73. However the missionary, whose so public ministry impresses him, Roch-Joseph Carpena-Díaz O.P, the Vicar Apostolic of Fujian, was forced to flee in 1837 and the thriving mission was destroyed.

<sup>10</sup> *Correspondance*, 72, to Jean Castro, C.M. in the Diocese of Pékin, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *Correspondance*, 67, to Pierre Martin, C.M. in Paris, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Although technically the "French Mission" staffed by the Congregation ended with the revolution, I will use the term to describe the mission of the Congregation *founded from France* as the **Missions** of the Congregation included an entirely separate mission *founded from Portugal*. The latter will be referred to as the Portuguese Mission.

There was another Vincentian Mission in China in 1835. The Portuguese had arrived at the same time as the French as successors to the Portuguese Jesuit Missions in Macao and later Beijing. Their position, especially in Macao was more assured than that of their French confreres, as they were part of the government sponsored Portuguese Mission funded by the Portuguese Queen. Such favour did not confer as much dignity as in previous centuries, but locally it was still important. The Portuguese Empire was almost a spent force by 1835, retaining a few colonies in Asia of which Macao was of crucial importance to both trader and missionary. Although Portugal had little influence internationally, it still could interfere successfully in Church affairs and did so regularly, demanding rights, collectively called the *Padroado*<sup>14</sup> seceded to it at a more expansive time in the country's history. In 1783, two Portuguese Vincentians from Goa arrived in Macao to set up a seminary there and later, in 1801, two others moved to Beijing to take charge of the Portuguese Mission based there. The Congregation was itself suppressed in Portugal in 1833 and although two more Portuguese Vincentians did come to China after Perboyre arrived, the Portuguese Mission, in the government-sponsored form in which it had existed, was in serious decline by 1835, at which time there were eleven Portuguese Vincentians on the Chinese Mission, seven of whom worked in Macao.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the French missionary who arrived in Macao in 1835 was supported by the burgeoning missionary enthusiasm at home but could not yet depend on the protection of his government. At that point, the government-supported scramble for influence in China had not yet begun. Europe in general was in an expansionist mood, but its traditional players in Asia, Portugal and Spain, no longer held centre stage; their roles were soon to be taken by Britain and France. When Perboyre arrived in China, his French confreres were the "arrivistes" when compared with the established Portuguese, and although the relations were friendly between the two groups and they did support each other in the field, the next five years would see a constant jockeying for position between the two missions. As well as that, the first danger Perboyre had to contend with was not

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<sup>14</sup> The *Padroado* was a series of privileges and responsibilities regarding the administration of the Church in the Portuguese Empire seceded to the Portuguese King in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Holy See. A similar arrangement existed in the Spanish Empire known as the *Patronato*. Its responsibility included the funding and protecting of Catholic Missions in Portuguese Territories and the right of appointment of bishops. When the Portuguese Empire was in its ascendancy, the system had some usefulness, but by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Portugal were no longer able to perform the duties associated with the *Padroado* effectively, yet still insisted on its privileges. China was considered part of the Portuguese sphere of influence and China-bound missionaries were all expected to travel via Lisbon. Macao was, from the beginning, the transit point for entry into China. Therefore, even in its decline as a world force, Portugal was able to exercise a degree of control over the Chinese mission disproportionate to its real political power.

<sup>15</sup> Perboyre says there were five confreres on the staff of the seminary in Macao. I cannot explain the discrepancy.

the hostility of the “pagan” Mandarins but the possible antagonism of the Catholic Macanese authorities, demanding their outmoded privileges.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Chinese Church in 1835**

In 1835 the situation of the Church in China was bleak, with the proviso that the increased number of missionaries coming to China were beginning to make a difference and were stemming the decline in the numbers of Catholics. All estimates for the period must be taken as indicators rather than absolutes but it was clear that the golden age was over. The mission founded by Ricci in Beijing, with its outreach to the cultured classes, had been arrested as a result of the Rites controversy<sup>17</sup> and, while there was technically a presence at court in 1835, that mission was defunct. In the provinces the situation was complicated and uneven. The Church that formerly had as many as 300,000 members spread throughout the empire now had 200,000. The local clergy, in general, were from the same, very simple, backgrounds as their flocks and received only limited training. They had not been able to exercise sustained, effective leadership of the Church when the flow of missionaries stopped. Around the same time Protestant missionaries had begun to appear on the scene and, while their efforts were no threat to the long established Catholic missions,<sup>18</sup> they provided an alternative missionary strategy for China that was to prove very successful later on. Sporadic, but often localized, persecutions weakened the communities further. Perboyre was amazed to find a thriving public Church life in Fujian, which clearly did not fit into his romantic vision of the persecuted Church, but in other places mature communities had disappeared completely. As well as these issues, internal divisions within the Church made it less able to respond to the situation of the time.

There were, under the Padroado system, from 1690 until their suppression in 1842, three dioceses in China: Beijing, Nanjing and Macao. In theory they covered nine (present-day) provinces. In practice their effective jurisdiction was curtailed by the political situation in China, rivalries between national missions, the inability of Portugal to staff or fund the dioceses properly and Rome’s desire to change to a form of Church administration more in conformity to actual needs.

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, judging from his letters, Perboyre did not experience any disturbances in Macao, but Torrette had been expelled in 1832 for one year and the issue of the Padroado was by no means settled. He talks in some letters of the possibility of travelling via Manila. This was possibly an alternative transit point to China were Macao closed to missionaries who had not embarked for China at Lisbon as Portugal insisted.

<sup>17</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a dispute emerged among the missionaries about the use of certain rites to reverence Confucius and the ancestors. The rites themselves had ambiguous religious associations and the issue turned on their understanding in the eyes of the people. The literati were clear on their secular status, the less educated interpreted them as having religious significance. Rome, after much, often acrimonious, debate, banned Catholics from performing these ceremonies. As the rites were an integral part of public life, the ban meant that the elite, who were generally speaking all public servants, could not enter the Church. Christianity was thus confined solely to those on the margins of society. The ban was lifted only in 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Perboyre makes no mention of them, yet they also lived in Macao.

European politics made it impossible to simply annul the Padroado and Rome's solution was to give the administration of whole provinces to Apostolic Vicars. The Apostolic Vicars were subject to the immediate jurisdiction of the Pope, and thus did not come under the Padroado. This instrument allowed Rome to wrest control of some of the Chinese Mission from Portugal's ineffective control without challenging directly the Portuguese authorities.

By the time of Perboyre's arrival in China, the See of Macao had been vacant since 1828 and was, effectively, to remain so until the appointment of Jerome de Matta, C.M., a member of the St. Joseph's Seminary staff, in 1845. Beijing had been vacant for 17 years and an administrator, Cajetan Pires Pereira, C.M., who was himself the Bishop of Nanjing, was running the diocese. Pires had been unable to get permission to leave his post at the Emperor's Bureau of Astronomy. Thus the Diocese of Nanjing was also without a resident bishop, being administered by a Vicar General, Domingos-Jose de Santo Estevam Henriques, C.M. who was often ill and eventually returned to Portugal.<sup>19</sup>

As well as the dioceses, there were Vicariates scattered throughout central and eastern China in the charge of various religious congregations (which did not include the CM). These more contemporary administrative structures had the potential to facilitate the ordered development of the mission but, in fact, they often existed on paper only as there were not the personnel to staff them. Also, the new pattern of vicariates was superimposed on a confusing patchwork of districts administered by the mission society that had founded it. These districts were not fully under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicar of the province in which they were situated, on the principle that the founding organization's established "rights" to leadership of the mission they founded were not abrogated by the new arrangement. The result was a system of administration that was impossibly complex and the arrival of a new generation of missionaries from Europe after the Napoleonic wars put the issue of administrative reform into sharp relief.

### **Lazaristes, successors to the Jesuit Mission**

The French Vincentians who arrived in Beijing in 1784 took possession of only *part* of the great Jesuit apostolate in China, namely the French Mission. The French Jesuit Mission had separated from the Jesuit Mission (mainly Portuguese) in 1685<sup>20</sup> and was supported by the French crown. Its centre of operations was the Church of the Holy Saviour, the BeiTang in Beijing and included a large number of mission districts scattered over a huge area of central and eastern China. The French Vincentians never had enough staff to administer this dispersed collection of mission districts. In 1820 the head of mission, Louis

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<sup>19</sup> Van DenBrant, Joseph *Les Lazaristes en Chine*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Volume III, Online Edition, "The Church in China."



Francois Marie Lamiot, C.M. was expelled from Beijing and he moved to Macao. For the next 15 years the superior of the Beijing mission was a Chinese confrere, Mathew Xue, C.M. who, fearing persecution, in 1826 moved the mission headquarters from Beijing to Xiwangze in Mongolia. He in turn gave over the responsibility for the mission to Joseph Martial Mouly, C.M. in 1835. In 1829, Jean Baptist Torrette, C.M. arrived in Macao. He was the first Vincentian sent from France after the reestablishment of the Congregation in France and on Lamiot's death became the Procure and effective head of the mission.<sup>21</sup>

Portuguese Vincentians had, in 1784, established St. Joseph's Seminary in Macao at the former Jesuit college of the same name. It was natural, therefore, for their fellow countryman, Msgr. Gouvea, the bishop of Beijing, to invite them to take over the Portuguese Mission (Jesuit) in his diocese. Their base of operations in Beijing was St. Joseph's Church, the DongTang in Beijing. The two national missions were quite distinct, maintaining independent financial and formation programmes and the latter mission was, in 1835, only nominally under the authority of the newly reestablished Superior General.<sup>22</sup> However, Clet had worked in what was, strictly speaking, territory of the Portuguese Mission and later Perboyre did also. The contrast between the two was that the French Mission was entering a period of vigorous growth while that of the Portuguese was facing serious decline.

Perboyre was the hundredth Vincentian to work in China, the majority of his predecessors were Chinese, 25 were Portuguese, and 17 were French.<sup>23</sup> However, the Vincentian missions of the period are either styled French or Portuguese. Even Perboyre balked at being part of a "Chinese" mission.<sup>24</sup> This reluctance had more to do with wanting to establish a *having been sent from France* identity for the China Mission over the Portuguese, rather than a strong anti-Chinese sentiment. The localization of the Chinese Church was to be an issue of a later age; but in 1835 the question was different. The new missionary enthusiasm in Europe made reorganization of the Chinese mission territories urgent and possible. The question for Perboyre and his companions, though he never puts it quite so starkly, was which of the two groups of European Vincentians would define the new style mission in China, the established Portuguese or the reinvigorated French?

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<sup>21</sup> The "chain of command" in the mission is hard to reconstruct from Perboyre's letters, but it seems that Torrette had originally been Procure and Head of the French Mission; he was appointed Visitor of the French Mission in 1835. How this related to the Portuguese Mission is not clear.

<sup>22</sup> The newly arrived Perboyre was clearly anxious to restore the international authority of the Superior General; see *Correspondance*, 79, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 212.

<sup>23</sup> There was one Irish confrere Robert Hanna (1762-1797), who joined the community in France and arrived in Beijing with Lamiot in 1794.

<sup>24</sup> *Correspondance*, 96, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 283.

## The Mission to which Perboyre was attached<sup>25</sup>

The French Mission served 40,000 faithful<sup>26</sup> belonging to communities scattered over seven provinces: Mongolia, Zhili,<sup>27</sup> Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Zhejiang. Although these districts were scattered through many provinces and vicariates, by virtue of their being part of the French Mission they were under the jurisdiction of the Beijing Diocese. Very correctly and with great sensitivity, Perboyre wrote a cordial letter of introduction to his Portuguese confrere João de Franca Castro e Moura C.M., who, though living in Shandong province was then the Vicar General of the vacant diocese of Beijing.<sup>28</sup> The head of the mission lived in Macao beside, but independent of, St. Joseph's Seminary. From his base there, he conducted a lively correspondence with his confreres throughout China and seemed to be able to give some real administrative and financial oversight to the mission, to judge from Perboyre's letters. He also directed a seminary, the continuation of the French Mission's seminary in Beijing that Lamiot transferred to Macao in 1820. He had three Vincentians confreres, two Chinese<sup>29</sup> one French<sup>30</sup> to assist him. Perboyre worked with a group of confreres responsible for districts in four provinces: Henan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Zhejiang. In one letter clearly designed to arouse missionary feeling at home, Perboyre describes the transformation wrought by the presence of his French confreres,<sup>31</sup> and, by default, gives the impression that little was being done prior to their arrival. This was not the case. Chinese confreres had been working in the districts throughout the period when French Missionaries were absent. However they were few, the area was vast and persecutions were severe. As a result, huge swaths of territory were, in effect, abandoned. The arrival of more priests from abroad and the appointment of the new superior allowed for a major restructuring of the mission (which amounted to a reestablishment), but it would have been impossible for the four foreigners to achieve anything of substance without the Chinese confreres and catechists who did most of the work.

## Personnel

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<sup>25</sup> Perboyre's letters are a poor source of information on the mission. He was not the superior, and his letters to Torrette or the Superior General are not the official reports. Thus, in his correspondence, he makes either general observations which are tantalisingly vague, or conversely, specific references which do not give an impression of the whole mission.

<sup>26</sup> Alphonse Hubrect C.M., *La Mission de Peking et les Lazaristes*, p. 258.

<sup>27</sup> Modern Hebei with Beijing and Tianjin.

<sup>28</sup> On his way to Henan, Perboyre wrote Castro a very warm letter of introduction. *Correspondance*, 72, to Jean Castro, C.M., in the Diocese of Pékin, p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Li, C.M. (b 1803), sometimes called Chen, and Mathew Zhao, C.M. (b 1810), at that time a cleric. Both had lived in France for at least a year.

<sup>30</sup> François-Xavier Timothée Danicourt, C.M. (b 1806), who later brought the first Daughters of Charity to China in 1848.

<sup>31</sup> *Correspondance*, 77, to A. M. Candeze, Vicar General de Saint Flour, pp. 200-205.

The Vincentians in China in 1835 consisted of Chinese, Portuguese, and French Nationals. The nine French were all relatively young (average age 30) and were recent arrivals, the earliest, Torrette, (b 1801) having set foot in Macao only in 1829. The 11 Portuguese were, by and large, more senior (average age 50) and with a great deal of experience. One of Perboyre's Chinese teachers, Joachim Gonsalves, C.M., was a significant scholar and his Latin-Chinese dictionary went through many editions.<sup>32</sup> The largest group, the 18 Chinese (average age 40) might have been expected to provide leaders for the mission, but the level of training they received and the expectations of the foreign missionaries (and their European superiors) did not easily allow for such a possibility. The classic example of this failure of vision was the transfer of leadership of the French Mission in Mongolia from the experienced administrator, 54-year old Xue to the recently arrived, 28-year old, Mouly.

### **Perboyre's Mission**

*In the time of the Emperor Kanghi (sic) the Christians had churches in many towns; now they are in the hands of the pagans, and the Christians are dispersed in the rural areas, especially in Honan (Henan), where we count among town dwellers barely 20 people from Peking involved in trade and watch-making in the capital of the province. Which means that here, as in France, we have the joy of being the missionaries to the poor people of the countryside.*<sup>33</sup>

The French Mission's districts<sup>34</sup> in Henan, and later Hubei were Perboyre's field of mission. The superior of the mission was François Alexis Rameaux, C.M. and, with the arrival of Perboyre, he had at his disposal five co-workers to cater for Catholic communities scattered over an area about the size of France. These communities included not only those directly under the French Mission but also, in response to the appeals of Pires, those communities in Henan that were administered by Nanjing. The Bishop of Nanjing administered Henan but according to Perboyre himself, that province was not part of the Diocese of Nanjing,<sup>35</sup> its eastern neighbour. Hubei was part of the Vicariate of HuGuang, (modern day Hubei and Hunan) but in 1835 the Vicariate was vacant and was

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<sup>32</sup> This scholarship is all the more remarkable when one remembers that there was a strict ban on the teaching of Chinese to foreigners. This restriction was, in the same period, hampering the development of international trade in nearby Canton.

<sup>33</sup> *Correspondance*, 89, to Pierre Martin, C.M., in Paris, p. 250. Perboyre is here rather making a virtue of necessity, see note 16.

<sup>34</sup> An interesting task would be to publish a map of these mission districts. This author was not able to reconstruct the locations from the letters alone.

<sup>35</sup> *Correspondance*, 77, to A. M. Candeze, Vicar General de Saint Flour, pp. 200-205.

being administered by the Apostolic Vicar of Shanxi/Shaanxi.<sup>36</sup> Although Perboyre's letters are usually positive in tone, the need for reorganization was obvious. There was a will for change and, by January 1838, Perboyre was already imagining what would in fact become the shape of the Congregation's missions in southern China.<sup>37</sup>

Perboyre had, even if there had been no other issue involved, a difficult mission. The Church in Henan and later Hubei had been neglected since the suppression of the Jesuits and all that followed. The districts were widely separated and the missionary journeys he made were physically very demanding. The individual missions themselves,<sup>38</sup> while described in very uplifting terms in his letters, cannot have been easy, given the previous neglect. His own health was not good. On arrival at his base in Henan, he was ill for three months,<sup>39</sup> making the Paris doctor's reversal of his decision to allow Perboyre to go to China seem misplaced. Later he suffered from a hernia, which was no trivial matter, given his workload. His command of the language is a matter of dispute but, given the simple introduction he received in Macao and his age, his own humble assessments of his fluency must have been reasonably accurate. His description of his Chinese co-worker as the bearer of the main preaching load was probably born of necessity and not just Perboyre's modesty. From a note in the published *Correspondance*,<sup>40</sup> the defence of his linguistic abilities seems to have turned on the need to show that his silences during interrogation were the result of Christ-like forbearance not simple incomprehension. Such a defence is unnecessary, as the heroic quality of Perboyre's life and death does not turn on a rather forced comparison with the Passion of Christ.

What is lacking in Perboyre's letters is any real evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods they were using. Nor are there any references to any doubt as to his own sense of self-worth. Perhaps that is too contemporary a perspective to apply to the type of letters that survive or are even imaginable for the time. Also this age delights, and even draws some consolations, from knowing its heroes' feet of clay. Perboyre's negative thoughts on his own work or on himself are not found in his letters. A record of them would help us understand his struggle all the more easily. The absence of his more private reflections on his experience of mission mean that his inner dispositions must be reconstructed from his stated opinions on ancillary subjects and not direct statements of his own.

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<sup>36</sup> The detail may seem unnecessary to the western reader, but from 1837 onwards many of Perboyre's letters, especially those to the head of Mission, Torrette, are reflections on which division of territories could best serve the interests of the Congregation.

<sup>37</sup> *Correspondance*, 90, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 253.

<sup>38</sup> For a summary of the typical mission, see Robert Maloney, C.M., *Seasons in Spirituality*, p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> *Correspondance*, 89, to Pierre Martin, C.M., in Paris, p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> See Footnote 2, *ibid.*, 86, to l'Abbe Lacarière du clergé de Saint-Eustache de Paris, p. 234.

**Perboyre's Personal Companions**<sup>41</sup>

*Rameaux, François-Alexis (b 1802) Superior of the Mission,*

*Baldus, Jean-Henri (b 1811)*

*Bai, John, C.M. (b 1774)*

*Wang, Andrew (b 1798)*

*Song, Paul, C.M. (b 1774)*

*From 1838*

*Ceng, Paul, C.M. (b 1813)*

*Yang, Andrew, C.M. (b 1803)*

*A list of Perboyre's companions in Henan and Hubei, reconstructed from his letters*

Perboyre's companions in the community were, once he left Macao exclusively Chinese or French. While in Macao learned Chinese with the accomplished Gonsalves, and even taught French in the Portuguese seminary. However once on the mission, his relationship with his Portuguese confreres, to judge from his letters, seem to have been professional rather than personal. His one surviving letter to a Portuguese confrere, Costa, displays respect and great tact, but not the warm quality one sees in his other letters. We have no letters written to Chinese confreres, if, indeed, there were ever any, making any real assessment of his relationship with them from his correspondence difficult. Perboyre's letters are full of references to these men and what is refreshing is the naturalness of the descriptions. We do not find a modern political correctness in his references to his confreres, but neither do we find any want of regard for his Chinese companions. His remarks show an honest assessment of their individual virtues and faults. In one example, his advice to Torrette concerning a confrere involved in unspecified scandals is both wise and respectful, without any tendency to make sweeping statements about the Chinese confreres in general.<sup>42</sup> In another instance he does remark on the unwillingness of the Chinese priests to seek out the lost sheep,<sup>43</sup> but his remarks lack the disdainful tone that would make the remark an embarrassment. From the start of his mission in Henan, he had, as companion, John Bai, C.M., who later transferred with him to Hubei. Bai (ordained in 1832) had been working in Hubei but some public scandal made a transfer necessary. Perboyre was given some responsibility over the rehabilitation of this penitent priest. The references to Bai, (who was only two years his junior) seem a little patronising to modern readers, but Perboyre had been the director of the Internal Seminary in Paris and, perhaps, saw himself in

<sup>41</sup> It would be interesting to produce a "Catalogus" style list of the confreres in China in 1835. Most of the lists divide people into their national groups, which tend to make it difficult to get a picture of the compositions of the local communities of the day.

<sup>42</sup> *Correspondance*, 78, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, pp. 207-208.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 259.

something of a director/seminarist relationship with his charge.<sup>44</sup> Perboyre's letters suggest that he took advice from others (including his Chinese confrere Song) on how best to help the troubled priest, that the two of them were able to work well together, and that Bai did benefit from the relationship. Otherwise Perboyre seems to have had a very open relationship with his Chinese companions.<sup>45</sup> Rather surprisingly, given his attachment to Clet's memory, Perboyre does not draw attention to the fact that Paul Song, C.M. (b 1774) had been Clet's co-worker for many years. Later, in his imprisonment, he received a great deal of support from another Chinese confrere, Andrew Yang C.M., who had been trained in Macao and only joined the mission shortly before Perboyre's arrest.

His relationships with his French confreres were more complex, as might be expected. He was the most senior in vocation of the entire group and had been director of the internal seminary, traditionally a significant post. Shortly after arriving in Macao, he makes an unusually strong remark concerning a travelling companion from France in a letter to his sister Antoinette.<sup>46</sup> The robust language is untypical and may simply be the result of the months of enforced intimacy aboard ship. However the vigour of the remarks invites reflection as to the identity of the unnamed priest. Two Vincentians travelled with him from France, Joseph Gabet (b 1808) and Joseph Perry, (b 1808) both of whom ultimately left the Congregation. Unfortunately, as he never actually says that the objectionable companion was a Vincentian and there were other priests on board, it is impossible to comment further. His other remarks about his companions are warm and display a genuine regard for, and an attractive humility before, his (mostly) younger fellow countrymen. Rameaux, who was the same age but somewhat his junior in vocation and experience of the priesthood, wished to defer to him as the superior but Perboyre firmly sets aside the possibility<sup>47</sup> and seems genuinely to have been happy not to have the responsibility. The letters give little impression of his companion Baldus and it is with the letters to Torrette that we see signs of a more frank relationship. They were about the same age and were ordained around the same time, although Perboyre was his senior in vocation. Apart from the communications regarding spending, there is a series of letters in which Perboyre reflects on permutations and combinations of new territories that might be given to the community. Torrette clearly has a different view on the matter and there are signs of tension between them. In one instance

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, to Jean Baptiste Nozo, Superior General, in Paris, p. 218.

<sup>45</sup> Perboyre's letters are, generally speaking, a poor source of information regarding his attitudes. He was often writing to men who did not know the Chinese confreres personally and therefore he does not give intimate news of their doings.

<sup>46</sup> *I have in this country a particular enemy, concerning whom I must be careful; he is the worst individual I know; he is not Chinese, he is a European. He was baptised in his infancy and later he was ordained a priest. From France, he has come to China with us on the same ship. I don't doubt that he follows me everywhere, and he will certainly cause my ruin if I fall into his hands. Correspondance*, 69, to his sister Antoinette, in Paris, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-To Jean Baptiste Nozo, Superior General, a Paris, Page 218

Perboyre was irritated when Torrette forwarded some of Perboyre's more general letters to Paris for publication in the *Annales de la propagation de la foi* without permission.<sup>48</sup> In another instance he wrote, rather tactlessly it must be said, about a previous procurator who was considered by his contemporaries as useless because he had never been to China.<sup>49</sup> Since the procurator, Torrette, had gotten no further than Canton, the remark was bound to cause offence. It was unlike Perboyre to write in this way and in a later letter, a contrite Perboyre writes to thank Torrette for having corrected his fault. The last letter of Perboyre to his Visitor, happily, was in a more cordial vein, as Perboyre was arrested not long afterwards and, by coincidence, Torrette died the day after Perboyre, though the former died of natural causes.

## Conclusion

*The life of the missionaries in China is always apostolic; it is spent amid fatigues and dangers; for three quarters of the year they traverse vast areas to direct the communities, preaching, administering the sacraments etc., living frugally in a country where the rich, as usual, live well but where the poor don't always have a bit of rice with which to feed themselves.*<sup>50</sup>

Perboyre's five years in China belong to a period of transition in the Church's mission there. That transition ultimately went in a very different direction soon after his death. He arrived from a Church of martyrs with rather a romantic desire to be a martyr himself. He wished to imitate Clet and to give his life for the exotic mission that his brother had died trying to reach. The reality he found on arrival in China was much more complex than he imagined. Hostile Portuguese authorities in Macao, districts in Fujian which seemed more thoroughly "Catholic" than the Europe he had left, and communities in Henan which had simply collapsed through neglect rather than been fortified by the blood of the martyrs. He found national rivalries among his European companions and an administrative structure that was incapable of coping with the evangelical possibilities presented by the new influx of French Missionaries. He also found human weakness among his co-workers, both French and Chinese. He found a China as sophisticated as the France he had left and yet with extraordinary disparities between rich and poor. He suffered from his own physical infirmities and a workload that involved travelling long distances to minister to small communities. A different person might have become disillusioned with the disparity between his Paris-conceived vision of mission in mysterious China and the less than romantic reality that was his apostolate in

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 282.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 242.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86 to A. M. l'Abbe Lacarière du clergé de Saint-Eustache de Paris, p. 235.

Henan and Hubei from 1835-1836. That he was “ennobled” rather than embittered by his experiences, suggests that he was indeed “a special sort” deserving of our attention and, dare one say it, imitation.

The person who emerges from the letters is not a plaster saint or one whose experience is of relevance only to China. His story has more universal application. He is, in a sense, every Vincentian, and with that realization comes the hope that we can all aspire to his kind of holiness honed in the mystery of daily life. This is not a particularly novel idea perhaps, but original and inspirational in every particular example of its successful application. The Perboyre one finds in the letters is a man applying that simple principle in the difficult circumstances of China circa 1835 and who, in so doing, became a model for us all. Through his experiences he became the man we know today as St. John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

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