

Lu Bohong, the “Forgotten Saint” of Shanghai

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Lu Bohong in 1917.

Photo: taken from Zhao Jianmin, *Tianzhujiào zài Huá shìhuà*, p. 496, by kind permission of Zhao Jianmin.

Whoever is Lu Bohong? In 1938 one would have been more likely to know the answer than today, because the Catholic entrepreneur and active “apostle of charity” was internationally known; in fact alongside Ma Xiangbo (1840–1939), Joseph Lu Bohong (1875–1937) was probably the best known Chinese Catholic of his times, but due to the war with Japan (1937–1945), the civil war (1945–1949) and subsequent developments (Communist power take-over) he sank into oblivion.

Family

His name Lu Bohong 陆伯鸿 was earlier on also written as Loh Pa Hung or Loh Pa-hung. He came from a traditional Catholic family. The first Christian in the Lu family

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was supposedly already baptized in the time of Xu Guangui (1562–1633), that is shortly after 1600. However, more precise information on the genealogy of the Lu family, which probably came to Shanghai from Henan in the 18th century, can only be traced back to about 1850, when Lu Songyuan (ca. 1810–1880), the grandfather of Lu Bohong, actively supported the emerging mission in Shanghai. In 1875 little Joseph Lu Bohong was born in Dongjiadu parish in the south-eastern area of the old city of Shanghai. As the only boy in the family, he was lovingly brought up by his mother and his two sisters. He witnessed the rapid growth of the city of Shanghai, which between 1840 and 1940 became not only the largest but also the most modern and wealthiest city in China, and also the largest centre of Christianity with many schools, publishing houses and hospitals. However, the great divide between the very rich and the poor slum dwellers was also particularly visible in the metropolis; there were many beggars, street children and refugees, but also epidemics, drug-related crime and prostitution.

The increasing modernization of Shanghai was facilitated also by a group of local businessmen, the so-called *compradores* (*maiban jieji* 买办阶级), who are often portrayed in communist historiography as henchmen of the imperialist powers. Shanghai's Catholics, some of whom had close contact with the French (Jesuit) missionaries, were almost predestined to take on a role as mediators between the foreign entrepreneurs and investors and the local workers and immigrants. The Lu family was among these successful Catholic families who worked with the foreign entrepreneurs in trade, industry, administration and banking. Lu Bohong could probably also simply be portrayed as one of many successful businessmen who was able to carry out large projects through his contacts with the mission procurators in Shanghai. But he was a capitalist in the best sense: he used his talents and resources masterfully and in the long term for non-profit ventures: for the relief of the poor.

Youthful Ambitions, Marriage and Children

Lu Bohong grew up in the vicinity of the well-known church of Dongjiadu (which was also the cathedral until the 1950's), and from his childhood enjoyed the music and decoration of the great church during the magnificent liturgical celebrations of his times. In his youth he wanted to pursue a career as a civil servant. At the age of 20, however, he did not get any further with the Confucian examinations and began to learn French privately from a Shanghai Jesuit (Fr. Simon Gong Chai, 1850–1914). That Jesuit priest made attendance at daily Mass a condition for the language lessons and so Lu also learnt some Latin. Gradually, the notoriously proud and opinionated young man became a spiritual person who prayed a lot and was also active as a catechist in the suburbs of Shanghai. Daily attendance at the early Mass, where Joseph Lu assisted the priest with the Latin prayer responses, became a seldom missed custom. He married in 1896 and had three sons with his first wife who, however, died in 1905. In 1900 his son Lu Yingeng (1900–1980) was born, and who in the 1940's tried to continue his father's charitable projects, but emigrated to the USA in 1949. Around 1900 Lu Bohong worked as secretary and translator for a French lawyer



Photo taken in 1921, before the birth of Lu Bohong's sixth son Lu Zengli.

In front, from left: Lu Zengzuo, Lu Bohong's sister, his wife Zhu Yana with the third daughter in her arms (she died as a child), Lu Deying, Lu Bohong, Lu Bohong's sister, Lu Bohong's eldest sister and Lu Weidu.

Second row, from left: Lu Naying, wife of Lu Zengxi, Lu Yingeng, Lu Zengqi and Lu Zengxi.

Photo: taken from Bruno Hagspiel, *Along the Mission Trail, 4, China*, Techny 1927, photo page between p. 4 and 5.

in the French Concession in Shanghai. Thus he learned legal structures and accuracy in administrative matters.

The year 1905 brought not only the death of his first wife but also a serious illness which the thirty-year-old Lu almost did not survive. In a vision he saw the Mother of God and after his recovery he dedicated himself all the more to his work in one of the prayer and catechesis groups that were organised in the parish. These prayer groups were similar to the Legion of Mary (which only came to China in 1940) and focused on “good works,” e.g. visiting the sick, helping the poor and missionary work in the suburbs of Shanghai. It becomes clear that this “going to the needy” shaped Lu Bohong's life, for in the remaining three decades of his life he made countless such visits almost daily: to hospitals, old people's homes, suburban parishes, but above all to poor neighbourhoods. He was a real “activist,” constantly on the move, whether on foot, in a rickshaw, by train or (later) in his own car. His visits to prisons became almost legendary, where he tried to convert and baptize especially the inmates sentenced to death before their execution, in order to at least save their souls.

In 1909, he married his second wife, Zhu Yana (1891–1973), who faithfully accompanied him and with whom he had five children, including Michael Lu Weidu 陆微读 (1913–2010), who held influential positions in the Shanghai Patriotic Association from 1955 on (a circumstance which, unfortunately, must have subsequently damaged Lu Bohong's reputation in certain underground Church circles).

Successful Entrepreneur and Founder of Charitable Institutions

The milestone as an entrepreneur in his own right came in 1911 when the Chinese municipal government put Lu Bohong in charge of the electricity plant. The rapidly growing popularity of lightbulbs in Shanghai meant that Lu could expand quickly and already two years later he took on the building and administration of a streetcar line in the part of Shanghai that lies to the south of the old city and the French Concession. Lu Bohong's large projects (electricity plant, streetcar line, later also waterworks) became quite important for the infrastructure of that zone. Together with the wealth Lu also had the possibility to realize his long held dream project: a large hospice for the poor! So often, on his visits to the suburban slums, he had met helpless existences, people in need of bread, medicine, a home and care, and he could not help. Now, however, the city administration decided to restore an extremely run-down poorhouse in the southern city, the Puyutang 普育堂. This project, known as the “New Puyutang” (Xin Puyutang), in Western sources called “St. Joseph's Hospice,” became the life's work of the young entrepreneur. He planned the large-scale new building as a kind of model institution, modern, clean and healthy, a home for the poorest of the poor, regardless of whether they were orphaned, old, wasting away or mentally ill. For the construction, Lu Bohong secured the bricks of the old city wall of Shanghai, which was torn down in those years. He entrusted the care of the residents to the Vincentian Sisters and soon after the opening in 1913, there were several hundred living in the home. Later the resident community grew to around two to three thousand, which was naturally a constant financial burden for Lu, who often had to depend on donations to buy rice for his protégés. The residents were divided according to their needs: here the orphan children, there the elderly and the bedbound. There were workshops, a section for the mentally ill and a large chapel. So Lu had created a “City of the Poor,” similar to that of St. Joseph Cottolengo (1786–1842) in Turin a hundred years earlier.

Known as an efficient organiser and generous donor, Lu Bohong received requests from many sides to support Catholic charitable institutions. Thus in 1914 he financed the Franciscan Sisters' clinic for the poor in Yangshupu, a different part of Shanghai city. In the following years, he contributed to half a dozen Catholic clinics and hospitals in the Shanghai area. In 1918 Joseph Lu was significantly involved in the founding of the “Central Hospital” in Beijing. This was the first modern (i.e. “Western-organized”) hospital founded by Chinese people themselves. All the former hospitals in China had been founded and financed by missionaries. Admittedly, the “Central Hospital” was also dependent on the service of the French Vincentian Sisters, because at that time there were hardly any well-trained Chinese nurses at all.

Lu Bohong had no academic qualifications but he was ahead of his times, because he had an eye for the practical needs of his fellow human beings and was always ready to provide active help. After the outbreak of the “plague” (Spanish flu) in 1919, he opened an “isolation hospital” for infected people in a suburb of Shanghai, also the first of its kind in China. Then in 1933 he founded China's first, large psychiatric hospital, the “Mercy Hospital for Nervous Diseases,” also in a suburb in the south of Shanghai.

In 1924 Lu Bohong invested in a transport business, the Datong Shipping Company. At the National Synod that took place in Shanghai in May 1924, Lu Bohong was an im-



Around the year 1925: Lu Bohong (left) visiting a prison and trying to convert and baptize a prisoner before his execution. Photo: taken from the illustrated book by Shi Jianhua and Lu Qin'an *Hanren de ai* 含忍的爱, p. 38.

portant personality; he helped cater for the many bishops and priests and also organised a banquet at which Shanghai politicians and influential persons could meet the prelates of the Catholic Church.

A “Saint” during Life, but “Persona Non Grata” after Death?

During his lifetime Lu Bohong was regarded as a “second Vincent de Paul.” With his life-long friend, the Catholic entrepreneur Zhu Zhiyao 朱志尧 (1863–1955), Lu was one of the founding fathers of the Catholic Action in Shanghai (1913) and became its president. He took care of the missionaries who needed help, e.g. newcomers in Shanghai. The missionaries of Steyl owe him special thanks because, when the German missionaries were driven out of the mission areas after the war, he lodged a group of 14 Steyl members in his hospice in Shanghai, giving them a home before their departure. During the harsh years after the war (after 1918) Lu also sent money to Europe. Thus bishops in Hungary and Germany received financial donations from him for the support of poor children and religious houses. Bishop Augustin Henninghaus, SVD (1862–1939) had good connections with Lu Bohong and also requested a donation from him when the Yellow River flooded large areas of Shandong in 1921.

When Lu Bohong was a member of a Shanghai delegation at a trade congress in Seattle, USA, in 1925, he took the opportunity to invite the Jesuits in California to establish a school for English education in Shanghai. Such an arbitrary course of action certainly did not garner the applause of the French Jesuits in Shanghai, some of whom resisted the

“encroachment” of the English language. However, Lu Bohong was used to putting his plans into action. In the summer of 1926 he travelled to Rome in that cause and gained an audience with the Pope, who then suggested to the Jesuit General that he enlist American Jesuits to establish a school of English in Shanghai. (Fr. Pius Moore was able to open Gonzaga College for the teaching of English in Shanghai in 1931.)

Lu Bohong, who struggled considerably to learn French as a young man, was no academic but he had excellent connections with the French in Shanghai and was presented with several honorary awards and decorations by France and Belgium. Joseph Lu also learned English. He even tried, as mentioned above, to gain Catholic missionaries to teach English. He was a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan. In 1936 he was honoured with the Order “Papal Chamberlain of the Sword and Cape” (Cameriere segreto di Cappa e Spada). In February 1937, he was one of the outstanding representatives of China at the International Eucharistic Congress in Manila. That was perhaps the highpoint of his career, because in that same year Shanghai suffered the catastrophe that left his life’s work almost in ruins and in the end also cost him his life. From September 1937 on, Japanese bombs fell on the suburbs and settlements inhabited by Chinese, while the foreign settlement areas (the so-called “Foreign Concessions”) remained unharmed.

Many of the upper class fled the city at the time, a relatively easy matter. Lu Bohong also faced the question whether it would not be better to take the boat to Hong Kong, but it seems that Bishop Auguste Haouissée, SJ (1877–1948) advised him to stay in the city. If Lu Bohong had been a European, he would certainly have been involved in a similar way as the “father of the refugees” Fr. Robert Jacquinet de Bésange, SJ (1878–1946), who is known to have organised a safe zone for refugees near the French Concession through diplomatic contacts. The problem was that after the occupation of the city, the Japanese tried to establish a city government that would include respected Chinese, but the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which had by then been expelled from its seat in Nanjing (Nanjing Massacre: December 1937), forbade any cooperation with the enemy occupiers. That was the situation on December 30, 1937, when Lu Bohong left his refuge in the French Concession, accompanied by his son. He was already in his car when “a man selling oranges” approached and asked him to buy oranges. Suddenly, however, the man drew a pistol and fired several times on Lu who died of his wounds barely an hour later. The assassin ran off and no one confessed to the crime. How was it possible that the universally loved and respected man, the “beggar king of Shanghai,” became the victim of an assassination? The general answer, fed by rumours, was as follows: “He was a collaborator with the Japanese and therefore KMT patriots got rid of him.” That was never confirmed, however, and the family suffered greatly from the KMT’s failure to make an official statement. So, unfortunately, Lu Bohong in common parlance became a *hanjian* 汉奸 (collaborator of Japan), although there was and is no evidence of Lu collaborating with the Japanese occupiers. In China, however, the *hanjian* are reviled, and so the “Saint of Shanghai” became a “persona non grata” after his death.

Naturally the events of the war and the power takeover by the Communists in 1949 were further challenges for the family of Lu Bohong. The new situation blurred and ob-

scured the previous achievements of the social apostle. He quickly fell into oblivion. It was better not to mention him and his many contacts with the missionaries at all anymore.

The Jesuit priest and mission historian Joseph Masson (1908–1998) travelled to Shanghai after the second World War to search for material for a biography of Lu. In 1950, he published the then most detailed study on Lu, entitled: *Un millionnaire chinois au service des gueux. Joseph Lo Pa Hong. Shanghai 1875–1937* (A Chinese millionaire at the service of the poor. Joseph Lo Pa Hong. Shanghai 1875–1937), Tournai – Paris: Casterman. Shortly after the murder of Lu Bohong, a German brochure of just under 30 pages was also published, namely the booklet by Johannes Thauern, SVD *Lo Pa Hong, der katholische Mann. Ein Vorbild und Mahner* (Lo Pa Hong, the Catholic Man. A Role Model and Admonisher), Mödling: St. Gabriel Verlag 1938.

Lu Bohong’s son Lu Weidu cooperated from 1955 on with the official Church (Patriotic Association) in Shanghai and thus Lu Bohong’s prestige was to a certain extent used by the newly powerful for their own legitimation. Lu Weidu’s son Lu Qin’an 陆钦安, born in 1940, also accepted from Bishop Fu Tieshan the position as secretary in the Patriotic Association in Beijing in 1985. In 2019 I was able to meet this Mr. Lu Qin’an and I have him to thank for all the information about his famous grandfather. The most important thing that he urgently wanted to tell me during our first meeting, was that the mystery about who was responsible for the assassination had at last been revealed, after 80 years! In 2014 a historian, Mr. Sun Xiaoxiao, published a book in which the names of the seven assassins are listed: they were men of the KMT army intelligence service (*juntong* 军统). They were responsible for the murder of a whole series of collaborators in Shanghai in the spring of 1938, the first of whom was Lu Bohong. He had been eliminated “as a precaution,” so to speak, because there was no evidence that he had collaborated with the Japanese.

Relieved, Lu Qin’an leaned back on the sofa in his flat: “Finally, after so long and so many rumours, we know who killed my grandfather. We also know that he was not a collaborator.” I believe we both thought the same thing at that moment: Actually one could restore his name and his honour. But how? And his grave? “Oh, that was looted during the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards also found his medals in the coffin and stole them or threw them into the water,” says Lu Qin’an with a sigh.

Lu Bohong’s colourful and so committed life naturally lends itself to a film, and as his grandson Lu Qin’an told me, there was a Hong Kong film producer years ago who was keen to make a film about Lu Bohong. “But I didn’t agree,” Lu Qin’an said. “Why not?” I asked.

That would surely have been a film in which my grandfather would have been portrayed together with the Shanghai clique of rich entrepreneurs of the time, with the mafia, the underworld, with the opium dealers and brothel owners. I did not want that.

Then for me as an Austrian he had a surprise. He said:

You know, after the first war there was an Austrian noblewoman or countess who decided to work as a nun in the mission, and she really wanted to do her service in

the Lu Bohong poorhouse in Shanghai. Have you heard about her? Do you know the name of that princess?

I have tried to find something out and came across the name “Mère Carla Helene, formerly Countess Ida von Eltz from Vienna,” but that was all. Perhaps historians in Austria (or Germany, because the von Eltz family comes from Germany) could reconstruct the life of this Countess who spent her life at the service of the poor in Shanghai.

For me, the acquaintance with Lu Qin’an, the now 82-year-old grandson of Lu Bohong, was a call to reconstruct his grandfather’s life, if possible, as a role model of a socially committed modern Christian and Catholic. It became a spiritual experience and I sometimes see Lu Bohong before me, visiting the sick and taking slum dweller beggars to his hospice. Or as he kneels before a statue of St. Joseph and prays for a “miracle.” (It reportedly happened at least twice that the St. Joseph’s Hospice ran out of rice, but in response to prayers, generous donors suddenly arrived.) Lu Bohong was a man who in many respects can serve as a role model. I do believe that if there had not been that assassination, he might perhaps already have been beatified. In China, where most of the local saints are martyrs from the Boxer era, the role model of this “modern saint” would be doubly important. Lu could be someone who inspires charitable work in today’s circumstances.

And in the future? Will he be newly discovered in China? An appreciation of the Church’s social work in the period before 1949 would be urgently needed, but that would require an opening of the Communist view of history, and unfortunately that opening does not seem to be in view yet today. *Quo usque tandem?* Is this awesome social apostle to be forgotten for ever? For even though a “Civil Administration Museum” (Minzheng bowuguan 民政博物馆) was opened in 2012 in one of the buildings of the former “St. Joseph’s Hospice” and Lu Bohong’s charitable work is documented to some extent (e.g. with names and photos of orphans who were taken in at the time), there is still no adequate biographical representation of Lu Bohong in China to this day. There is not a single book about him and he is practically unknown among the Catholics of China today! The illustrated book entitled *Hanren de ai* 含忍的爱 (Compassionate Love), that Lu Qin’an produced with his friend Shi Jianhua in 2021, does contain many old photos, but with twenty xeroxed copies, it is only intended for internal use. ... Thus, my forthcoming book *Shanghai’s Forgotten Apostle of Charity Joseph Lu Bohong*, to be published by Projekt Verlag, is the only updated biography of that meritorious Catholic.

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