

## Xixiang, a Historic Catholic Mission Station in Northwest China

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The history of Christianity in northwest China still remains a neglected topic. Accordingly, few people have ever heard of Xixiang 西乡 (variants: Si-hsiang, Si-hiang), the present seat of the Vicar General of Lanzhou 兰州 Diocese,<sup>1</sup> which is situated about 15 km west of the modern city of Wuwei 武威 (former Liangzhou 凉州) in Gansu Province.



Map of the Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu Occidentale in the 1920s. Photo: Courtesy of the SVD Archives.

On the comparatively large Catholic church compound located in the small dusty hamlet named Xixiang or Songshu 松树 (Pine Tree) you will not only find an impressive, newly built Catholic church with adjoining living quarters for the priests and brothers but also an old Catholic cemetery, an orchard and among several other buildings a small, recently

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1 In 1946, Lanzhou Diocese was officially promoted to “archdiocese” by the Vatican.

established diocesan museum. A visit to the museum and the cemetery will quickly take you back into Xixiang's past as the former central mission station of both the Belgian Congregation of Scheut, i.e. the Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae (CICM), and the German Congregation of Steyl, i.e. the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD). In fact, Xixiang served as the residence of four former bishops of the Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu, namely of Mgrs. Ferdinand Hamer CICM (1840–1900), Hubert Otto CICM (1850–1938), Godfried Frederix CICM (1866–1938) and Theodor Buddenbrock SVD (1878–1959). The first Chinese Catholic priest in Gansu who was also a native of Gansu, Bartholomé Ma (?–1918), was ordained here in 1901, and the grave of the late (Arch)Bishop of Lanzhou Diocese, Philip Yang Libo 楊立柏 (1918–1998), who was a former student of the missionary school in nearby Wuwei, has a prominent place in the small cemetery.<sup>2</sup> How does all this relate to such a small and remote place?



Bishop Frederix (?) CICM in Xixiang, ca. 1920.  
Photo: Courtesy KADOC, Leuven.

Its hidden location is probably the reason why even those who are relatively well informed about the Christian missionary enterprise in China have hardly ever heard of Xixiang or know of its exact location or its former significance as an important centre for the training of Chinese priests and for spreading Christianity in China's far northwest. Gansu itself is a province rarely visited by tourists and those who do, usually follow the traces of the famous Silk Road. Admiring the marvels of old Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian sites in Gansu, the visitors are usually not aware that they also travel along routes of relatively early encounters between China and Christianity. In fact, the first contacts with the Middle Kingdom were already established during the Tang dynasty (618–907) by Nestorian merchants who traded along the Silk Roads. However, these encounters had no long lasting effects with regard to conversions. The same is true for the Christian traders and missionaries

2 See Alois Steyaert CICM (1902), "Le premier prêtre indigène du Vicariat," in: *Missions en Chine et au Congo*, Vol. 14, p. 36; Koen de Ridder (2000), "A Pear-Tree Legacy of Love," PhD Diss. K.U. Leuven, p. 100; [www.catholicclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=554](http://www.catholicclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=554) (accessed April 14, 2014); and <http://paulhanyz.blog.163.com/album/#m=2&aid=236681444&pid=7554694139> (accessed April 14, 2014).

who travelled from Europe to the courts of the Mongol emperors during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) such as Marco Polo, John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck. The first seeds for a more sustained Christian missionary enterprise in China's northwest were planted by Jesuit and Franciscan Fathers starting from the mid-17th century.<sup>3</sup> These were then firmly rooted with the arrival of the CICM Fathers in Gansu in 1879 who, in the early 1880s, established their main mission station precisely in this small hamlet of Xixiang.

The CICM missionaries had been active in Inner Mongolia since 1865. When in 1878, the Vatican officially commissioned the newly established Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu to the Scheut Congregation, it was decided to withdraw some missionaries from Mongolia in order to quickly set up the new mission in Gansu. Already in 1879, Bishop Hamer CICM arrived with only three other priests in Gansu to shoulder this enormous task.<sup>4</sup> Since the Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu not only comprised modern Gansu Province but also portions of modern Qinghai and Xinjiang Provinces, the question arose where to establish the main station in this huge new mission area.

Although the CICM missionaries had been presented with land by an affluent Chinese Christian merchant in Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, Bishop Hamer preferred to move on to Liangzhou (modern Wuwei) where the missionaries were also well received by the still existing Catholic community of so-called “old Christians.”<sup>5</sup> These “old Christians” were the offspring of Christian refugees from Central China whose forefathers had been converted during the 17th and 18th centuries and later resettled in the Liangzhou area as well as in other places along the Gansu Corridor. Some sources claim that the Jesuit Father Etienne Faber (1597–1657, variants: Fèvre, Lefèvre, Fabro) had already founded three mission stations in Gansu by the mid-17th century, namely in Liangzhou, Lanzhou and Qinzhou (modern Tianshui). Thereafter, the two Franciscans Giovanni Battista Maoletti (1669–1725) and Fr. Ottaiano (variant: d’Ottojane, ?–1737) served – obviously more or less secretly due to opposition from the Buddhist clergy – in Lanzhou and Liangzhou.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a report by Maoletti from around 1715 already mentions the existence

3 These early encounters are attested in various sources. For more information see, for example, Paschal M. d’Elia SJ (1941), *The Catholic Missions in China*, Shanghai, pp. 6-32; Hubert Gundolf SVD (1969), *China zwischen Kreuz und Drachen*, Mödling, Chap. 2 and 3; and Roman Malek SVD – Peter Hofrichter (eds.) (2006), *Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, Sankt Augustin.

4 For a detailed overview of the early history of the CICM in Gansu see de Ridder, “A Pear-Tree;” and Lieven van Ostade CICM (1915), “Gedeeltelijke Kronijken van Noord-Kan-Sou van 1877 tot 1914,” unpubl. manuscript, KADOC, Leuven, Z.II.b.4.19.

5 On the “old Christians” see *In Noordelijk Kansu. Land en Missie* (1920), *Missiën van Scheut-Sparrendaal*, pp. 28-29; and Johannes Ternay SVD (1953), “Liber Historiae Districtus Tsinghai – Sining, China [Tsinghai Chronik],” unpubl. manuscript, Archivum Generale, Rome: AG-SVD 632, pp. 11-12.

6 CICM missionaries reported that during the first decade of the 20th century a stone stele still existed right on the southern outskirts of Xining which marked the place of an 18th century Catholic church. This church is supposed to have been erected with the support of two exiled Manchu princes who had converted to Christianity during the early 18th century. This accords with Maoletti’s report who stated that there were even two churches in Xining in about 1715, one for men and one for women. The stele in Xining was apparently secretly removed at the time when Frs. Schram and van Essens opened a new mission station in Xining in 1912. Fr. Ottaiano’s grave was still visited by Catholic missionaries in its original location just south of Liangzhou up to 1941. Thereafter, his grave was moved to a new communal cemetery due to planned road construction. See *In Noordelijk Kansu*, pp. 28-29; letter of Bishop Otto CICM of April 10, 1919 from Liangzhou, KADOC, Leuven, P.I.d.2.3.; Ternay SVD, “Liber Historiae Districtus Tsinghai,” pp. 11 and 31; and B. Szcześniak (1959), “The Description and Map of Kansu by Giovanni Battista Maoletti de Serravalle,” in: *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 18, p. 312. For a more detailed account of

of some twenty Christian oratories, churches and small Christian communities in Gansu and Qinghai.<sup>7</sup>

During the early 18th century an exiled Manchu prince, i.e. the 14th brother of emperor Kangxi, who had supposedly converted to Christianity, had presented an estate in Liangzhou to these Franciscan fathers. The first residence of Bishop Hamer was actually erected on this formerly donated land in Liangzhou, which was still in the possession of a Chinese Christian family by the name of Li. Unfortunately for the missionaries, the holder of the original documents of landownership of the Catholic Church who was also a member of the Li clan, had later renounced Christianity. Since he and his family were still living on a portion of this land, he neither agreed to hand over the documents nor to leave the occupied plot. After unsuccessful judicial efforts to regain recognition of official landownership, the Scheut missionaries finally, i.e. between 1882 and 1884, moved their main station to nearby Xixiang, a small hamlet inhabited by about 250 “old Christians” – then about three hours travelling time from Liangzhou, now only 15 minutes by car.<sup>8</sup> There, the CICM missionaries had been able to acquire an estate of three hectares, enough space to build a church, the bishop’s residence and proper living quarters for themselves and their Chinese staff. Eventually, they also erected an orphanage of the Holy Childhood as well as a seminary. Later on, a dispensary was added and even a small station for the treatment of opium addicts was established. Xixiang’s role as the main CICM station in Gansu also involved serving as the regular retreat centre for those Scheut fathers stationed in Gansu and as the main location for teaching Chinese language classes to the newly arrived missionaries.<sup>9</sup>

After World War I, the missionaries of Scheut suffered from a lack of priests and funds for their China missions, which resulted in a decision in ca. 1920 to refocus on missionary work in Ningxia and Mongolia and to give up the Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu. At the same time, German missionaries had lost several missions in the former German Colonies and were looking for new mission fields. Thus, in 1922 the Vatican divided the old Vicariate of Kansu into a “Vicariate Apostolic of Kansu Occidentale” which was conferred on the Societas Verbi Divini, and one of “Kansu Orientale” for which the German Capuchins (OFMCap) took responsibility. Following the example of the CICM missionaries, the Steyl missionaries also first used Xixiang as their central mission station. The Liangzhou area

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the early Catholic activities in the Xining area see also Louis Schram CICM (repr. 2006), *The Monguors of the Kansu-Tibetan Frontier, Part I-III*, Xining: Plateau Publications, pp. 608–611; and Ma Mingzhong 马明忠 (2009), “Zaoqi jinru Qinghai de tianzhujiao chuanjiaoshi kaoshu 早期进入青海的天主教传教士考述,” in: *Qinghai shehui kexue* 青海社会科学, No. 6, pp. 153-156.

7 See B. Szcześniak (1959), “The Description and Map of Kansu,” pp. 294-313. Szcześniak also mentions another Jesuit by the name of Domenge who was apparently proselytizing in the Liangzhou area around 1706, i.e. shortly before Maoletti and Ottaiano arrived in Gansu. In “Noch eine Mission: Westkansu,” in: *Steyler Missionsbote* 1922, Nos. 9-10, p. 78, yet another Jesuit by the name of Mauran is mentioned as having founded a church in Xining. For some more material proof of early Christianity in Gansu see also “Un coup d’œil sur les Missions de Scheut,” in: *Missions en Chine et au Congo et aux Philippines* 1915–1919, Vol. 27, p. 176.

8 See Adolf van Hecke CICM (1882/1883), “Partie Orientale du Vicariat Apostolique du Kan-sou,” unpubl. manuscript, KADOC, Leuven: Z.II.b.4.1., pp. 28-30; Hubert Otto CICM (1893), “Kan-sou, Aperçu sur ce Vicariat,” in: *Missions en Chine et au Congo*, No. 59, p. 362; and de Ridder, “A Pear-Tree,” pp. 67-72.

9 See de Ridder, “A Pear-Tree,” passim; and Theodor Buddenbrock SVD (1954?), “Chronik der SVD Mission in Kansu-China,” unpubl. manuscript, Archivum Generale, Rome, no file no., p. 9.





Farewell to CICM missionaries in Xixiang by newly arrived SVD missionaries, 1923. Photo: SVD Archives.

did not seem a bad choice because it was conveniently situated on the eastern end of the so-called Gansu Corridor at a nodal point of major trading routes which connected the eastern part of Gansu with its western part, as well as with the Kokonor region and the north-eastern parts of Xinjiang which were all part of the vicariate. However, in 1925, Bishop Buddenbrock SVD made plans to move his residence to the provincial capital of Lanzhou because of its greater political and economic importance and its closeness to the provincial government. After the great earthquake of May 23, 1927, which was followed by a huge flood and mud slide that either heavily damaged or totally destroyed most of the mission's buildings in the greater Liangzhou area, Bishop Buddenbrock finally moved to Lanzhou.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of these terrible natural disasters which had cost tens of thousands of lives in the Liangzhou area, Xixiang – along with most other stations – was rebuilt and continued to play an important role in the vicariate. The orphanage and the dispensary, which had been passed on to the SVD missionaries, were later joined by a home for the aged, a hospital and a polyclinic. These were taken care of by the Missionary Sisters “Servants of the Holy Spirit” (*Servae Spiritus Sancti*, SSpS) who had arrived in Gansu and Xixiang in 1924 at the invitation of the Steyl missionaries. The former Minor Seminary of the CICM, however, had been split into a general elementary school and into separate courses for seminarians. The school was later moved into town to Liangzhou and the Minor Seminary was re-established together with a Major Seminary in Lanzhou. By 1934, Xixiang also offered a school for girl catechists. Furthermore, many girls were trained by the SSpS Sisters in needlework and other household chores in order to provide them with practical abilities to earn a living for themselves or for their future families.

10 See Buddenbrock SVD, “Chronik der SVD Mission in Kansu-China,” pp. 15-17; and Freundeskreis (ed.) (1939), *Kan-su. Zwischen Gletscher und Wüste*, Wien – Mödling, pp. 84-89. For a general account of the history of the SVD in Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang see Hao Bo 昊伯 (2006), *Huaxia yizong. Shengyanhui Gansu, Henan fuchuanishi (1922-1953) 華夏遺蹤. 聖言會甘肅, 河南福傳史 (1922-1953)*, Taipei; Johann Bromkamp SVD (1970), *Mission ohne Maske. 26 Jahre in China*, Buxheim; and Bianca Horlemann (2009), “The Divine Word Missionaries in Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang, 1922-1953: A Bibliographic Note,” in: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 59-82 (for the Chinese translation see: “1922-1953 nian jian Gansu, Qinghai he Xinjiang de ‘Shengyanhui’ chuanjiao shituan: shumu yanjiu 1922-1953 年間甘肅, 青海和新疆的‘聖言會’傳教使團: 書目研究,” in: *Zhongguo bianjiang minzu yanjiu 中國邊疆民族研究* 2010, No. 3, pp. 381-404.)



Xixiang Orphanage,  
ca. 1930. Photo: SVD  
Archives.

The SVD missionaries and SSpS Sisters were supported in the 1930s/1940s by the Chinese Missionary Sisters Oblates of the Holy Family (OHF) who served on about fifteen stations in Gansu including Xixiang.<sup>11</sup> Xixiang also continued to serve as a retreat centre for the SVD missionaries where they would meet in July or August for their annual spiritual exercises or spent some time to relax or to recover from illness. Sometimes, the missionaries would make excursions into the nearby Qilian Mountains where the mission station owned some yaks, which were herded by Tibetan nomads who also produced milk and butter for the missionaries.<sup>12</sup>



Orphaned girls  
doing needle-  
work.  
Photo: SVD  
Archives.

- 11 For some general information on the SSpS and OHF Sisters see Edberte Moroder SSpS (2007a), *Licht im Dunkeln. China 8. Ostgansu*, Stockerau; *ibid.* (2007b), *Licht im Dunkeln. China 9. Westgansu*, Stockerau; R.G. Tiedemann's contribution *Oblates of the Holy Family* at <http://ricci.rt.usfca.edu/institution/view.aspx?institutionID=429> (accessed July 4, 2011); [www.catholiclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=708](http://www.catholiclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=708) (accessed April 10, 2014); and Bianca Horlemann (2013), "Christian Missionaries in Qinghai and Gansu: Sources for Tibetan and Mongol Studies," in: *Xiyu lishi yuyan yanjiu jikan* 西域历史语言研究集刊 (Historical and Philological Studies of China's Western Region), No. 6, p. 174.
- 12 See the report of January 16, 1937 by Hermann Lob SVD, Archivum Generale, Rome: AG-SVD 631.5716, p. 3; "Aus dem Jahresbericht des Apostol. Vikariates Westkansu (China), 1924," in: *Steyler Missionsbote* 1925, No. 6, pp. 87-89; and "Auf hoher Alm' in Kansus Bergen," in: *Missionsgrüße* 1940, Vol. 19, Nos. 5-6, pp. 35-36.

Because of its remoteness, the mission station of Xixiang was rarely touched by political and military turmoil, which regularly shook Gansu Province before 1950. However, several famous foreign explorers of the late 19th / early 20th century found their way to Xixiang as guests of the missionaries. Among them were Sven Hedin in 1896, Clarence D. Bruce in 1905/1906, Carl Mannerheim in 1907 and the French Trans-Asian Citroën Expedition in late 1931.<sup>13</sup> In 1936, the Liangzhou area was also skirted by a division of the Red Army on its Long March. Being frightened by many rumours, most of the missionaries, Sisters and some staff fled from Xixiang over the nearby Qilian 祁連 mountains into Qinghai Province. Although the station was looted by communist soldiers, it remained largely intact and the missionaries were able to return after several weeks.<sup>14</sup>

After 1950, Xixiang shared the fate of most Christian mission stations in China. The foreign priests were expelled and the three hectares of mission grounds eventually communalised. Apart from the numerous graves of CICM and SVD missionaries who had passed away over the years due to illness or old age, the old cemetery of the mission station also bears witness to the local Chinese Catholic priests who had gradually started to replace the foreign missionaries after 1950. Many of them suffered severe persecution under the new communist government and especially during the so-called Cultural Revolution in the 1960s/1970s.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the memory of Xixiang's long history as an important Christian centre in the Liangzhou area remained alive, and during the reform era of the 1980s, it quickly resumed a new role in the local Christian community after the partial restitution of the former estate. Under the present Vicar General, Father John Baptist Yang Zhongxue, Xixiang / Songshu Parish not only upholds the memory of its past as a focal point for the local Catholic community but it also continues to be an active member of Lanzhou Diocese which presently numbers thirty-eight parishes and ca. 40,000 baptized Catholics. As before 1950, Lanzhou Diocese supports several welfare and educational projects such as village schools and two orphanages. The latter are taken care of by the OHF Sisters whose convent has been re-established by the present (Arch)Bishop Joseph Han Zhihai 韓志海 in 2009.<sup>16</sup> Special Bible study courses, which are offered annually during wintertime in Xixiang, seem to be well attended, as well as programs which engage the local youth.<sup>17</sup> In sum, Catholic life is again vibrant in Xixiang / Songshu Parish.

13 See, for example, Carl G. Mannerheim (1969), *Across Asia from West to East in 1906–1908*, Oosterhout, pp. 430 and 494–496; Sven Hedin (1898), *Through Asia*, London, p. 1227; Clarence D. Bruce (1907), *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*, Edinburgh, p. 267; Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil (2008), *Expedition Seidenstrasse*, München, pp. 256–259; and “Nachrichten aus der Kansu-Mission,” in: *Missionsgrüße* 1932, Vol. 11, No. 6, pp. 87–88. On foreign travellers as guests of mission stations see also Bianca Horlemann (in print), “The Catholic Missionary Enterprise in Late 19th / Early 20th Century Qinghai, Gansu and Xinjiang as Perceived by Chinese and Western Travellers,” Leuven Chinese Studies Series.

14 See letter of November 28, 1936 by Bishop Buddenbrock SVD, Archivum Generale, Rome: AG-SVD 631.5700–5706; and the report by Hermann Lob SVD, AG-SVD 631.5713–5734.

15 For a detailed report of the sufferings of the SVD missionaries between 1950 and 1953 see Buddenbrock SVD, “Chronik der SVD Mission in Kansu-China,” pp. 44–55. The diocesan museum in Xixiang has devoted considerable space to the memory of the persecuted Chinese priests.

16 See <http://directory.ucanews.com/statistics/china-lanzhou/190> (accessed April 10, 2014); and [www.catholiclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=554](http://www.catholiclz.org/news/Show.asp?id=554) (accessed April 10, 2014).

17 See [www.asianews.it/news-en/In-Lanzhou-diocese,-Bible-studies-warm-the-hearts-of-the-faithful-during-the-cold-winter-months-17551.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/In-Lanzhou-diocese,-Bible-studies-warm-the-hearts-of-the-faithful-during-the-cold-winter-months-17551.html) (accessed April 10, 2014); and <http://paulhanyz.blog.163.com/album/#m=1&aid=251431360&p=1> (accessed April 10, 2014).



Xixiang, Church and Chapel



Xixiang Church, Early 20th Century.  
Photo: Courtesy Ferdinand Verbiest Institute.



Xixiang Chapel, ca. 1930s. Photo: SVD Archives.



Xixiang Church in 2009. Photo: Bianca Horlemann.



Interior of Xixiang Church



Interior of Xixiang Church, Early 20th Century.  
Photo: Courtesy KADOC, Leuven.



Interior of Xixiang Church, ca. 1920s.  
Photo: SVD Archives.



Interior of Xixiang Church in 2009.  
Photo: Bianca Horlemann.

Xixiang, Cemetery



Xixiang Cemetery, Early 20th Century.  
Photo: Courtesy KADOC, Leuven.



Father A. Volpert SVD visits the Xixiang Cemetery, late 1940s. Photo: SVD Archives.



Xixiang Cemetery in 2009.  
Photo: Bianca Horlemann.