
LIFE AND DEATH AT *DONGJIADU*: A JESUIT WRITES DURING THE TAIPING REBELLION

董家渡生死记：太平天国时期一位耶稣会士的著述

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ABSTRACT

François Ravary (1823-91) was a French Jesuit, an alumnus of Issenheim, Brugelette, and Laval, who went to China in 1856 to join the Jiangnan mission. He remained there for the rest of his life and is remembered for one achievement: the construction of “The Bamboo Organ of Tungkadoo”, completed in 1857. His mission, however, extended in other directions, most of them connected with music, the fine arts, and education in the context of various intercultural modes of exchange. Some of his letters have survived, detailing the rich musical culture he helped to create in mid-nineteenth century Shanghai. One of these narrates the chilling account of the murder of the Jesuit Luigi Massa by the Taiping in 1860. A corrective to a few details surrounding this tragedy, it also highlights the continuing importance of source study, epistolary research, individual (as opposed to collective) evaluation, and translation.

LETTERS FROM THE CHINA MISSIONS

Letters from the China missions have been published almost since there were any Christian missionaries in China. Serial publications from the eighteenth century, such as the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (1702-76), and *Der Neue Welt-Bott* (1726-58) are well-known, and yet even in the seventeenth century some letters were published, not only as part of the mission business agendas, or histories of different orders, but also because there was a real market for this alluring genre – edifying and exotic all at once. They were an early and popular form of travel writing, similar to the books of a Paul Theroux, or a Pico Iyer today.

After the collapse of the first major push to establish Christianity in China in the modern era – due in large part to the proscriptions uttered by the Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors that started coincidentally with the suppression of the Jesuit order in the 1770s – mission letters became less of a marketable commodity. In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, they became internal publications for the most part (for example, the *Woodstock Letters* (1872-1969), and the *Lettres de Jersey* (1882-1939), to cite two Jesuit examples). It is not the purpose of this research to examine why this happened, but to retrieve from an unpublished, unstudied past, the story of one missionary in particular, of how he lived and interacted with his colleagues, friends, and Chinese converts in mid-nineteenth century Shanghai. The missionary is François Ravary, S.J.

If Father Ravary is known for anything now, it is for the workshop he established in 1856 at the “Jesuit village” of *Zikawei* outside Shanghai for the construction of bamboo pipe organs. I have written about this elsewhere (Urrows 2014; Urrows 2017) and am presently working on an edition of eight letters, now at the French Jesuit Archives and written between 1856 and 1861, that will tell the whole story of his fascinating musical undertakings in his own words. However, he wrote about many other topics, and one especially important letter has nothing to do with music and is instead a letter written in the aftermath of the terrifying Taiping attack on Shanghai in

August 1860. It includes a previously unpublished account of the murder of Luigi Massa.¹ Although Ravary was close to the foreign settlements in Shanghai (at the Church of St. Francis Xavier at *Dongjiadu*) during the whole of the Taiping attack, and had of necessity to give a second-hand report, it contains important details and reaffirms that Massa died not at *Zikawei*, as is sometimes said, but at the orphanage at *Caijiawan*.

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FRANCOIS RAVARY AND THE JESUIT MISSION IN CHINA

François Ravary was born in Angers and educated at the minor seminary of Combrée. After receiving a baccalaureate degree with distinction in the early 1840s, he entered the Jesuit order in October 1845 and started his novitiate at the Jesuit college at Issenheim in Alsace. In 1848 Ravary continued his studies and his *régence* (“regency”: a year or more of “apostolic practice” and teacher training) at the Jesuit exile college at Brugelette in Belgium. He spent four intensively formative years at this famous and influential school. It was here that he met Hippolyte Basuiau (1824-86), a professional violinist-turned-Jesuit, who was his shadow and alter ego for the rest of his life. Seven of the eight letters mentioned above were personal letters addressed to this friend.

The Falloux Laws of 1850 permitted the Jesuits to return to France and open new schools; in 1852 Ravary moved to the scholasticate at Laval where he completed his studies. He was eventually

¹ Some of Ravary’s letters were used by A-M. Colombel (1899), but often redacted or censored and not always correctly transcribed.

ordained in 1856, perhaps in Shanghai, where he arrived in February of that year to join the China mission at the age of 33. Here, he so impressed the mission's Superior, Mathurin Lemaitre (1816-63), that he was quickly made Minister of the College of St. Ignatius at *Zikawei* (to the shock and envy of some much longer-serving colleagues). With the help of a Belgian lay brother, Léopold Deleuze (1818-65), he created the *atelier* for the construction of bamboo pipe organs at the school, and in 1857 they completed their first and most famous installation for the Church of St. Francis Xavier at *Dongjiadu*, usually called in French at the time, *Tong-Ka-Dou* (whence the English name, "The Bamboo Organ of *Tungkadoo*").

After completing the *Dongjiadu* organ, Ravary focused on teaching, mission, and administrative work, leaving the *atelier* to Deleuze and his Chinese apprentices. Here they built more bamboo organs and harmoniums for Shanghai churches, and this led to the harmonium

workshop at the *Tushanwan* orphanage, which lasted into the twentieth century. But many of the specialized supplies for the workshop had to come from France, and Ravary constantly wrote to Basuiau asking for these items (Basuiau was, conveniently, Procurator of the Paris Province).

The political situation at the time Ravary wrote the seventh in the series of eight letters is too complex to review in its entirety here. The "crunch" apparent from Ravary's vivid narrative arose through dislocations caused not only by the attack of Taiping troops that he describes, but also the ongoing Second Opium War that had broken out four years earlier. The latter conflict accounts for the mention of numbers of British and French troops in Shanghai at this time. Technically at war with the Chinese empire, the British and, to a lesser extent, the French in Shanghai had understandably little stomach for fighting on behalf of Qing interests.

In 1853, the Taiping captured Nanjing,



François Ravary (right) and another priest or brother, with the drum and bugle corps, *Zikawei*, ca. 1880.

only 270 kilometers from Shanghai, and made it their capital. An unaffiliated group, the “Small Swords Society,” invaded and seized the walled city of Shanghai in that same year, eventually to be driven out by imperial and French troops. In general, however, the foreign powers tried (rather unsuccessfully) to pursue a policy of neutrality even before the Second Opium War broke out. When the Taiping captured Suzhou in

Massa was one of five brothers, descendants of a noble Neapolitan family, who all became Jesuit priests, joined the Jiangnan mission, and all of them died in China. His brother, Nicolò (1815-76), mentioned in the letter, had come to China in 1848. An artist, he taught painting to students at *Zikawei*, and later at *Tushanwan* when it became one of China’s major centres for Western arts and crafts training (Clarke, 2009).

Like the Good Shepherd, he gave his life for his flock. But quite a few of the children and the converts escaped death by the sword, the dear and brave missionary had saved them through his apostle-like courage.

June 1860, all this changed. At the request of the *daota*² the British and French forces in Shanghai agreed to help defend the city. And this, despite the fact that at almost exactly the same time, other Allied forces³ were attacking and taking the Dagu forts at the mouth of the Beihe River below Tianjin. By 1862 an imperial edict gave the foreign settlements in Shanghai the explicit right to defend themselves, and the Taiping, decisively defeated in 1864, were no longer a threat to the city (Nield, 2015, pp. 196-209.)

RAVARY’S REPORT ON THE MARTYRDOM OF LUIGI MASSA

Ravary’s letter, dated 1 September 1860, was written at *Dongjiadu* over several days, and completed on 3 September. It runs to six cramped pages, and the deterioration of the thin paper as well as ion transfer (corrosion) of the iron gall ink has made it particularly difficult to read.⁴ It contains just under 3,300 words in French, and yet it is not the longest letter that Ravary sent to Basuiaiu at this period.

The paragraphs presented here contain the narrative of the murder of Luigi Massa. Luigi

Father Massa’s story falls into a certain category of martyrdom: he was simply someone who made difficult decisions in the course of a confrontation, which probably knowingly led to his own death at the hands of the Taiping. Ravary was not present, but he heard about the tragedy on the same evening. In translating the letter, I have adopted a degree of editorial license, dividing Ravary’s endless paragraphs, adding punctuation, and inserting editorial extensions of his text where needed for clarity. Although he addressed Basuiaiu in the third person (*vous*) as required at the time, his style towards his slightly younger classmate is informal and heart-on-the-sleeve, with the exceptions of the formulaic opening and closing salutations, and his occasional mock-serious asides. We must not think that people at that time always spoke and wrote in the manner of a Newman, a Longfellow, or a Tennyson. Chinese place names have been rendered in their current pinyin forms. I have however used *Zikawei* throughout, since it is so well-known and recognized, rather than *Xujiahui*. The full text of this letter will be included later in my book, *Jesuita Cantat: A Jesuit musical culture in mid-nineteenth century Shanghai*.

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² A mid-level magistrate overseeing administration of a city and its surrounding areas, sometimes called a “circuit intendant”.

³ The Anglo-French alliance formed during the Second Opium War (1856-60).

⁴ François Ravary to Hippolyte Basuiaiu, 1-3 September 1860. *Compagnie de Jésus - Archives jésuites de Vanves*.

Shanghai, the 1st of September 1860

My reverend Father,

The peace of Christ. I write these few lines to you in haste in the midst of difficulties and confusion, which entails from a large Residence like *Dongjiadu* during an almost-complete evacuation. Well then, good Father, our good Lord has visited us in His justice and mercy, and may His holy name be blessed. The storm which we have marked on the horizon, tempest-tossed, has burst close to us, and even upon us. We have seen the [Taiping] rebels! And to us, and especially to our converts, they have done a lot of ill. But for greater clarity, let's follow things step by step.

In my last letter I told you about the approach of these wretches, and of the ravages which they have caused throughout the country. After marches and countermarches, always in the glow of fires which they have set, they arrived at *Qingpu* and *Songjiang*, about eight or nine leagues⁵ from Shanghai. You surely have known, that near the first of the villages mentioned, dear Father Nicolò Massa, surrounded by a few weeping women, had been stripped of his clothing, beaten, and wounded by some of these brigands. And many of our *Kam-sous*, or churches, were pillaged, desecrated, and burned down by these "long-haired" rebels. Around the middle of July, they had gotten close to Shanghai. The [local] people armed themselves, and as they [the Taiping] passed through they met with a fierce resistance from this badly armed militia of country folk. On one particular evening, the rebels were found as close as our orphanage at *Caijiawan*. The poor children! At the sight of the banners of these plunderers and arsonists, Father Luigi Massa gave the signal for flight. In the course of the entire night he led these dear, half-clothed orphans on the path to *Zikawei*, where they arrived at our college without any great accident, but much harassed. The residence, the infirmary, the sick, and thirty of the smallest children had been left there [at *Caijiawan*] to the protection of God. [At] this time, they [the orphans who had been brought to *Zikawei*] left out of fear, and the children arrived in Shanghai on the same morning. The seminarians were at that time on their summer holiday, at a place about a league

⁵ Ravary meant the *lieue de Paris* (ca. 3900 metres).

from here, and so the place was empty. For five or six days the Seminary⁶ was converted into an orphanage. Then the rebels were pushed back by the local people, calm returned, and the poor little family [of seminarians] took flight in small groups and returned to Shanghai.

Regrettably, however, on the 15th or 16th of August the rebels again hoisted their blood-stained flags over the countryside and headed towards Shanghai. Around 5 in the evening on the 17th they were again at *Caijiawan*. Quite a few converts, both men and women, with the orphans and Father Luigi, were at prayers in the church. God was their only hope, and their only help. Five or six of these wretches came in. The intrepid missionary went to meet them. Armed with swords in their hands, they demanded money, always money. Father Luigi gave them 40 piastres,⁷ but that wasn't enough and so they hit him again and again, and Father Luigi was wounded! During this time, a group of Christians escaped through the door of the sacristy, and other children, great and small, followed them. They had to pass over a large canal. Alas, many of them sank under the water and drowned. How, good Father, can I describe these scenes of horror. Two or three new groups of murderers went into the house. In the church, they beat and injured men, women, and children who hadn't yet been able to escape. Then they set fire to the compound. Father Luigi, constantly harassed by some of these wretches, was dragged outside of the house, where they beat him constantly. The good priest collapsed in a rice field, where he was murdered and died. Like the Good Shepherd, he gave his life for his flock. But quite a few of the children and the converts escaped death by the sword, the dear and brave missionary had saved them through his apostle-like courage.

And now he is gone, this good teacher, whom all the missionaries loved with their whole hearts for his good nature, his simplicity, and his virtue. A cruel death, but beautiful in the eyes of God and man, and especially among

⁶ The Major Seminary of the Sacred Heart, located near *Dongjiadu*.

⁷ The Mexican silver dollar, known in English as the "dollar Mex".

his brothers-in-arms. *Pretiosa in conspectu Domini mors sanctorum ejus*.⁸ On this fatal day, one missionary, 12 to 15 orphans, and 10 to 12 converts were killed. A large number of children met death crossing the canal. May the holy will of our good Lord be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

After describing in detail the unsuccessful Taiping attack on Shanghai during 17 - 23 August 1860, Ravary concludes with these thoughts:

And now, good and dear Father, what is going to become of us? The first squall has passed, but is it over? The proverb says that “sunshine comes after a storm.” For the moment (3 September) the horizon is less bleak. It seems most likely that the storm is calming down. The Reds⁹ have gone away and appear to be heading to other places *to enhance the welfare of the people* (this is the lingo of their proclamations). For us and for our converts, just as on the day after the battle, we’re busy with putting things back in order, counting our losses, looking to the future, regaining our position, and re-establishing some semblance of propriety all around us...

Baron Gros¹⁰ has been advised of the arrival of the rebels at Shanghai, of the death of Father Luigi, and of the disasters at *Caijiawan* and *Zikawei*. We have requested immediate assistance, and at the moment we are waiting for 1 to 2,000 French troops. Yesterday and the day before 1,400 British troops had already landed at Shanghai! This will go some way to re-establishing peace and commercial activity in this country. We can’t wait to hear something positive.

I finish here, my Reverend and very dear Father, my rather tired fingers just won’t go on any longer. And anyway, the time has come to give these badly written and badly thought-out lines to the Father Superior [Lemaitre]. As always, they will at least tell you of my good will and of the inalterable friendship of your old companion-at-

8 Ps. 116 [115]: 15 [6]. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

9 A reference to the Taiping habit of wearing a red turban around their heads for identification.

10 Jean-Baptiste-Louis, Baron Gros (1793-1870), French Ambassador Extraordinary and High Commissioner in China.

arms. Pray for us,

Your Reverence’s servant in Christ,
F. Ravary S.J.

Letters of missionaries are still an important primary source for historical study, especially these rare personal letters. Reading these documents leads in my research to a mode of analysis that avoids what the philosopher Karl Popper called *naïve collectives* (Popper, 1963/2002, p. 459). In contrast I understand Ravary and Massa primarily as individuals and seek to understand their *individual* actions and relations to other individuals who made up their community of Chinese converts, foreign missionaries, merchants, and military personnel in the Jiangnan region. They were human, and thus fallible; but they show that the record of most missionaries’ lives was on the personal level one of calling, devotion to their mission, love for their communities, and often of constructive and sometimes brilliant innovation in difficult circumstances. French and Neapolitan, in no sense did either of these two priests see themselves as actors in any political drama: their allegiance was to the vows they took when they became Jesuits, and everything else was quite secondary to their cultural outlook.



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