

CATHOLICISM AND THE GELAOHUI IN LATE QING CHINA

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Introduction

Christianity reached China as early as in the Tang dynasty (618-907), but exactly when and how Christianity arrived in China is still under dispute.¹ Internal crises, together with the demand of conservative Confucianists to crackdown on “foreign religions” in the 750s caused a great decline in the number of Christians in China.² In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), Christianity’s presence in China was still limited to foreigners and almost had no influence on the indigenous population.³ Christianity began to really make an impact in China only from 1600 onward, when the Society of Jesuits arrived in China. This period produced several highly influential missionary figures in early modern Chinese history: Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) were among them. After a period of domination by the Jesuits, Spanish Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians also arrived in the 1630s. However, the number of missionaries was only 30 to 40, and it remained small until 1680.⁴ The Rites Controversy in the 18th century was a heavy blow to the development of Christianity in China. Many missionaries were forced to leave the country, others had to stay underground.⁵

After the Opium War, many missionaries from different countries and mission societies went to China. The most obvious change was the increase in the number of missionary societies. In 1842, there were only seven protestant societies. By 1860, there were twenty more societies.⁶ The number of Protestant missionaries increased from barely 100 in 1860 to about 3, 500 in 1905.⁷ This was largely due to the “improved” international relations of Western powers with the Chinese government, in particular thanks to the treaties signed between Western countries and the Chinese government that guaranteed the freedom and protection of Western missionaries in China. However, three decades after the Second Opium War (1856-1860), anti-Christian movements in

1 Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 10.

3 *Ibid.*, 14.

4 *Ibid.*, 22.

5 *Ibid.*, 30.

6 *Ibid.*, 48.

7 *Ibid.*, 68.

the country almost completely destroyed the Christian flock. The decade from 1890 to 1900 saw the movement reach its zenith. Many of these persecutions against Christians were directly or indirectly related to the Boxer Uprising (1898-1901), but some of them had no connection with Boxers at all. Numerous researches have been carried out to study those anti-Christian incidents. It is hoped that the studying of these anti-Christian incidents will serve as a lens through which to understand late imperial Chinese society.

Previous scholarship on the study of anti-Christian incidents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be roughly divided into three categories. The first argues that anti-Christian incidents happened because Christianity and Chinese culture are irreconcilable due to fundamental cultural differences. The most well-known discourse from this school is from Jacques Gernet. In his research of Christianity in China in the seventeenth century, he argues that the Chinese found it difficult to accept Christianity because “at all events, the intellectual traditions, modes of thought and vision of the world of the Chinese differed markedly from those of Europe. Together with the social organization and political traditions of China, these differences constituted a considerable obstacle to Christianization.”⁸ The second type of argument sees missionaries as representatives of Western imperialism in China, and missionaries’ imperialistic behaviours provoking Chinese hatred. In his study of the origins of the Boxer Uprising, Joseph W. Esherick argues that it was German missionaries’ arrogance in west Shandong province that made the Boxers evolve from a cultural organization to a defensive and protective one against missionaries.⁹ Esherick’s argument is widely supported by Chinese scholars.¹⁰ The third type of argument claims that Chinese people’s anti-foreignism was the cause.¹¹ For these scholars, missionaries were simply victims of China’s xenophobic tradition.

Among these studies, several scholars particularly claim that members of the gentry class were instigators or leaders of many anti-Christian cases. The gentry class in Chinese society was the traditional elite and the protectors of Confucianism, the foundation of Chinese civilization. However, with the extra-territorial rights obtained from treaties between Western powers and the Qing government after the Opium War, missionaries often intervened in the Chinese government’s business in order to protect

8 Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 246.

9 Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

10 Gu Changsheng, *Chuanjiaoshi yu jindai Zhongguo* [Missionaries and Modern China] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2004), 10; Qi Qizhang, “Fan yangjiao yundong fazhan lun” [On the Development of Anti-Christian Movemet], in Gu Daquan et al., ed., *Jiao'an yu jindai Zhongguo: jindai Zhongguo jiao'an xueshu taolunhui wenji* [Anti-Christian incidents and China: Essays from anti-Christian incidents in modern China symposium] (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1990), 4.

11 For example, Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1929), 507.

Chinese Christians. Thus, the presence of missionaries posed a direct threat to the gentry, making the conflict between missionaries and the gentry unavoidable.¹²

The above arguments may serve as the main or one of the most important factors of China's anti-Christian movement in the late nineteenth century as a whole, but given the regional varieties of China, these factors cannot be generalized. Once we analyze the stories behind such events in detail, we may find that sometimes none of the above-mentioned explanations are convincing. In her study of Chongqing, Judith Wyman refutes the traditional view of anti-foreignism which was based on race and ethnicity, because Chongqing itself had been a place where people of different ethnicities living together and foreign missionaries for Sichuan were only another group of outsiders.¹³ Through the study of Catholics in rural Jiangxi province, Alan Richard Sweeten demonstrates that in rural Jiangxi province Chinese Catholics were not separated from the community because of their religion.¹⁴ In his research about Christianity in Fuzhou, Ryan Dunch also argues that becoming Christian did not separate one from Chinese culture, as much Christian knowledge could be understood within Chinese culture.¹⁵ These findings proved that anti-foreignism, anti-imperialism, and cultural conflict were not universally applicable to explain the anti-Christian incidents that took place everywhere.

This paper aims to offer an alternative interpretation of these anti-Christian incidents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It focuses on Belgian Franciscans in Enshi 恩施 of Hubei province from 1890 to 1910. By looking into the social context of Enshi and Franciscans' mission history in this region, especially the interaction between Franciscan missionaries and the secret society, the Gelaohui 哥老会 (Society of Brothers and Elders), this paper argues that in Enshi, and many other places in the Yangzi River valley, the anti-Christian activities were led by the Gelaohui. Since the Gelaohui did not have a direct connection with the Boxers, this paper urges scholars to divert their attention from the over-studied Boxer Uprising to other parts of China. By studying other regions and other forces that were both anti-Christian

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- 12 Paul A. Cohen, "Christian Missions and Their Impact to 1900", in *The Cambridge History of China*, eds. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge [Eng.] & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 543-544; Lü Shiqiang, *Zhongguo guanshen fanjiao de yuanyin, 1860-1874* [The Reasons of Chinese Gentry's Anti-Christian Movement] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo, 1966); John K. Fairbank, "Introduction: The Many Faces of Protestant Missions in China and the United States", in *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); Also see John K. Fairbank, "Patterns Behind the Tientsin Massacre", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20, 3/4 (December 1957), 480-511.
 - 13 Judith Wyman, "The Ambiguities of Chinese Antiforeignism: Chongqing, 1870-1900", *Late Imperial China* 18, 2 (December 1997), 88-90.
 - 14 Alan Richard Sweeten, *Christianity in Rural China: Conflict and Accommodation in Jiangxi Province, 1860-1900* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2001), 97.
 - 15 Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 15.

and anti-government, it is hoped that this paper will enrich our understanding of both Christianity in China and late imperial Chinese society.

Enshi and Secret Societies

Enshi's full name is Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture (*Enshi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou*). It shares a border with Sichuan province in the north and west, with Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of western Hunan (*Xiangxi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou*) in the south, and with Yichang in the east. Qing rulers had followed the administrative system of the Ming dynasty in this region. Enshi was called Shinan prefecture (Shinan fu 施南府), and included the following counties: Enshi, Xuan'en, Laifeng, Xianfeng, Lichuan, Jianshi, Badong and Hefeng. Enshi had been governed by local chiefs until 1735 when the Qing government replaced hereditary local chieftains with nonhereditary appointees from the central government (*Gaitu guiliu*)¹⁶ in minority areas. In this paper, Enshi refers to both the Shinan prefecture and Enshi County.

Enshi was a mountainous region and greatly lacked good transport routes. The most obvious terrain feature of this region is mountain. The territory is situated between the Mount Ba (Daba shan) and the eastern ridge of Mount Wuling (Wuling shan). The local gazetteer described Enshi as: "it is situated among thousands of mountains, and it could be reached neither by road nor by water".¹⁷ Belgian priest Théotime Verhaeghen noted that: "Traveling in Enshi, the only view one gets are big mountains. They are divided into many smaller ridges and canyons by rivers".¹⁸ In some parts of Enshi, people from one village could hear voices from the neighboring village, but they were never able to meet face to face because the mountains between them were too steep to build roads.¹⁹

Besides the comparatively isolated geographical location, Enshi also suffered from frequent natural disasters. The most common were floods. Others like droughts, hail storms, and gales were also frequent. Between 1821 and 1865, there were twelve natural disasters in Enshi County, including floods, droughts, landslides, locust plagues

16 Replacement of hereditary local chieftains with nonhereditary appointees from the central government. Since the Yuan dynasty, the central government had relied on local chiefs to govern the minority people in China. As there had been many rebellions by local chiefs, the Yongzheng emperor of Qing dynasty began to apply the new policy of Gaitu guiliu in minority regions in 1726. Enshi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou minzu zongjiao shiwu weiyuanhui [Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee] ed, *Enshi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou minzuzhi* [Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Ethnic Gazetteer] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2003), 133.

17 Duo Shou et al., *Enshi xian zhi* [Gazetteer of Enshi] 1864, vol.2 (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1976), 299.

18 Théotime Verhaeghen, *Les derniers jours d'un martyr: relation de la persécution de 1898, dans laquelle périt le R.P. Victorin Delbrouck, de l'Ordre des Frères- Mineurs, Missionnaire Apostolique* (Malines: Imprimerie S. François, 1903), 2. All translations in this article are my own.

19 *Enshi Tujiazu Miaozu Zizhizhou minzuzhi*, 273.

and leopard attacks.²⁰ This meant that on an average there was one serious natural disaster every three to four years. Due to frequent natural disasters and bad medical conditions, contagious diseases such as cholera, malaria, black smallpox and all types of typhus were common during the Qing dynasty.²¹

As a peripheral region with weak government control, the society of Enshi developed its own rules and regulations. Among its own mechanics was the constant interaction between people and secret societies. In the late nineteenth century, the most active secret society in this region was the Gelaohui 哥老会 (Society of Brothers and Elders), also called Hanliu 汉留 (Heritage of Han).

About the origin of the Gelaohui, there is a general agreement that it originated from the Guluhui 咕噜会, an armed organization in Sichuan province made up of immigrants from other provinces and local brigands during the early Qianlong reign (1736-1796). During the Jiaqing (1796-1820) and the Daoguang reigns (1821-1850), when the southern-based Tiandihui 天地会 was spreading toward the north, it absorbed some elements of the White Lotus Teaching (Bailian jiao 白莲教) and the Guluhui in the Sichuan-Hubei-Hunan region, and the merging of all these elements gradually formed the Gelaohui.²² However, the detail of the Gelaohui's formation remains unknown due to the lack of sources.²³ The Gelaohui was originally quite active in Sichuan province, and later spread to Hubei, Hunan and many other places in the Yangzi River valley. Its core region was part of eastern Sichuan that was located at the upper Yangzi River. Its headquarters were based in the border region between Sichuan, Hubei and Shanxi. Enshi's location of the border areas of Sichuan, Hubei and Hunan province made it a natural hotbed for the Gelaohui.²⁴

What made the Gelaohui stronger in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the dissolution of the Hunan Army (*Xiangjun* 湘军), a temporary army established by Zeng Guofan on the bases of local militias in Hunan province in order to fight the Taiping army. After the dissolution of the Hunan army, many soldiers had no land to farm and they did not want to return to become farmers, neither could they find jobs, so most of them became vagabonds. Many joined the Gelaohui because they were enticed by promises of mutual aid.²⁵ The second expansion of the Gelaohui took place

20 Lin Song, He Yuanjian, *Shinan fu zhi: Hubei sheng* [Gazetteer of Shinan fu] (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1976), 207-217.

21 *De Franciskaansche Missie China: Zuid-West Hoepè*, 21. Archive of Belgian Franciscans cathedral, Sint-Truiden, Leuven, Belgium.

22 Tan Songlin, ed., *Zhongguo mimi shehui* [Secret societies in China], vol.4 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2002), 151; Cai Shaoqing, "On the Origin of the Gelaohui", *Modern China* 10, 4 (October, 1984), 483.

23 Tan, *Zhongguo mimi shehui*, 151.

24 *Ibid.*, 156.

25 Zeng Guofan, *Zeng Wenzheng gong quanji. shuzha* [Complete Works of Zeng Wenzheng. Letters], vol.31 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1985), 20-21.

following the treaties signed between Western countries and the Qing government after the Second Opium War. Because of these treaties, many inland Chinese cities were opened to Westerners. The entrance of Western steamships in those port cities further outdated the tradition of men pulling Chinese boats in the Yangzi River Valley, especially in the gorges, thus facilitating the development of the Gelaohui.²⁶ During this transformation, the port cities of Chongqing and Yichang were affected greatly, resulting in increased Gelaohui followers in these regions. Since Enshi is located between Chongqing and Yichang, this region became a shelter of the Gelaohui by the end of the nineteenth century.

As an organized group, the Gelaohui had an important role in the local society. Sometimes it was even more powerful than the local government. In 1899, Zhang Zhidong was informed that one of the local Gelaohui leaders Huang Heting pretended to be a military official of the Qing, and controlled strategic locations with his followers. Another Gelaohui leader Jin Xingwa pretended to be a leader of the Red Banners, and collected road taxes at four locations along each pass from all passengers.²⁷ Gelaohui members protected opium traders and in return charged protection fees. Those traders who passed Enshi only needed to visit local Gelaohui leaders Liao Hongju, Pan Zifang and Shang Jiwu in order to have safe passages. Because the Gelaohui had branch “offices” almost everywhere, so opium traders were able to move around freely and safely by building good relationships with the Gelaohui leaders.²⁸ In fact, a quarter of opium taxes in the province came from this area, an indication that this region might have contributed one quarter of the opium output for the province.²⁹ The Gelaohui was so strong that when Chiang Kai-shek’s government retreated to Chongqing while facing Japanese attack, he was able to raise an army solely based on Gelaohui members. This army was called unit No. 163. While it resided in Laifeng County of Enshi in the winter of 1945, it revived the local Gelaohui activities because of its Gelaohui origin. During this time, older generations of Gelaohui members resumed their earlier activities, and young people actively joined the society, creating a golden age for the Gelaohui. For conveniences, even law-abiding commoners also joined the Society.³⁰

26 Wu Shanzhong, *Wanqing Gelaohui yanjiu* [Study on Gelaohui in Late Qing] (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2003), 113-116.

27 Zhang Zhidong, *Zhang Zhidong quanli* [Complete Works of Zhang Zhidong], eds. Yuan Shuyi, Sun Huafeng and Li Bingxin, vol. 9 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1998), 7745.

28 Duan Nongyu, “Yapian yu hanliu he tufei” [Opium, Hanliu, and Bandits], in *Hubei wenshi ziliao*, eds. Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, Hubeisheng weiyuanhui, wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, vol. 1 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2000), 96.

29 Jerome Ch’en, *The Highlanders of Central China: A History, 1895-1937* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 80.

30 Tang Qifa, “Wo de fandu shengya” [My Life As a Drug Dealer], in *Hubei wenshi ziliao*, eds.

Missionaries and Gelaohui

Western missionaries reached Hubei province during the Ming dynasty. Since there were frequent persecutions, early Western missionaries could only enter the mainland and work secretly. The first missionary who arrived in Hubei was an Italian Jesuit, Michael Ruggerius. He established a base in Xiangyangfu in 1587, but later returned to Europe in order to persuade the Pope to send envoys to China.³¹ The next missionary who entered Hubei was Jesuit Pierre de Spira. He arrived in 1627, but was murdered while crossing a river by boat on his way of arrival. In 1635-1636, Father Rodrigue Figueredo attempted to establish a base here, but failed due to the persecution by local government.³² The period from 1724 to 1844 witnessed many imperial persecutions of Christianity throughout China. Despite this, missionaries continued to work in China.³³ Christianity reached Enshi in 1837. In that year, Christianity was introduced to Zhiluo village of Lichuan County by merchants. These merchants reported the development to Bishop Théotimus Verhaeghen of Vicariate Apostolic of Yichangfu. The bishop sent priests to Lichuan and began to convert more people in Enshi.³⁴ In 1870, Hubei province was divided into three dioceses: North-West Hubei, East Hubei and South-West Hubei. In the same year, Belgian Franciscans were officially assigned to work in South-West Hubei, which included Enshi. They soon spread Christianity to most parts of this area. At the same time, the Venetian Franciscans worked in east Hubei, and Florentine Franciscans worked in north-west Hubei.³⁵ The fast spreading of the Gospel at this region was the direct result of the experience these missionaries had gained from their previous mission work in other parts of China. It was also the result of the French protectorate of Catholicism in China, particularly regarding Catholic missionaries' right to purchase properties in interior China.³⁶

31 *Hubei tianzhujiao jiaoshi jilüe* [Catholic History of Hubei], 1, Hubei Sheng dang'an guan [Hubei Provincial Archives]; Noël Gubbels, *Trois siècles d'apostolat: Histoire du Catholicisme au Hu-Kwang depuis les origines, 1587, jusqu'à 1870* (Paris, 1934), 8.

32 Gubbels, *Trois siècles d'apostolat: Histoire du Catholicisme au Hu-Kwang depuis les origines, 1587, jusqu'à 1870*, 9.

33 *Ibid.*, 119.

34 *Lichuan tianzhujiao dashiji* [Major Events in Catholic History of Lichuan], Catholic Church of Enshi.

35 *Missions Franciscans de Chine*. Archive of Belgian Franciscans cathedral, Sint-Truiden, Leuven, Belgium.

36 In the 1860s, French government conducted a series of negotiations with the Qing government regarding missionaries' legal right to purchase properties in China and Chinese people's freedom to convert to Christianity. Those negotiation documents could be found in *Convention Berthemy: Régulant L'acquisition de terrains et de maisons par les missions Catholiques dans l'intérieur de la Chine*, KADOC archive center in Catholic University of Leuven.

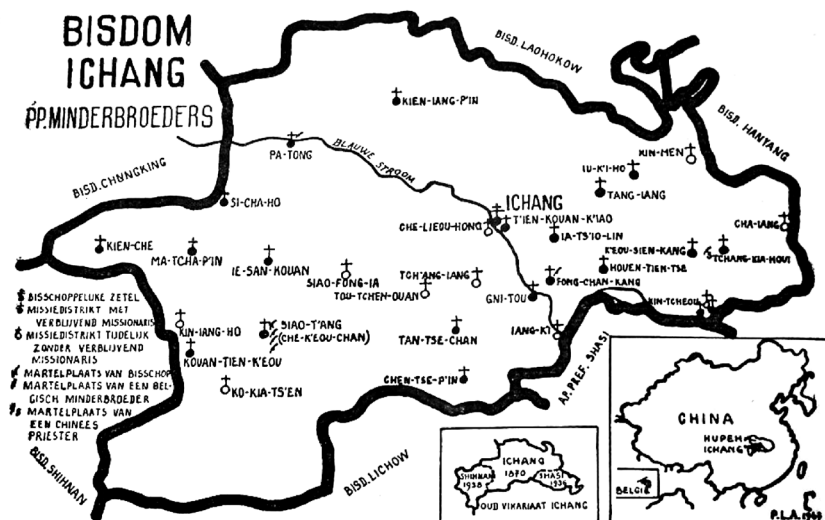


Figure 1. A hand drawn map of Yichang diocese. From Archive of Belgian Franciscans cathedral, Sint-Truiden, Leuven, Belgium.



Figure 2. A Christian family in South-West Hubei province. From Verhaeghen, *Les derniers jours d'un martyr*, 21.

Having come through persecutions and changes of political environment in China, Belgium Franciscans had gained experience in adjusting mission policies according to different situations. Although they reached Enshi a bit late compared with many other places in the province, they were able to establish systematic infrastructure here once they arrived. The central cathedral was located in Yichang. The cathedral included one advanced seminary and one mission school. Chapels were built in counties that had Christians.³⁷ Similarly with Catholicism in other parts of the country, mission schools were built. The first one was built in Lichuan County in 1885. Teachers were selected among local Christians, catechists and missionaries, and sometimes from local scholars.³⁸

Reading through the mission archive sources left by those Belgian Franciscan missionaries, one could feel that they worked quite smoothly overall in Enshi in the nineteenth century. Occasionally there were minor disputes between the missionaries and different kinds of people, but such disputes largely remained regional incidents. Since 1890, the Gelaohui appeared more and more frequently in their records. The missionaries' fear and hatred of the Gelaohui also became more and more intense. Such evolution was reflected in Chinese records as well. Before the Gelaohui was well formed and active, its predecessors already posed a serious threat to the Qing Empire in the 1850s. In a memorial submitted to the Xianfeng Emperor in 1853, Zeng Guofan reported that:

Last year, rebels from Guangdong province entered Hubei, and most members of the Tiandihui 添弟会 also went with them...Furthermore, there are so-called Chuanzihui 串子会, Hongheihui 红黑会, Banbianqianhui 半边钱会, Yiguxianghui 一股香会. Those secret societies have various names, and often move around with large parties and settle in mountainous areas... Recently some realized that those secret societies collaborate with and cover for each other, so that cases accumulated in past decades that should have been solved remain unsettled, criminals that should have been beheaded remain at large.³⁹

Zeng thus recommended investigating and arresting those outlaws in all the provinces. The Xianfeng Emperor replied to this memorial that those outlaws should be punished harshly and the source of the trouble removed.⁴⁰ In the following years, Zeng and his generals were busy arresting bandits and secret societies in Hunan province and nearby regions.⁴¹

37 *Lichuan zongjiao diaocha baogao* [Report on Religious Investigation in Lichuan], 1951. Enshi shi dang'an ju [Enshi Archive].

38 *Ibid.*

39 Zeng Guofan, Li Hanzhang, *Zeng Wenzheng gong (Guofan) quan ji* [Complete works of Zeng Wenzhang], Juan shou, Zouyi (Taipei Xian Yonghe Zhen: Wenhai chubanshe, 1974), 284.

40 *Ibid.*, 288.

41 *Ibid.*, 291, 299, 339.

In fact, many articles from newspapers published during the late nineteenth century also suggested that the secret societies were the main trouble maker against missionaries.⁴²

The Gelaohui's anti-Christian activities started around 1870⁴³ and reached its peak after 1890. Most anti-Christian incidents that took place in Hubei province before the 1870s were not directly related to secret societies. In the Qing government's records, anti-Christian incidents involving secret societies could only be found after the 1870s.⁴⁴ The situation was gradually aggravated after 1870. Besides placards and rumours, anti-Christian incidents also started to emerge frequently. After October 1898, the Gelaohui began to attack Christians in all parts of the south-west Hubei vicariate. The persecution had started in Sichuan province and later spread to Hunan and Hubei.⁴⁵ In these three provinces anti-Christian incidents took place one after another.⁴⁶ According to the church records, the Gelaohui divided themselves into many groups to attack the churches in different places. Each group had as many as one thousand well-equipped soldiers.⁴⁷ The two most serious anti-Christian incidents that occurred in Enshi were priest Victorin Delbrouck's murder in December 1898 and the massacre of Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen in 1904. Evidences show that both were committed by the Gelaohui.

Priest Victorin Delbrouck's Assassination in December 1898

The assassination of priest Victorin Delbrouck in 1898 was due to the direct influence of Yu Dongchen's revolt in Sichuan province in 1898. Yu Dongchen was a Gelaohui leader in Sichuan, and he led anti-Christian activities in 1890 and 1898.⁴⁸ Delbrouck's death was the first anti-Christian incident in Enshi that brought serious diplomatic trouble to the Qing government.

42 For example, Hushang guoke, "Zhongxi guanxi lun" [On the Relationship between China and the West], *Wangguo Gongbao* [A Review of the Times] 34 (October, 1891).

43 Other studies also show that the Gelaohui became active only after the 1860s. See Carl Whitney Jacobson, "Brotherhood and Society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867-1912" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1993), 95; Robert Herman Felsing, "The Heritage of Han: the Gelaohui and the 1911 Revolution in Sichuan" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1979), 96.

44 Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo, ed., *Jiaowu jiao'an dang* [Archives on Mission Work and anti-Christian Cases] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo, 1974-1981), Vol.1. No.2, 985-1003; Vol. 2. No.1. 997-1044.

45 *Annales des Franciscaines Missionnaires de Marie*, 1898, 23. Archive of Belgian Franciscans cathedral, Sint-Truiden, Leuven, Belgium.

46 Verhaeghen, *Les derniers jours d'un martyr*, 24.

47 *Annales des Franciscaines Missionnaires de Marie*, 1898, 23.

48 Qin Baoqi, *Zhongguo dixia shehui* [Underground Society in China], vol. 2 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2005), 420.

At the time, Father Victorin Delbrouck worked in the district of Lichuan County, under the administration of Father Polydore. This district, according to the observation of then Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen, was “obviously blessed by God”. There were many conversions; the local mandarin was very favorable toward the religion and the missionaries.⁴⁹

After Yu Dongchen’s revolt, anti-Christian rumors spread to all the counties in Shinan fu, particularly in Lichuan County, which shares border with Sichuan province. From these rumors Delbrouck came to know that “they (Gelaohui) burned the missions and killed many missionaries in Sichuan and Hunan provinces”. Accompanying those rumors was some alarming news that Gelaohui troops were coming to look for him. On 10 November, Gelaohui troops were about five to six days’ marching from Delbrouck’s residence.⁵⁰ Realizing that he was in danger, Delbrouck tried very hard to save his mission, but he did not succeed. He sent a letter to the local official in Badong, promising three hectoliters of corn if the mission was successfully protected.⁵¹ Unfortunately the Chinese official did nothing to protect him.⁵² Although some local notable men joined together to protect the church,⁵³ this seemed inadequate because the Gelaohui troops came closer and closer. On 25 November Bishop Théotime, who lived only three days’ walking distance from Delbrouck, sent him a letter, informing him about the danger:

In Lichuan, there are persecutions in our neighborhood. For about a month Christian inscriptions disappeared everywhere, being torn apart by the hands of sectarians. The placards instigate the killing of missionaries and the plundering of Christians. Christians and missionaries here are prey to all kinds of injustice. All honest Christians and pagans fled. Finally a real persecution came. More than two hundred Chinese joined the Ko-ti-houi (Gedihui), Society of Brothers: a secret association and they are waiting for the signal (to attack). Yesterday was the date designated to burn my residence and kill us, they have not arrived yet... We stand in defense, but I hope it will not be necessary to come to this extremity.⁵⁴

Warned of danger by this letter, and even more by the information collected by his Christian informers, Delbrouck eventually sent a letter to the Yichang government

49 Natalis Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen: frère- mineur vicaire apostolique du Houpé Méridional évêque titulaire de Siena: esquisse biographique* (Malines: Impiumeire S. François, 1906), 145.

50 “Letter on 10 November 1898”, *La dernière Lettre du P. Victorin: Massacre en Chine*.

51 *Ibid.*

52 “Letter on 28 November 1898”, *La dernière Lettre du P. Victorin: Massacre en Chine*.

53 “Letter on 10 November 1898”, *La dernière Lettre du P. Victorin: Massacre en Chine*.

54 Natalis Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen: frère- mineur vicaire apostolique du Houpé Méridional évêque titulaire de Siena: esquisse biographique* (Malines: Impiumeire S. François, 1906), 165-166.



Figure 3. Xiang Ce'an. From Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen*, 169.

asking for protection. The Yichang government sent a letter to the Badong official, but the letter arrived too late to be useful.⁵⁵ On 29 November, Delbrouck was urged by his Christians to leave his base in Shekoushan to take refuge in another district called Xiaomaitian, where they expected to find a shelter. On the same day, the rebels took up arms and marched in the countryside, led by a lettered man Xiang Ce'an. They destroyed missionaries' residences, burned houses of Christians, and killed many people. Father Delbrouck found himself hiding with three Christian companions in an inaccessible cave. Unfortunately, the bandits found them. He was taken to Shekoushan after being insulted and brutally tortured. On 11 December he was killed by the bandits.⁵⁶

Similar to Yu Dongchen's revolt in Sichuan, this anti-Christian incident was led by the Gelaohui with organized troops. The revolt was well organized, with Xiang Ce'an as principal marshal, and Li Shaobai as vice marshal. They also had a flag with the motto of "destroy the foreign". Leaders Xiang Ce'an, Li Shaobai and Li Qingcheng were all leaders of the local Gelaohui.⁵⁷ Shinan fu and Yichang fu were important bases for the Gelaohui for a long time because of the topography. It was not easy for the government troops to defeat the Gelaohui in these two regions.⁵⁸

55 "Letter on 28 November 1898", *La dernière Lettre du P. Victorin: Massacre en Chine*. Archive of Belgian Franciscans cathedral, Sint-Truiden, Leuven, Belgium.

56 Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen*, 168-169.

57 Zhang Zhidong, *Zhang Wenxiang gong quanji* [Complete Works of Zhang Zhidong], vol.1. (Peking: Zhongguo shudian: xinhua shudian shoudu faxingsuo, 1990), 871.

58 *Jiaowu jiao'an dang*, vol.6, 1146.

The Murder of Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen in 1904

The death of priest Delbrouck did not stop the Gelaohui's persecution of the missionaries. Soon after the end of this case, more anti-Christian incidents took place in Lichuan, Badong and other counties. Before Father Delbrouck's death, Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen had written to warn him about the danger. Despite the death of Father Delbrouck, and continuing threat posed by the Gelaohui, Bishop Verhaeghen continued to work in this region.

This incident took place in a market center called Shazidi of Enshi County. On 17 July 1904, bishop Théotime Verhaeghen went to Shazidi on a pastoral tour with the priests Frederic Verhaeghen and Florent Robberecht, and a Chinese Christian Jia Chengqing. When they were resting on the street, a personal dispute between a passerby and one of the group developed into a big conflict between Christians and a local lineage. To solve the conflict, both party agreed that the chief of the lineage would invite the Bishop and his companions to have a public banquet in his house.⁵⁹ The Gelaohui in Shazidi had already noticed those missionaries and their activities a long time ago, and this incident gave them a good opportunity to interfere. On the pretext of taking revenge for the local lineage, Gelaohui leader Xiang Xuetang killed those missionaries.⁶⁰ During this incident, the chapel and some Chinese Christians' houses were burned. Local Gelaohui leaders also quickly sent the news to Gelaohui branches in other counties and asked them to come to discuss a larger plan. Xiang Xuetang and other leaders were soon captured and executed by the Qing government. The diplomatic troubles caused by this incident made governor Zhang Zhidong punish local officials heavily. Thus the county magistrate of Enshi, Wang Hongbin, was fired, and the interim prefect of Shinan prefecture He Xizhang's head badge was removed for two months.⁶¹

These two incidents showed that members of the Gelaohui were in leading roles in attacking missionaries and Chinese Christians in South-West Hubei in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In other parts of China, Gelaohui branches were also active in similar activities. For example, in Shaanxi, the anti-Christian activities after the 1890s were also largely organized by branches of the Gelaohui.⁶²

As a matter of fact, these anti-Christian incidents in Enshi after 1870 were part of a larger development in south China that was largely led by the Gelaohui. In the entire Yangzi River Valley, most anti-Christian incidents that took place in the late nineteenth century were directed and organized by them. The most influential anti-Christian incidents directed by them in the Yangzi River Valley in the nineteenth century were: the Li Hong incident, the Yangzi anti-Christian movement and the Yu Dongchen revolt. They were connected with each other in such a way that the Li Hong incident was

59 Zhang, *Zhang Wenxiang gong quanji*, 60.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanli*, vol. 3, 1643.

62 Carl Whitney Jacobson, "Brotherhood and Society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867-1912" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1993), 157.



Figure 4. Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen travelling in Enshi From Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen*, 122.

preparation for the Yangzi anti-Christian movement, and the Yu Dongchen revolt was the peak during the Yangzi movement. The anti-Christian incidents that were created by members of the Gelaohui were so widespread that the viceroy of Huguang, Zhang Zhidong, sent a memorial to the Qing Emperor in 1891, stating that:

In all the provinces the Gelaohui is the biggest threat to local society. These bandit members' whereabouts are difficult to tell because they always move around secretly. They often spread rumors and create problems. If we do not destroy them completely, they will form a "larger river" and bring about more serious problems. Generals and officials in all provinces should investigate meticulously, punish leaders of the Gelaohui heavily, and disband these lower ranking members of the Gelaohui... The Gelaohui members formed alliances by swearing brotherhood with each other and establishing sub-branches. The big branches have tens of thousands of followers. Even the smaller ones have more than one thousand followers. All the arrested members of the Gelaohui have shown similar *piaobu* (a small piece of cloth), *haobu* (identity card with member number), and seals. It is obvious that they are plotting to revolt. They are in all the provinces along the Yangzi River. Hubei province is located in the upper Yangzi River, and is in the conjuncture of the north and south; the Gelaohui is especially active here. Earlier in the summer of this year, there was an anti-Christian incident in Wuxue; the Gelaohui used this opportunity to spread rumors against Christians.⁶³

63 Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanli*, vol. 2, 796.

It is not clear why the Gelaohui were opposed to Christianity. Several factors might have contributed to their causes. Firstly, Western missionaries' interference in local affairs forced members of the Gelaohui to act against them. In Lichuan County, where Christians were constantly harassed by the Gelaohui in the 1890s, it was reported that missionaries purchased land and houses and rented them out to Christians. The local magistrate did not dare to interfere with Church affairs. There was even Christian who claimed to be bishop of Lichuan, and interacted with local officials in the name of the bishop. During court procedures, missionaries and Chinese Christians sat together with local magistrate as judges. The local officials' tolerance of missionaries' interference in local affairs was blamed even by their superiors for breaking the system.⁶⁴ With this amount of Christian involvement in local government affairs, the anger felt by local non-Christians is understandable.

Secondly, Gelaohui's anti-Christian activities might have been part of their larger anti-imperialism agenda. Many of its members were unemployed boatmen, who suffered the direct impact of Western imperialism after the opening of port cities in the interior of China. At the same time, the Gelaohui, like the Tiandihui, and other branches of the Hongmen organization were anti-Qing as well. The leader of the Li Hong incident in 1891 planned to put the Qing in conflict with foreign powers so he could use the opportunity to revolt against the Qing.⁶⁵

Thirdly, the Gelaohui's anti-Christian and anti-government orientation might have been a result of the military tradition of highlander societies. This tradition was closely tied to weak government control and the necessity of self-government. In this area, self-defense included two components. The first one was building fortresses. Villages with fortresses were called *Zhai* 寨 or *Bao* 堡. These villages usually stored food and weapons in case of attack. The second component was local military troops. Compared with many places in China, this area's local military defense was supplied more by secret societies instead of government-approved local militias. As early as during the Jiaqing reign (1796-1820), from 1796 to 1804, the White Lotus Society in Hubei, Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces revolted against the Qing. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Gelaohui often acted as a counter-oppression mechanism, both against authorities and other oppressive individuals. This tradition of self-defense continued until the early twentieth century, when the Divine Army (Shenbing 神兵), who was active in this region as an agency of anti-high taxes and other oppressive governmental policies, was eventually cracked down by the Republican government.⁶⁶ Thus the Gelaohui's activities fitted well into this military tradition of this area.

64 Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanli*, vol. 6, 4741-4742.

65 Qin, *Zhongguo dixia shehui*, vol. 2, 417-420.

66 Liu Xuexiong, "Xiang E Chuan Qian 'shenbing' tanmi" [Study on the "Divine Army" of Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan], *Hubei dang'an* [Hubei Archives] (April 2002); Xiao Hong'en, "Ershi shiji shangbanye Exinan shenbing yundong de xiandai zhuanxing" [Modern Change of Supernatural Soldiers Campaign in the First Half of the 20th century in Southwest Hubei Province], *Journal of Hubei Institute for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 24, 6 (2006).

Independently or together, the above factors may explain some of the Gelaohui's anti-Christian actions. Nonetheless, the Gelaohui's attacks on Catholics do not mean that they were anti-Christian or anti-foreign per se. Their persecution of the Catholic priests and Chinese Catholics might be closely tied to the competition between Catholicism and Protestantism, or between different European organizations and individuals in China. It was well known by Belgian priests that the Gelaohui who attacked them embraced Protestantism in Sichuan because of fears of punishment, and particularly, were under the protection of a Mr. B. This Mr. B claimed that he was from France, and was the direct descendent of one of the Lords, with whom William of Normandy conquered Britain in 1066. On other occasions he claimed that he was related to the king of England. When he was in Paris, he developed strong interests in missionary vocation. He obtained his passport as a tourist, which allowed him to move from one province to another more freely than as a missionary. He spent many years in China, had seen many different provinces and spoke Chinese well. He did not belong to any congregation or society of Protestant missionaries. He was called by the Chinese "European beggar" (Yang jiaohuazi). His adherents had the duty to provide a bowl of rice to him in the morning, noon and evening, on a rotating basis. His teaching was against the Catholic doctrine, and was also against the doctrine of Rome, although he called his teaching "the religion of Rome". However, he compared himself to St. Paul. Before the massacre of Bishop Théotime Verhaeghen, this Mr. B had been working for two to three months in this region. To Belgian Franciscan missionaries who worked in this area, Mr. B's teaching increased the boldness of disbelievers, and encouraged their brutality against the Franciscan missionaries and Chinese Catholics.⁶⁷ In fact, it seems that most people in Enshi were affiliated with Protestantism, and Belgian priests believed that the promised support from Protestant missionaries increased the audacity of these local Chinese.⁶⁸ An article published in the North China Herald in June 1891 also stated that the Gelaohui was not really anti-Christian:

May it not be the case that these disaffected classes are easily brought into sympathy with the Ko Lao Hui or the Hunan "brave", and that they think by involving the country in a war with foreign powers, the long-wished for opportunity will arise, and the evils of the present government may be remedied by a change?⁶⁹

Just as the newspaper article pointed out, the Gelaohui did create many social problems for the Qing government. However, the military weakness after the Taiping Uprising made it difficult for the Qing government to suppress them. In the year of 1891, the government of Hubei province twice reduced military expenses; sixteen infantry units were disbanded, and only six units were left in the entire province. Among these

67 Gubbels, *La vie et le martyre de Monseigneur Théotime Verhaeghen*, 256-258.

68 *Ibid.*, 262.

69 North China Herald (June 12, 1891), 735, cited in Robert Herman Felsing, "The Heritage of Han: the Gelaohui and the 1911 Revolution in Sichuan" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1979), 99.

six, three of them were used to maintain order in the treaty port of Hankou, and the other three units resided in other parts of the province. Jingzhou, Yichang, and Enshi had no official troops at all.⁷⁰ In order to suppress Gelaohui troops in Lichuan County after Victorin Delbrouck's assassination in 1898, Zhang Zhidong had to dispatch fifty Mauser guns and ten thousand bullets from Yichang, and one hundred soldiers from Hunan province to Enshi.⁷¹ Such lack of punishment from the government allowed the Gelaohui to be one of the active players in the social unrest that includes millenarian upheaval, peasant rebellion, common banditry and the Muslim and Miao uprisings.⁷²

Other parts of the Qing Empire also suffered the consequences of a weak military in the second half of the nineteenth century. When Guangdong province was under threat of the French invasion in 1883, the military force in Guangdong was so weak that the Qing government had to order Peng Yulin, one of the chief generals of Zeng Guofan, to recruit soldiers in Hunan and bring them together with some of his old troops to Guangdong immediately.⁷³ Because of the distance, it was difficult for Peng's army to arrive on time; he instead suggested recruiting people locally to organize militias (*tuilian*).⁷⁴ This was a more efficient and at the same time a desperate means of defense, and even leaders of pirates were enlisted.⁷⁵

It is necessary to reconsider the essence of the anti-Christian movement which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century China. To what extent did the anti-Christian movement represent the conflict between Christianity and Chinese culture? To what extent did it represent the hatred of Chinese people against Western missionaries as an imperialist enterprise? It may not be as much as some scholars have argued. If it was not national, it is very likely that at least in some places the anti-Christian movement was solely a result of dealings between missionaries and secret societies.

Until recently, the study of Christianity in China has been overly focused on the Boxer Uprising. However, the Gelaohui deserve more attention. The reason why the Boxers attracted so much attention might be due to the consequences brought by them, which were the invasion of Beijing and the burning of the Summer Palace by the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900. This was the ultimate crisis faced by the Qing. Nonetheless, a comparison of the causes and consequences between the Boxer Uprising and the Gelaohui's anti-Christian movements shows many similarities. Both the Boxers and the Gelaohui were anti-Christianity. The difference was that the Boxers supported the Qing while the Gelaohui was against it. The original motivation of both the Boxers

70 Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanli*, vol. 2, 797-798.

71 *Ibid.*, vol. 10, 7948.

72 Albert Feuerwerker, *Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1975), 66-71.

73 Peng Yulin, *Peng Yulin ji* (A collection of Mr Peng Yulin), shangce. Zougao, diangao (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2003), 347.

74 *Ibid.*, 349.

75 *Ibid.*, 388.

and the Gelaohui had elements of self-defense or mutual aid but no clear political agenda. While both the Boxers and the Gelaohui's anti-Christian activities brought diplomatic issues to the Qing, the difference lies in the scale of them. For example, the anti-Christian incidents that happened in Badong, Changyang and Changle counties of Hubei province in the 1890s made the French consul in China request 425,000 *liang* of silver money in compensation from the Qing government. The amount was so unbearable that the governor of Hubei, Zhang Zhidong, wrote to the Qing ministers in Paris to urge for a reduction in the amount through diplomatic procedures.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Based on the history of Belgian Franciscans in Enshi from 1890 to 1910, this paper focuses on the relationship between Belgian Franciscans and the secret society Gelaohui. The argument is that the anti-Christian activities in Enshi, as well as in other parts of the Yangzi River Valley during this period were mainly organized by the secret society Gelaohui. The causes and consequences of anti-Christian activities led by the Gelaohui and the Boxers had many similarities. Nonetheless, the Gelaohui's anti-Christian activities have not been sufficiently studied to date.

The history of the Gelaohui, especially its expansion in the middle of the nineteenth century shows that they might not be anti-Christian per se, but rather in the eyes of the Gelaohui, Christianity belonged to the larger framework of Western imperialism that should be contained. Thus, the Gelaohui's anti-Christian activities reflected the deep impact of Western imperialism on China. A study of secret societies such as the Gelaohui would reveal how ordinary Chinese found other ways to living, particularly through secret societies and Christianity, when government was weak under Western pressure and the traditional Chinese way of life was in jeopardy.

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76 Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanli*, vol. 9, 7737.

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