

## *Shanghai's Old Church*

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(The following is a shortened version of a very detailed and scholarly article on Shanghai's oldest church. The unabridged version can be obtained from the Holy Spirit Study Centre.)

### **Introduction**

If you walk down Wutong Road, which cuts through the Yuyuan District of East Shanghai, you will come upon a primary school on the northern side of the street between Anren and Wutong Lanes. The school is surrounded by a high crenelated stone wall, on top of which can still be found jagged bits of barbed wire, rusting remnants of former days. As you pass through the imposing wrought-iron entrance gate and walk along the path skirting the playing field, you will suddenly come upon an old building shaped much



like a temple, with a roof of thick black tiles and eaves that slope upward above the entrance door, and which shelter an ancient bronze bell. One is struck by the antiquity of the place. Along both walls vestiges of handsome, arched windows with slivers of colored glass cling to what is left of the lattice work. The building was vandalized during the Cultural Revolution, and

this is all that remains of the lovely stained glass windows that once added color and grace to what was in pre-Liberation days a major centre for East-West cultural exchange.

This is what is left of Shanghai's oldest Roman Catholic church, and people in the neighborhood still refer to the structure as Old Church. Throughout its over 350 years of history, it has withstood the vicissitudes of time with quiet and graceful dignity. As the first Catholic public place of worship in Shanghai, it was also the centre of activity for the early Christian community. Later on the site changed hands and it was converted, in part, into a temple to honor the god Guandi, where local people came to worship and pray for such graces as wealth, health and good fortune. In the mid-19th century, when the Western Powers wrested foreign concessions from the Imperial government, the property was returned to the missionaries and it once again became the centre of Catholic church influence in the area. Soon after Catholic activity shifted away from "Old Church" to such places as Dongjiadu, Yanjingbang and Xujiahui, and Old Church deteriorated to such a degree that by the time of the Liberation the aged buildings had fallen into such disrepair that many considered the place a neighborhood anachronism. However, because of its historical significance for the Catholic community of Shanghai, Old Church today continues to be held in high regard in the district. Also in recent years, Old Church has been recognized as a rare example of late Ming and early Qing architecture. Today many students come to this site to study the forms and styles of the past. Recently, it has become a popular tourist site as well, and it is now included in the organized tour of Yu Park's ancient buildings.

## **Xu Guangqi and the Shanghai Catholic Church**

It was towards the end of the Ming dynasty that Xu Guangqi, a native of Shanghai and a highly respected government official at the court, made the acquaintance of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in Beijing. Xu had a deep respect for Ricci as a scholar and as a man of virtue. After a period of instruction in the teachings of the Catholic church, Xu was baptized in the city of Nanjing (Nanking) in 1603. Five years later, Xu was passing through Nanking on his way home to Shanghai with his father's coffin, where it was to be buried

according to traditional custom in the family ancestral plot in Xu Park. While visiting the Jesuits, he invited some of them to accompany him to Shanghai. The Jesuit superior, Father Jean de Rocha, selected Father Lazaro Cattaneo to go with Xu and, if possible, to establish a residence in Shanghai. Cattaneo stayed with Xu in his ancestral home for three days but had to withdraw to a residence outside the city since he had not as yet received the necessary authorization from the local government authorities to live inside the city limits. The following year, 1609, Xu provided a house in the western sector of his estate for any foreign missionaries that might be in transit and need a place to stay. Inside the house was a small room which was used for a chapel and where the faithful might come to worship and to pray. A letter of Father Nicolas Trigault records that Father Cattaneo celebrated Mass here on Christmas in 1609. This was the first private chapel in Shanghai; unfortunately, nothing remains of it today.

With Xu Guanqi's support, the number of converts to Christianity in and around Shanghai continued to increase. Father Cattaneo and his fellow missionaries did not limit their activities to Shanghai alone but often traveled between Hangzhou and Jiading. It was in Jiading that the missionaries convened an important meeting in 1624 to discuss the vital issue of how to translate Catholic religious terminology into Chinese, including the term used for God, *Tianzhu*, 'Lord of Heaven'.

## Francesco Brancati and the Old Church

One of the most important figures of that early Shanghai Catholic Community was Father Francesco Brancati, whose name and exploits have found a place in both Catholic mission history and Chinese secular history. Born in Sicily in 1603, he entered the Jesuit Order and arrived in China in 1637. He began his study of the Chinese language and culture in Hangzhou, but he was soon transferred to Shanghai. One can find in the Shanghai Gazette, which was published during the years of the Kangxi Emperor, the following notation: "Father Francesco Brancati plans to build a new church to accommodate the growing number of Catholics who are now too numerous to fit into the their small chapel." It was Xu Guangqi's fourth granddaughter,

Martina, who had married into the Pan family, the original owners of Yu Park, who arranged for Father Brancati to buy one of the Pans' older houses which he intended to convert into a church. Martina became the foremost supporter of Shanghai's first Catholic church.

The building that Father Brancati purchased was situated in the northern part of the city in the district of Anli. It was named the 'Great Hall of Earthly Spring' and was built by Pan Yunduan whose father Pan En was the owner of Yu Park. Of all Pan's buildings, 'Great Hall' was considered to be the most ornate and beautiful. With the passing of 'heaven's mandate' from the Ming to the Ching Dynasty, the Pan family fell on hard times. The Great Hall and its surrounding lands were sold to a man by the name of Fan Wenshiha, who headed the local Military Bureau. Fan was murdered in 1638, and when his relatives could not afford the up-keep on the property, it was then sold to Father Brancati through the mediation of Martina Xu in 1640. During the months that followed, extensive renovations were carried out on the Great Hall. Father Brancati had the interior redesigned into a Chinese style temple. It was China's first Chinese style Roman Catholic church.

Subsequent history testifies to the fact that Old Church enjoyed a wide influence and unique authority among Catholic centres of worship down through the centuries. That history, for all its times of triumph and joy, was also not without its moments of failure and sadness. Old Church was much loved and much resented; an object of admiration but also of rancor. In a word, it epitomized the fluctuations of Shanghai's own history, especially that of its more recent past.

The new church was named Church of Reverential Unity and it was dedicated to Jesus the Savior. Documents of the time describe it faithfully and record its measurements most accurately. It was fourteen meters high, fifty-four metres wide and ten and a third meters long. From the high beam over the altar hung a large banner on which four Chinese characters were elaborately carved in gold: "Honor and Respect Heaven's Teaching". The Ming Emperor had written the inscription himself and sent it to the missionaries as a personal gift to commemorate the completion of the church's renovation. Furthermore, he also granted permission for this same inscription to be copied and hung in every Catholic house of worship through-

out the empire. The two characters on the banner meaning 'Heaven's Teaching' were a direct translation by Matteo Ricci into Chinese of the term for Catholicism. The commemorative banner gave clear evidence of imperial approval, and other high officials were not slow in following suit, sending ornate plaques and commemorative scrolls of their own to Father Brancati to be hung in the church alongside that of the Emperor's. The dedication of the church gave the Shanghai Catholic community a permanent place for worship with a resident pastor and initiated a ministry among the people of the city that was to flourish for years. According to records of the time, 1240 adults were baptized in the year 1640, and the community increased by two to three thousand with each passing year until 1661. By 1665, there were over 50,000 Catholics in Shanghai. When Bishop Anthony Posateri made his pastoral visitation in 1682 their numbers had increased to over 80,000. Old Church each year set new attendance records as Catholics continued to increase and multiply in Shanghai and throughout its countryside.

In addition to his pastoral ministry, Father Brancati gave much care and attention to the study of the Chinese classics. He had many friends among the literati, who held him in high esteem and with whom he was wont to discuss not only religious topics but also the fine points of Confucian philosophy.

As resident priest of Old Church, Father Brancati also took up the task of evangelizing the surrounding countryside. Father Philippe Couplet, his successor, wrote of him: "Father Brancati was a very devout and capable man. With the quiet aid and support of the wife of a high official, he was able to erect over 90 churches and 45 chapels in towns and villages throughout the area."

## **Expropriation and Restitution**

During the beginning of the Kangxi Emperor's reign, there were many court officials whose attacks on the Catholic Church and the foreigner missionaries put great pressure on him to take action against them. At their instigation the Emperor issued a decree forbidding the practice of the Western religion. Foreign missionaries were ordered to leave the country. On the Feast of the Presentation of Mary, February 2, 1665, Father Brancati celebrated a final Mass for an immense gathering of Catholics in

Shanghai and then boarded a ship for Guangzhou. His temporary exile proved to be permanent, for he was never to return to the Catholics of Shanghai among whom he had lived and worked for so long. When, six years later, the Emperor chose Father Ferdinand Verbiest to head the Imperial Bureau of Astronomy in Beijing and once again allowed foreign missionaries to return to China, Father Brancati was near death. He passed away on April 25, 1671 in the Foreign Concession in Guangzhou. But the work he had pioneered continued under the capable leadership of Fathers Jacques Le Favre and Philippe Couplet. They also brought the body of Father Brancati to Shanghai and buried him there in the cemetery for priests situated on the south bank of Lujiabing outside the South Gate of the former Yang Family Estate. This had been his dying request. The site was used as a burial ground for Jesuits up until the turn of the century. Records of the confiscation and later restoration of Old Church and its properties can be found in editions of *The Kangxi Shanghai County Gazette* that cover the history of the early years of the Qing Dynasty.

### Father Jacques Le Favre

The new pastor, Father Jacques Le Favre (1610-1676), spent much of his time renovating Old Church. He enlarged its capacity by raising its roof and extending its floor space. He also redid the priests' residence and restored the surrounding gardens. He completed his labors one year before he died. Records of the time attest to the stateliness and beauty of the outward structure of the church and the elegance of its interior furnishings. Old Church would remain structurally unchanged for the next 200 years. Save for a few minor alterations and repairs, it retained its unique look and feeling right up to the time of the liberation of Shanghai. Father Le Favre passed away peacefully on January 28, 1676, and was buried in the cemetery nearby the tomb of Father Brancati.

### The Temple of Guanyu

The last priest to succeed Father Le Favre as pastor of Old Church was Father Roman Hinderer. He initially enjoyed the

good graces of the Kangxi Emperor who allowed him the freedom to evangelize the surrounding countryside, but he fell from favor, as did all the foreign missionaries, at the height of the bitter controversy over the Chinese Rites Question. Upon the death of Kangxi in 1722, the Yongzheng Emperor ascended the Dragon Throne. This signaled 100 years of suppression of the Catholic Church in China. The government compelled the missionaries to leave and forced them to return to Guanzhou and Macao. Only Father Hinderer was left in the province, and he could move about only in secret, administering the sacraments and caring for the other spiritual needs of the Catholics wherever he could.

When a government official in Fujian filed a charge against the Dominicans residing there, he dealt the final blow to the Catholic Church. The case went as high as the Supreme Tribunal in Beijing, and it was finally settled only by a decree from the Imperial Board of Rites. The Edict of Suppression of 1724 read in part: "All foreign missionaries are to be expelled upon receipt of this decree and they are to be sent without exception to the foreign enclave at Canton." Old Church could hardly escape the effects of the Imperial edict. Old Church with its adjacent properties was summarily confiscated by the government. According to a report carried in *Shanghai Studies* of 1731, the 8th year of the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor, church and grounds were converted into a temple for the worship of the god Guandi.

The temple was named after Guanyu, who, as far as we can ascertain from historical records, was a Shu general during the period of the Three Kingdoms. Later generations revered him for his loyalty and bravery, and in time they deified him, building temples of worship in his honor. His name was officially enrolled among the gods during the Ming Dynasty by the Wanli Emperor in order to give the people an example of fidelity to the throne and courage in its service. From that time forward, he was referred to as Guandi and sacrificial rituals were performed in that name. Being a god native to China, his followers were found mainly among the Daoists, who enjoyed great public support during the Ming and even during the early Qing. When Daoism went into decline, many of their temples fell into the hands of Buddhist monks. Such was the fate of Old Church. Guandi was in great vogue at the time, especially among busi-

nessmen, who prayed to him for protection and material gain. Thus the god of war became a god of wealth. Records of the time state that a beautiful statue carved from gold was placed beneath a wooden canopy in that part of the church given over to temple worship. The statue, it is said, was exquisitely wrought and was highly acclaimed as an artistic masterpiece. When Old Church was finally restored to its original owners, the statue of Guandi was removed and placed in a temple in Ximen where it continued to be venerated up until the time of the Liberation. The temple then fell into disrepair and was used briefly as a medical dispensary. It was completely destroyed in the Cultural Revolution.

## Restoration

With the expulsion of the foreign missionaries in 1724 and the confiscation of Old Church, Chinese Catholics gathered for prayers at the Lu, Ai and Shi family residences. On occasion a priest passing through would celebrate a Mass for them in secret. Thus the faith was kept alive for over a century.

On October 24, 1844, China and France signed the Treaty of Huangpu, which rescinded the Edict of Suppression at the command of the French Consul. Qiying, the Qing government official at the signing, presented a memorial to the French which stated: "Hereafter no restrictions or penalties are to be placed on those Chinese and foreigners who legally and lawfully instruct and receive converts into the Catholic Church." While the Daoguang Emperor finally signed this rescript into law (using the four Chinese characters 'imperial order as written') many local officials and their people still harbored serious prejudices against the Christian churches. The French Consul arrived in Shanghai on October 17, 1845 with a flotilla of six war ships. During his official visit to the Viceroy of Shanghai, he demanded, among other things, the restoration of Old Church, the priests' residence, the cemetery, the grounds and gardens. The Viceroy flatly refused him. "If the property confiscated by imperial decree over 100 years ago were now returned to the foreigners in this way," he said to the Consul, "the people of Shanghai would rise up in rebellion." This response disappointed the foreign missionaries, who also saw in the Viceroy's refusal a loss of face for the Consul and a blemish on the honor

of France. However, the Viceroy remained adamant and the Consul withdrew without getting what he had asked for. He returned to Guangzhou where he put increased pressure on the governor of that province to appeal to Beijing to resolve the dispute.

On March 18, 1846, the Daoguang Emperor issued a second edict following the one of February 20 in which he decreed: "All churches built throughout China during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, with the exception of those properties that have already been clearly converted into temples or residences, are ordered by this imperial edict to be restored to the local missionaries when definite proof of their former status has been given." While Old Church fell outside the terms of the Edict, the missionaries in Shanghai once again petitioned the French Consul to demand its immediate return from the Viceroy. Again the viceroy refused. But this time the Consul reminded him that the French flotilla was near at hand and its commander was about to pay Shanghai a visit. In the face of military intimidation, the Viceroy hurriedly met with the Provincial Governor in the city of Suzhou. They finally agreed to restore the cemetery land, and, in addition, to give to the missionaries three pieces of property, as compensation for the loss of Old Church and the priests' residence.

In 1858 the combined forces of the French and British marched north. Qing resistance was too weak to halt their advance and the government had to settle for the terms dictated by the French in the Tianjin Treaty. Less than two years later, in 1860, the English and French expeditionary force once again moved north, this time entering Beijing, and burning and looting the Summer Palace. The Qing government was constrained to sign another treaty forced upon them by the invaders. Article 6 of the new treaty read: "All churches, schools, cemeteries, property and houses confiscated during the years of persecution are to be returned. Where this is impossible, compensation must be made..." The translator, acting solely on his own authority, added the following phrase: "...and permit French missionaries throughout China to rent or buy properties and build structures upon them." The treaty allowed for the immediate restoration of South Church in Beijing. In January of 1861, when General Montalban, commander of the French troops, returned to Shanghai, he had his Chief of Staff once again peti-

tion the Viceroy of Shanghai to return Old Church and its residence to the missionaries. The French Consul also brought pressure to bear on the Viceroy, who was finally forced to give in. Viceroy Wu Jianzhang provided 20,000 taels of silver for the erection of a new Guandi temple in another place and arranged for the transfer of a gold statue to the new site. On February 19, Old Church was returned to the French Consul and, finally, to the bishop of Shanghai who appointed Father Yu Bolu to be its first resident pastor in over a century.

Old Church was renamed the Church of the Immaculate Conception. At first, people referred to it simply as the Church of the Holy Mother, but with the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, it was re-dedicated to Mary under her newly proclaimed title. Not long afterwards, a new church was built in Yangjingbang. This church was dedicated to St. Joseph and it soon outgrew Old Church in popularity and in the number of its parishioners. As a result the pastor of Old Church moved to St. Joseph's and Old Church became an out-station. Old Church's Catholic membership stabilized at about 500 and remained so until the end of the 19th century. It was, however, a very active congregation. Among its many pastoral activities, the parish also ran the following institutions: St. Joseph's catechist school, an Old Folks Home, the Beggar's Hospital, and two boys schools and a girls primary school. Through such institutions the parish was able to make a strong contribution to the development of the diocese and to the care of the city's poor.

Japan invaded China in 1937, and after the August 13 Incident its troops occupied the city of Shanghai, except for the Foreign Concessions. Many houses were destroyed in the heavy bombardment leaving thousands homeless. Many of the well-off merchant class took refuge in the Foreign Concessions. The authorities there feared that the sudden influx of such large numbers of refugees would cause an outbreak of rioting. At this juncture, the Catholic Church took the initiative. Acting under the auspices of the International Red Cross, Father Rao Jiaju marked out a section of the area, bordering on the French Concession, where people could take refuge from the Japanese army. Old Church, which was the only church within this area, became the centre for relief distribution. The boarding school became a primary school for the children of refugee families.

No tuition was charged and the teachers subsisted on a meager living allowance. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the English, French and Americans became enemy nationals. Father Rao, among others, was rounded up and incarcerated in the Xuhui prison camp. The Japanese moved to occupy the whole of Shanghai and the Wang puppet government took over the Concessions.

## Old Church Today

At present, Old Church is the only church in Shanghai that is built in Chinese architectural style. The church is broad, almost square, with thick rounded stone pillars, and a roof that is quite high and arched, creating an impressive vault. The drum shaped bases of the pillars are decorated with carved figures and patterns. The exquisite ceiling designs, made by Father Brancati's craftsmen during the late Ming, are still clearly visible. The rafters still preserve their original shapes and styles, although some of the eaves are missing. Two brass bells still hang from the corners, and the wooden windows are painted sky blue in honor of the Virgin Mary. Above the main altar hangs a large wooden banner on which are engraved the Chinese characters: "Hope Everlasting". Written on two other banners, one in each of the two alcoves beside the main altar, are the words: "Holy Mother" and "The World's Protector". In addition, there are also two long scrolls on which are inscribed the following characters: "The Source and Creator of the Universe is One," and "God Alone is to be Worshipped." All these inscriptions have been written by famous Mandarins and scholar officials of the past. We are told that within the church there was once a larger-than-life painting of Matteo Ricci and Xu Guanqi, which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

One of the four greatest painters of the early years of the Qing Dynasty was the Jesuit Wu Yushan of Mojingdao (1632-1718). He was converted to Catholicism in the year 1675 and arrived in Macao in 1681 where he entered the Society of Jesus. He was ordained a priest in 1688 and worked for the following thirty years in Shanghai, Jiading, Pudong and Puxi. He was also a poet who left this poem which he inscribed on the sundial located in the garden of Old Church:

*In the stone pavilion,  
The shadow of the sundial marks the hour.  
I hear the tinkling sound of a bell calling,  
And smell the sweet aromas of the noon meal,  
Wafting through the kitchen window.*

In 1958, with the establishment of the Southern District, the Patriotic Association of Yimiao District took responsibility for the Southern District as well. The priests left the church and the church was closed. Shortly afterwards the property was given over to the school, with the church serving as the school auditorium, while the priest's residence was converted into a kindergarten.

Old Church's history has found an important place in the history of Shanghai, giving insights into the sufferings and rebirths of its people. Old Church is indeed worthy of preservation. Let us hope that it will serve both as a monument to the people of Shanghai's past, and continue to play an active role in its present and its future.

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