Conclusion

Writing about China is sometimes an exercise in useful superfluity—as one completes a line of commentary on an historical moment, even if it bears utility in understanding trends and events, one realizes that the vicissitudes of China’s historical trajectories are so varied that any single interpretation seems canceled by the era that follows. The essays in this volume may at first appear overly varied, as if one essay proves the previous one outmoded, but even so, such transformations in the historical tableau accurately represent the rapid fluctuations that describe China’s past, and its present. It was recommended to me that I provide a brief conclusion to this compendium of research essays and reflections, and the first thing that came to mind was the now hackneyed, but still useful, Chinese saying, *hua she tian zu*, or “When drawing a snake, add a foot.” The Chinese hearer of this saying immediately knows the implication; one should avoid ruining the effect by adding something superfluous. There is no need, I first assumed, to add concluding remarks to the essays included in this volume about the long history of China’s Catholics and their place within the history of Sino-Western intellectual and religious exchange. But as I pondered what I might say by way of a conclusion, I observed the swaying branches of the blossoming cherry trees outside my office window, where I spend long hours reading due to the “shelter in place” rules enforced as the COVID-19 virus sweeps across the globe. I recalled that several years ago I was in Wuhan, the origin of this virus, conducting research

on two Catholic missionaries who died there in 1820 and 1840, respectively. It struck me that both of these missionaries, François-Régis Clet (1748–1820) and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre (1802–1840), were executed in a fashion uniquely relevant to the way in which this particular virus attacks those whom it infects, and that their stories might help explain how the contours of China’s Christian history connect to our own time. Clet and Perboyre were executed by slow strangulation—they died because they could not breathe. It occurred to me that China’s Catholic history bears deeper relevance to China’s present than many assume. In fact, many of the COVID-19 patients treated in Wuhan were admitted into hospitals that were founded by Roman Catholic missionaries.

Research often carries scholars to unexpected locations, locations that few people have heard of. While I was in Wuhan conducting research on the French Lazarist martyrs of that area, I was certain that almost no-one from my native US had ever heard of that city, and I also assumed that they never would hear of Wuhan. I was mistaken. “Wuhan” is now in the common lexicon of everyone who has followed the disquieting history of the COVID-19 virus and its origin in Wuhan. To be precise, the Catholic missionary martyrs of Wuhan died in Wuchang, the urban core of the thirteen districts of the large prefectural-level city of Wuhan. In my essay of December 2008, included in this compendium, I recount my time in Wuhan, during which I met with priests who complained of tapped phones and unremitting interference in diocesan affairs by local officials. In that essay I also describe the deaths of Clet and Perboyre and my search for the execution ground where they died, but in these concluding remarks I would like to offer a few more reflections on how their lives and deaths largely echoes the situation that emerged from Wuhan in November of 2019.

François-Régis Clet and Jean-Gabriel Perboyre lived in considerable anxiety because of the political chaos that churned around them, they were isolated, and they died from strangulation. They are among the few canonized Catholic saints who died because they could not breathe. Accounts of their martyrdoms were disseminated widely throughout France, and when the famous Carmelite nun, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), read about them she was so transfixed what they endured in Wuhan that she kept in her personal prayer-book a holy card of Perboyre. Four characteristics of their lives attracted the interest of French Catholics during the late nineteenth century, and these same characteristics have attracted the interest of scholars presently living through the suffering

and social unrest caused by what in China is known as the *Wuhan ganmao*, or “Wuhan flu.” First, they lived within politically fraught times; second, they expressed a great deal of fear and anxiety in their epistolary exchanges; third, they spent their final months in forced isolation; and fourth, they experienced remarkable agony due to strangulation as they died on the Wuhan execution ground during the late Qing dynasty.

François-Régis Clet was born tenth in a family of fifteen children, and when he was twenty-one years old he entered the Lazarists because of his admiration for Saint Vincent de Paul’s (1581–1660) affection for the poor and overlooked. He was in Paris when intense anti-clericalism erupted during the French Revolution (1789–1799), and when priests were being exiled from their native France he volunteered to go to China where he felt certain he would confront more of the same oppression. As anticipated, once he was in China Clet encountered disagreements between the missionaries and local officials, but what most exasperated him during his early years within the Qing empire was his initial struggle to learn Chinese. In one letter home, he wrote quite pejoratively of the Mandarin dialect: “No word except *barbarous* describes the Chinese language. Its written characters represent, not sounds, but thoughts, and their number is incalculable.”¹ He began his life as a missionary in China in 1789, and three decades later he was tied onto a wooden pole in Wuhan; a rope was wrapped around his throat and he was slowly deprived of the air his body required to remain alive.

Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, like his confrere, Father Clet, was born into a large French Catholic family, and four of his siblings, like him, became Lazarists because of their desire to serve others following the pattern of Saint Vincent.² He entered the Lazarists when he was only sixteen years old, and while he was in the seminary he displayed the usual French piety that was common in nineteenth-century France. Perboyre spent long hours in front of the tabernacle in prayer and kneeling in thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion. His brother, Louis, was also a Lazarist, and Louis was sent to China before Jean-Gabriel. The two brothers were very close, and thus when the news reached Jean-Gabriel back in France that Louis had died of illness en route to China it was a painful shock. While on his deathbed, Father Louis Perboyre (d. 1831), wrote a letter to Jean-Gabriel: “I am dying before I can accomplish my goal—I hope that my priest brother can come and take my place.”³ Jean-Gabriel did take his brother’s place; he left France five years after Louis’ death, and

in 1835 he took his first steps as a missionary on Chinese soil. For Jean-Gabriel, his time in China was short. He was tied to a pole and strangled, just as François-Régis Clet was, only five years after his arrival.

While Clet and Perboyre served as missionaries in China, the empire was strained with social disorder, and among the popular uprisings that afflicted several provinces was a rebellion led by a millenarian sect called the White Lotus Society.⁴ Unfortunately for the Lazarists in Hubei, local officials lumped Christians into the same category as the White Lotus followers, that is as a “heterodox religious sect.” The result was terrifying for both the missionaries and Chinese faithful; Christians were loathed and attacked both by the White Lotus group, as well as many magistrates within the provincial government. As Catholics were accused of the same religious agenda as anti-court societies such as the White Lotus adherents, anti-Christian intrigues also precipitated official decrees ordering the suppression of Christians. One such incident in 1818 forced François-Régis Clet into hiding. On 25 May, the imperial palace in Beijing was suddenly enveloped in “strong winds and torrential rains, while the sky turned red as thunder pealed above the city.”⁵ The emperor’s advisors suggested that the strange occurrence was caused by the spiritual interference of the Christian missionaries, and thus Yamen runners were dispatched to arrest Father Clet. He was forced to remain in seclusion, hiding in small caves and remote places in the woods, and he eventually sought refuge in the home of a Catholic family, where he “sheltered in place” for six lonely months.

Clet’s location was revealed by an apostate Christian and he was locked in chains, after which he was delivered to a local court where he was made to kneel on chains while his face was beaten with a leather strap.⁶ When he was later transferred to the prison at Wuhan, his clothes were, as one witness described them, “stained with blood from cuts and wounds caused by the blows and ill-usage to which he had been subjected during the journey.”⁷ He was condemned to death by slow suffocation on 17 February 1820, and he was taken to the execution ground in the Wuchang district of the city, where he endured strangulation when a cord was tightened around his neck in three stages. His remains were collected by pious Chinese Catholics, and they were eventually sent to Paris where they are today reserved at a side altar in the Lazarist motherhouse.

Perboyre’s arrest and execution in Wuhan were quite similar to what François-Régis Clet had undergone two decades previously. An anti-Christian movement emerged in 1839 that compelled Jean-Gabriel to live

in a state of isolation, and through this time he was hidden and protected by Chinese Christians who sheltered him despite the danger of losing their own lives if Perboyre was discovered. After offering Mass on 16 September 1839, a local Christian arrived to inform Perboyre that two officials and a large band of troops were quickly approaching the church. He fled only a few moments before the church was besieged and razed, and he survived temporarily by hiding in forests and the secreted rooms of Chinese Christian homes. He was eventually discovered and seized by patrolmen who dragged him away by his Qing-style queue to be interrogated in tribunals.⁸ Jean-Gabriel Perboyre was summoned from his cell on 11 September 1840, and led to his execution while carrying a sign announcing his sentence. A Lazarist record of his final moments is difficult to read, though the section that describes how he was executed in the Wuchang district of Wuhan provides the details regarding the particular nature of his martyrdom.

The executioner then placed a cord around his neck and slipped a piece of bamboo into the knot. With a strong twist, he tightened the cord around the convict's neck, and then he loosened the cord to give the poor sufferer a moment to catch his breath. Then he tightened the cord a second time, and relaxed it again. Only after the third twist did he keep the cord tightened until death followed.⁹

Local Christians bribed the officials to acquire the rope and clothes that remained on Perboyre's body after his strangulation, and his corpse was interred beside the grave of François-Régis Clet at a place called Hong Mountain near Wuhan.

I discuss Clet and Perboyre here in my concluding remarks because of their relevance to the present situation of China's Catholic community, especially the "underground" and "aboveground" Christians in and around Wuhan, afflicted by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Local Chinese Catholics still remember and commemorate the martyrdoms of Clet and Perboyre, and the detail that they were executed by strangulation, in the minds of some, serves as an historical precursor to the way the virus afflicts the infected by attacking their ability to breathe. Wuhan's nineteenth-century Catholic history has been compared with the city's twenty-first-century pandemic. Seminarians now preparing for the priesthood in the Wuhan seminary affectionately care for the two tombstones that formerly adorned the graves of Clet and Perboyre on

Hong Mountain; the stone monuments are often seen surrounded by fresh flowers and seminarians praying for their intercession. These gravestones were previously relocated to the home of a local Catholic where they were concealed and protected during the destructive years of the Cultural Revolution. The Franciscan bishop of Wuhan, Bernadine Dong Guangqing, OFM (1917–2007) conducted a search for the gravestones after the Cultural Revolution had ended, and had them restored and installed at the Huayuanshan Catholic Seminary. Presently, they are displayed in the seminary courtyard and Clet and Perboyre are viewed as sympathetic intercessors as hospitals receive patients who bear such infectious diseases as the Coronavirus. As I write this conclusion to the essays included in this volume, the Catholic seminary, churches, and other Catholic sites of Wuhan are places of fervent prayer as many members of the Christian community have suffered and died from COVID-19.

If anything, I trust that this compendium of research essays underscores how systemic was, and is, the Roman Catholic presence within the larger mass of Chinese society. Sino-Christian exchange has at some level influenced the overall history of China since the appearance of Franciscan mendicants during the Yuan dynasty, but Catholics were certainly not the only participants in China's early modern and modern transformation. Secular diplomats and Protestant missionaries, too, were lively interlocutors within the Sino-Western dialogue. The English explorer and naturalist, Thomas Wright Blakiston (1832–1891), serves as a good example of a non-Catholic Westerner who participated in Sino-Western exchange in China. Blakiston made his way of the Yangze River in 1861, and when he encountered the Catholic missionaries around Wuhan, he believed a “disguised priest or two of the Romish Church” had surreptitiously concealed themselves within the Chinese population.¹⁰ As William T. Rowe puts it, “Roman Catholic missionaries were not the only Europeans who made their presence felt in Hankow [district of Wuhan] in pre-treaty-port days.”¹¹ The cultural connections between Westerners and Chinese during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries are ubiquitous and complex; these essays represent only a small portion of intellectual and religious encounters between East Asia and the West. Cultural dialectics are never homogenous, and I trust that this volume supports that assertion.

To make one final point: while the word “conflict” has appeared throughout these essays, I do not suggest that conflict has monolithically defined Sino-Western encounters. Far from it. Just as often the word

“friendship” appears throughout this compendium, and this is a much better term to describe the general nature of China’s long relationship with the West. Beatrice Leung and William T. Liu authored a fine book on the history of Catholicism in modern China, and they chose to entitle their study, *The Chinese Church in Conflict*, emphasizing the antagonisms that China’s Catholic Christians have experienced with the state, as well as Vatican tensions with Beijing’s post-1940 government.¹² Other works in recent decades have sought to downplay the theme of conflict in their narratives, choosing instead an alternative nomenclature in their titles. Such works use such terms as “cooperation” and “common ground” to depict the Sino-Christian and Communist-Christian dialogue.¹³ In my own work I have attempted to portray the history of Christianity in China as existing somewhere between what is implied in the terms, “conflict” and “cooperation.” In 2015, I published a study of the Catholics in Shanxi, entitled *Heaven in Conflict: Franciscans and the Boxer Uprising in Shanxi*, and two years later, in 2017, I published an edited volume centering more on the theme of cooperation than conflict, entitled *China’s Christianity: From Missionary to Indigenous Church*.¹⁴ The essays in the present volume, I hope, tread cautiously between representing Christianity in modern China as a Church of mostly conflict, or one of mostly cooperation; it has historically been, and continues to be, a religious community that rests between these extremes.

In his reflections on the end of the excruciating years of the Cultural Revolution, the now-deceased bishop of Shanghai, Aloysius Jin Luxian, wrote that while human beings are capable of “hatred and delighting in destruction, they are also able to preach benevolence, amity, and harmony. Human progress is like the tides of the sea—waves advance and recede; we recede a single step, but we advance two steps.”¹⁵ This is an optimistic view of humanity, one that most of China’s Catholics, at least the ones I know, agree with. In several ways I remain an “outsider” of the Church in China, but what I have observed over the decades is more advance than retreat, and in that way, I suppose, I am more inside than outside the mind of China’s Catholic community.

NOTES

1. Quoted in G. de Montgesty, *Two Vincentian Martyrs: Blessed Francis Regis Clet, C.M., Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.*, trans. Florence Gilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, 1925), 23.
2. For an exhaustive biography of Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, see *Life of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre: Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyred in China, September 11th, 1840* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1894).
3. See André Sylvestre, C.M., *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre: Prêtre de la Mission, Martyr en Chine* (Moissac, 1994), 10.
4. For various popular movements of the late-Qing, including the White Lotus Sect (Bailian jiao), see Jean Chesneaux, Ed., *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).
5. See Clark, *China's Saints*, 156–157.
6. De Montgesty, *Two Vincentian Martyrs*, 81.
7. De Montgesty, *Two Vincentian Martyrs*, 82–83.
8. See Clark, *China's Saints*, 162–163.
9. Sylvestre, *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, 26.
10. Thomas W. Blakiston, *Five Months on the Yangze* (London, 1862), 69. Also quoted in William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 45.
11. Rowe, *Hankow*, 45.
12. Leung and Liu, *The Chinese Church in Conflict*.
13. See Diana Junio, *Patriotic Cooperation: The Border Services of the Church of Christ in China and Chinese-Church Relations, 1920s–1950s* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988).
14. Clark, *Heaven in Conflict*; Anthony E. Clark, Ed., *China's Christianity: From Missionary to Indigenous Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
15. Jin Luxian, *Jin Luxian Huiyi lu shangjuan* [The Memoirs of Jin Luxian, Volume One] (Hong Kong: Xianggang daxue chubanshe, 2013), 172.