



## Verbiest Update

Information on the activities of  
Verbiest Institute KULeuven, Verbiest Institute Taipei  
And Chinese College Leuven  
sent by e-mail, occasionally by **Verbiest Foundation** to its friends  
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### **CICM (Scheut) and the Olympic Winter-games in China** The Ski contest takes place in a former CICM (Scheut) Mission.

#### **The Olympic Winter-games in China – An invitation to celebrate together!**

Olympic games are always an occasion for the whole world to celebrate a global event. The athletes belong to several countries, races, and cultures. They travel a long distance to China and live together during weeks in one Olympic village. They compete in many different sports activities. Holding high the flapping national flags of their own country they march proudly into the stadium, welcomed by applauding local citizens and millions of television spectators all over the world. The Olympic flame carried through the different homelands arrives finally in Beijing and is lightened as a symbol of the joyful event. It remains alight during the games and reminds the athletes of the Olympic spirit: friendship, unity, and the idea that to take part is more important than to win. This whole event is unique, a high goal to be pursued and a reason for us all to celebrate. No event in the whole world can be compared to it. It is an invitation for the world to look beyond the dramatic events we are daily confronted with as racial prejudice, wars and other dramatic events diametrically opposed to the Olympic spirit and to the spirit of the gospel. The Olympic games invite us to join this international celebration. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 the Olympic winter games in Beijing will start. As Christians and especially as members of CICM and the Verbiest Foundation in Louvain we have one more special reason to participate in the Olympic Winter games in China, because a former Mission of CICM (Scheut) is directly involved.

#### **Ski-events take place in Xiwanzi, where 160 years ago the China-Mission of Scheut started.**

An important part of the Winter-games takes place in Beijing and Tianjin. The ski-events however take place in the mountains at 250 km North-West from Beijing, more precisely in Xiwanzi, the Catholic village where Theophile Verbist – the founder of the CICM congregation (Scheut) – together with three more confreres started the CICM Mission in December 1865. The official name of that village at that time was Chongli District and that is the name we shall hear and read about in the media during the Olympic Games. The old CICM missionaries called the village Xiwanzi, the popular name used by the local inhabitants at that time until today.



The history of Xiwanzi (Chongli) dates back to many centuries ago. Christianity started there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christians fled from Beijing into the mountains of Xiwanzi to escape from Church persecutions. They lived in caverns excavated in the mountains, where they felt safe. During the winter they were protected against cold and during the summer against heat. Five years ago, I visited Catholics who are living in those caverns today and found it an agreeable home to live in. Already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuits and later French Lazarist missionaries visited the Christians there. Xiwanzi developed into a community of a thousand Christians with their own church. From 1865 the Scheut Fathers developed Xiwanzi into a Catholic village of 5000 believers (See picture of the old village). It became the center of an extensive diocese with about 20 mission stations, where generations of CICM Fathers preached the gospel. There was a seminary for the formation of Chinese priests, a primary and secondary school for boys and girls, an orphanage, a hospital, a printing press, the bishops house with an important historical library and precious archives. Mgr. Leo De Smedt built the beautiful cathedral, famous in the whole North of China. Xiwanzi was an important and flourishing diocese. On the hill, just outside the village lies the 200-year-old cemetery with graves of French, Belgian and Dutch bishops and priests who lived and worked their whole life in China. Xiwanzi became their home and that's where they lay buried till today. CICM (Scheut) has family ties with China and Xiwanzi. In the whole of Northern China 252 Scheut Fathers lay buried.

**The Catholic village Xiwanzi had a dramatic history.**

This beautiful story came to an end on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1946, when the 8<sup>th</sup> army invaded Xiwanzi. The village, the schools, the seminary, and the cathedral were destroyed. The unique library with the precious archives and a treasure of historical documents were burned. Many Christians died as victims, others were taken away as prisoner during the cold winter onto the snowy mountains and were never seen again. The report on the drama written by the CICM parish priest Father François Legrand, received critical feedback in the Chinese press. I learnt about this drama in Belgium in March 1948 when I was only 16 years old. The old bishop of Xiwanzi Mgr. Leo De Smedt visited our school in Sint Niklaas and told the story to us, students at the college. This became even the origin of my missionary vocation. I was so impressed by that story that I decided that same Sunday evening: I want to enter the CICM congregation and go to Xiwanzi in China. Today 70 years later I still am daily occupied with China ... recommending and promoting unity and dialogue in China today.

Mgr. Leo De Smedt returned that same year (1948) to China, where he was arrested in 1950. He was to prison and died in 1951. The young Chinese bishop Mgr Melchior Zhang Kexing succeeded him



but was soon imprisoned himself. Consequently, the Catholic community of Xiwanzi isolated itself and refused to change that attitude when the Chinese People's Republic was established. They joint the "underground Christian community". Thirty years later, after 1980, we were allowed with the Verbiest Foundation to visit the former Scheut missions in China, but we could not freely travel everywhere where we wanted to go. To visit at that time the "Underground Christian community" in Xiwanzi without



formal permission of civil authorities would have been disastrous for our work even though our clearly stated intention was to foster communication within the Church and with the government. We hoped to break the deadlock and the internal division within the Chinese Church and promote dialogue both inside the Church and with the official authorities.

In 2012, when Scheut celebrated its 150 years jubilee, we asked and obtained from the authorities the permission to visit Xiwanzi and to meet with the old friends of CICM (Scheut). From then on, Verbiest Foundation and CICM (Scheut) organized together friendship visits to Xiwanzi from Belgium from the Netherlands, from Taipei and Singapore. We visited them every year and revived our friendship with the Christians of Xiwanzi. They started at that time to rebuild their destroyed cathedral, more beautiful and bigger than the old one, with their own means and personnel. They found beautiful white stones in the nearby mountains. Years ago – in the 1920-30’s – they already used these stones to build their first cathedral, which was destroyed later. They were proud when we, old friends came from abroad to admire their work and their testimony. At the occasion of every yearly visit the old friendship recovered as well as the old cathedral. Some Christians – not many – obtained the permission from the authorities to welcome and accompany us under supervision. We couldn’t have long conversations but every word, smile or glimp shared a gospel message. Standing in a circle in the middle of the rude concrete construction we sang the *Our Father*. Its echo resounded with emotion against the raw concrete pillars of the rising cathedral.



In 2017 our visit was even more impressive.

Together with the members of the Central Administration in Rome and several provincial superiors we visited the beautiful new cathedral, accompanied by a group of Christians. We climbed the hill next to the cathedral and visited the 200-year-old cemetery. Praying silently, we walked by the restored tombs. In our minds the names of confreres and friends revived who once upon a time spent their whole life with the Christians of Xiwanzi sharing joy and sorrow to build a better future:

Joseph Rutten (Clermont s/Berwinne), Désiré Abbeloos (Opwijk), François Legrand (Liège), Jef and Gerard Goedertier (Gijzegem), Henri Piette (Arlon), Henri Serruys (Heule), Jozef Raskin (Stevoort) etc. We reflected long and silently as we stood before the tombs of four bishops buried there: Jerome Van Aertselaer (Hoogstraten), Everard Ter Laak (Didam), Leo De Smedt (Sint Niklaas), Melchior Zhang Kexing and others.



Our visits to Xiwanzi reached a peak when Charles Phukuta, CICM Superior General headed our visit to Xiwanzi in 2018. Our Superior General wanted our pilgrimage to Xiwanzi to be a *thanksgiving visit*. CICM missionaries lived and worked in China for 90 years. They experienced this as a time of unforgettable mutually exchanging of gifts. They were enriched by Chinese culture as lived by the people. They were inspired by their

love for their country and by their stress on the importance of family life. They took these values back with them to the West. The superior wanted to celebrate this and express his thanks.

On the way to Xiwanzi our delegation concelebrated the Eucharist first in the Nantang Cathedral of Beijing. We told the Christians in the Cathedral that we were on a pilgrimage to Xiwanzi (Chongli). The Christians understood immediately the historical meaning of it and answered with a warm and long applause. When we arrived in Xiwanzi we had hoped to be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist with the Christians in their beautiful new cathedral. Apparently, the time was not yet ripe for it, which we could understand. Dialogue to pass across misunderstandings of the past takes time. We were happy that more than 500 Christians were given permission to meet with us in the cathedral. Speeches were made referring to our century-old friendship, the arrival of Theophile Verbist in 1865, the missionaries who had been working there and lay buried on the cemetery. No mention was made of the drama of 1946. We referred to it indirectly as we expressed our hope to pass beyond events of the past to prepare a new future in unity. As a sign of this restored unity Father Phukuta offered the local church a valuable monstrence from Belgium, given by Parcum Museum (Park Abbey, Heverlee) (see photo). We could not yet celebrate the Eucharist together, but we promised to keep meeting each other in the Eucharist from our churches at home. This hope echoed in the hymn we sang together in the new Cathedral of Xiwanzi. These were unforgettable moments in Xiwanzi.

**Surrounded by high-rise buildings of Xiwanzi City the newly built cathedral testifies today that the old Xiwanzi is still alive and has new hope for its future in China.**



Since several years, at the Verbiest Institute and the Chinese College in Leuven University (Belgium) we felt like privileged witnesses of the intensive preparation that went on in China for the Olympic Winter games. Several years ago, the small mountain village Xiwanzi was chosen to organize the ski contests of the great international Olympic Winter-games in 2022. Soon after this historical decision we witnessed the birth of a new Xiwanzi (Chongli). The old village with its

cave-dwellers was transformed into a modern city Chongli (Xiwanzi) with 60.000 inhabitants living in 10-storied buildings. Xiwanzi was being prepared to become a ski resort for the Olympic games with a special 250 km long intercity TGV train connection to Beijing. Meanwhile this unbelievably ambitious plan already became a reality. The little village experienced a true metamorphosis. The old *catholic village Xiwanzi* disappeared, but its spirit and testimony are still alive. Today we face the challenge to evaluate and to appreciate the meaning of the new phase in the history of Xiwanzi. In the center of the new city Xiwanzi, between all those high buildings glitters the new Cathedral as a proud witness of the existence of the old Christian community inside a new city, and of its growing hope in the new China.



**An old bicentennial cemetery and an old chapel testify today: *old friendships never die.***



*The chapel of Hadriaan van der Heyden cism (Waalwijk) in Qipanliang built in 1904, near the highspeed Chungli train station, and which is now declared a monument of cultural exchange.*

Near the recently built TGV train station of Xiwanzi in the settlement Qipanliang there stands an old chapel, built in 1904 by the Dutch Scheut Father Hadriaan van der Heijden (Waalwijk NL), who died and was buried there in 1910. Today the chapel is out of use but is recognized by the State as a local historic monument. Together with the cemetery on the hill nearby the chapel remind us of the rich past of the old Xiwanzi: a history of intercultural exchange and friendly relationships that still exist today despite misunderstandings in the past. Friendly relations are always precious and unique. We should cherish them, respect, and restore them if they were wounded in the past. They mean unity and respect, in the spirit of the Olympic games.

What a disappointment that the Covid-19 pandemic prevented our presence and celebration at the games. We could have reanimated our old friendship by a common visit to the old graves of the pioneers at the cemetery and to the old chapel of Father van der Heijden. Old friendships never die. They reunite us in our effort to restore and to foster our wounded unity. In Belgium we also cherish our centuries-old bond of friendship with people living in the cities near Xiwanzi: Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua. Our friendship delegations visited them recent years, and we were welcomed the Chinese way with a dinner. We met new friends in mutual appreciation.

For ten years we hoped and planned to be present at the Winter games in 2022 to confirm more explicitly and commemorate our friendship with the whole Chinese nation. We dreamt that during the Olympic games at the ski resort of Xiwanzi, friends of Chongli, Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua together with friends from abroad, would celebrate the old friendship in their new cathedral! I assume that official authorities shared that dream. The pandemic killed it. The pandemic however cannot stop us from participating from home in the Olympic celebration. We hope that local friends – those from Chongli with those from Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua – will not fail to celebrate together. They will remember that we, friends far away at our home in Belgium, will celebrate with them in China. That celebration will be a climax in the bicentennial history of Chongli, Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua. It will even be an historical moment of growth towards unity among friends in the whole of China.

**Jerome Heyndrickx cism**

### **Know and support the China Programs of Verbiest Foundation**

- The **Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation** is named after the Belgian Jesuit missionary Ferdinand Verbiest who was a famous astronomer and teacher of Emperor Kangxi in the 18th century. The Foundation was established by CICM missionaries in 1982 at the **Leuven University (Belgium)**.
- Verbiest Foundation is chaired by **Cardinal Jozef De Kesel of Malines (Belgium)**. Members represent the missionary congregations: CICM, CMF, Brothers of Charity. The Foundation sponsors the activities of **Verbiest Institute at Louvain University (Belgium) and of the Verbiest Institute in Taipei** (Central Building, 8<sup>th</sup> floor). Since May 1, 2009 the Foundation also sponsors the **Chinese College Leuven**. Through these institutes it promotes academic research on the history of the Chinese Catholic Church and pastoral cooperation with the Church in China.
- The **priority concern** of Verbiest Foundation is: to develop a new relationship with the Church in China. **In line with the letter of Pope Benedict XVI it promotes reconciliation and unity inside the Catholic Church without prejudice for or against anyone of the two Church communities in China.**
- The **most efficient way** to help the Church in China is **to invest in the formation of Church personnel**. Therefore the Foundation offers support for **the formation of ministers** (priests, religious, lay catechists) for the Catholic Church in China. The foundation offers scholarships for the formation of priests, religious and also lay ministers. Priority goes to supporting **formation programs inside China**. We invite also priests and religious to come abroad for obtaining a more specialized **formation in the field of evangelization** in institutes in Europe, the USA or the Philippines. Scholars are expected to return to China and teach in Catholic seminaries and formation institutes. We are in direct contact with the dioceses or religious communities in China and we **see to it that the money of donations is well used.**
- The Foundation also responds positively to requests from China to support (small scale) **development projects** in dioceses of N-W China: **Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia.**
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