

VISITING ST JOHN'S ISLAND

PETER STUCKEY AND CHRIS BAILEY

Introduction

St John's Island is about 160 kms WSW of Hong Kong. It is about the size of Lantau Island and is the largest of the Chuan Shan Islands which form part of Tai Shan County. The adoption of the name St John's Island appears to be through anglicisation of the Chinese name for the island, variously spelt as "Shang Chuan Island" on current Chinese maps, or as "Sancian", "Ilhas de San Joao" or "St Jean" Island on older western maps. Our interest in visiting the island was aroused by the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society's visit to Goa in January 2001. There, in the Basilica of Bom Jesus, in Old Goa, we had seen the preserved remains of St Francis Xavier. His corpse is displayed in an elaborate glass-sided, silver ornamented casket that rests high up on a Florentine marble mausoleum. St Francis, we learnt, had died on St John's Island on the night of 2/3 December 1552, aged 46.

In view of the local interest two visits were made by members of the HK Branch, one travelling "independently" and the other through an organised China Travel Services guided tour. Here follow their accounts of the visits.

Independent travel

Two Branch members, Rocky Dang and myself, Peter Stuckey, went to the Island on 20th and 21st October 2001. We took a Chu Kong Shipping (CKS) ferry from the China Hong Kong ferry terminal in Tsim Sha Tsui, to Xin Hui, leaving at 8:45 a.m. The ferry passes between Macau and Taipa and then follows up the river system past the Yamen Fort to Xin Hui for a fare of HKD 188. At Xin Hui we took a short taxi ride to visit the "Bird's' Paradise." Here egrets fly over a huge banyan tree. The tree is reputed to be 500 years old. It extends to cover over a hectare with many trunks formed from the aerial roots descending from the branches of the single organism. Similar trees exist in the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta and in Phimai in NE Thailand.

After a good Chinese lunch at the Lai Yue Mun Restaurant in Xin Hui we took a taxi (RMB 250) through the County city of Tai Shan and past some interesting old Chinese villages, including Yeung Do. We arrived at the Guang Hai Bay port of Shen Ju in good time to catch the 4:00 pm public ferry to Shang Chuan Island. The timetable shows ferries leave daily at 9:30 am, 11 am, 2pm, and at 4pm. for the crossing that took us just over an hour. They are scheduled for the Shang Chuan to Shen Ju crossing at 7:30 am, 9:30 am, 12:00 and 2:00 pm. A group could otherwise hire a speedboat.

We were told that the island had been closed to visitors until 1983 and that there was still a sizeable PLA naval base there. As we entered the fishing harbour at the NW side of the island we passed some naval vessels and fishing boats. We also had our first view of the St Francis Xavier Church on the hillside. There were several modern large tourist hotels in the Fei Sha Tan Tourist Resort at the eastern side of the island. We took a public minibus from the port to the Resort. Probably the best of the hotels was the Biyun Tian Hotel (Eastern Harbour View Hotel), though we chose a smaller one. Both faced the beach, with a pleasant esplanade packed with plenty of hawkers in the evening. The choice of restaurants was uninspiring. In the morning we hired a minibus with driver for a half day (RMB 150) to show us around the island. He took us to the fishing village, purpose-built in 1992, and over the Cheung Po Chai pirate pass with the Twin Treasure Rocks. He also took us to a grotesque Laughing Buddha cave with little figurines representing the Journey to the West.

Such were the delights the driver thought we should enjoy, but for us the highlight was the visit to the Church of St Francis Xavier at the NW side of the Island. The church was a simple white tiled building with a plaque above the porch dating the church at 1869. There was reported to have been a church at the spot since 1700 with various restorations from 1813 to 1932. The caretaker unlocked the church for us. There are several rows of pews facing a large wooden cross. On the altar stands a statue of a bearded priest in front of which is a statue of the Virgin Mary. Religious paintings were hanging on the walls. In the centre of the church lay a stone sarcophagus with some Chinese inscriptions.

Outside, a modernist sculpture had been erected by the Yamaguchi

Association on 3 December 1999. Behind the church over 100 steps led up to a tall statue of St Francis Xavier. Beside the steps were 14 stone posts bearing Chinese numbering and inscription. The pedestal of the statue bears worn inscriptions in Chinese and Portuguese - 'Aqui foi sepultado S. Fran.co Xavier da Comp.a de Jesus, Alpo do Oriente. Este Padrao se levantou no anno de 1639.'

The current caretaker, Mr Lam, took over in 1996 from a Christian caretaker aged 86, who had cared for the church since 1984. We had the pleasure of meeting this delightful old man in the village beside the church. The current caretaker suggested that for further information we could contact the Religious Affairs Dept. of Tai Shan Municipal Government on Tel 075 552 5980.

We returned to the port for a good seafood lunch. The ferry arrived a little late but took us safely back to Shen Ju in good time for us to hire a taxi to Zhuhai. There we crossed the border to Macau and enjoyed our dinner accompanied by a bottle of good Portuguese wine, and a toast to the memory of St Francis.

A visit assisted by China Travel Service

By chance, in June 2001, I (Chris Bailey) had read an article in HK Magazine about the Jesuit-run Xavier Retreat House on Cheung Chau - dedicated to the missionary Saint Francis-Xavier. The article quoted the resident priest, Father Kane, as follows: "*Xavier was one of the founding members of the Jesuits, and came to Asia in 1542. He was a tough guy, a trailblazer and died very near to Hong Kong, on an island about 60 miles west of Macau. His letters describe travelling from Japan and trying to get to Guangzhou, and stopping somewhere nearby to get fresh vegetables and water. There is one historian who theorizes that he stopped at the Old Port in Hong Kong. In any case, he must have passed through Hong Kong waters and seen the islands here. So I stand here (in the Xavier Retreat House) and see what he saw over 400 years ago ... It's very private, on top of a hill and overlooking the sea. It's a very beautiful sight.*"

This information inspired me to speak to Father Kane who said he knew the island well, had been there several times via Macau and that there was a non-active church dedicated to Francis Xavier, built close

to the spot where he died, by some French missionaries in the 19th Century. Father Kane referred me to Father Antonio Tam in the Macau Jesuit Residence who, despite being elderly, still travelled regularly to St Johns, and was leading a Taiwanese group there the following month. He recommended the services of the Religious Affairs Bureau rather than China Travel to organize our trip, so that we would gain a better insight into the history of Christianity in the area. This proved more difficult than it sounded, but China Travel came to the rescue with a reasonable-sounding itinerary.

Our trip eventually took place in the first weekend of November 2002. China Travel suggested a suitable package tour for five adventurers - Patricia Bierregard, Anna and Michal Niewiadomski, Jenny Wu and myself, Chris Bailey - members of the HK Branch of the RAS. We had planned a varied itinerary including St Francis' Church on the island, Flying Sand beach, Big Buddha and Nine Dragon's cave - with the firm CTS instruction: No missioning! We caught the 8:30 am. ferry to Gong Yi from the China Hong Kong Terminal. The sea journey was quite rough until we reached Macau, where a right turn along a Pearl River tributary took us back through time for a pleasant 3 hours viewing village life along the river banks (having upgraded ourselves to the upstairs first-class cabin). The rice-fields at harvest time were particularly splendid and the hamlets looked inviting, with interesting watch towers.

We disembarked at around 1pm at the small port of Gong Yi and were met by Roger, our excellent CTS guide who escorted us to the town of Tai Shan for an elaborate lunch. We caught the 4pm boat for another rough trip across the muddy waters, but in less than an hour were rewarded with the splendid sight of our goal - a white church on the hillside - as we arrived at the island, dominated by a large PLA base. Roger could not tell us how many military personnel were stationed at the base and we glimpsed only a few blue and white uniformed sailors walking along the streets.

The day's end was approaching and Roger speedily herded us into another vehicle for the short drive to the church, and the resident caretaker opened the gates - we finally climbed the stairs to the recently redecorated church and entered its large wooden doors. The interior was well-kept and featured a large central "tomb" with paintings along

the walls (St Francis healing the sick etc) and statues around the altar. In the surrounding grounds, a garden seemed to have been abandoned; a large copper statue dominated. We managed to snap a few interior shots. With the light fading rapidly, we walked down to a nearby spring from where St Francis was supposed to have drawn his water supply. The stone upon which he is said to have died can still be seen.

We were rushed onwards for our remaining sight-seeing: a huge, fat Buddha on the nearby hillside, an ex-PLA storage cave which had been turned into the Nine Dragons Cave, complete with waxwork figures, and Flying Sand beach - a lovely 2-mile stretch where our hotel was situated. A few weeks before our visit, the hotels had all been full for the Golden Week holiday in China, but now everywhere seemed deserted except for a few hopeful souvenir shops. The hotel itself was also empty but we were nevertheless given rooms right next to the disco and so were "entertained" (or changed rooms in our case) to the sounds of karaoke till 3am.

We agreed on an early start the next morning, including a pre-breakfast swim despite a chilly wind, to enable us to include an extra sight on our tour, back on the mainland - a typical village with watch tower. Roger, our guide, was very accommodating on this, though as we sped through the outskirts of Tai Shan we also spotted a Ming dynasty pagoda in the distance which looked worthy of investigation: "No time" was Roger's response, which, at least, provided us a good reason to return.

After lunch in Tai Shan, we walked around the central area and Roger showed us a recently completed pedestrian mall. The old facades of the buildings had all been renovated and painted in pastel tones - our photographs look like a typical Macau street scene. Tucked amongst the mall buildings was another church and we were invited inside by the female pastor, Huang Bi Juan. She gave us a brief history of the "Three Self Patriotic Protestant Church" and its present active role serving some 200 local families.

We took the country road for our return journey and soon spotted a suitable village with watchtower. We wandered into our chosen village with its harvest of golden grain spread out to dry in the sun in front of the houses, and spoke to some elderly residents - one old lady was 105

- who were very friendly and didn't mind us snapping away.

All too soon, it was time to head back for the 2.30pm ferry (and the dreaded customs hall that was rumoured to be tough-going, but in fact gave us no problems). In all, a relaxing and different weekend which was fun and gave us a sense of achievement.

Details of St Francis Xavier's life and links to St John's Island (as gleaned from a search on the Web and other sources)

St Francis spent 10 years in Asia and became known as the Apostle of the East. He was the third son of a high official and was born in April 1506 in the Castle of Xavier in Navarre in Northern Spain. Francis was influenced by Ignatius of Loyola and his "Spiritual Exercises" while they lived in Paris. Later, while in India, Francis became a member of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, which Ignatius had been instrumental in founding. Francis left Lisbon in 1541 and travelled via Mozambique to Goa in 1542. Many were converted, inspired by his life, writings and teaching. He travelled to Malacca in 1545, translated prayers into Malay, and again won many converts. He travelled to the Moluccas, to Cochin (1548), to Kagoshima (1549) and to Kyoto (1550).

In 1551 he resolved to return to Goa and his ship called in to St John's Island in December 1551. St John's Island was a common port of call for Portuguese ships in those times. While Francis was there, a Portuguese prisoner in Guangdong, probably a smuggler who had been caught by the Chinese authorities, managed to get a letter to a friend of Francis's. The letter suggested the sending of an ambassador to China to seek help for such prisoners. Francis saw opportunities in this and set out from Goa again in April 1552. He intended to bring the news of Christ to China and, with others on board the "Santa Cruz," intended to pursue the release of Portuguese prisoners. However, when they called in at Malacca, they found the Captain of Malacca, a son of Vasco da Gama, resented the appointment of an ambassador other than himself. He allowed the Santa Cruz to leave Malacca, but only without the ambassador.

Francis realised his mission was in peril but arrived at St John's Island in August 1552. The Chinese authorities forbade him to enter

China. He tried to make informal arrangements but was unable to persuade anyone to smuggle him in. The other Portuguese ships left St John's so that when Francis fell ill of fever in November, his ship was the only Portuguese ship in the port. Francis died unattended by any of his brethren and without the last religious rites.

His corpse was reported to have been surrounded by lime in the coffin before it was buried in a grave on a beach on St John's Island. The lime was intended to accelerate the decomposition of the flesh so that the bones might be more conveniently returned to Malacca. However, when the Santa Cruz was ready to return in February 1553, the corpse was found to be intact so the whole coffin was returned to Malacca. The corpse was again buried in Malacca for five months but again was found not to have perished when it was exhumed and returned to Goa in 1554. Francis was canonised in 1622 with a feast day of 2 December. His body was transferred to the Basilica of Bom Jesus in 1624. It is now preserved intact, minus a right arm which was severed at the elbow and taken to Rome in 1614 and a toe, reportedly bitten off in ecstasy by a lady on viewing his corpse.

The 450th anniversary of the death of St Francis was commemorated by the Macau Ricci Institute who arranged a Symposium in Macau on 28th and 29th November. Some members of the RAS HK Branch attended this seminar which was followed by a visit to St John's Island.

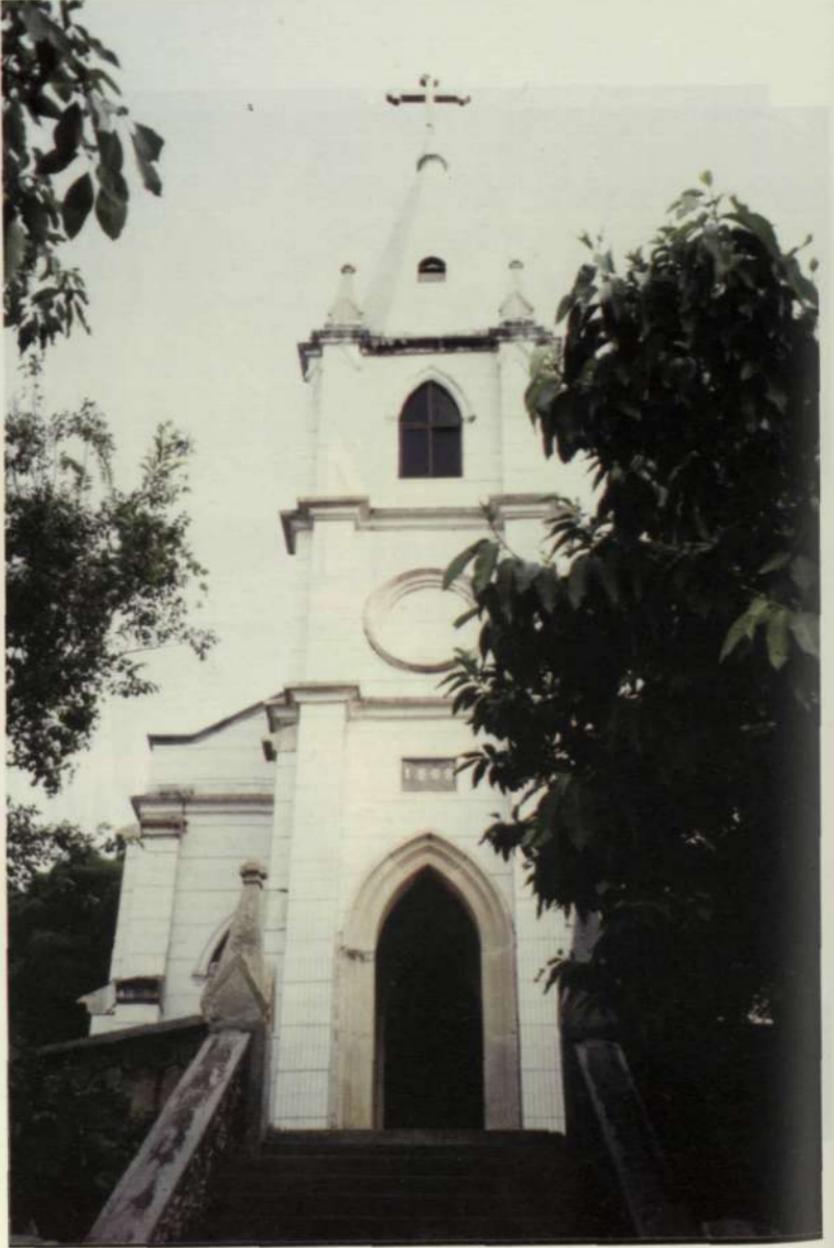
Phillip Bruce, a Branch member had visited St John's Island before he left for Spain. He wrote to us from Spain, and noted that he had visited the castle at Xavier, the birthplace of St Francis. 'A spartan place, with, not surprisingly, a huge Jesuit college next to it. It is really interesting to have seen both the beginning and the end of the story.'



The harbour at St John's Island



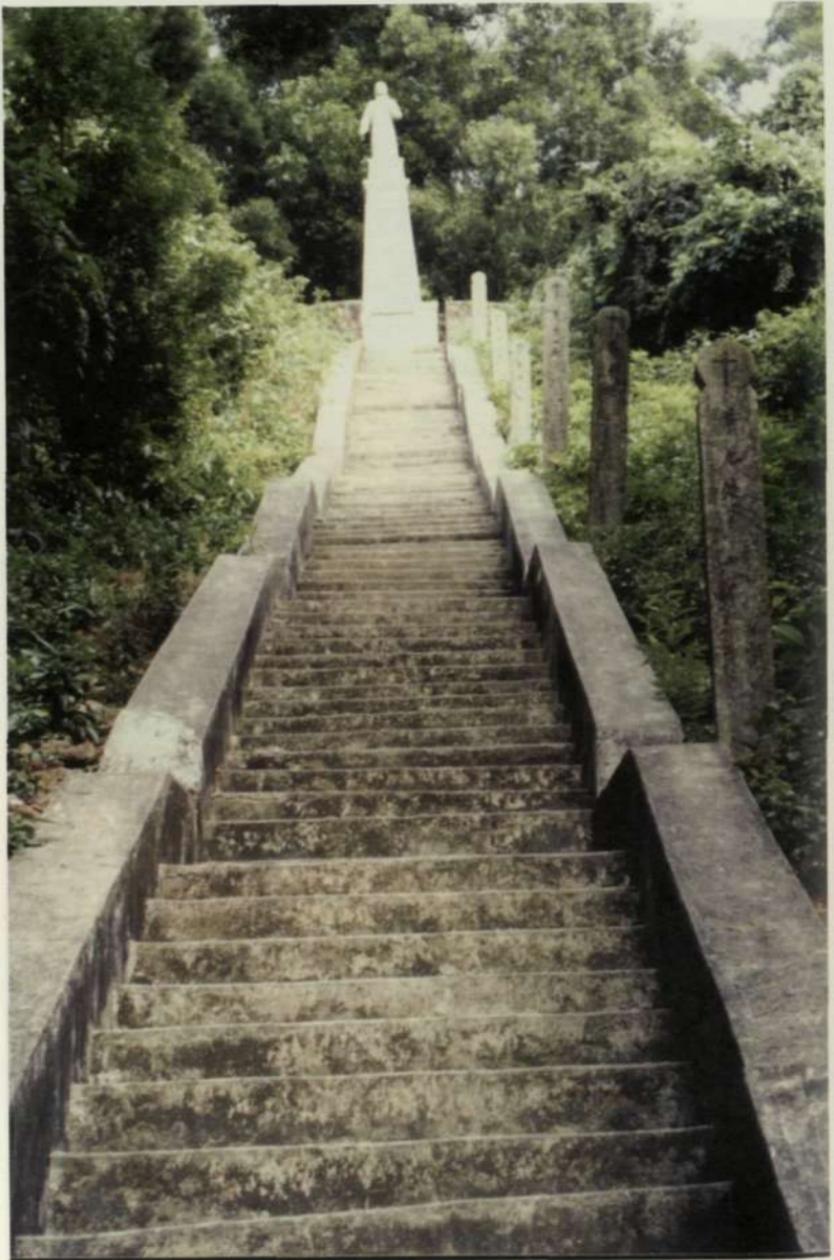
Entrance gate to church of St Francis Xavier, St John's Island



Church of St Francis Xavier, St John's Island.



Interior of church of St Francis Xavier, St John's Island



Steps leading of statue of St Francis Xavier, St John's Island



Statue of St Francis Xavier, St John's Island

