

# Teilhard's China Years<sup>1</sup>

Kathleen Duffy, SSJ

## INTRODUCTION

Jesuit paleontologist and geologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a world traveler and, as such, an avid and prolific letter writer. Staying in touch with family and friends, sharing his experiences of a new land, continuing to minister to those at home who were seeking spiritual guidance, and attempting to communicate his evolutionary ideas with those who could give him feedback while he was far from home—each of these tasks was so very important to him. Many of his letters have been preserved, translated, and edited—letters to his parents while teaching high school in Cairo Egypt,<sup>2</sup> to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon while serving on the front lines in World War I,<sup>3</sup> to Maurice Blondel through Auguste Valensin shortly after the war,<sup>4</sup> to his friends Ida Treat, Rhoda de Terra, Lucile Swan, and Leontine Zanta,<sup>5</sup> to Auguste Valensin, SJ, Msgr. Bruno de Solages, Henri de Lubac, SJ, and André Ravier, SJ,<sup>6</sup> and during the last days of his life, to his good friend Pierre Leroy, SJ,<sup>7</sup> among others. In these letters, Teilhard describes his experiences and shares his ideas and theories more informally than he does in his essays and so provides deeper insight into his approach to life, his strengths and weaknesses, his hopes and dreams.

For this paper, I rely mainly on Teilhard's letters collected in the volume, *Letters from a Traveller*,<sup>8</sup> written during the years he spent in China. These letters, addressed to his cousin, Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon, his friends, Max and Simone Bégouën, his colleague, Abbé Breuil, and his brothers, Joseph and Gabriel, and edited by his cousin, Marguerite, provide a window into the soul of a man far from home who, while living a full professional, spiritual, and social life, experienced major obstacles to the fulfillment of what he saw as a personal call from God.

---

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this paper was delivered at a conference held in Beijing, China during a geo-tour in honor of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The tour group visited places such as the Peking Union Medical College where Teilhard lived and worked for many years, a museum where some of the fossils he collected are displayed, the park where he often picnicked, and the excavation site at Zhoukoudian where he contributed to the discovery and analysis of the Peking Man fossils. Experiencing the sights and sounds of Beijing first hand made the contents of Teilhard's letters come alive.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from Egypt 1905-1908*, trans. Mary Ilford (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier Priest 1914-1919*, ed. Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon, trans. René Hague (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Maurice Blondel, *Correspondence*, ed. Henri de Lubac, trans. William Whitman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Two Friends 1926-1852*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: New American Library, 1967); Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Lucile Swan*, ed. Thomas M. King, S.J. and Mary Wood Gilbert (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2001); Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Léontine Zanta*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row Publishers), 1968.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Lettres Intimes à Auguste Valensin, Bruno de Solages, Henri de Lubac, André Ravier 1919-1955* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from My Friend, Teilhard de Chardin: The 1948-1955 Correspondence including the letters written during his final years in America*, ed. Pierre Leroy, trans. Mary Lukas (New York: Paulist Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveller*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962). References to this volume are cited in parentheses within the text.