

Alexandre Yersin

Unwavering dedication to science



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Alexandre Yersin was a Swiss-French physician and bacteriologist who became well known for his groundbreaking research and discoveries surrounding the plague. Born on September 22, 1863, in Lausanne, Switzerland, Yersin studied medicine in France before working in the labs of both Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch. Yersin's scientific career flourished quickly. He participated in the creation of the anti-rabies serum and assisted in the discovery of the diphtheric toxin alongside Emile Roux.(1)



Figure 1: Alexandre Yersin.

Yersin's most notable contribution came in 1894 when he was transferred to the Pasteur Institute in Hong Kong. An outbreak of the plague had been overwhelming hospitals and killing much of the local population. Earlier in life, Yersin was required to take up French citizenship to practice medicine, but this meant that he was denied access to British hospitals operating in Hong Kong. Yersin was forced to operate out of a hut and received no assistance from the British. Despite this, Yersin successfully isolated and identified the bacterium responsible for the plague, which he named *Yersinia pestis*. This momentous discovery ultimately led to the development of effective treatments.(2)



Figure 2: Alexandre Yersin in front of the National Quarantine Station in Shanghai.

However, Yersin's work on the plague was not without controversy. Japanese bacteriologist Kitasato Shibasaburo had identified the bacillus several days earlier.(1) This created a lasting historical debate over who should be credited with the discovery. While Kitasato did indeed identify the bacillus responsible for the plague, at the time, his reports were vague. Yersin's meticulous work and extensive studies solidified his credit for the discovery of *Yersinia pestis*.(2)

Yersin continued to study the bubonic plague, even setting up a laboratory in Indochina at Nha Trang. Yersin stayed in Indochina and participated in agricultural research in addition to his microbiologic studies.(3)



Figure 3: Statue at the Alexandre Yersin Museum in Nha Trang.

Yersin's discoveries and contributions laid the foundation for further research and advancements in the understanding and treatment of infectious diseases. Throughout his career, Yersin faced numerous challenges and obstacles. His unwavering dedication to scientific exploration allowed him to overcome these hurdles and achieve groundbreaking discoveries. Yersin lived out the remainder of his days in present day Vietnam and his legacy is still celebrated in Nha Trang.(1)

Yersin's pursuit of knowledge remains an inspiring testament to the power of scientific curiosity and the profound impact that one individual can have on the world of medicine.

References

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