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**Introduction to the Essay by Father Rob Carbonneau, C.P.,
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Undergraduate Assignment *Catholic Missionaries' Articles and Photography: Understanding Republican Era Chinese Society as seen in Sign Magazine- A U.S. National Catholic Monthly published by the Passionists.*

From 1921 to 1982 *The Sign* was a U.S. Catholic magazine published monthly by the Passionist Congregation, St. Paul of the Cross Province, based in the Eastern United States. From 1921 to 1951, "With the Passionists in China" was a popular monthly feature of written by missionaries based in Hunan province.

Each student in this class received three sequential issues of this magazine. These were archival copies from the Passionist Historical Archives.

First, students were asked to write a bibliographic review of the pertinent China articles from these selected magazines.

Second, students were asked to research and write a research paper summarizing and interpreting the selected articles and photos from archival copies from the magazines that they were given. The total length of this paper was suggested to be approximately 3,000 words which is equal to about 12 double-spaced pages. Footnotes were encouraged.

Third, students were asked to undertake this written assignment as a layered presentation. Each student was to keep in mind the following questions so as to help them write their paper. Describe how you understand the China articles, photographs, and fund-raising materials as a cross-cultural historical relationship.

- Presume your reader is a college student like yourself or an educated person who might stumble upon your summary on the internet.
- Thus, explain to that person who reads your essay what you consider important. Write about you have learned from the articles and photographs in the magazines you have been given that pertain to Modern China. You are to educate the reader thematically, and by doing so activate their knowledge and interest to actually read the articles and look at the photos that you have described in your synopsis.
- Students were encouraged to be as focused as possible in their summary they wrote. At the same time, they were encouraged to be free to write with credibility and insight rather than fear that the information in these articles and from these photos is too much for the reader to handle.
- Bottom line: the objective of this undergraduate written assignment was to free the reader to appreciate twentieth century China and see the content as a gift of cross-cultural understanding.

This was an undergraduate history on China. Since students had no prior knowledge of this history or culture I prompted them to consider two themes that might help them write their respective Sign Magazine articles.

Theme One: describe for the reader what you consider best depicts the life and experience of the Passionist missionaries, the Sisters of Charity from Convent Station, New Jersey and the Sisters of St. Joseph from Baden, Pennsylvania. Presume this will come to life based upon your analysis and presentation found in the respective written articles and the photos associated with each article. To rephrase this, your writing should stress and bring to life what is going on in the daily lives of the missionary men and women as seen in what they wrote and associated photos. Think of yourself as their voice. Think of yourself bringing them to life once again ninety years later.

Theme Two: describe for the reader what you consider best depicts the life and experience of the Chinese people and their daily life, culture and identity in the changing parameters of their society from 1929 to 1940. As in the above section, this perspective will come to life based upon what you are able to cull from the articles and photos. Keep in mind that while it will probably be the case that there are no Chinese who wrote articles, I am sure you have noticed that there are so many dimensions in these articles and these photos that offer understanding and make visible the pulse of Chinese society. Again, to rephrase this: your writing should stress and bring to life what is going on in the daily lives of these Chinese people. Note that in some cases their names are provided, and we actually can visualize their experience in the photos associated with each article. Think of yourself as their voice. Think of yourself bringing them to life once again ninety years later.

Benjamin Jones Undergraduate Historical Essay on Sign Magazine and China, 1931

It was surprising to receive the *Sign* magazines. Handed to me in a yellow, full-paper sized envelope by our professor, Father Rob Carbonneau, CP., they were the focus of my next paper for Modern China at the University of Scranton. With simple, pictureless exteriors, they were remarkably well-preserved for being nearly one-hundred years old. But the real surprises lay within its pages, detailing the struggles of Catholic Passionist priests and nuns working practically as relief-givers and spiritually as missionaries in Hunan, China in 1931. Sitting in class and reading through the magazines for the first time (three of them in total), I became paranoid at the affect my sweaty hands might have on their structural stability. I was *not* going to ruin them! I think in a way, I was also very cognizant of my effect on these magazines not just physically, but intellectually. How do I explain what I believe they have revealed to me, to someone who probably does not know where Hunan even is? Can I do so, despite how much material the long since passed Passionist writers and photographers managed to pack into them? Well not to worry, because I can tell you with much certainty that I have never been more out of my element than right now. The largest, most immediate takeaway I have from reading these magazines is the vast impossibility of being able to understand absolutely everything there is to

know about China, much less events that transpired in one province of China nearly one hundred years ago. But in Father Carbonneau's words, of course that is the case; instead of trying to know or love all of China, me and my classmates were tasked with the opportunity to "Let China love *you!*" Well, with all love, it does not come without difficulty or hardship, something that the pages of *Sign* magazine reveal all too well.

One aspect of the magazines that stuck out to me was the sometimes daily struggle with the environment that the missionaries and the locals had to deal with, especially during record flooding that impacted their residence in Hankow in October 1931. The dykes of the nearby Yangtze River (which were assumed to be well-maintained given exorbitant taxes for their upkeep) broke down completely, allowing water to rush into the streets, shops and homes of the village. Over the course of just a few days the water began submerging houses smaller than two stories in height. The water slowly but pervasively swelled and rose in height, forcing families to flee to higher ground and forcing the missionaries to move supplies, books, beds, and the orphan boys that they took care of onto the second floor of their Procure Building. You can get a palpable sense of fear from the article, written by Father Alfred Cagney, who was living there at the time. He wrote about all that they and local authorities tried to do to save lives and mitigate destruction, dealing with several thousand newly-displaced people in the area.¹ The detailed black and white pictures really brought the Chinese perspective of this event to life; one displayed a family's hastily-assembled shelter in a tree with a makeshift cloth or leather roof, highlighting the scramble for essentials that this family and many others had to make in order to survive during and after the flood. Father Cagney and the others had seen nothing like it, and

¹ Alfred Cagney, C.P., "Desolation in Hankow," Vol. 11 *Sign* (October 1931): 183-187.

were greatly challenged by the flooding to further their devotion to God by caring for the poverty and starvation they saw around them. Their presence in China forced them to act as first-responders to calamity, although this was certainly not the first instance of man-made calamity.

Missionary life really came through in all of the articles, with all of its challenges in an unfamiliar Chinese world. One article in particular, written by Father Silvan Latour, made very eloquent attempts to make the Chinese view of the world not only understandable, but relatable to the Western readership of *Sign*. It detailed China's longstanding belief that it was the center of the world, and the only example of an unblemished, perfect society. Thus, when foreign interests from Europe came to their shores, they considered them all to be barbarians². China had no conception of the Western legal and cultural world, and was not given much of a say in the matter when the Opium Wars broke out between the Qing Dynasty and European nations like the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. Latour realized as much during his own time³. Latour wrote his article with an empathy and intellect that was surprising and heartfelt, portraying missionaries as front-line ambassadors of the West, representing all of the good that their culture was capable of. The portrayal of Chinese people in his article did not feel too plying, or overly sentimental, but precise in fleshing out their humanity, something that no doubt felt like an urgent need to many of the missionaries, as they needed to fight bias and ignorance just as much as they needed funds to operate their mission operations across Hunan and other parts of China.

² Silvan Latour, C.P., "Eyes East," Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 122-126.

³ "Nor has this conviction been formed without certain justifiable reasons. The "foreigner" has entered China to build up cities on lines diametrically opposed to her ancient laws and customs. Evils in port towns have multiplied. Through her intercourse with foreign nations have come to her some of the greatest woes she has known. In a word, the Chinese people, having seen and the same right to judge after he had witnessed the same evidence in hand? The best, the highest, the most humane principles of our western civilization are, as yet, scarcely evident to the Chinese." -Silvan Latour, C.P., "Eyes East," Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 123.

If I can say one thing for certain, it is that there is an unmistakable sincerity and passion in these articles, no doubt stemming from the close quarters that these missionaries had to report the nearby starvation and human suffering which was impacting the Chinese peasants around them. They are not just stories; these were their lives! Their writing was striking for its frankness, evoking empathy without any lack of material to draw it from. Because to live in China at this time was to be witness to profound human suffering. Think about how pressing the desire must have been for these missionaries then, to convey their stories in ways that could cut through the limited perspective of a person's life in the much more affluent United States. How to make clear the stakes that are at play, the humanity in the destruction?⁴ In this way, the photos that accompany these articles- many of the Chinese peasants, locals, orphans or otherwise -was as much a picture of China as it was an attempt at placing you as the reader inside the head of the Passionist who took that photo. Feelings of unease, displacement, shock, unrest, or concern are correct and understandable feelings to have, perhaps similar to how the photographer(s) felt themselves. They were instrumental in drawing I as the reader into the conflicts that remained pervasive in Chinese life at this time, and the missionaries tenuous place amongst the chaos. The photos valiantly attempted to recreate that first contact between weary peasants and these strange foreigners from the West, who seem to care if they or their children were starving and in need.

The missionaries expressed very clearly in their articles the danger and fear that they felt while doing the work they felt called to do by God, thanks in no small part to the rapidly worsening political conflict they found themselves a part of. One article from November 1931 by Father Raphael Vance described the widespread fighting close to Hunan, in Canton and in other

⁴ "At present we find the mighty Orient in political chaos. . . But in the midst of all its bloody struggle, while bandits ply their nefarious trade, while Communism rears its ugly head in a vain struggle to dominate the once mighty Celestial Empire, quietly and unobtrusively the Catholic missionary labors on." - Silvan Latour, C.P., "Eyes East," Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 126.

parts of the country, much of it worsened by the Communist leader Ho Lung who, surreally, was known to the missionaries as someone who they had briefly instructed in 1925. Father Vance and his fellow Passionists had a nerve-rackingly unique look at the factions present in local Nationalist forces, who were barely on the same page and could not settle vital leadership issues, while meanwhile it felt like the Communists were only getting bolder. Vance briefly mentions two “outstanding Communist leaders” who were given 50,000 rifles by emissaries from the Soviet Union; one of those leaders was “Mao Tse Tung,” later to be known as Mao Zedong, the future leader of the People’s Republic of China!⁵ Reading that for the first time gave me chills, and gave me a somber appreciation for the privilege of being able to read and write about this history, instead of having to live it and experience it. Father Vance had no way of knowing that this horrible chaos that millions of Chinese were experiencing would not even begin to settle until October 1st, 1949, when Mao Zedong would take the reins of ultimate power in China. Even then, more human misery would follow, albeit under one centralized government. The missionaries most immediate concern was always survival and caring for the locals, praying that they would be spared the devastation that they were seeing around them. A photograph of ruins in the city of Changsha, in Hunan, after Communists had set fire to the city illustrated this vividly. Broken wooden beams, stone pillars, and tiles can be seen at the damaged entrance to the smoky city, which appears totally abandoned. Gazing into the smokey picture provoked me a similar sense of unease that the missionaries and local Hunan residents must have also felt regarding their own future.

The fundraising appeals made by the missionaries drew greatly on depictions and written testimonies of the hardships that they were facing, or disasters that were poised to grow worse

⁵ Raphael Vance, C.P., “With A Price Upon His Head,” Vol. 11 *Sign* (November 1931): 247-248.

over time. These appeals to emotion and to charity seemed justified and effective given the often distressing content present across the *Sign* magazine articles. The strongest appeal for donations that I came across in the articles was the one that accompanied the end of Father Cagney's article concerning the flooding in Hankow.⁶ It is short and sweet, to the point and striking in the idea it relays; that despite the tales of hardship the reader has just absorbed, far more will happen in the future and be largely uncatalogued given its immediate importance in abetting by substantial, practical means. So why not donate a little? Other appeals for fundraising felt to bogged down by prose by comparison, and not as effective if placed at the beginning or end of the magazines, which they often were.

The visualization of the Chinese people in Hunan in these articles was both revealed and hidden, drawn out but also colored by the hopes and fears of the missionaries' who wrote about and photographed them. An issue that came up while reading the *Sign* articles was how to discern if the photographs in particular were telling the whole truth, or a partial, edited truth, capturing a perspective but not a full reality. With such an emphasis and attention being placed on allowing the reader into China as a physical space, how much room was really left to flesh out the Chinese people as more than just background noise, as features in a "foreign" landscape? Indeed, some articles felt like they did not do enough to reveal the Chinese voice. One such article, by Father Michael A. Campbell, C.P. "White Boys in Yellow Skins," talked at length about the joys and good-natured fun that the priests found in the adventurous spirits of the orphaned boys that they took care of⁷. Campbell found many similarities between the "boys of

⁶ "The story which you have just finished reading is a graphic account of what the flood has meant to Hankow. But the story of the real desolation will come later and will be written in poverty, pestilence, starvation and death. Please do pray for our missionaries and their afflicted people. If your means permit, we shall be grateful for any donation you may send to The Sign." - Alfred Cagney, C.P., "Desolation in Hankow," Vol. 11 *Sign* (October 1931): 187.

⁷ "Indeed, I have found that the boys of Hunan, in spite of their different features and strange tongue, are at heart very much like our American lads. The Chinese boys have their fun, like to play at times in school when they should

Hunan” and the familiar American boys back home, engaging in similar acts of foolish schoolyard feuds and imaginative storytelling based on the local landscape and customs⁸.

However, I find it difficult to discern whether Campbell was being overly patronizing towards the local kids that he writes about, or if that was partly due to a concerted effort to account for and hopefully bypass any bigotry and ignorant misconceptions that readers back home may have had about the Chinese. Bigotry, unfortunately, is as prevalent back then as it is now. Maybe it is all too easy to think, “*of course Chinese kids are just like American kids! Why wouldn't they be?*”, and to expect insight that is more involved than what I personally might find obvious from my 21st century perspective.

These articles had the effect of making me as a reader consider my own inherent biases or misconceptions, even as the temptation exists to write off an article's viewpoint as outdated, when it really is nothing more than a reflection of the attitudes and beliefs of the person who wrote it, when they wrote it. Sometimes the articles made me wish that the missionaries had more often given their typewrites to the Chinese themselves, allowing them to communicate in the most exact words possible their own perspectives, but this was far from the familiar world of instantaneous communication that most of us live in today thanks to social media. Despite all of this, the photography, while facing some of the same problems that the articles do, gifted the most clarity on the lives and troubles of Chinese people during this time. Campbell's article

be studying and are quick to see a joke. I was surprised to learn how readily they saw the point of April Fool day and how thoroughly they enjoyed the pranks played on one another.” -Michael A. Campbell, C.P., “White Boys in Yellow Skins,” Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 117-119.

⁸ “Caves! What imaginations this word awakens in the mind of the young American. He thinks of wild beasts, quick sands, a hidden treasure. What does the Chinese youth fancy? Utter darkness, bottomless pits, the home of a god or of a thousand devils, an underground passage way leading to some distant city. There is not a cave within a radius of thirty miles that the boys cannot name for you. Never will they pass by one without making mention of it. The mountains of northwestern Hunan are perforated with caves. Every locality has its tung and every cave has its many legends.” --Michael A. Campbell, C.P., “White Boys in Yellow Skins,” Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 118.

featured a picture of Aloysius Pung, a local native to the area who was at that time studying for the priesthood. The young man's kind and intelligent energy gave me the desire to know more about his experiences, how he got involved with the missionaries, and what made him decide to join the priesthood, but all that was provided was a brief blurb of information⁹. Similar to this presentation of interesting photographs made limited by a lack of a fully realized Chinese voice is a photo and accompanying article about the announcement of the first native Chinese woman to become a Sister of Charity. The article details the actions of Mary Therese, formerly Mary Twan, a woman who proved invaluable in helping the missionaries and their work¹⁰. But more is spent celebrating the symbolic value of her sisterhood than providing a space for Mary Therese to speak about her experiences and perspective as a Chinese Catholic woman. Does that reflect some degree of sexism, of mistrust, even as Sister Therese is being hailed as an exciting development for the Catholic Church? The article left me wanting to hear about Mary Twan's conversion and decision to join the sisterhood in her own words, outside of the trappings of *Sign* magazine. It is important to keep in mind that plenty of Chinese harbored deep suspicions and mistrust towards foreign religious; how did Mary look to the "pagan" Chinese culture surrounding her? The article is what it is, but it frustratingly did little to reveal the deeper story that the picture hinted at. From a Westerner's perspective in 1931, did her devoutness and professionalism in her dress and edifices appear first, or her Chinese features? How about in 2022?

Other pictures in the *Sign* articles, however, were striking for their frozen scenes of abject poverty and human suffering. In the issue from September 1931 a picture of six family members

⁹ Michael A. Campbell, C.P., "White Boys in Yellow Skins," Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 117.

¹⁰ Francis Flaherty, C.P., "A First Religious Profession, The Start of what, we think, will prove the Beginning of a Native Sisterhood in the Passionist Mission District in Hunan, China," Vol. 11 *Sign* (October 1931): 191.

captured their malnourished state, having left their home due to famine. The mother, with many mouths to feed, had abandoned a child out of desperation. Skinny and hunched with exhaustion, they offer a glimpse into the millions of similar refugees, displaced by the rampant internal conflicts between competing warlord factions in China, the Communists and Nationalists being just two of several such groups at that time. Strikingly, this family was lucky, for they were able to return to their home after new crops came in.¹¹ Plenty of other families were not so fortunate. Another photo from the next month's issue featured a missionary holding a bowl and standing next to three extremely starved Chinese peasant men, two of them sitting down, with their tight skin and bones very visible. They seemed on the verge of death, as if they would not even last the night. It showcased the scale of it all, the widespread desperation that many Chinese felt at this time, and why many turned to the missionaries for help that they could not get anywhere else¹². What was the relationship like between them and the missionaries, especially between those who were so sick that the missionaries performed baptisms so that their souls could be accepted into heaven? It seems unlikely that all of them were given much choice in the matter, or if they really cared or not. The magazine made it seem like this was cause for celebration, but there had to have been a taxing effect on the missionaries and the others in their care. It is possible that accounts of despair on the parts of missionaries were mostly regulated to private letters back home to friends and family.

The sometimes narrow depictions of the Chinese people and their lack of voice to match the voice of the missionaries in the articles made the depiction of their lives and struggles feel incomplete or one-sided. This is in some part due to the nature of the use of their stories and

¹¹ Silvan Latour, C.P., "Eyes East," Vol. 11 *Sign* (September 1931): 124.

¹² Timothy McDermott, C.P., "Riding the Flood," Vol. 11 *Sign* (October 1931): 188-191.

pictures not just to inform and place the readership into a largely unfamiliar side of the world, but also to strengthen fundraising appeals for the missionaries and their work. Some of these appeals felt a little uncomfortable to read, as they seemed to- intentionally or not -dehumanize Chinese people into objects of suffering, that could be exchanged for sums of money. While that may be a slight overstatement, it made the instances where the Chinese people themselves were front-and-center in the fundraising appeals a little harder to look at. Going into this project, I assumed I would see fundraising appeals similar to the ones that you might get in the mail, with individual pictures of children, providing names as well as faces alongside pleas for funding from generous and empathetic patrons. The fundraising appeals in *Sign* magazine felt incomplete (if not as sincere as they could have been) because they often seemed to talk about all of China as one monogamous block of suffering and need. While that is an effective piece of imagery, it feels inaccurate given the complexity and vastness of China that was made apparent in the articles. This may be the result of the disconnect between missionaries in Hunan and the editorial room of *Sign* magazine back home in New Jersey. Written and photographed material often took weeks if not months to make it back to the States, and once there it was largely at the discretion of the editorial staff how they wanted to frame and add qualifiers to the stories that the missionaries sought to make fully understood by the readership. Requests for specific layouts or photos to be used were sometimes lost in the process at best, or possibly ignored at worst. Somehow it feels fitting that the chaos of an entire country should be paralleled by the chaos of a editorial room, piecing together meaning and context out of an ocean of possibilities.

Utilizing the *Sign* magazine articles in order to write this paper was a challenge, albeit an exciting one. I could not portray every aspect and every theme I was able to draw out of China in a single paper, so I decided to focus on the disasters, both man-made and natural, that impacted

the lives of both the missionaries and the local Chinese. For the missionaries these events added to the culture-shock and fish-out-of-water feelings that many experienced. Making their experiences and perspectives come to life was relatively straightforward, given the abundance and variety of written material that they provided. The Chinese perspective was harder to discern by comparison, owing in part to the lack of material written by Chinese individuals. Primarily China and the Chinese people were objects that were presented to evoke empathy or familiarity, imbued with humanizing qualities but denied the fully realized voice that many of them could have had if they were given the chance to publish their perspectives in an American magazine. However, that is what I as a reader felt like these magazines lacked; the Passionists knew that the most familiar viewpoint to present to readers would be their own. Never did their articles feel insincere or overtly manipulative.

The work of the missionaries seemed to encompass a number of pros and cons. They provided aid to countless Chinese at a time where there was no ruling, centralized government in China. Competing factions cared about their own spheres of control more than anything else, and the vast majority of people, poor peasants, suffered as a result. The missionary work saved many, and gave them the chance at a better life through education. This education came with a conversion to Catholicism, however, which did pose its own set of problems in a traditional, Confucian Chinese culture. Being regarded with suspicion, some converts were harassed or even killed, exemplifying the tenuous position these individuals had, walking embodiments of the cultural collision of two worlds, the West and the East. Did some Eastern thinking lend itself to learning about Catholicism? The Confucian concept of filial piety and hierarchy perhaps did so, emphasizing the group and seniority above younger individuals. Was Jesus thought of as an emperor of a kind, whose heavenly mandate struck closer to home for some Chinese individuals?

As much as the *Sign* magazines reveal about China at this time, it also reveals just how much is unknown, or what might be impossible to know.

I have gained a newfound respect and understanding of China through interacting with these *Sign* magazines. It is difficult and misguided to try and understand China solely through news about the country. It often gives a picture of the Communist leadership of China, its oppression and obstacles, but less about the people they happen to serve. The main concept that comes to my mind more readily when I think of China now is resilience. The history of China is filled with calamity and deadly disasters, uncertainty and luan (chaos), but the determination of the Chinese people to carry on and survive is extraordinary. I was challenged to consider levels of human suffering that were often hard to read, especially given my privileged status as a student of history; as bad as things are now for these people, I know how it gets worse. Yet despite this, being absorbed by the drama of events while reading China, the Communist takeover in 1949 almost felt surprising! Will this stability truly last, knowing all that has come before? Reading this material better allowed my imagination to fill in or expand on what was said and shown, placing myself amongst the American missionaries and Chinese peasants that were witness to seismic social changes during their lifetimes. It connected me to the very human desire for peace and safety, something that spans across time, space, culture and language. Not all of the missionaries were able to speak much Chinese, yet they knew what human suffering looked like. If any of their writings on the Chinese seemed pedantic or a little too showcased, it was because they were trying to lift them up and across the Atlantic Ocean, forcing their own foreigners in New York and Pennsylvania and other strange provinces to gaze into their own eyes, saying in effect: *“These are your brothers and sisters! They need your help!”* Seen in that way, the limitations of their perspectives and technology in relaying such an important message

across time and space can be forgiven, much how people in the future may look back on us and say that we did not understand the bigger picture. It is a testament to the character and willpower of the human spirit to be able to say with sincerity and conviction, *“Not without lack of trying.”*