

Introduction to the 2022 Historical Essay written by Aidan Guarrnucio by Father Rob Carbonneau, C.P., Ph.D. Adjunct Professor of History 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.

Analyzing the Chinese Missionaries of the 20th Century in Hunan Province

By Aidan Guarnuccio [2022]

Missionaries played a key role in the expansion of Christianity throughout China in the early 20th Century. As described below, Passionist Catholic missionaries, predominantly from the United States, kept the public up to date with *Sign Magazine*, a Catholic magazine meant to keep the faithful informed of the Church's doings. While the articles within the magazine contain first hand documentation of the missionaries' doings, they also provide photos of the times, providing insights into what life was like for these individuals.

During the months of January, February, and March of 1936, the missionaries present in the Hunan province of China were at the mercy of whatever political or military group was conquering the region they lived in. This time period was extremely hectic, as regional powers struggled for dominance, and many Westerners continued to be unwelcomed by new powers. The first article from January 1936 describes the fear that gripped Yungshun, China. With the impending invasion of the Reds coming upon the city, the missionaries present were ready to flee

at a moment's notice. The author of the article, Bonaventure Griffiths, CP, received the diary that outlined much of the Yungshun region's missions, it was obvious this was not an oddity, but rather, living in fear was something these individuals became used to. The missionaries were particularly fearful of an individual named Ho Lung. Leader of the Reds in the region, Ho embraced Mao's encircling technique and purged the countryside around the city of Yungshun. For three years, Ho intimidated the people of the city to a state of disarray and confusion until he finally took Yungshun on November 6, 1936. The soldiers under Ho Lung's command would inform the common people that they had nothing to fear, but they were coming to redistribute wealth and clear the country of the oppressors, including "the Catholic missionaries, who were deceiving the people," (p. 352). As the eventual day approached, the missionaries wrote about the people of the city fleeing the city, and wondered what would happen to themselves if they stayed. When the Reds finally did invade, the Catholics present, including the 'main character' Fr. Timothy, escaped the city. In the following month of February 1936, the story of Fr. Timothy McDermott and the others fleeing Yungshun continued to be covered by *Sign*. Fr. Timothy eventually made it to a nearby mountain village and received food and shelter from the locals after convincing them they were not bandits.

The fear felt by Fr. Timothy was not an isolated situation, though, as many missionaries throughout the Hunan region and China as a whole felt the same feelings during this time. In the February 1936 issue of *Sign*, rather than an article, the magazine published a collection of letters. These letters, written by many different individuals involved in the mission, describe the "terrors of the latest Red invasion of the Passionist Vicariate in China," (p. 413). All across China, Western missionaries were at risk of being overtaken by the Communists and were unsure of how to proceed in the future.

The brutality of the Reds did not go unnoticed in these letters. One letter, addressed to Fr. Flavian from an individual named Fr. Joachim Beckes, C.P. went into the detail about the Reds activity in the region of Wuki, China. According to Joachim, despite no invasion occurring in their region, the Chinese people were still living in fear, as rumors of executions, vandalism, raids, and other atrocities committed by the Reds. Joachim also described the state of the Catholic Mission in the region by saying “The Mission is a grand mess ... not much left in the Mission, so it’s useless to stay for very long,” (p. 414). It seems despite the best efforts of the missionaries placed in these contention regions it was difficult to maintain the Catholic mission when invasions were pending.

Another missionary, Fr. William Westhoven, C.P, was writing to Bishop O’Gara, and describing the movements of the Reds in Yuanchow, Hunan Province, and the lack of communication being experienced. The letter is full of fear, as William seems to be very nervous an invasion could be coming any day. Ho Lung, the leader of the Reds that Fr. Timothy encountered, becomes the subject of conversation between William and Bishop O’Gara. During this month, it was reported the Ho captured five transportation busses, and while he kept two of them, he burned the other three. The abuse of power from the Reds was obvious, and the Catholic missionaries wanted to try and avoid being caught in the invasion, so they attempted to escape the city. However, no soldiers or people were able to escort William and the other missionaries out of the city, and they would have to escape on their own.

Another missionary, Fr. Denis Fogarty, C.P. was stationed in Luki, in the Hunan Province, and wrote of his escape from the village. After a small battle outside of Luki, where one man fighting for the Reds was killed, shots were fired and many began to flee. Denis also wrote that several members of a missionary group in another region of Hunan were being held

for ransom, which was a very real concern for many missionaries at this point, since the Reds were closing in on so many regions across China.

The true intent of the Reds and the danger they presented to the missionaries in China was presented in the March 1936 issue of *Sign*, where a letter from Father Anthony Maloney, C.P. was published in full. The first lines of the letters read “In Supu we lost everything” (p. 474), describing how the Reds ravaged Catholic buildings, destroying furniture, things hidden for safe keeping were discovered, and Fr. Anthony was forced to flee. Once again, Ho Lung, leader of the Reds in this region, was the individual pursuing the missionaries, and Fr. Anthony remarked in his letter on December 27, 1935 that he and his company were “fortunate to escape; for a while our chances looked mighty slim,” (p. 475). The remainder of the letters provide in-depth outlines of the dangers that Fr. Anthony and his party encountered, including countless run-ins with Reds and bandits, shootings, and trekking through the wilderness in order to escape persecution.

Most notable, though, was when Fr. Anthony arrived in the town of Chenki, a town the Reds had already ransacked, they arrived at the Catholic Mission building and found it in despair. The intense dislike the Reds possessed for the Catholics is a prevalent theme in all of the articles in the *Sign* magazines. The missionaries showed genuine bravery and commitment to their mission, as even in the face of capture, torture, or even death, they persisted. When Fr. Anthony arrived in Chenki, he said Mass on Christmas Eve, despite the dangers this may put him in with local authorities. The unwavering faith the missionaries possessed is inspiring, and demonstrates their love for the mission they were spreading.

The Catholic missionaries of China faced imminent danger during the Reds’ conquest of the Hunan province. Despite this, the missionaries remained strong and persisted, as whenever

they settled into a new town, the mission continued. Despite facing potential consequences from the Communists or even local, non-Communist authorities, they continued to spread the word and follow through on their plans. The Chinese people found solace in these missionaries, as they seemed to provide light in a very dark, tumultuous time in Chinese history. Missionaries during this era did more than just spread Jesus' word, but healed the sick, or provided other services to local communities in the name of Christ, and this proved to have a significant impact on the people they served. Even in the darkest of times, Jesus can still be present, and these missionaries are living proof that this is true, as even today, and strong Catholic presence persists within China.

While the missionaries were the main subjects of the texts of the articles, the Chinese people were the focus of the many images that were placed into the articles of the *Sign* magazine. The first article in the January 1936 edition of *Sign* discussed the conquest of Yungshun, a city in northwest Hunan. The image that stood out to me the most depicted coal balls drying in the sun. This business was owned by a low-income peasant. The process of forming a coal ball is tiresome, as one individual has to form the soft coal into the specific shape it is intended to be in, and then allow the coal to dry and harden. The coal powder eventually forms a small cake-like ball and would be sold for retail. Usually, the sellers of such an item needed the money they received from the sale to buy basic necessities, such as food and clothing, as they would not make a significant amount of money. In the description of the image on page 353, the author writes "The Reds ... sacked the town. Shops and homes were robbed of everything," proving that despite Mao's promises of a better life for the peasantry, the persecution was not just for those from the West, and no one was safe.

Despite the fear of the Reds the Chinese people may have possessed, many still embraced the Catholic missionaries and adopted the religion. In the article *Campaigning for Christ in Supu*, Fr. Raphael Vance, C.P. describes how well the mission went despite the fears of potential repercussions for embracing the Western religion. The photograph on page 355 shows the missionaries, Passionist Fathers Raphael Vance and Fr. Dominic Langenbacher with Chinese catechists. The young men in the picture, dressed in the traditional Catholic catechists' cloak, show signs that the missions were working and making a difference in the communities. Supu was deemed a great success prior to /the Reds invasion, as the people seemed to truly embrace the teachings of the missionaries, and these images seem to prove that. As brave as the missionaries in these situations were, though, the Chinese converts I'd argue, are taking even more of a risk than the Westerners. Because of the nature of the conversion process, the Chinese citizens opened themselves up to persecution from the Reds. However, those in Supu and in many other towns and villages embraced Christ and the new theology presented by the missionaries.

The other image from the article depicts five young children laughing and smiling while sitting on the ground. When these missionaries arrived in towns, they did not simply say Mass and preach the word of God but would work for the people in order to help them. For example, in Supu, the missionaries acted as physicians and aided the people with medicine. The positive interactions were greatly appreciated by the Chinese people, and they welcomed the missionaries in return. The image of the children smiling with their local pastor demonstrates the love and faith the Chinese people had for these western missionaries. If the Chinese people did not like the message being taught, the parents of the children would not have allowed their sons and daughters to be so close to the priest, but they let their children sit and enjoy his company. In

combination with the picture of the Chinese catechists, it is safe to say the individuals of Supu enjoyed the presence of the missionaries and embraced Christianity.

The article in the February 1936 edition of *Sign* paints a darker picture. Correctly titled *Communist Fury* – this story describes the brutality at which the Reds took over parts of Hunan Province. The first of several images in this article shows soldiers in formation in front of key buildings throughout the town, and soldiers using a church as a barracks. The use of these significant buildings is intentional, as the Reds want to show their strength and domination over the local people.

However, the most powerful image from this edition of the *Sign* came in the following article, where two young boys are pictured on a dirt path. They were fleeing their homes to the mountains after the Reds invaded. In the image, the boys, who look to be from poor, peasant families, have nothing with them but the clothes on their back. Their mothers or fathers are not mentioned, and they truly seem alone. These young children were forced to flee since their house was plundered by the invading Red Army, and should they have stayed, could have been killed. That is the irony of the Red invasion of rural China. Despite making grandiose promises of peace and prosperity for the commoner, the Communists attacked every-day citizens as if they were the enemy. The boys in this image have nothing, and one of them does not even have shoes, and yet they were attacked by the Communists like everyone else.

The terrors these boys went through were not just experienced by them, but rather, was a common experience for rural Chinese. The staggering losses from previous wars over the decades have shown the biggest victim of any war in Chinese history has been the common people, and this conflict is no exception. Mao, using the Communist ideology, was able to lure the common people into a false sense of security and safety.

The introduction of the communist ideology into rural China changed the landscape of the country forever. The society of China was very rigid and built upon private ownership of land for generations. This time period – the initial Communist invasion – ushered in unprecedented changes to a scale that the Chinese people had never seen before. Despite lofty promises, including the maintenance of private ownership of land, Mao quickly changed his mind when he assumed power and truly embraced the Soviet-style of Communism.

Later during the Korean War (1950-1953), Mao eliminated millions of individuals who he considered political opponents. These people included land owners, most of which were peasants. As the boys in the picture from the *Sign* article showed, these individuals did not have much, and now, Mao was taking everything else they had. While some may argue the Communists brought more political stability, the means as to which Mao rose to power caused a significant amount of tension and hardship for the everyday Chinese citizen.

The missionaries, though, seemed to have provide a light in a very dark tunnel during this tumultuous time period. And the use of images throughout the *Sign* magazines makes the experience for readers much more human, including myself. With the inclusion of the images, I was able to truly connect to the stories being told and gain a better understanding of the suffering of the Chinese people. Life for the Chinese peasants, even prior to an invasion of the Reds, was difficult and challenging, as the constant threat of storms or other natural disasters, along with bandits, famine, disease, and other things that could greatly affect the life of the Chinese people in a negative way were always present. The joy on the faces of the children and the Chinese catechists in traditional robes, however, demonstrate the embracing of the Christian ideology.

In this time of intense crisis, many of the Chinese people turned to the faith, and this is significant not only for the Catholic Church in China but for the people, too. Now the Chinese

people had something else to turn to for spiritual aid rather than just embracing the Communist propaganda that glorified Mao as a god. The hardships of the people, documented by the Passionists in China, may have pushed more Chinese to turn to God. This was key for the missionaries, as not only was this beneficial to the mission but also for her personal safety, as the faithful Chinese helped the missionaries in several ways. Whether it be providing transportation to and from villages, leading the westerners to safe location after an invasion, or providing a place to say Mass and celebrate the Eucharist, the Chinese people, despite the hardships endured, embraced Christianity and the faith presented to them.

As an International Studies major, I found these magazines very interesting and applicable to my major. As part of my major, I am responsible for learning about the culture and society of different countries outside of the United States, and this entire course has allowed me to do that. Using these magazines, though, which focused on the Chinese people in a way that I had yet to be exposed to, allowed me to truly understand what was going on in such a crucial moment in Chinese history.

The articles provided insight to the breaking down of traditional Chinese society, and understanding how this happened is key to understanding how modern China acts and how it was formed. The breaking down of the rural Chinese population and the destruction of traditional ideas fascinated me. Coming from the United States – a relatively young country without the grand history of China – it was interesting to hear about the destruction of thousands of years of culture and history. The Communists in China changed everything about Chinese society and its impact on the Chinese citizens cannot be understated. Seeking to understand this was certainly one of my objectives entering this class as an International Studies major, and the use of the *Sign* magazines has helped me begin to accomplish this mission.

Another major aspect of my major is international relations and affairs, and while not as prevalent in magazines I received, foreign nations certainly did play their part in this changing of Chinese society. The Soviet Union directly influenced Mao and inspired his rise to power, and the Western nations did not do much to intervene, but took advantage of the resources China had to offer in centuries prior. Taking an International Relations class while taking this course on China has been great, as I have been able to actively apply key ideas and concepts from International Relations to this course on China, and despite not being mentioned in my *Sign* articles, the influence of the USSR cannot be understated, and it has been a fun process to view this project with International Studies in mind.

Writing this paper as a whole has been a fun and interesting process. Being able to use physical documents from the 1930s was exciting, as I am holding pieces of history nearly 100 years old that are first hand accounts of what truly happened in China. Being able to read these accounts has provided so much insight to understanding how the Communists were able to rise to power, but more importantly, showed the people's reactions to this rise to power. The magazines laid out the pain and anguish felt by the Chinese people, and hearing the stories of individuals and specific people made the history come alive for me.

The writing process took some time to get going. Initially, I struggled significantly with analyzing the pictures and drawing connections with how these images accurately reflect Chinese society. After taking a step back, I tried to look at the pictures not just applying them to the specific article they coincided with, but to Chinese society as a whole, and this helped me see the bigger picture. These images are representative of the Chinese people, providing small snapshots of what life was like. Looking at the images from this point of view helped me begin

to analyze them and try to draw connections to the grander story of Chinese history we are learning in class.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this writing project and using the materials provided in class. The *Sign* magazines helped paint a picture of China during the Communist takeover, and I now feel I have a better understanding of the events surrounding the rise of Mao based on the first-hand accounts of the missionaries.