

2014

China's Modern Martyrs: From Mao to Now

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Anthony E. , "China's Modern Martyrs: From Mao to Now" Whitworth University (2014). *History Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 37.
<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty/37>

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CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT – CLARK ON CHINA
SPECIAL SERIES: “CHINA’S MODERN MARTYRS: FROM MAO TO NOW
Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D.

Part 1, Accusations

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” John 1:10

I have just returned from another year in China where I have witnessed the Church grow. I have seen churches struggle to accommodate the crowds who come for Holy Mass, and I have listened to countless stories of Christian suffering under China’s Communist rule. Over the years I have traveled with, worshipped with, and prayed with Chinese Catholics. Priests have risked their safety to meet me at secluded places, accompany me on peasant-filled busses to remote places of Catholic martyrdom, and send me surreptitious messages about the continued suppression, suffering, and humiliation that China’s Catholics endure every day. I once sat across from a crippled underground bishop, his spine permanently stooped over from twenty years of torture in a Communist prison because he refused to denounce the Pope. The bishop’s eyes beamed with joy, despite his distorted face, and he said over and over, “Thank you, Lord.” At such times when I am with holy Chinese Catholics who have suffered tortures for their faith, I recall the famous line from Saint Augustine: “God had one Son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.” This holy bishop, Hu Daguo (1920-2011), was divinely connected to the suffering Son for whom he too had suffered. For nearly a decade I have preserved testimonies, handwritten accounts, and archival documents that outline how China’s Church has suffered under its Communist authorities, and in the

following series I will highlight some of those stories, stories that will help Catholics better understand China's modern martyrs, from Mao to now.

Looking Ahead: His Excellency, Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin 馬達欽主教

While most Westerners hear only of China's "economic miracle" and its appalling persecution of Tibetan Buddhists, few news sources or those persons in college classrooms discuss the government's consistent maltreatment and discrimination against Catholic Christians. Only hours after Bishop Ma Daqin was consecrated the Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai in July, 2012, the 54-year-old champion of Shanghai's Catholic community was quietly escorted away by plain clothed Communist officers. He has not been publically seen since. Bishop Ma was favored and recognized by Pope Benedict XVI, and was set to succeed the recently-deceased Bishop of Shanghai, Aloysius Jin Luxian, SJ, (1916-2013) a Jesuit who suffered 27 years of imprisonment before his release. China's Communist government only begrudgingly allows Catholicism to remain active, and the state remains adamant that Church hierarchy remains obedient first to the government, and governs the Catholic community in complete separation from the Holy Father in Rome "in all matters except spiritual ones." Ma Daqin is first a Catholic, and for this he is now under house arrest.

During his ordination as bishop, Ma Daqin allowed the three consecrating bishops who are in communion with the Holy See to lay hands on him, but when an illegitimate, state-supported bishop approached him, Ma stood up to embrace the other bishops, defying state interference in Church law. And after this bold act, the new Bishop Ma announced in his public thank-you speech that he declined any further affiliation with the

Communist-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association. He would, he said, devote himself only to his ministry as a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church. Shanghai's crowded Saint Ignatius cathedral erupted into a long and enthusiastic applause of open support for the bishop's defiance against the government. While unconfirmed, I was told by sources in Beijing that Bishop Ma is still under arrest at the Sheshan Catholic seminary near Shanghai, and is undergoing "reeducation" by the local authorities. China's Catholics are heartened by Bishop Ma's courageous opposition to Communist control, and continue to pray for a renewed era of clerical resistance to the state's heavy, and often cruel, interference in the Church's life and affairs in China.

Looking Back: A Communist Attack Against God, the Trappist Abbey of China

The history of Communist hostility against Christianity in China reaches back more than eight decades before Bishop Ma Daqin's heroic defiance in Shanghai, and perhaps one of the most tragic examples of how merciless the Party can be is the appalling Communist massacre of thirty-three holy martyrs connected to Our Lady of Consolation Trappist Abbey at Yangjiaping. Still today, Chinese Catholics only speak of this incident in hushed tones for fear of the government. In 1947, a bedraggled and terrorized group of Trappist monks arrived in Beijing, where the American Jesuit, Fr. Charles J. McCarthy, SJ, (1911-1991) was the first person to collect the horrible stories of what had happened to their celebrated abbey, then in ruins. The stories they provided Fr. McCarthy had clearly stirred the young priest, for he later penned one of the most harrowing accounts of Communist atrocities in China's early modern history. He began his narrative in vivid terms:

In the early morning hours of August 30, 1947, the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Consolation . . . was reduced to ruins by fire. . . . The burning of their monastery, affected by Communists who control this region, was but one act, and not the most pathetic, in a long tragic persecution inflicted on the brave Trappist Community. At present writing, sixteen Trappists are known to have died during the ordeal.¹

The death toll indeed rose beyond sixteen, and as the details of their deaths came to light the inhumane tactics of China's Communists also became known.

Perhaps our best source of what happened in 1947 at Yangjiaping Abbey are the published descriptions by Fr. Stanislaus Jen, OCSO (1936-2003), one of the Chinese monks who witnessed many of the incidents.² Fr. Jen recounts that Communist forces under Mao Zedong (1893-1976) had gained control of the area around Yangjiaping Abbey in late 1937, and by 1939 had decided to begin a campaign against the Christian monks. At noon one day some of the monastery Oblates left the enclosure to enjoy a walk, and were startled to discover an army of 8,000 Communists that had surrounded the community. Commanding officers entered the Abbey and demanded that the monks surrender the few rifles they had been given during the Boxer Uprising in 1900 to defend themselves; the situation was tense. Fearing an attack on the monastery, the monks surrendered their rifles, and once they were unarmed the Communists forced themselves into the Abbey and searched through every room, even upturning the floors. As Fr. Stanislaus wrote, "Even the Oblates foresaw the end of O. L. of Consolation for the monks."³

Under orders of Chairman Mao's leader of the People's Liberation Army, Zhu De (1886-1976), some of the monks were arrested; "they were stripped of their clothes, tied by thumbs and big toes behind their back and hanged in trees in the valley for hours in icy cold winter temperature."⁴ Scoffing at Bro. Alexis Liu, OCSO (d. 1948), soldiers shot bullets near his head to frighten him. The People's Army eventually left the Abbey, leaving behind representatives of the Communist police, and from that time on the monastery was "completely under the control of the Communists."⁵ During the decade before 1949, when China became a Communist country, Chairman Mao was already asserting strongly the Party's position against religion, especially the Christian religion. In one impassioned speech, Mao proclaimed that, "the imperialist powers have never slackened their efforts to poison the minds of the Chinese people," and this "policy of cultural aggression," he argued, "is carried out through missionary work, through establishing hospitals and schools, publishing newspapers" to "dupe the people."⁶ Christians, he told his followers, were imperialists determined to take over China, and since nearly three-fourths of China's Christians were Catholic, the People were encouraged to attack Catholic institutions and convert them to their own way of thinking.

Accusations: The People's Court and the Trappist Monks of Yangjiaping

An exceptional account of what the Communists did to the Trappists next is found in Gerolamo Fazzini's, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs*, though even this work does not provide all the tragic details.⁷ By April 1947, the Communists began gathering people near the Abbey and conducted "peasant association meetings," during which the Party cadres contrived false allegations that the monks had taken land from "the People," and that the Catholics were determined to tyrannize the Chinese. After pillaging the

monastery, the Communists organized an open-air trial before more than a thousand villagers. At the first of these “People’s courts,” on 1 July 1947, two of the monks were dragged before a crowd, accused of “oppressing the people of China,” and ordered to give the Abbey’s goats to the peasants.

At another trial on 10 July, the monks were again presented to the People’s Court. The thirty-nine-year-old Fr. Seraphin, OCSA (1909-1948), was, as Thomas Merton, OCSA (1915-1968), wrote in his *The Waters of Siloe*, “marked out for particularly cruel treatment,” and was “beaten across the back with clubs for two hours” in the presence of the villagers, many of whom were formerly friends of the Abbey.⁸ The monks stood on stage stripped to the waist – the Communists tore their habits during their arrests. The charge: the Abbey had collaborated with foreign colonial powers during the Boxer Uprising and used the guns received from the French government to oppress the Chinese people. The verdict: the People’s court ordered the monks to repay to the local peasants all it “had stolen from the people.” The next trial was held on the morning of 23 July. The Communist soldiers kicked the monks as they walked from their residence to the Abbey church, where the soldiers occupied the choir stalls while the monks began to chant the morning Divine Office: *Laudate Dóminum de cælis; laudate eum in excélsis*, “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above.”⁹ Peasants filed into the nave as they sang.

Theresa Marie Moreau’s dramatic book, *Blood of the Martyrs: Trappist Monks in Communist China*, describes the scene of this final trial in the Abbey church:

A table for the judges had been placed underneath the extinguished sanctuary lamp. . . . Father Gulielmus Cambourieu [OCSO (1870-1947)], gifted with a sensitive nature, whispered to his confreres, ‘Were all going to die martyrs. Let’s make a general Act of Contrition.’ They were to be tried before another People’s Court.¹⁰

The Communist court summoned Father Seraphin to the platform and accused him of spying among the neighboring villages, gathering information for the Japanese. After denying the false charge, members of the People’s Liberation Army were ordered to beat the monk with clubs. The abuse was so severe that Father Seraphin cried out, “Have a little mercy.” His judge’s reply was direct: “The time for mercy is past; this is the hour of our revenge.”¹¹ A Catholic woman named Maria Zhang was commanded to testify against Father Seraphin, but after she defended him before the court the young woman was tied to a column and beaten on her head and back. Collapsing from the abuse, the Communists thought she was dead; “they took one of their crude festal banners, threw it over the prostrate form, then calmly resumed the trial.”¹²

Selected village representatives gathered in the nave, and at last demanded that the entire Trappist community should be executed. The Party cadre officiating at the trial coldly informed the monks that, “the people’s decision is our decision; for the Communist government is the people’s government.”¹³ One after the next, the Trappist monks were forced to the corner of the church, near where the vigil lamp of the Blessed Sacrament was suspended, and their hands and feet were shackled in chains. Their rosaries, scapulars, and holy medals were taken away, and they were escorted to the monastery refectory, where they were imprisoned to await their punishment. The monks

submitted to Christ's divine will, for as Saint benedict had written in his Rule, "monks are men who can claim no dominion even over their own bodies or wills."¹⁴ The trial and the accusations were a charade. The Abbey and the surrounding villages had always lived in peace, and the monks had even helped the villagers on many occasions. The Party had carefully orchestrated the trials and beatings; they had turned the villagers against the monks with fabricated rumors and encouraged them to raid the monastery's provisions and seize its land and animals. The Trappists had lost everything but their lives, but many would lose even this.

The Hidden History of China's Communist Government

China's current government is careful to hide the events of this tragedy, and few people in and out of China today are aware of the un pitying violence the Communist Party has inflicted upon China's Catholics. Over the past several years the horrific events of the Trappist martyrdoms in 1947 China have punctuated my research on other historical events. After Mass at Beijing's West Church, an elderly Catholic man called me to the parish center to show me materials he had gathered about the Yangjiaping massacre, and suggested a surreptitious meeting with one of the Abbey survivors. I later met this survivor and recorded his tragic story of what happened. Last year, Theresa Marie Moreau kindly sent me a copy of her summoning book, *Blood of the Martyrs*, and in a recent correspondence she expressed her hope that the Trappist martyrs of China are someday elevated to the honor of the Altar as canonized saints in the Catholic Church. And during research visits to important Catholic archives in Europe, I inadvertently came across several rare documents related to the Trappist monks in China who were tried, tortured, and martyred by Chinese Communists.

Other accounts of Communist persecution of China's Catholics have been given to me during recent trips to China. "We can't say anything about this," they tell me, "but you can." In the next several columns I write for *Catholic World Report*, I will honor the wish of these holy and suffering Chinese Catholics, and tell some of these stories so more may know about the atrocities committed against the Church in China by its current government. Mao's People's Liberation Army, his Red Guards, and his Party officials have buried priests alive, tortured them in cruel prisons, and subjected countless faithful Christians to "reeducation" classes and years of harsh conditions at remote Labor Camps. In the next issue of "Clark on China," I shall outline what happened to the Trappist monks of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey at Yangjiaping after their trials. Relying on several sources, including the report taken by Fr. Charles J. McCarthy in 1947 and the testimony given to me by one of the survivors, I will describe the terrible death march inflicted on the monks, and the awful torments they endured under China's People's Liberation Army. As one Communist soldier informed the monks, "Before long, in our territories there will be no Catholic Church." Despite their sufferings, or perhaps because of them, the area around Yangjiaping now boasts a thriving Catholic population. The Trappist monks, and the Chinese Catholics today who remember their torments in 1947, highlight well the words of Saint Peter in his first Epistle:

Beloved, do not be startled at the trial by fire now taking place among you to prove you, as if something strange were happening to you; but rejoice, in so far as you are partakers in the suffering of Christ.¹⁵

Images:

- 001: Our Lady of Consolation Trappist Abbey before its destruction by Chinese Communists in 1947.
- 002: Our Lady of Consolation Trappist Abbey church during Holy Mass before its destruction by Chinese Communists in 1947.
- 003: The monks Our Lady of Consolation Trappist Abbey before their persecution by Chinese Communists in 1947.
- 004: The survivors from Our Lady of Consolation Trappist Abbey after their suffering under Communist persecution. This photo was taken in Beijing, October 1947; Fr. Charles J. McCarthy, SJ, is seen in the back row, fourth from the right.

All photographs are from Ren Dayi任達義, *Yinshui siyuan Chahaer huai laixian Yangjiaping Shengmu shenwei yuan Shengmu shenle yuan zhi muyuan* 飲水思源察哈爾懷來顯楊家坪聖母神慰院聖母神樂院之母院 (Hong Kong 香港: 1978).

任達義, *Yinshui siyuan Chahaer huai laixian Yangjiaping Shengmu shenwei yuan Shengmu shenle yuan zhi muyuan* 飲水思源察哈爾懷來顯楊家坪聖母神慰院聖母神樂院之母院 (In Remembrance of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, Chahar Province, the Mother House of Our Lady of Joy, Liesse) (Hong Kong 香港: 1978).

Notes:

¹ Charles J. McCarthy, SJ, “A Trappist Tragedy,” in Paolino Quattrocchi, *Monaci nella Tormenta* [Abbaye de Cîteaux, 1991], 136.

² The document I am relying on most is a fascimile of one of Fr. Jen’s books, provided to me by an anonymous Catholic at Beijing’s West Church: Fr. Stanislaus Jen/Ren Dayi, OCSO 任達義, *Yinshui siyuan Chahaer huai laixian Yangjiaping Shengmu shenwei yuan Shengmu shenle yuan zhi muyuan* 飲水思源察哈爾懷來顯楊家坪聖母神慰院聖母神樂院之母院 (In Remembrance of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, Chahar Province, the Mother House of Our Lady of Joy, Liesse) (Hong Kong 香港: 1978).

³ Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 17-18.

⁴ Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 18.

⁵ Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 19.

⁶ Mao Zedong, “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 312.

⁷ See Gerolamo Fazzini, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pages 285-310.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 254.

⁹ Psalm 148.

¹⁰ Theresa Marie Moreau, *Blood of the Martyrs: Trappist Monks in Communist China* (Los Angeles: Veritas Est Libertas, 2012), 29.

¹¹ Merton, *The Waters of Siloe*, 256.

¹² Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan* , 99.

¹³ Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan* , 99.

¹⁴ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Chapter XXXIII (London: Baronius Press, 2005), 48.

¹⁵ I Peter 4:12.