

WINDING ROAD... STEADY STEPS. SALESIAN CHARISM IN THE FIRST 30 YEARS OF FMA IN CHINA

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Introduction

While abiding by the theme of the Seminar, the title of this paper has been enhanced so as to correspond better to the documentation used and on account of its surprising similarity to the major epochs of Chinese history. Here we address ourselves to the period from the arrival in China of the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) in 1923 up to their expulsion by the then newly established communist government in 1950.

A brief presentation of the turbulent political context of China that witnessed the arrival of the FMA pioneers sets the stage for their first 30 years of activity. A table juxtaposing the political developments during this period with the progress of missionary work gives a graphic idea of the highly volatile and explosive situation of wars and revolutions that compounded the challenges the sisters faced in their apostolate of education, evangelization and nurturing of indigenous vocations.

The paper sheds light on the contribution of the FMA to the advance of the Salesian spirit in China through their availability, sacrifice, indomitable courage in facing severe challenges and above all their fidelity to the spirit of "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*" by offering to youth and the needy services in keeping with the charism of the Institute and in response to the needs of the place and time.

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1. Background Briefing

After ten bloody attempts and some twenty-seven years of indomitable struggle that claimed innumerable lives of the revolutionist heroes Dr. Sun Yat-sen, recognized as the 'Father of the Nation', finally declared the birth of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912. This had actually brought an end to thousands of years of imperial dynastic rule in China. *The Times* of London appraised the event thus:

"History has witnessed few such surprising revolutions, and perhaps none of equal magnitude, which has been carried out in all its later stages with so little bloodshed. Whether the last of those stages has been reached is one of the secrets of the future. Some of those who know China best cannot but doubt whether a form of government so utterly alien to Oriental conceptions and to Oriental traditions as a Republic can be suddenly substituted for a monarchy in a nation of four hundred millions of men, whom Kings with semi-divine attributes have ruled since the first dim twilight of history."¹

It is not difficult to understand the chaos and disorder that followed. There were massive power struggles between the old regime – the fading mandarins of the bygone reign – and the reformers, with their latest conflicting ideologies. At the periphery of the central power and armed forces, one could only imagine the lawless scoundrels, ruffians, bandits and gangsters flipping around all over. It was under such traumatic conditions that our courageous missionary pioneers set foot on China, exactly during the 1920s, '*the darkest period in the Republic*', and the very spot where the Southern revolutionist government was counteracting the warlords in the North.

¹ Quoted in Henry McALLEAVY, *The Modern History of China*, New York, Praeger Publisher 1967, p. 186.

2. Defining the Boundary

As we all know the spectrum of “the Salesian charism” is vast and multi-faceted both in its expressions and actualizations, and thus cannot easily be boiled down to few pages. Hence this paper will limit itself to some of its features stated under the entry “charism” in the latest edition (1982) of the FMA Constitutions. In art. 76 we read:

“We carry out our mission in the unity of our charism and the plurality of social-cultural situations, with the adaptability, courage and creativity which urged Don Bosco to go to the young.

“Normally this is done through the works proper to the Institute, oratories, youth centres, schools, and our initiatives for education, training and helping young people.

“As far as possible, we respond to the particular need of the local church and area also in other ways, always keeping with the character of the Institute.

“In every place and in whatever situation we may be, let us make these words of our Founder our own: ‘I have promised God that I shall work for my poor boys to my last breath’.”

Even a cursory glance at the chronological table below will suffice to identify many an element referred to above.

3. Winding Road... Steady Steps

3.1. *The Torn Yellow Earth, the Running Stream*

The ‘life cycle’ of our sisters’ mission in China has been short – just a span of 30 years. The main source of their history is their ‘*cronaca*’, the written records left by those sisters. When scrolling down those pages one may be surprised seeing that one year of their life history could at times be just an A5 size page of narration. However, looking at the backdrop of the socio-political situation in which our sisters lived, the ever restless life-wrestling world around them, it is not difficult to imagine how overwhelmed they were as they struggled

to cope with the events of their everyday lives. Too often almost as a routine they had to run for their lives from the intensive non-stop bombardment that lasted for half an hour or more². Yet admirably, our sisters were fully engaged in active missionary and community services. The following table tries to offer a scenario of the major national events of China in juxtaposition with our sisters' life in those years.

Year	Political tensions and contentions ³	FMA expeditions ⁴
1912 Jan.	The birth of the Republic of China, led by Sun Yat-sen	
Feb.	Elected Yuen Shik-kai (Cheng mandarin) as 'provisional president'. Yan ambitiously sets up his own Northern Army	
1913	Kuomintang (the <i>National Party</i>) ⁵ comes into being	
1916	Yuen Shik-kai dies. National Govt established in the South	
1916-1927 Warlordism: full scale civil wars – North & South		
1917-	China enters World War I	
1919	Japanese occupation of Shantung – National May 4 Student Movement	
1920	New Canton Military Government led by Sun established	

² [Anonymous], *Storia della Missione FMA in Cina, Anni 1923-1945*. Internal documents of FMA, Hong Kong, China Province, p. 26.

³ H. McALLEAVY, *The Modern History of China*, pp. 182-327; Immanuel C.Y. HSU, *The Rise of Modern China*, New York, Oxford University Press 1983², pp. 452-644.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.1923-1954.

⁵ Currently the national ruling party in Taiwan.

1921	Foundation of Chinese Communist Party	
1923 15 March		Arrival of six FMA missionaries in Ho Sai
1924		Shiu Chow ⁶ – Mary Help of Christians College for girls
1925 March		Shelters for the blind and aged women - orphanage
	Sun Yat-sen dies	
1926		New missionaries from Italy. New clinic in Ho Sai
1927	Co-existence of three self-styled Chinese governments: the warlords in Peking, the Nationalists, the Communists	
1928-1937	Fragile Unification – The Nationalist Government	'Santa Infanzia' opened for abandoned and physically impaired young girls. 1 st batch of missionaries homewards
1934		Lok Chong – new clinic Shanghai – primary & professional schools, boarding, hospital services, parish work
1936		Ho Sai – novitiate canonically established
1937-1939 Sino-Japanese War (The Nanking Massacre in Dec. 1937)		
1938	↓	Ho Sai – First 4 Chinese FMA
1939		Novitiate moved to Shanghai

⁶A historical strategic place in South China, situated at the north of Kwangtung (Guangdong) and thus the site of numerous battlefields, both north bound and south bound. It had always served as the entrance to the heart of China and up to the capital for merchants and especially for Catholic missionaries like Matteo Ricci. The Vicariate Apostolic of Shiu Chow was erected in 1920. This China Mission was entrusted to Fr (later Msgr.) Luigi Versiglia, who established the FMA at Ho Sai & Lok Chong.

1939-1945 World War II – China joins the Allies		
1940		+ Sr Maria Tch'an dies in Shanghai – 2 yrs of profession
1941	↓	4 new professions
1942		2 new professions
1944		+ Sr Rosa Tong dies in Shanghai – 3 years of profession + Sr Maria Russo dies in Shiu Chow
1945-1949 Civil War – Nationalists vs Communists		
1945		+ Sr Giovanna Rossi dies in Ho Sai Two German missionaries take shelter in Macau. First house in Macau
1946	↓	
16 May		Province of China canonically erected with 26 sisters, 5 houses
1949		5 new professions
1 October 1949 Establishment of the People's Republic of China		
1950		3 new professions
1953 All missionaries and local sisters (except 5) were forced to leave China and settled in Hong Kong		

As recorded in an internal document, the demography of the FMA in China from 1923-1954 is as follows⁷:

FMA 53 : Missionaries	- 34
Local sisters	- 19
● Deceased	- 04
● Repatriated	- 17 (missionaries)
● Moved to other provinces	- 04 (missionaries)

⁷ *Storia della Missione FMA in Cina – Anni 1923-1945*, p. 83.

3.2. A Tale of Two Cities⁸ (non-fiction): Vicariate Apostolic of Shiu Cho - Shanghai

3.2.1 To Be or Not to Be

To highlight the 50th anniversary in 1922 of the foundation of the Institute of the FMA, the embarkation of missionaries to new horizons could only have been most significant and desirable. It was then that Msgr. Luigi Versiglia, the Apostolic Vicar of Shiu Chow, where there were already 60,000 inhabitants, urged in his appeal for helping hands from the FMA. They were expected to share his load in the education and evangelization of young girls and women, and especially for the formation of indigenous vocations, including those who would be the pioneers of a local religious congregation he was planning to found. He finally succeeded in welcoming six missionaries from Italy, who arrived at Shiu Chow on 15 March 1923, marking a historical milestone.

Thanks to the painstaking research by the participants of the previous Seminar in Hong Kong⁹, we have concise illustrations of the episodes concerning the genesis and exodus of our missionaries in China in the first three decades, their endeavours and predicaments. There is a great temptation to plagiarism, except for that the events here are depicted in the light of our charism. Besides highlighting the various challenges faced by our FMA pioneers in the Far East (including China), Sr Loparco rightly pointed out in her paper that

⁸ Related readings: Domingos LEONG, *The Political Situation in China in 1920-30 and Its Effects on Salesians* in Nestor C. IMPELIDO (ed.), *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence in East Asia*. Vol. I. (= ACSSA - Varia, 2). Hong Kong, [no publisher] 2006, p.33-45; Carlo SOCOL, *The Birth of the China Province and the Expansion of the Salesian Work in East Asia (1926-1927)* in N.C. IMPELIDO, *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence....*, I, p. 47-61; Grazia LOPARCO, *The Arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the Far East* in N.C. IMPELIDO, *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence....*, II, pp. 15-34; Elena MIRAVALLE, *The Mission of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in China* in N.C. IMPELIDO, *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence....*, II, pp. 35-45.

⁹ N.C. IMPELIDO, *The Beginning of the Salesian Presence....*, I-II.

their arrival was “[...] characterized by the educative nature of the institute”¹⁰, and further reaffirmed, “The missionaries’ letters testify to their availability to serve as needed, according to the initial requests, and the effort to develop works that respond to the spirit of the Institute.”¹¹ Their fidelity was to such a point that “One could sense a certain tension between the availability of the FMA, faithfulness to the spirit of the Institute, and the requests for evangelization put forward by Msgr. Versiglia [...]”¹²

Though compromise was made later, tensions continued to grow between the Superior Sr Parri Palmira and Msgr. Versiglia, later succeeded by Fr Ignatius Canazei who then headed the newly born Salesian *Visitatoria*. Disputes ranged from decisions on designating an institute for young people as “orphanage” or “boarding”, setting up of oratory or school to matters regarding religious instruction, commitment to the association of the indigenous religious, etc. In fact, the struggles were related to the process of discerning what was better suited to translating the apostolic ideals into concrete action. Albeit all this dissent, there isn’t the faintest doubt that they were all good ‘Salesians’; just that they were too zealous in accomplishing the mission entrusted to them. Collaboration is a long process of learning through pains, patience, respect, tactics and time.

3.2.2 “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle”

Art. 22 of the FMA Constitutions describes the features of ‘poverty’ characteristic of the sisters, which should be a perfect echo of St. John Bosco’s motto and a sign of their faithfulness to the spirit of their holy founder:

“Our poverty [...] a necessary requirement of ‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’ for the (FMA). Let her also be ready to

¹⁰ G. LOPARCO, *The Arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians...*, p.15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

suffer heat, cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue and contempt, willing to sacrifice everything as long as she can co-operate with Christ for the salvation of young people."

The present Provincial Secretary of the FMA China Province Sr Elena Miravalle, who has been holding this job for over a decade, has already offered in her paper a systematic account of the FMA activities and their expansion in China from their arrival to their establishment in Macau and Hong Kong in 1950.¹³

Whether in Ho Sai, Shiu Chow, Lok Chong in the south or later in Shanghai, the big metropolitan city in the north, they were mainly engaged in schools of different levels and grades from nursery to high school, orphanage and boarding, vocational training centre, oratory, catechism and services for the church, clinic and shelter for the physically impaired, and even service in hospitals and military hospitals. Whether they were '*works proper to the institute*' or '*response to the particular need of the local church and area*', as indicated in the aforementioned art. 76 of the Constitutions, they were all expressions of the charism in action.

Besides difficulties of language and communication, adaptation and inculturation, our sisters also faced countless hardships and intimidations: wars and death threats, flights from bombardments, diseases, arrest, interrogations, anxiety, isolation, fear and loss. They often had to endure great poverty due to the lack of means of support, whether economic or medical. In fact, as the *Storia della Missione FMA in Cina* pointed out, already from the year 1925 when our sisters landed in China, other than the difficulties of the language, the disasters of poverty and the sacrifices of the apostolate, there was another factor that made life very difficult, and that not only for the missionaries – the wars.¹⁴ If we turn back to the chronological table reported above, one is overwhelmed by the extent and duration of

¹³ E. MIRAVALLE, *The Mission of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians...*, pp. 35-45.

¹⁴ *Storia della Missione FMA in Cina – Anni 1923-1945*, p. 8.

war. On the other hand, we can only admire the courage, constancy, faithfulness and creativity of our missionaries under such duress and physical constraints. Not only did they not react, they were proactive instead.

It is recorded that already in 1927 the ‘pirates’ and the soldiers were fighting in the backyard of the sisters in Ho Sai, and by the end of the same year, the house was invaded by hundreds of ‘revolutionary’ soldiers. Yet at the same time a group of young catechists received the medals of Mary Immaculate, turning to her for patronage; later this became an association in our oratories.¹⁵

The dramatic story continues and brings us to 1938, to Shanghai, where our house was completely destroyed in bombing. The sisters had to start again from the very beginning, right from the scratch. Down at Ho Sai, where the fighting and poverty was not less fierce a historical and memorable event took place – the profession of the first four indigenous FMA.¹⁶

Also in other sources, though on a smaller scale, we find episodes recounting the heroic deeds of our sisters in Shanghai, amid perilous and miserable life challenging conditions. Some episodes appear really adventurous.

One of the reports in the ‘*Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*’ stated that our sisters there, “other then looking after the wounded solders, helped the mass of refugees gathered in the refugee camps, tending to those suffering from cholera with great generosity”.¹⁷ To meet the innumerable demands of the multiple services especially during wartime, the utmost urgency was to find a station from where they could launch out. It was then that they found a small house, abandoned by the Japanese troops, which was actually in a dilapidated and messy state. Our courageous sisters just threw

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Giuseppe CACCIA, *Dalla Cina - In Shanghai, mentre perdura in guerra...* in *Il Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, N. 8-9, 1938.

themselves into action, picked up the pieces and restored it to a more or less habitable condition. Just a couple of days later it welcomed 24 young girls working in a nearby Japanese factory, sheltering them from immediate moral and social dangers and harassment.

The founding of the new school for the working-class children also the following year in Shanghai could make us wide-eyed¹⁸. In a rural area of the city, Chapei, where there never had been a school for girls, the missionaries were besieged by pleas to open a school for such purpose. Obviously the financial situation of our sisters was contrary to such a project. Since the social demand concerned the charism proper, they went ahead adapting to their needs whatever they found to be useful.

The sisters found an old pagoda that had been used for schooling and was deserted then. Though the surroundings were fully furnished with Buddhist statues and decorative objects, the central hall offered ample space to gather a relatively sizable group. Our sisters did not think twice but immediately seized the opportunity to occupy the place and did their best to convert it into classrooms. In fact, the side chambers still preserved many old coffins – as per the old Chinese custom of keeping the corpses for a later burial – but left abandoned during the wars, some remnants actually exposed. Well, let the dead bury their dead! The lively missionaries instead set to raising the living. Fortunately the old inhabitants neither complained nor interfered! Their presence was completely quiet and calm. At the beginning of the classes the dead tenants numbered more than the live. The student strength, however, increased day by day. Soon there were 200 students and many still in the waiting list.

There are very many such stunning incidences and accounts. Some have been recorded and maybe there are many still to be discovered.

¹⁸ Giuseppe CACCIA, “Dalla Cina - Una scuola... in pieno stile ‘900!...” in *Il Notiziario delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, N. 8-9, 1939.

On the other hand, events like the repatriation of missionaries and the loss of even young sisters should have been painful and confusing. Persecutions under communists were certainly ordeals. Yet, listening to the live testimonies of the sisters who survived that epoch seems like watching scenes from a movie; their usual comment is, ‘How beautiful was the life of those days!’

Concluding Remarks

Looking back at the courage and fidelity of our sisters in China in the first three decades of the history of the Chinese Province amid the unending and mounting tumultuous conditions, we cannot but admire their determination and fidelity to their commitments. By the time they transferred to Hong Kong, there were already 18 Chinese sisters, all born in wartime. Their retreat to Hong Kong resulted in new apostolic vineyards in Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Australia. The fire in their hearts will go on. Don Bosco’s dream of China should come true. “*Yes, we can!*”