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# The Legacy of Thaddeus Yang

David J. Endres

**T**a-Teh Hsiu-Shih (1905–82),<sup>1</sup> later named Thaddeus Yang An-Jan and hereafter referred to by his shortened pen name, Thaddeus Yang, was one of the first indigenous priestly vocations for the Chinese community of the Order of St. Benedict (Benedictines).<sup>2</sup> Born to a Chinese Buddhist family in Java, Indonesia, and educated in Hong Kong and then Europe, Yang encountered the Roman Catholic Church and the Benedictine Order in Belgium. Attracted to Christian faith, he was baptized and soon thereafter pursued a religious vocation as a Benedictine. After ordination he was sent back to the Far East to labor as a missionary in China. In that role he helped to educate Westerners, especially Americans, about Chinese culture, religion, and the missions. While mission historians have often studied the role of missionaries being sent to distant lands to preach the Gospel to non-Christian peoples, the mission legacy of Thaddeus Yang, O.S.B., illustrates the reverse situation of an indigenous Catholic missionary who educated Americans about the missions and helped to stimulate interest in mission support.

## Conversion and Calling

Thaddeus Yang was born on May 15, 1905. His father had lived a life similar to that of a Buddhist monk, practicing a life of solitude and self-denial.<sup>3</sup> From his early years, Yang wished to imitate his father and live the austere life of a monk. His mother, though, cautioned him against it, encouraging him instead to enter the diplomatic service. His education, which his mother hoped would equip him for eventual diplomatic duties, took him to Hong Kong and across Europe to England, Germany, and finally Belgium.<sup>4</sup>

As a teenager studying in Europe, Yang formed a friendship with the famed missionary Vincent Lebbe, among other Christians.<sup>5</sup> Yang related, "Without ever making any attempt to 'convert me,' they gradually and unconsciously exercised a decisive influence upon me, by simply carrying out the teaching of the Gospel which they professed to believe in." In particular, he recalled Lebbe's magnetic personality: "Father Lebbe was not a theologian. He loomed above theology. He so loved Christ and China that his sole ambition was to lead China to Christ."<sup>6</sup> As it turned out, Yang played a part in achieving Lebbe's goal of bringing China to belief in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

At Lebbe's invitation, Yang accepted a scholarship to study at the Catholic-sponsored University of Louvain in Belgium. He was not yet a Christian, but he was attracted to the faith and eager to learn more. Still Yang found some of the church's doctrines, especially that of Jesus' redemptive suffering and death on the cross, difficult to accept. Eventually, Yang was swayed only by the conviction of Lebbe, not through any reasoning or argumentation. Within a short time he asked Lebbe for baptism.



*David J. Endres is a Catholic priest and teacher in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. He is adjunct professor of history at Xavier University, Cincinnati, and teacher and chaplain at Bishop Fenwick High School, Franklin, Ohio. His research and writing have focused on the Roman Catholic foreign missionary movement.*

—[dendres@catholic.org](mailto:dendres@catholic.org)

The day after Christmas 1923, at the age of eighteen, Yang was baptized, taking the Christian name "Albert."<sup>8</sup>

Soon after his conversion to Christianity, Yang stated his intention to become a monk. His earlier longing to follow his father in living as a monk assumed a new direction after his conversion. Yang's spiritual director, however, advised the neophyte to exercise caution and asked him to wait before pursuing a religious vocation. At this time Yang learned that Lu Tseng-tsiang (later Rev. Peter-Celestine Lou Tseng-tsiang, O.S.B.),<sup>9</sup> who was the Republic of China's first prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, was considering joining the Benedictine Abbey of St. André. He also learned that the abbey was weighing the possibility of founding a monastic community in China. Yang took this as a sign and traveled to Brugge to see whether he might gain acceptance into the community.

Abandoning his studies of political science and diplomacy, Yang was successful in his request for admittance and received the habit of the Order of St. Benedict on October 4, 1927; he made his profession a year later, on October 5, 1928. Following his profession he was sent to the Abbey of Maredsous, another Benedictine abbey in Belgium, to study philosophy, and later to the Abbey of Mont-Cesar near Louvain to commence theological studies for the priesthood. Upon arriving at Mont-Cesar he was greeted by the prior: "So you are a Chinese. Aren't you by any chance one of those babies I bought for five francs apiece?"<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, Yang could take a joke, even to the point of being likened to a pagan baby who had been ransomed from his heathen beliefs. On July 31, 1932, Yang was ordained to the priesthood. His entire preparation for life as a Benedictine was spent on European soil, but he soon found himself preparing for his return to the Far East.

## The Benedictines in China

Along with sending Western missionaries to China, the Catholic Church emphasized the growth of indigenous leadership, especially the promotion of native priests and religious sisters and brothers.<sup>11</sup> Religious orders with European and American roots began monasteries and convents, hoping to attract Chinese priests, monks, and nuns who would take the Catholic faith to their neighbors. It was thought that they would have a decided advantage in converting their own people, since they could avoid the traditional missionary's label as "foreign" and "imperial."

The members of the Order of St. Benedict (Benedictines) of St. André Abbey in Brugge, Belgium, planted roots in China in 1929 when they began the Priory of Saints Peter and Andrew in Xishan (Si' Shan), near Nanchong (Nanchung) in Sichuan (Szechwan) Province, in south-central China. At the request of Archbishop Celso Constantini, apostolic delegate to China, the Benedictines introduced Catholic monastic life to this overwhelmingly Buddhist province. The priory aimed to attract native vocations to the Benedictine order who would go out and Christianize their neighbors. Indeed, the first native vocations from China had already joined the Benedictine Order by the time of the priory's founding. Several Chinese students were being educated in Europe preparing for a return to their homeland as missionaries. As a recently converted ethnic Chinese himself, Yang found his path joining that of fellow Chinese students.

The Benedictine priory at Xishan was a foundation for teaching and missionary work among the Chinese. Yang arrived there in 1934. The priory was by this time thoroughly Chinese in its character. As Yang related, "The buildings are entirely Chinese—inside and outside. At Xishan even the Church is decorated in the Chinese style, and the Gothic vestments, designed by one of the Fathers, are made in Chinese embroidery. The monks wear Chinese dress, eat Chinese meals (with chopsticks), and, with the exception of Holy Mass and the Divine Office, chant the prayers in Chinese."<sup>12</sup>

Yang's years in China would be marked by the challenge of being an intermediary between his cultural heritage and his new life as a Christian monk. When his father, a devout Buddhist, had learned of Yang's plans to convert to Christianity, he reluctantly gave his assent, replying that his son should follow his conscience if he found that a "foreign religion is better than our own." Yang was not only convinced of the truth of Christianity but could also see that it was no more foreign to China than was Buddhism, which had been imported there from India. As a Chinese Christian missionary, Yang's goal was simple. "In China, as anywhere else, the Universal Church cannot suffer indefinitely the brand of 'Foreign Religion.'"<sup>13</sup> Yang wished to show the compatibility of the Christian faith with the rich traditions of the Far East.

Yang and the Benedictines approached their missionary work in China through education. By 1936 the Benedictines at Xishan had begun a small grade school and also began teaching at the Sichuan diocesan seminary. The grade school grew to over two hundred students within a few years, mostly from local non-Christian families, though some families had already been converted. The monastery community flourished as it successfully attracted native Chinese vocations; by 1945 there were ten priests (including two Chinese) and seventeen Chinese in preparation for life as Benedictines.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the religious community was considering the founding of a house in urban Chengdu (Chengtú), the intellectual and cultural capital of western China, where the Benedictines would have greater opportunities to minister.<sup>15</sup>

### Director of *China Correspondent*

The Second World War greatly impacted the work of the Benedictines in China. The Nazi occupation of western Europe cut off the Benedictine priory from its mother abbey in Belgium and, with this, most of its financial resources. The priory at Xishan did not possess any land to cultivate rice or vegetables, and without funding from Europe its funds were quickly depleted. By 1943 the Benedictines were forced to close both the seminary and the school that they had staffed.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time that the war was restricting the educational ministry of the Benedictines, Yang was asked to revive the publication of a defunct French-language publication, *Le Correspondant Chinois*, which had begun publication in April 1939. The

revamped publication was to be in English for the benefit of U.S. servicemen serving in China. The first issue of the publication spoke to this need: "Since the arrival of American and other allied Forces in China, the Catholic missionary will realize that his work is no longer limited to his prewar Chinese flock." Stating that "in war-time, the first casualty is truth," the publication was to offer an account of the "real China," including "Chinese culture and civilization past and present" from a Christian perspective. The publication was not to be overtly political aside from its editorial positions but aimed at printing primarily religious, cultural, and human-interest stories.<sup>17</sup>

With support of the local bishop and his religious superiors, Yang began directing *China Correspondent* with its first issue in December 1943, continuing through the end of publication in September 1944.<sup>18</sup> Working alongside Yang was the editor of the new publication, the American Passionist Cormac Shanahan (1899–1987), who had served as a China correspondent for the Passionists' own mission magazine, *Sign. China Correspondent* featured articles from various Catholic priests serving in China, including Yang and Shanahan.

Yang's directing of and writing for *China Correspondent* represented his earliest literary contributions to an English-speaking audience. Yang wrote on a variety of topics, including religion, culture, and current events.<sup>19</sup> His writings evidenced admiration for both Chinese culture and Western thought. For instance, his article on political theory connected Chinese thought with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (especially "government of the people, by the people, for the people") and the rallying cry of the French Revolution ("liberty, equality, fraternity").<sup>20</sup> His article on religion in China pointed out the "startling similarity" between Chinese religious thought and the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus, especially the Beatitudes and the call to charity and love.<sup>21</sup> For Yang, there was not an intellectual or spiritual divide between the Chinese and Westerners.

### Cultural Studies Institute

The exchange between Western and Chinese culture, which Yang had highlighted in *China Correspondent*, continued to impact the goals of the Benedictines. A new Benedictine house was opened in October 1944 in Chengdu, where they planned to open the Institute of Chinese and Western Cultural Studies. The goal of the institute was to make "Chinese civilization better known to the West, and Western civilization better known in China."<sup>22</sup> In short, it was to foster understanding between "Oriental and Occidental peoples." Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Republic of China, offered financial support to the institute, but additional help was needed to make it a reality.<sup>23</sup>

Yang discussed the project with both the local bishop of Chengdu and the Chinese government's ministers of education and justice. "We had reached the conclusion that funds were needed for the new venture," Yang related, "and that under pre-



Thaddeus Yang, ca. 1943

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vailing circumstances only in the United States could funds be raised with any success." With Europe in the grip of the Second World War, America provided the only possibility to raise the needed seed money for the institute. This realization spurred a visit by Yang to the United States that he described as a ten-month-long "loathsome begging expedition." He departed on a U.S. military transport ship, arriving in San Pedro, California, on May 3, 1945.<sup>24</sup> However distasteful Yang might have found his trip, he returned to China with enough money to begin funding the institute and to complete the main building of the new monastery of St. Benedict's in Chengdu.<sup>25</sup>

The institute was formally inaugurated in the fall of 1945 and included a school of languages and training in arts and music. With the help of Chiang Kai-shek, a library of over 10,000 volumes was transported from Xishan to Chengdu. Yang served as both subprior of the community at Chengdu and vice president of the institute. As Chengdu was the location of several universities, the institute was ideally situated to initiate a Western-Chinese dialogue between students and scholars.<sup>26</sup> Though short-lived, the institute was successful in bringing about such an exchange of ideas before Communist troops overtook Chengdu at the end of 1949.

### Yang and the American Catholic Press

Beginning with his directing *China Correspondent*, Yang began to increase his literary output. Following the demise of the publication in 1944, Yang began writing articles for various English-speaking Catholic periodicals, including *America*, *American Ecclesiastical Review*, *Catholic Mind*, *Catholic World*, and *Shield*.<sup>27</sup>

*Shield*, published since 1921, was the official periodical of the Catholic Students' Mission Crusade, an American mission support organization that had a special interest in China. Yang worked closely with J. Paul Spaeth, publications editor for the Catholic Students' Mission Crusade, to offer a glimpse of the Chinese missions to students in America. Several of Yang's contributions were published in *Shield*, while others were passed on to various American Catholic periodicals.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to writing about Chinese culture and religion, Yang's articles during these years were fiercely anti-Communist. In his contributions to *Shield* before the beginning of Communist control of China, Yang was optimistic about China's future and the progress of the Catholic Church in that country. He saw the situation in China as involving one of the most important political and spiritual struggles of the twentieth century. As late as 1945 Yang wrote that it was uncertain whether China would become a Christian power or a bastion of Communist-inspired paganism. At that time, China was home to 4.5 million Christians, many of whom were optimistic that China would remain a land fertile for the spread of the Gospel message.<sup>29</sup>

Yang pinned his hopes of a Christian and democratic China on the influence of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Republic of China. An ardent supporter of Chiang, Yang attempted to garner American support by promoting Chiang as a true Christian leader. He once wrote, "Providential circumstances have brought the author in personal contact with the Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and this contact has long convinced him that the Chiangs are sincere believers of Jesus Christ and His teaching."<sup>30</sup> But Chiang and his Nationalist supporters ultimately lost ground in the conflict with the Communists, despite the support of the American "China lobby."

### Persecution and Expulsion of the Missionaries

With the founding of the Communist-led People's Republic of China in late 1949, numerous Christian missionaries were expelled, imprisoned, or killed. By 1953, 125 native Catholic Chinese priests, 37 foreign Catholic missionary priests (including two Americans), more than 30 Catholic laymen, and numerous brothers, sisters, and seminarians had been killed. More than 3,000 missionaries had been expelled, and more than 850 priests and bishops had been imprisoned. The Catholic institutions confiscated by the Communists included three universities, 200 high schools, and 200 hospitals.<sup>31</sup>

The Benedictines in Chengdu suffered from the Communist persecution, beginning with the arrival of the Communists on Christmas Day 1949. In early 1950 the Institute of Chinese and Western Cultural Studies was shut down, and its 10,000-volume

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## Thaddeus Yang points to the impact of native clergy in evangelizing their own people and their influence in eliciting support from Christians in the West.

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library was confiscated. The Chinese government placed the Benedictines under house arrest and monitored their activities around the clock. One by one, between December 1951 and March 1952, they were asked to leave the country or were imprisoned.<sup>32</sup>

In 1953 the Communist government expelled all foreign priests and religious brothers and sisters, including the Benedictines.<sup>33</sup> Expelled from China, the monks sought permission for a canonical transfer of their monastery to America. With the permission of Cardinal James McIntyre of Los Angeles, they acquired the Hidden Springs Ranch at Valyermo, California, establishing the American foundation of St. Andrew's Priory in 1955. There Yang continued his life as a Benedictine, along with several other monks who had been attached to the former priories in China. Yang died there on August 15, 1982.

### Yang as Reverse Missionary

While Yang's story is far from normative, it illustrates the role that missionaries in foreign lands played in educating Americans about the mission field and, in this case, China's rich heritage. Yang's goal was twofold: to foster greater understanding by Westerners of China, and to interest the Chinese in Christianity and the Benedictine monastic life. He wished to break down the walls between Chinese culture and Christian faith, showing them to be compatible and mutually enriching. Even before Yang became a reverse missionary in 1955, leaving China for America because of the expulsion of missionaries by the Communists, Yang had been utilizing the press to inform Americans about his homeland. First through *China Correspondent* and later through articles in various American Catholic publications, Yang attempted to foster cultural appreciation, political sympathy, and interest in funding Chinese missionary works.

Though the Chinese missions collapsed in the wake of the Communist takeover, the example of Thaddeus Yang points to

the impact of native clergy in evangelizing their own people and their influence in eliciting support from Christians in Western nations for the sake of the missions. Yang's missionary legacy highlights the importance of engagement between religion and culture and the possibilities for evangelizing historically non-Christian cultures. As an early native vocation to the priesthood, Yang shows the importance of indigenous leadership in emerg-

ing churches. Yang represents an early generation of Asian-born Catholic priests, who today significantly outnumber Western missionary priests serving in the Far East. Yang's journey, one that took him from Buddha to Christ and from China to America, broadens our understanding of the role of the indigenous Christian missionary within China.

## Notes

1. Special thanks are due to fellow historians who assisted me in this research: Robert Carbonneau, C.P., of the Passionist Historical Archives, Union, N.J., and Luke Dysinger, O.S.B., of St. Andrew's Abbey, Valyermo, Calif., and St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, Calif.
2. After Yang received his religious name, some still called him "Brother Ta-Teh." His name has appeared in print as An-Jan, An-Yuen, and An Djan. He used "An-Jan" when he wrote the foreword to *The Communist Persuasion: A Personal Experience of Brainwashing*, by Eleutherius Winance. New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1959.
3. Yang's imitation of his father is found in chapter 1, "The Young Ascetic," in Yang's autobiography, titled "Chinese Bonzes and Catholic Priests," dated January 4, 1943, pp. 3-7, folder 9, in box 51, Catholic Students' Mission Crusade Collection, Archives of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (hereafter CSMC).
4. "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," interview with Thaddeus Yang in the Benedictine Chinese Mission Office, Lisle, Illinois, May 15, 1945, pp. 2-6, folder 4, CSMC.
5. In "From Buddha to Benedict," [www.valyermo.com/monks/yang1.html](http://www.valyermo.com/monks/yang1.html), Yang recalls his first impressions of Lebbe, who was introduced by his Chinese name, Lei Ming Yuan ("The-Thunder-That-Rumbles-in-the-Distance"). Yang also devotes chapter 14 of his autobiography to Lebbe. See "The Thunder Which Rumbles in the Distance," in "Chinese Bonzes and Catholic Priests," pp. 44-47. For background on Lebbe, see Jean-Paul Wiest, "The Legacy of Vincent Lebbe," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23 (January 1999): 33-37. Special mention should be made of the Thoreau family, with whom Yang lived as a student in Belgium. Yang credits their Christian example as helping him decide on a vocation to the priesthood. See chapter 12, "A Model Family," in "Chinese Bonzes and Catholic Priests," pp. 38-40.
6. Yang, "From Buddha to Benedict."
7. Beginning about 1920, Lebbe began providing promising Chinese students with the opportunity to study in Europe. By 1924 over 200 students had come; they established the Catholic Association of Chinese Students in Europe. By 1927 the association had over 400 student members. Yang served as an officer in the student organization. See "Chinese Bonzes and Catholic Priests," pp. 45-46, 48-49.
8. Yang, "From Buddha to Benedict"; "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," p. 6.
9. Also spelled as Lu Tseng-Hsiang. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1935. In August 1946 Pope Pius XII appointed him titular abbot of St. Peter's of Ghent. He died January 15, 1949. Yang wrote about Tseng-tsiang in "China's Premier—Catholic Monk," an essay dated August 1944, folder 2, CSMC.
10. Yang, "From Buddha to Benedict."
11. Pope Pius XI emphasized the need for mission territories to be entrusted to local, native clergy. His encyclical on the missions, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), stated that the goal of the new churches in mission lands was independence, an indigenous clergy, and hierarchy. The move toward indigenous clergy in the missions was strengthened by the ordination of six bishops for China in October 1926.
12. "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," p. 10. See also Yang, foreword to *Communist Persuasion*, by Winance, p. xi.
13. Thaddeus Yang, "Universal Yet Foreign," *Liturgical Arts* 15 (November 1946): 19, 25.
14. "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," pp. 11, 9. The growing rate of native Catholic clergy was not unique to the Benedictines. Yang relates that by 1945, more than 40 percent of priests ministering in China were Chinese, and about two-thirds of the Catholic sisters. See Thaddeus Yang, "China's Future and America's . . .," *Shield* 25, no. 1 (October 1945): 26.
15. Interview with Eleutherius Winance, O.S.B., conducted by Christopher Zehnder, reprinted from the *Valyermo Chronicle*, no. 182 (Summer 1998), at [www.valyermo.com/monks/eleuth.html](http://www.valyermo.com/monks/eleuth.html).
16. "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," p. 12.
17. *China Correspondent*, December 1943, pp. 1, 4; also Yang, "The Chinese Adventure of an Indonesian Monk" (1971), [www.valyermo.com/monks/yang2.html](http://www.valyermo.com/monks/yang2.html).
18. The English edition was published monthly from December 1943 through September 1944, a total of ten issues. Henry A. Wallace, vice president of the United States, provided a complete collection of the publication to the Library of Congress on September 16, 1944.
19. Yang's contributions to *China Correspondent* include "San Min Chu I: The Triple Demism, as a Catholic Understands It," December 1943, pp. 26-30; "Religion in the San Min Chu I," March 1944, pp. 9-16; "China and the Vatican," April 1944, pp. 7-12; "Seven Years of War, July 7, 1937-July 7, 1944," July 1944, pp. 9-16; and "The Blood of Martyrs," August 1944, pp. 46-54.
20. Yang, "San Min Chu I," p. 26.
21. Yang, "Religion in the San Min Chu I," pp. 9-16.
22. "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," p. 16.
23. "The Chinese and Western Research Institute, Chengtu," folder 13, CSMC. Pertinent studies of the Chiangs include Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004); Robert S. Elegant, *Mao vs. Chiang: The Battle for China, 1925-1949* (New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1972); and William Morwood, *Duel for the Middle Kingdom: The Struggle Between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung for Control of China* (New York: Everest House, 1980).
24. Yang, "The Chinese Adventure of an Indonesian Monk." Yang details his journey in his diary, with the title, "Across the Pacific," dated March through April 1946, folder 11, CSMC.
25. Yang, "The Chinese Adventure of an Indonesian Monk."
26. The Sino-Japanese War caused a number of colleges to move westward, establishing themselves in Chengdu, among other cities. See Jessie Gregory Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges, 1850-1950* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 360-74, 380.
27. The *Catholic Periodical Index* includes the following contributions from Yang: "China and the Vatican," *Catholic World* 159 (September 1944): 510-14; "Future of Catholic Missions in China," *America* 73 (August 18, 1945): 388-89; "Sakyamuni in the Land of Confucius," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 114 (February 1946): 90-103 (reprinted in *Catholic Digest* 10 [April 1946]: 80-85); "China's Future and America's," *Catholic Mind* 44 (May 1946): 294-300; and "New Policy for the Church in China," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 117 (August 1947): 108-11.
28. Yang's contributions to *Shield* include "China's Future and America's . . .," 25, no. 1 (October 1945): 2-4, 26; "Grandfather and . . . Confucius," 25, no. 3 (December 1945): 9-10; "Justice in Warm River," 26, no. 1 (October 1946): 30; "My Father and the Chinese Buddhists," 26, no. 4 (January 1947): 33-34; "Great Man Chung," 27, no. 1 (October 1947): 27; "New Year of the Chinese Farmer," 29, no. 5 (February 1950): 34-35; "The Wisdom of My Grandfather," 34, no. 4 (March 1955): 9-10, 34; "Religion Among the Chinese," 35, no. 1 (September 1955): 2-3, 28; and "Year of the Dog in China," 37, no. 5 (May 1958): 8-9.
29. Yang, "China's Future and America's . . ."

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30. Thaddeus Yang, "Inner Life of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek," August 31, 1945, p. 5, folder 8, CSMC.
31. "Panorama of Persecution: China, 1946-1953," *Shield* 33, no. 3 (December 1953): 7.
32. Yang, foreword to *Communist Persuasion*, by Winance, pp. ix-x. See also Peter Zhou Bangjiu, *Dawn Breaks in the East: A Benedictine Monk's Thirty-three-Year Ordeal in the Prisons of Communist China* (Upland, Calif.: Serenity, 1992), especially pp. 3-30. Brother Peter Zhou had been a monk at the Chengdu monastery before being arrested and imprisoned by the Communists. He joined the community at Valyermo in 1984 after more than three decades of separation from his religious confreres. Brother Peter had been feared dead for many years.
33. See Zehnder, Interview with Eleutherius Winance.

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