



A Catholic Voice Out of China

by Margaret Chu



About The Author - This is a true-life experience of the author. She spent 23 years in jail and in the labor camp. In 1979, while still in the labor camp, Margaret, almost miraculously, received permission to leave China to join her brother, Joseph Kung, in America. Margaret wanted to share her experience with you to give you more insight into the condition of the thousands of Catholics in China. Unfortunately, the persecution is still ongoing. Some of her friends are still in labor camps. Many are in great poverty because they missed the education and career opportunities as ex-prisoners.



I

In China, there were tens of thousands of silent martyrs who died namelessly during the struggles. Many are still in jail. They suffered discrimination and poverty as ex-prisoners. The difference between those thousands of unsung heroes and I is that I was blessed with the opportunity of coming to this great country, the United States of America. I was reunited with my family. I can now practice my religion freely. The others did not have this opportunity.

I was fortunate to be born in a family of many generations Catholic. When I was a child, I had no deep understanding of religion. Religion was simply a way of life for me.

In 1949, I was in my early teens, full of hope dreaming of a great future filled with love, freedom, opportunity and a great career. Then, China turned red.

According to Communist teaching, "religion is the opium of the people". Therefore, to be a Chinese and a Catholic at that time was a very serious challenge. Suddenly, Catholics had to decide whether to follow God's law or to follow the government's anti-Catholic policy. To follow God meant prison. To follow the government meant security and opportunity for education and a job. It was a difficult and painful choice. With God's grace, thousands of Catholics courageously chose God. The leader of the Shanghai Catholic Diocese since 1950 was Bishop Ignatius Kung Pin-mei. In fact, he was the Bishop of three Dioceses including Nanking, the old Chinese capital, and Soochow. In the beginning of the Communist regime, the government continued to give the church some limited freedom. It hoped to win Bishop Kung's cooperation to form a state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Church independent of Vatican. After five years of increasing pressure without success, the government changed its tactic.

September 8, 1955 will always be remembered as the darkest day of persecutions in Shanghai. Maybe I should say as the glorious day when so many Chinese Martyrs were made. On this quiet night, in one swift operation, the Communist government paralyzed the Shanghai Diocese. Bishop Kung, together with hundreds of priests, nuns and lay Catholics were arrested. The seminary was closed. Many Catholics were placed under house arrest and must report to the police station daily for re-education (brainwashing).

I was not arrested on September 8, 1955, but I had to attend the brainwashing meeting everyday. Most of those at the meetings belonged to my parish. We were not allowed to talk to each other. However, our presence gave each other moral support.

In the brainwashing session, the government wanted us to sign a declaration stating that Bishop Kung was the leader of the counter-revolutionary gang dedicated to overturn the communist government. We had to report on all religious organizations, the names of their members and their activities.

Those who buckled under the pressure and signed the declaration were set free. They were restored all jobs and educational privileges. However, those who followed their conscience and followed the Church were dismissed from their jobs. They were not allowed to attend university and finally ended in prison.

I love Jesus, my Lord. I love my church. I love and respect my priests. I also love my friends. Before the September 8 crackdown, for five years the government already suppressed us. But, we struggled together. We prayed together. We cried together. To ask me to betray my beloved Bishop, priests, and friends, and to ask me to support the government's persecution of the Catholic Church, was to ask me to abandon my faith

and to betray my Lord. No. No. My faith did not allow me to betray my God. My love for my friends made it impossible for me to betray them.

Therefore, in front of police interrogators, I refused to participate and remained completely silent. While they read their propaganda, I simply prayed in my heart. It worked for a short while.

The government gradually stepped up the pressure on us. Within two months, many of those priests who were still free signed a declaration supporting the government's action to charge Bishop Kung with high treason.

I was young and innocent. I had unquestionable faith for all priests. It never occurred to me that they would give in so quickly to the government's pressure and betray their own bishop and the Church.

I was particularly shocked when I learned what my spiritual director, Father Aloysius Jin, S.J., had done after his arrest. He was a very eloquent priest, the Rector of the Shanghai Seminary, and had great influence among the faithful. Soon after he was arrested, he recorded a tape to persuade loyal Catholics to support the government. This tape was used for broadcast in many prisons. Many of my friends heard this tape in jail. Father Jin is none other than the current illegitimate bishop of Shanghai of the Patriotic Association. That was indeed a great blow to the Shanghai diocese and to me personally. At a time when I most needed spiritual support and consolation, I was left entirely alone without any priests in whom I could trust.

I realized that many Catholics who signed the declaration needed jobs or wanted to go to university. I too needed a good job. I also wanted badly to go to the university. But I could not give up everything I believed in. I refused to sign the declaration.

After six months, thinking that it had crippled the Catholic Church, the government relaxed its persecution. Many Catholics were released in early 1956. I too was allowed to leave my house. I got a temporary job as a medical lab-assistant and submitted application for admission to a university. I did very well in my job. The lab director wanted to offer me a full time position. However, when the Director found out about my religious background, I was fired. On top of that, regardless of my high scores in the entrance examination, my application to university was also rejected.

Because I was a niece of Bishop Kung, because I refused to betray my Church, I was considered by the government to be a high political risk and was thereby condemned.



After the September 8th mass arrest in 1955, we became a flock without a shepherd. Churches were still open, and Holy Masses were still celebrated. However, the fervent atmosphere was changed. There was serious mistrust between all levels of the Church. Many Catholics, including I, refused to receive Holy Sacraments from those priests who had publicly renounced the Church and betrayed the Bishop. At the same time, we had no spiritual support. We were lonely and isolated. We could only pray privately among friends.

God did not abandon us. At that time, I met a priest, Father Koo, who was under house arrest. In the spring of 1956, he was allowed to say public Mass in a small chapel, but not preach. To find a loyal priest was like finding a light in the midst of the dark raging sea. I found my light. Although the chapel was far from my house, I attended his Mass daily and received grace and consolation in his confessional. Before long, more and more people came to attend his Mass. As a result, the authorities closed the chapel after a few months.

A Trappist nun helped us to maintain contacts with Father Koo. We hand-copied his sermons and distributed them to the faithful. Holy Communion was sent to the nun's house and was distributed. Father Koo heard confessions in the park or while walking on a busy street. Once, we even secretly organized a pilgrimage to She-Shan, a national Marian Shrine near Shanghai. Father Koo's sermons were distributed even to other cities. It was truly a very risky yet rewarding time. This, in fact, was the beginning of the underground Catholic Church in China, and I was blessed to be a small part of it.

We never wanted to oppose the government. All we wanted was to keep our faith. We had no experience in political struggle. We never suspected that the government would plant a spy among us. As this spy came to us through the introduction of that good Trappist Nun, we blindly trusted her. She joined every religious activities organized by us. Several times she asked me to mail Father Ko's sermons to her friends. Like a fool, I did. Those addresses were fake. The Public Security Officers intercepted them all. These materials would later become the government's proof of my accused crimes. In addition, the spy reported to the authorities the location of a wanted Catholic in hiding. This person was later arrested.



In the early morning of May 28, 1958, about ten people from the Patriotic Association broke into my house. They grabbed my hands and feet, and dragged me to a study meeting, organized by the Patriotic Association. That study meeting lasted several days in a dormitory.

There were many other Catholics also dragged to the study group. The Association wanted to brainwash us to think that we had joined this meeting of our own free will. They waged a smear campaign against the church to force us to renounce the Pope. I was criticized, scolded, and jeered at by many people. I prayed my rosary quietly and ignored the commotion, and insults.

During the "study (struggle) meeting", I determined that my position must be complete reliance on God. I meditated on Christ's words to St. Peter "You are the rock. Upon this rock I will build my Church". I reminded myself that denouncing the Pope was the same as leaving Christ. I decided that I would rather die than leave Him.

After three days of "struggle (accusatory session)", an officer of the state religious bureau asked if I had come to the study group of my own free will. I replied: "Hell, no! I did not want to come. Your people dragged me here." The officer replied; "You may now go home. But you will be responsible for your future activities." I never ran faster in my life than out of that compound.

I felt great peace and joy after I left the session, because I was able to hold on to my own principle. However, I was truly scared of the prospects of imprisonment and labor camp. I was not sure how long I could endure and hold onto my own principles. I begged God to give me enough strength to accept any suffering which I might be made to endure. I prayed and prayed and waited. I was prepared for their future action.

Three months after that forced "religious" study session, I was arrested and jailed on September 12, 1958. I was 22. It was the beginning of my 21 years of jail and labor camp.

My first feeling when I stepped into my cell was to feel nausea. The cell was about 250 square feet, housing sixteen prisoners. There was only one very small window. There was a strong body odor from those cellmates who obviously had not washed for a long time. There were human wastes collected in a corner of our cell. Everything was simply suffocating. I thought of my family at home and my brother Joseph in the United States. The pain of separation was intense. I was psychologically less prepared than I had thought.

I met several Catholic acquaintances in the cell and began socializing with them. Guess what? I was accused by my jailers for influencing others and was transferred to another cell in the male section. Again, I met a male Catholic. Wherever I was transferred, I found other Catholics nearby.

After two months, without a trial, I was sentenced to eight years imprisonment as a counterrevolutionary because I participated in many religious activities.

I was naïve enough to think that since the government had what they wanted, they would leave me alone to serve my sentence. I thought that my religious and psychological struggle was over. I thought that I could enjoy God's grace in peace during my sentence. I was entirely wrong. My struggle had just begun.

After my sentence, I was sent to a transit jail, waiting to be dispatched to the prisoner labor camp. We had seven people in one cell, sharing three beds. Four of them slept on the concrete floor, partly under the beds. It was winter. There was absolutely no heat. The cell was very drafty and freezing cold. We had two stone cold meals a day. I started experiencing stomach aches and cramps.

My family was once allowed to visit me. While waiting in line, I said a few words to another Catholic. An inmate reported me. Consequently, my scheduled visit with my family was abruptly cancelled. All prisoners were allowed to shower once a month, but not Catholics. Somehow, we Catholic prisoners still managed to keep communicating among ourselves secretly.

After staying in this transit prison for about a month, I was sent to a prison knitting factory about 100 miles from Shanghai. My family came to bid me goodbye. From them, I learned that two of my good friends had died shortly after they were sent to the Camp. This news shocked me. I could not understand why anyone should die after a brief period in the Camp. What was the camp really like?

In the prison factory, we worked 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. The drums awoke us at 4 every morning. In a short time, I lost my appetite because of extreme fatigue. At night I collapsed on my bed without even washing my face. This routine lasted for an entire year.

A few days after I arrived in the prison, an officer asked me: "What is your crime?" I snapped back: "I did not commit any crime. I was arrested because I am a Catholic and I determined to keep my faith." The officer became very angry and shouted at me: "If you did not commit any crime, why are you here?" His extreme anger shocked me. I fell silent. The whole factory was dead silent.

Because of this incident, I discovered several Catholics. We quickly united. Among them was a girl named Tsou who was turned in by a priest in the government sponsored Patriotic Association. She was especially good to me. Unfortunately, after four years, she had mental break down. The officer even used her mental condition as a violation of prison regulations. They tied her. They hung her up and beat her. They extended her sentence twice. Although she has already completed her sentence, she is still in the labor camp without proper care.

After a year, the government changed the 18 hour shift to 10 hour shift. However, there were two hours of daily political re-education. At year's-end, we were all required to write a self-assessment how our political thinking had improved through labor. Those who refused to admit their crimes in the self-assessment were often isolated from other prisoners.

Because I was a niece of Bishop Kung and because I had never acknowledged any crime, I was under constant surveillance. I was a model worker. My productivity was among the highest in the group. I conformed to all regulations. I somehow succeeded in separating my work and my alleged crimes as two separate issues. But this did not earn me leniency from my country.

Looking back, those eight years of hard labor and the constant "struggle" sessions robbed me of the prime of my life. Although I knew I was doing all this for God, I despised and hated the camp which was barren of culture, music, humanity, and friendliness. I was exhausted and depressed by the endless brain washing and "struggle". I was completely homesick.

At the same time, I realized that to be released would not solve my problems. Ex-prisoners were social outcasts. I was condemned for life and would always be at the bottom of society. I thought of my brother Joseph's early invitation to come to the United States. Would that ever be possible now? I was very tired and depressed. Oh Lord, please give me strength, faith and hope.



Four months before the end of my eight years sentence, the Cultural Revolution began. The camp officers started surprise searches in all cells. Some years back, I had come across a few verses which inspired me. I copied them in a little notebook. I tucked the notebook away and forgot about that. During a surprise search, they found the notebook. They singled me out and made an example of me for other prisoners. They put me through many more struggle sessions, even took me to the court. I was afraid that my sentence would be extended. I was isolated. Most of the inmates were afraid to be near me.

In the morning of September 12, 1996, I was told that I would be transferred to another labor camp. I was stunned. Because this meant that my prison sentence would not be extended after all. Thank God. I took a deep breath and looked at the beautiful blue sky. Suddenly, everything became so beautiful.

Now, I must clarify that being released from prison did not mean freedom for me. I was not on my way home. No. I was simply transferred from a heavily guarded prison camp to a less secured labor camp.

Rules in that labor camp were a little easier. We had wages about six U.S. dollars a month. Out of the six dollars, three dollars were deducted for our ration. Sounds like a real bargain, doesn't it? We had to buy all our personal necessities out of that remaining three dollars each month! We received three weeks off to visit families each year. Otherwise, we were not allowed to step outside the camp. Our mail was all censored. One could only get married with the approval of the labor camp officer. We were not allowed to exchange any material things. And, I repeat, no material things were allowed to be exchanged among camp mates.

Catherine Ho who is the author of *Many Waters* (printed by Caritas Printing Training Center, Hong Kong 1988) was with me in the same camp. (In fact, I was the girl whom she called Xiaolong in her book). In May 1968, 2 years after I had been in this new camp, I received a parcel from my family. I told Catherine about this parcel. Immediately, an inmate accused me of giving something to Catherine. I strongly denied that. I was dragged to the office. Without any investigation, the officer assembled the entire camp to start a "struggle session" against me. In the session, the officer suddenly asked me whether I had committed my alleged original crime leading to my 8 year sentence. I was stunned. It then dawned on me that this "struggle session" was in fact prearranged. The parcel was only a pretense. Their real motive was once again to force me to admit all my alleged crimes. Therefore, I replied firmly: "I did not commit any crimes". Immediately, two people jumped on me and cut off half of my hair. The officer again

asked: "Are you guilty?" I firmly replied: "No". Two people then used a rope to tie my hands backwards tightly. It was connected to a loop around my shoulder and underneath my armpits. It was knotted in such a way that a slight movement of my hands would cause intense pain. They ordered Catherine to stand next to me. The Government often tried to alienate Catholics in that way. The struggle session lasted for two hours. Afterwards, they untied me and handcuffed me instead. The handcuffs became a part of me for the next one hundred days and nights.

After I was untied, I felt such pain that it seemed that all my bones were broken. I had bruises all over. I was very indignant over such inhuman treatment. I did not sleep that night. Therefore, I washed and ate with my cuffs on. I worked in the field with my cuffs on. I was followed every minute. Anyone who dared even to smile at me was punished. Working under 95 degree heat in the field, I was not allowed to wear a hat. I could not bathe or change my clothes with my cuffs on. My clothes would get soaking wet from perspiration, would dry and only to get wet again. I smelled worse than a skunk. Every night was another "struggle (accusatory) session". Everyone was encouraged to insult me. I, in fact, became a prisoner again without a trial and without anyone outside knowing it.

I could not appeal. I could not escape. I was isolated. I was too sad to cry. I hoped I would die. I could not commit suicide. But I could pray for the gift of death. So, when I was tortured, I hoped that I would be tortured more so that I could die suddenly. When I was ordered to carry things on my shoulder, I hoped that they would give me more to carry so that I could suddenly collapse. But, not only I did not die, I did not even get sick.

I spent my days and months working in the field with my hands cuffed. My sufferings became unbearable. Where are you, my Lord? I questioned divine providence. O Lord, for the last ten years, I struggled and suffered. Haven't I already proved myself to you? Let me die, my Lord.

In the summer, we had a two hour rest at noon. Almost everyone took the opportunity to sleep. I was too distressed to sleep. In the field were wooden barrels used as toilets. All waste was accumulated inside to be used later as fertilizer. The place smelled foul and was filthy beyond description. No one would go there longer than necessary. Certainly not the camp officers.

I found my haven right there in that stinky toilet. It was quiet and peaceful. There no one would come to accuse me. Once in a while, some kind people would secretly come with a wet towel to clean my face and rub my back. I could not do it myself because my

hands were still cuffed. Several people came to apologize for accusing me because they were under pressure. Their good intentions and sympathy moved me to tears.

When I was handcuffed in the beginning, I was the only target they attacked. They attacked me physically and verbally. Finding that I did not give in, they extended their target to include the Catholic Church. They would use foul language to insult the Church, insult God and the Blessed Virgin Mary. I was extremely saddened by their direct assault against our beloved God.

I prayed for my death, but it was not granted. I was afraid that I might not be able to endure much longer. I could no longer tolerate those foul languages day and night against God and against the Holy Mother. I finally admitted one of my alleged crimes as written in the court paper. I admitted that it was counterrevolutionary to persuade children not to join the communist youth organization, but I continued to refuse to submit any names of religious organizations and their religious activities. Nevertheless, that was enough for the camp officer to claim victory over me. My cuffs were finally taken off.

This episode of my being cuffed was only one incident. There were many others. For instance, there were times we did not have enough to eat. In desperation, we dug out the roots of a certain tree, grounded them into powder and ate it.

In 1969, I was transferred to another labor camp. I harvested tealeaves and vegetables. Frequently, I had to carry almost 150 pounds of vegetables on my shoulder. In the winter, I was ordered to the mountain about 20 miles away to gather fire wood. Somehow, I began to prefer this kind of labor, although it was very hard. Because to work in the mountain was to be absent from camp.

Whenever I thought of the future, I became extremely depressed. I felt that I might never live to see the revival of the Catholic Church in China. I had nothing to look forward to. I was very lonely. Before long, several years had passed.



For six years, my annual home visit privileges were taken away. In 1972, after 14 years, I was finally allowed to visit home. When I was home in Shanghai, I discovered that the underground Catholic Church flourished. I even went to attend an underground Mass. The city authority refused to register me as a resident of Shanghai. That meant I had nowhere to go but to return to the labor camp once my leave was up.

In the second half of 1974, I met Ignatius Chu who eventually became my husband. He was sent to jail three years before I was and for the same reasons. He too was transferred to hard labor. I knew him before, but had not seen him for some twenty years. We both grew much older. It must be God's providence that we met again. At that time, conditions at the camp were a little better. We were allowed to talk to each other. After six months, we decided to get married.

At that time, I received from my brother Joseph a copy of the approval of his petition for me to immigrate to the United States. Ignatius indicated his willingness to accompany me. Ignatius has a family of eight brothers. With the exception of his brother Father Michael Chu, a Jesuit, who was out of China when China turned Communist, all other seven brothers were at one time or another in various jails for their faith. At that time, he still had four other brothers plus himself in the labor camps. It was most unlikely that his passport would be approved.

To marry Ignatius would jeopardize my chances of getting my passport. Ignatius would not want to drag me into his family situation. We wanted to marry. But I also wanted to go to the United States. I wanted both. After much discussions and praying together, we decided to get married on February 11, 1976, on the feast day of our Lady of Lourdes.

The marriage plan was a secret in labor camp. We invited Ignatius eldest brother, Father Francis Chu, also a Jesuit, to come to Shanghai to marry us. Father Francis was in another labor camp at that time.

We both took home leave in February and hoped to get married in Shanghai. Father Francis also applied for permission to go home. Unfortunately, Father Francis did not receive the permission in time. By the time Father Francis finally arrived in Shanghai, we were back to our camps. So, Father Francis came to us. Ignatius and I faked illness that day and received permission to go to the clinic. Instead, we went to the train station to meet with Father Francis. From there, we went to a small restaurant.

At the dinner table in the middle of a noisy restaurant, Father Francis took out a few soda crackers and few drops of wine. He offered in secret a short Mass and performed

our marriage ceremony with our exchange of marriage vows. We were finally married before God. There were no flowers. There was no music, no guests, and no ring. All we had was God's blessings. That was more than enough for us. After dinner, having taken Father Francis back to the train station, we went back to our separate dormitories, pretending that nothing had happened.

Here I would like to add that Father Francis died in prison in 1983 as a martyr after his second arrest. He was 70. He spent a total of 30 years in prison and labor camp.

After my marriage, I started applying for my passport. But the officers of the camp refused to give me permission to proceed.

In the meantime, my brother Joseph started a letter-writing campaign. He wrote to Public Security Department, Overseas Chinese Association, Reformation Department, Foreign Affair Department and other departments and organizations. Finally, in August 1978, I was contacted by the Public Security Department. They rejected my passport application.

To test the attitude of the government towards us, we registered our marriage with the Government and it was approved on October 3, 1978. Two and one half months later, the US-China relation was normalized. In July 1979, we were notified that our passport applications were approved. It took us 39 months to obtain our passports. I was exuberated.

Finally, on September 5, 1979, Ignatius and I walked across the border bridge and stepped onto the soil of freedom in Hong Kong. Ten months later, on July 10, 1980, Ignatius and I arrived in the United States with my brother Joseph waiting for me at the Kennedy Airport. I started my second life.

I beg you to pray for China. The Roman Catholic Church is still under persecution. The Government is still putting bishops and other religious and the faithful in jail. It has destroyed our churches and the Mariah Shrine. We not only need your prayers; we also need your action as suggested in the June issue of the Cardinal Kung Foundation's newsletter. The underground Roman Catholic Church needs your voice and organized action to secure for them the religious freedom that we all enjoy here. Please also remember the Government sponsored Patriotic Catholic Church is not really a Catholic Church. It is an agency of the Chinese Government. It does not recognize the authority of our beloved Holy Father.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to thank our Almighty God for protecting and carrying me in my ordeals. I pray that He will continue to protect me, my family and friends as well.

I would also like to thank the Government of the United States for supporting human rights around the world, leading to my dream coming true.

I would like to thank my brother Joseph for his persistent support, care and efforts during the most difficult time of my life.

I would like to thank Pitney Bowes Company, which offered jobs to Ignatius and me when we first came to this beautiful, but strange land without any marketable skills and without a knowledge of English. We have worked at Pitney Bowes for the last 17 years without a single day of layoff.

Last, but not least, I want to thank the Cardinal Kung Foundation for giving me this opportunity to share my Chinese prison experience with you.

Thank you.