Ethnic Groups, Family Clans and Fengshui

In the early years of the Foreign Missions of Milan in Hong Kong, the population of the district of San On numbered about 250,000, the majority of whom lived in villages or market towns or "markets", so called by the missionaries. The district of San On included what are nowadays the New Territories of the Hong Kong SAR and the present district of Po On, in the province of Guangdong, neighboring Hong Kong.

Four different ethnic groups lived in the district, each one speaking their own dialect. The dialects were similar enough to make trade and communication possible; however, there were frequent conflicts between the groups. For this reason, both the Chinese and foreign authorities considered them difficult to control and govern.

Hakka

The Hakka were the group that had migrated to the coast of Guangdong. That migration had begun as early as the 14th century, moving from central and northern China (likely, in particular from the provinces of Shandong and Shanxi). Their migration to the area increased significantly towards the end of the 17th century, after the Qing dynasty government lifted the ban on settling on the coastal areas of Guangdong (1661-1684). The interdiction had been aimed at curbing the activities of Zheng



Daily life in a Southern China village. Printed in 1885.

Chenggong (known as Koxinga in Western literature), the Ming dynasty loyalist, who had refused to submit to Qing dynasty authority and, once defeated, had taken refuge in Taiwan.

More than other Chinese communities, the Hakka were used to moving from place to place, even emigrating outside of China and, therefore, to have contact with different ethnicities and strangers. Hakka villages were more open than others to evangelization. Besides the good example given by the missionaries through their committed lives, tireless efforts and earnest teaching, the reason for conversions among the Hakka might lie in the meaning of their very name: Hakka means "guests", or "strangers". Perhaps they felt somewhat foreign to the land themselves and therefore more open to an encounter with something new.

From time to time, the Hakka were exploited and oppressed by a Cantonese-speaking ethnic group called the Puntei. Since the Puntei had already taken the best land available in San On, the Hakka who were shepherds and peasants had no choice but to settle in the Sai Kung peninsula, where they became the nearly exclusive group, and the major group in the areas surrounding Tai Po and Sha Tin. Other Hakka settlements were in Yuen Long and Tai Mo Shan. Besides farming and raising sheep, the Hakka in the coastal areas also earned a living from fishing.



Puntei

The Puntei, who accounted for more then half of the local population, were settlers whose origin probably resulted from the union of local natives with northern populations supposedly originating from the provinces bordering the Yangzi River and who had settled in the area during the Tang and Song dynasties. They took possession of some of the best agricultural stretches of the northern and western part of San On district. Having developed more refined customs, they considered themselves as the legitimate inhabitants of the area and somewhat superior to the other ethnic groups there.

Hoklos and Tankas

Two other smaller ethnic groups also had a considerable impact on the territory. The Hoklos, renowned for their fierceness, hailed from the coastal area of Fujian and spread into the Hoi Fung district. The Tankas lived on boats and hacked out a living from piracy and smuggling, mostly of opium. The inland populations feared them.

Family lineages

The structure of life in the San On district, as in many other rural parts of southern China, was built around old-established lineages, also called 'clans'. Some of the oldest and most powerful lineages of the San On district were established as early as the Song dynasty and have unbroken genealogical records that date back some 800 years. The more powerful and ancient the lineages, the more influence and control they were able to exercise at the expense of later arrivals. Bloodlines have always been an essential element in the development and life of rural San On. Members of the same clan lived in the same village, or group of villages, clearly separated from other bloodlines. The family clan constituted a corporate unity, with its own property and internal regulative system. The clan also exhibited ritual unity centered on the ancestral cult and temple. High internal solidarity was often matched by suspicion of and hostility towards outsiders. The San On district, and later the New Territories, remained quite resistant to external interference.

The tight and exclusive clan system proved to be one of the main obstacles to evangelization in the rural areas. It was almost impossible for individuals or single mononuclear families, to make a major independent decision, such as conversion to Catholicism. This would have meant having to discontinue the ancestral cult and devotions in the temple, thus breaking the precious family unity. Success was possible only when an entire village converted to the Catholic faith; a decision that could have been made only by the initiative, or with the explicit authorization, of the elders. Yim Tin Tsai, of which we will write later, was one such village.



A Hong Kong lady. Printed in 1883.

When a large part of the San On district became the New Territories under British administration in June 1898, the Catholic villages, converted by the Italian missionaries with the collaboration of Chinese sisters, priests and catechists, were about 50 out of a total of 632 villages.

Life in the inland villages

The inland communities located on mountainous and rather inaccessible territory, were closed and isolated, self-sufficient and self-managing. For them, farming rice was the almost exclusive sustenance. Rice fields were perched high on hills and slopes. Villages by the coast sustained themselves with small trade and fishing. In addition, some grew rice on small, outlying, uninhabited islands. They could count on two harvests a year, weather permitting. Unpredictable tropical weather, with its heavy rainfall and typhoons often swept across the cultivated fields. At other times, the villagers faced drought.

As the population grew, the amount of cultivatable land became insufficient. In addition to the cultivation of rice, the hillsides were also used for forestry, herb gathering,

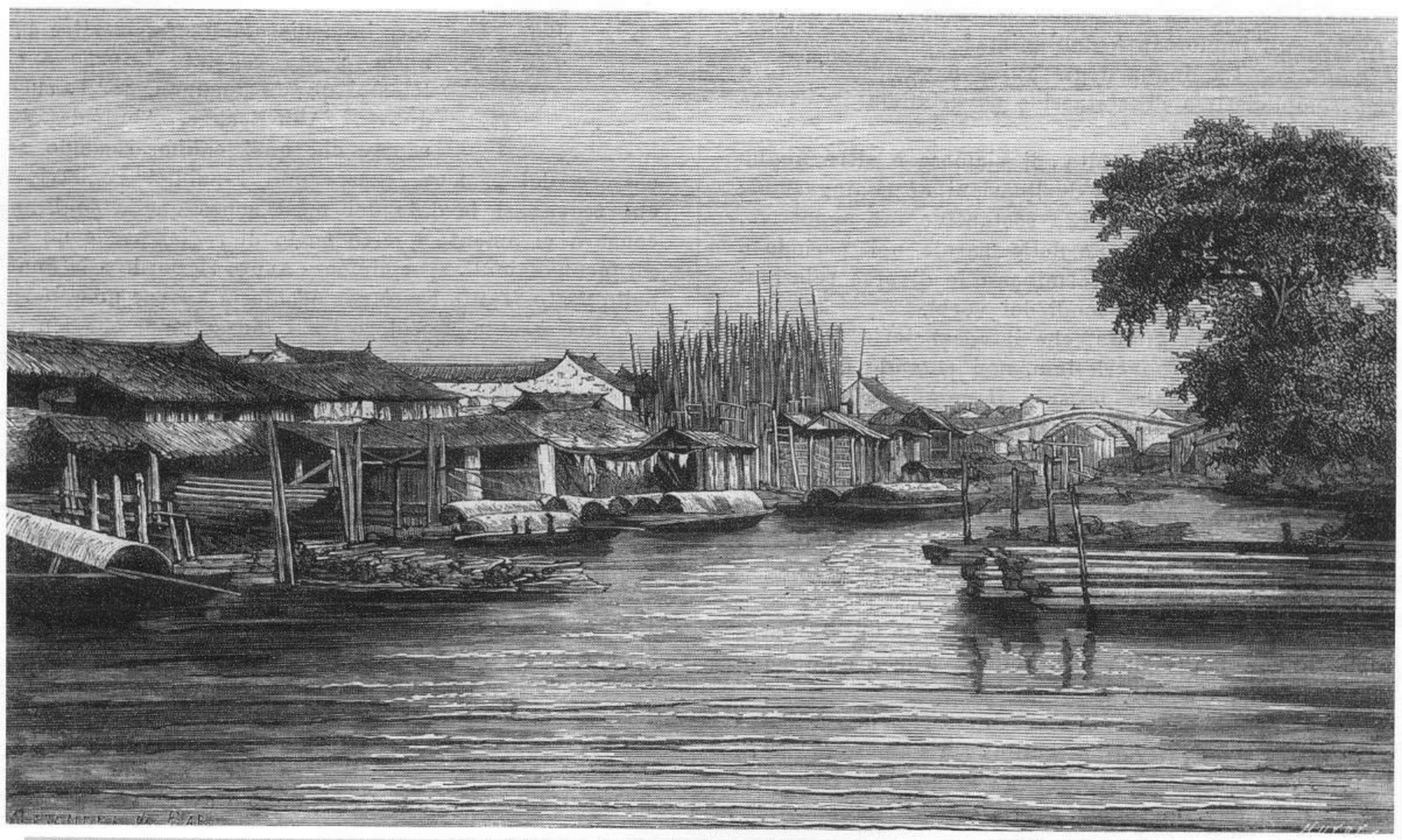
cattle grazing and burial sites. Families and clans contended for their ownership and, as a result, there were numerous disputes pinning whole villages against each other.

Fengshui

Villagers were quick to notice anything unusual, such as the building of a new house or alterations to the existing landscape. Evil spirits along with good and bad influences were widely believed to determine the fate of the dead, the living and the unborn. This deep-seated belief in such 'geomantic equilibrium' is called Fengshui. The two words feng and shui, which literally mean wind and water, indicate the combined effect of natural influences upon a landscape and the people who dwell on it. A site possesses good or ill fortune within the parameters allowed by its geomantic properties. An ideal site would be situated on high ground, facing water and protected by encircling hills.

Debates over Fengshui were often the source of disagreements and conflicts between families and clans; between old settlers and new arrivals. The missionaries themselves, as happened to Fr. Simeone Volonteri in 1863 in Tai Wo, occasionally became targets of suspicion and hostility for altering the Fengshui.

Being an essential element of communities' daily life, knowledge about Fengshui was passed down from generation to generation, and was also determined by Taoist priests and by village elders. The elders were the village chiefs who settled disputes and decided over matters concerning the community, including land distribution. Without them, there could be no harmony in the community. Hence, government officials enjoyed little authority in these villages. Members of the same lineage, through their control over a village or group of villages, could compete and write off any external authority, be it Chinese or, later, British.



A village along a river. Printed in 1887.

Itinerant Missionaries

The first missionary to work on the Mainland across from Hong Kong Island was Fr. Giuseppe Burghignoli. At first, he served as a chaplain to British soldiers in Kowloon and, from there, he went deep into the interior to work among the villagers of the New Territories.

In December 1860, Fr. Timoleone Raimondi, then still under Msgr. Luigi Ambrosi's authority, took the first exploratory trip to the Mainland. Msgr. Ambrosi had just obtained from the Apostolic Prefect of Guangzhou, Bishop Philip Guillemin, permission to expand the Hong Kong Prefecture to include the whole of San On district. A second expansion occurred in January 1863, which included part of the district of Kwai Shin, in Guangdong province.

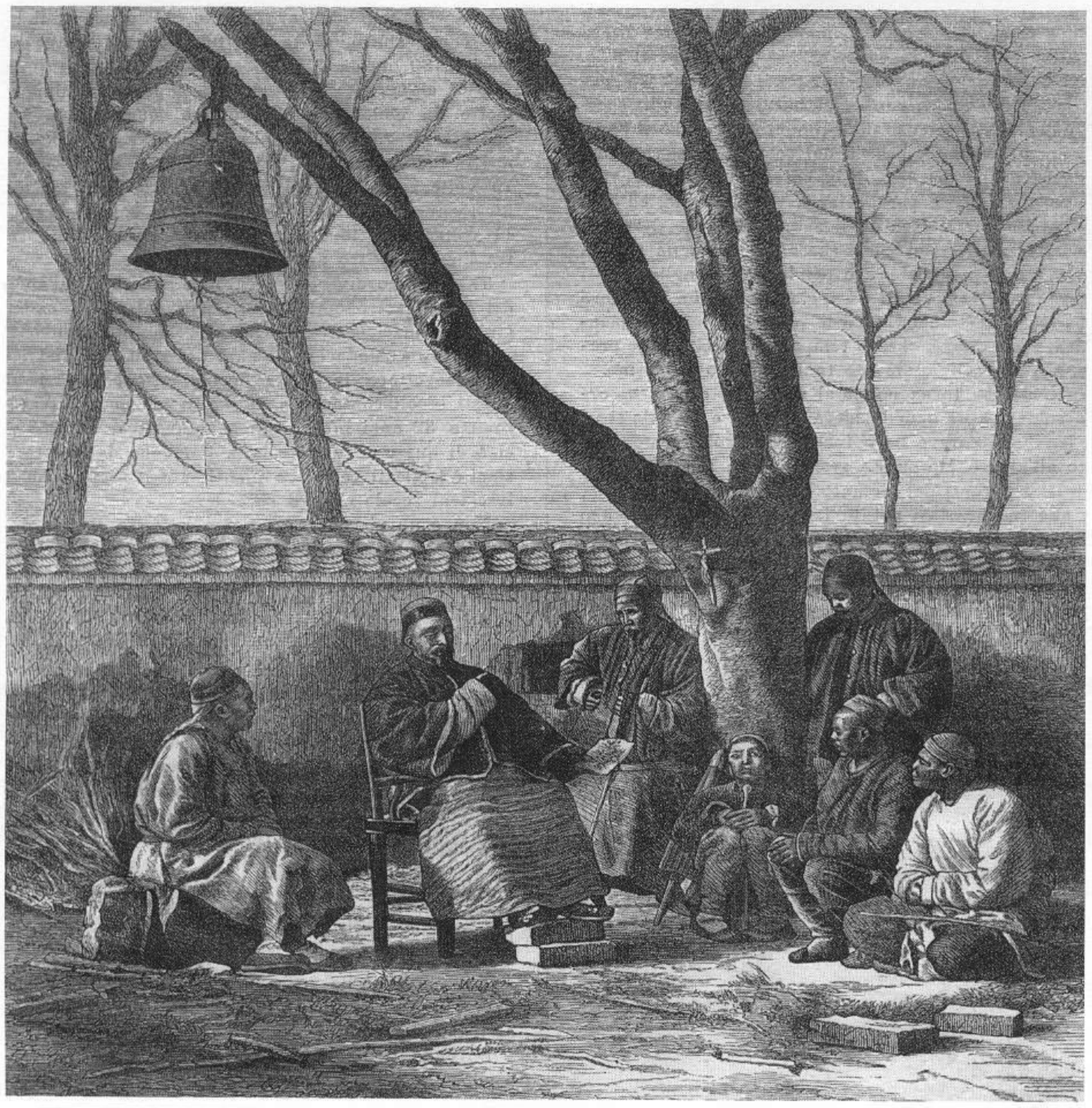
In 1861, Fr. Giuseppe Burghignoli took up residence in Tsuen Wan, where the local priest Fr. Matthew Lien had already built a school and a chapel. Frs. Burghignoli and Raimondi made a second exploratory trip in April 1861. They reached Nam Tau, the district capital of Po On, and then went on to Wun Yiu near Tai Po where there was a small group of Catholics, the fruit of the labor of the Paris Missionaries.

Later in the same year, Fr. Burghignoli left for Tianjin, where he was appointed by Msgr. Ambrosi, as the chaplain to the Catholic soldiers in the British army, while Fr. Raimondi headed to Europe on his first return trip.

Frs. Gaetano Origo and Simeone Volonteri, who together with a Chinese priest, Fr. Mark Leong, had evangelized the fishing village of Aberdeen in the southern part of Hong Kong Island, continued the work on the Mainland with the Chinese priest Fr. Andrew Leong. Towards the end of 1861, the three missionaries became the first small group to permanently settle in the rural district of San On. Back from Tianjin in early 1863, Fr. Burghignoli joined the three missionaries, and took up residence in Wun Yiu. From there, he often visited Tsuen Wan, where he worked with Fr. Andrew Leong, a lady teacher for girls, a male teacher and a servant. Until 1863, Fr. Volonteri was stationed in Tai Wo with a teacher and a servant. However, Fr. Volonteri had to leave Tai Wo that year precipitously because of the hostility of the local people. He was accused of upsetting the Fengshui, by making a hole in a wall to create a window.

Fr. Volonteri established his base in Ting Kok, where the local population accepted the proposal to open a school. Fr. Origo joined him in the spring of 1864. They were always on the move from village to village. In the spring of 1865, Fr. Origo moved to Sai Kung, which seemed well disposed to evangelization. The missionaries, especially Fr. Volonteri, also frequently visited other villages such as Chek Keng and Tai Long.

As a norm, the missionaries would establish a base in a village which accepted their presence. From there, they would be ready to move quickly as new opportunities and developments presented themselves. Most of their time was spent travelling from village to village, on foot or by boat, as itinerant preachers.



An itinerant missionary evangelizing in a village. Printed in 1887.

large proportion that, if Satan will not spew his venomous slobber, blessed be the Lord, will yield quite abundant conversions. The increased number of those whom the Lord has called to the knowledge of the truth and to the grace-filled discipleship of his son Jesus Christ, has allowed our missionaries to issue some guidelines for those admitted to the catechumenate. With them, the candidates will be better equipped to appreciate ever more clearly what a blessing it is to join the Catholic Church.

Evangelization in inland missions

Since the beginning of the activities of the Milan Foreign Missions, the Mainland districts were considered more receptive to evangelization than Hong Kong Island. In 1865, Fr. Giacomo Scurati wrote from Hong Kong that the Italian and Chinese missionaries, once they had crossed over to the continent established three mission centers.

From any of these three centers, our Gospel workers would set out, moving from village to village, preaching the true religion to simpler, uneducated people who are more inclined than the inhabitants of Hong Kong Island to hear the Lord's voice. [...] Thus, though still in the very beginning, these deeds of God [...] have generated a religious movement of such

On May 20, 1865, Fr. Volonteri described his missionary activity in the following fashion:

This year I managed to build a chapel in Ting Kok, all with money collected door to door, mostly from English Protestants. I started also to preach regularly to the faithful, hoping that my language could be sufficiently understood. Actually, on Pentecost Sunday, I preached even to the pagans gathered in the village square.

Children keep attending school in good number. Of those boarding here, eight were received into



the catechumenate at Easter. The acceptance ceremony that we have introduced serves to encourage and to test the participants at the same time. At the nearing of solemnities, we inform publicly all those who have been studying the catechism for some time that whoever wishes to choose the name of a saint should tell Father. Then those willing to become Christians and who know of no serious resistance from their family and are not confronting any other obstacle, come to inform the priest and tell him of the saint whose name they want to choose as their baptismal name.

Subsequently, as the solemnity approaches, after evening prayers are recited, as usual, aloud by all Catholics in the small chapel, or after morning Mass, the above-mentioned catechumens approach the altar and kneel in the area assigned to them. Then, Father, in the presence of all the faithful and of any pagan who happens to be in Church, asks them some questions such as "What they want"; "With what disposition they ask for baptism"; "If they are aware of the obligations that Baptism entails"; "If there are any difficulties"; "If they know the main tenets of our Catholic faith", and so on. After that, they are each given the saint's name that they had chosen for themselves. They are officially declared "Christians to be." They are also urged to keep those religious obligations that are suitable for them such as fasting, prayer and so on; and are encouraged to commit themselves to the study of the catechism and to prepare for baptism with the help of their chosen saint.

After these questions, which are formalized, and the extemporaneous exhortation by the priest, they are dismissed. The most sincere and best prepared receive baptism on the following solemn feast.

Fr. Raimondi described the successes achieved on the continent in his report of 1873:



A road crossing a village. Printed in 1894.

IV

Last year, on the Mainland we reaped good fruit. While eight years ago we did not have a single chapel, now we have 15 of them. There are 600 Catholics and a promising number of catechumens. Three priests toil there (Frs. Andrew Leong, Stephen Chu and Luigi Piazzoli). They are helped by two seminarians who are in first Theology (Anthony Tam and Mathew Fu). By doing this they are receiving their training as future missionaries and are, at the same time, being tested.

The method of evangelization of the missionaries of Milan was essentially divided into two phases. The first, aimed at the people (back then, called "pagans") was an invitation to receive baptism and, the second, was a preparation for those who had accepted the invitation (the catechumens).

The first contact with the people was through personal ties with family and acquaintances of those who had already embraced the faith. Occasionally the missionaries adopted the method of 'street preaching', or preaching in a public square. Providing a service, such as a school, or some other form of assistance, were also means of evangelization. When a small community was established, the new Christians themselves would become 'missionaries', introducing Christian teachings to family members, relatives, friends, acquaintances and other people from the same village or town.

Poor missionaries among the poor

For most of the missionaries, the immersion in the Chinese lifestyle, culture and language was a daunting task. They were often living alone, trying to learn local dialects, struggling with the hot and humid weather and often sick due to insufficient food intake.

A letter that St. Joseph Freinademetz, the South Tyrol SVD missionary wrote in Sai Kung where he resided from August 1879 to May 1881, provides a realistic description of what the daily life of a young, newly arrived missionary in the district of San On might have been like. The three meals of the day were taken early in the morning, later in the morning (lunch) and middle afternoon (dinner).

Our meals consist of the following: black coffee for breakfast, and sometimes, but not always, a piece of bread; at 9:30 we have rice and fish; at 16:30 rice and fish, again; and, after that, nothing else. I don't mind this system, but the food is not enough to provide the necessary energy to get the work done. Of course, it is worse when even the usual little food is not there at all; then there isn't even enough to make a little soup. Poverty is certainly the shortest way to heaven. In this place, I too have nothing... My room is just a hole, but compared to the homes of the Chinese, this is first class arrangement! There is even a window!

The poverty experienced by the missionaries was similar to the local San On population. Malnutrition had been widespread since the second half of the 19th century, when cultivatable land became insufficient to feed the increasing population. Undernourishment, together with other debilitating factors, such as miserable, dark and unfurnished houses combined with working barefoot in flooded rice paddies, resulted in poor health and exposure to many diseases.

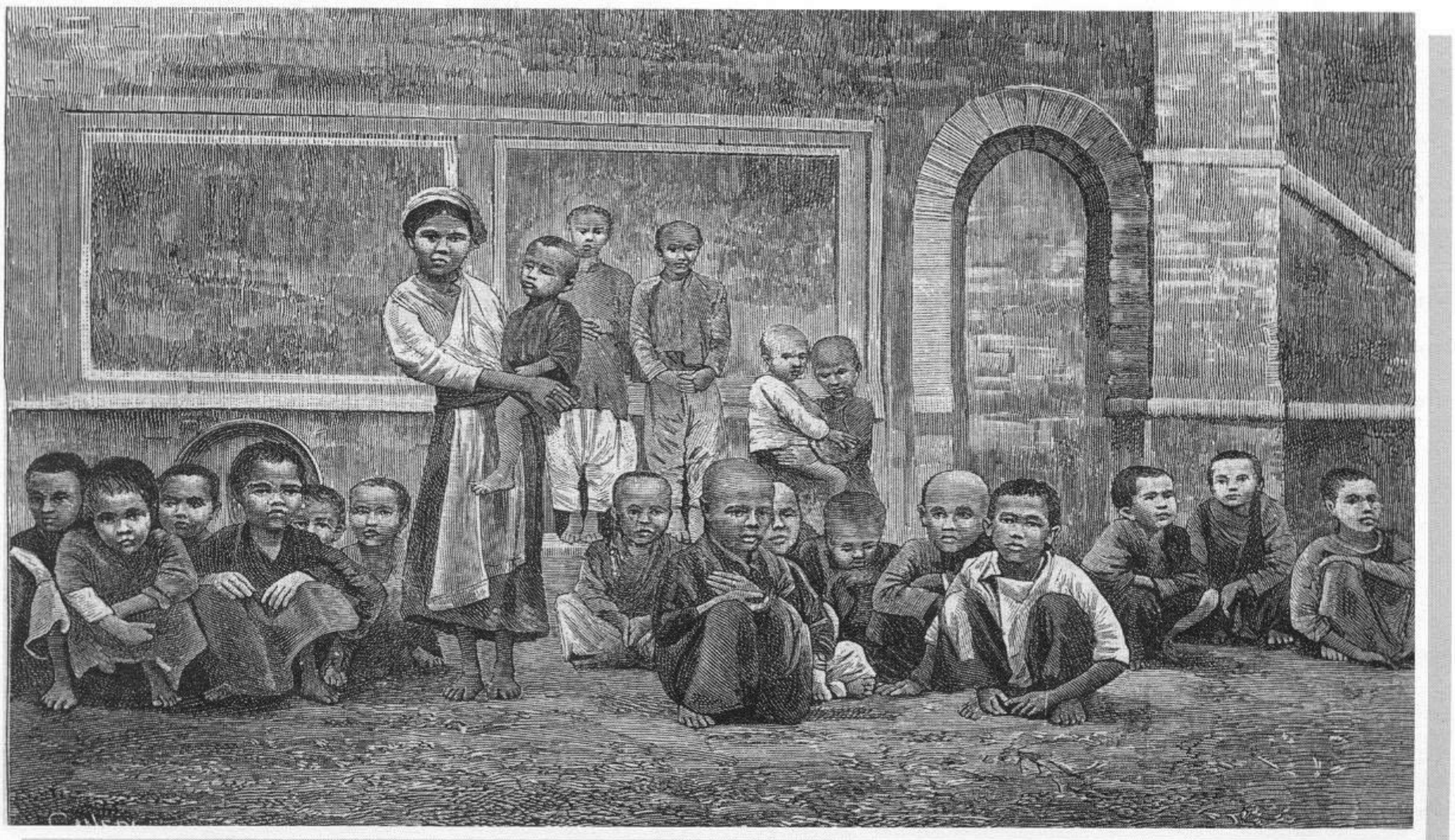


Building a Community

Sai Kung was a five-hour boat trip away from Hong Kong Island. Soon, the mission acquired a sailing boat, "Stella Maris", for the purpose of reaching there and other destinations on the continent. Sai Kung became one of the major stations of the Milan missionaries and of the Hong Kong Church. Even today in Sai Kung, one can still find a lively Catholic community. It has also become a favorite destination for Hong Kong people who wish to go on breath-taking walks in the hills and along the beaches in the area; or enjoy delicious seafood in crowded seaside restaurants.

The 200 or so people who lived in Sai Kung in the 1860's were housed in a row of single-storey, window-less homes built with sun-baked bricks on elevated ground. In front of most houses there was a yard for raising domestic animals such as cows, pigs and chickens. The narrow cobblestone streets were hard on the feet. Around the village there were rice paddies and meadows where animals grazed. In the middle of the village there was the lone temple dedicated to the 'Queen of Heaven', Tin Hau, goddess of the sea, patroness of fishermen and of all those who lived and worked on the sea. She held a special place in the hearts of the villagers who celebrated her feast by igniting fireworks, crackers and bangers. At her temple, Tin Hau received offerings of roasted pigs, decorated with flowers and golden ribbons.

The missionaries, who arrived in 1865, built a modest residence and chapel not too far from the temple. The Catholic celebrations



Group of children in a Catholic village. Printed in 1890.

in the early days of the mission could not match the solemnity of the local traditional religious festivals. A report written by Fr. Timoleone Raimondi in 1872 described the first public funeral for a Catholic in Sai Kung. The deceased was a local catechist, who was considered the best one. In Fr. Luigi Piazzoli's mind, the funeral was a golden opportunity to show to the local population that the Church honored its dead. Led by a cross-bearer and the two seminarians, Anthony Tam and Matthew Fu, the funeral procession left the Church and headed for the house of the deceased. The procession then returned to the Church with the corpse for the funeral Mass. After the religious service, the same procession accompanied the coffin to the burial place.

A Catholic island

On Pentecost Sunday 1866, Fr. Gaetano Origo, who had already opened a school and built a chapel in Sai Kung, baptized 19 neophytes, the first group of Catholics from the Mainland. Fr. Simeone Volonteri assisted him in the historic celebration. Soon afterwards, a group from Yim Tin Tsai, a Hakka island located a short distance offshore from Sai Kung Bay, asked to join the Church. Seven were baptized in the autumn of the same year. The following Christmas, about 30 more Yim Tin Tsai's inhabitants were received into the Church. Frs. Origo, Volonteri and Giuseppe Burghignoli were witnessed the birth of a new Christian community.



Fr. Origo was not able to enjoy the fruit of his toil in Sai Kung and Yim Tin Tsai for long. He died on March 26, 1868, at the young age of 33. His mission was continued by Fr. Volonteri and by many others after him in the course of decades. Among them we would like to mention in particular Frs. Luigi Piazzoli, Domenico Pozzoni, Emilio Teruzzi, Quirino De Ascaniis and Valeriano Fraccaro.

Yim Tin Tsai means 'small field of salt', perhaps because its inhabitants, all belonging to the same Chan clan, were salt-farmers. The salt was sold in Sai Kung and other neighboring villagers. Agriculture and fishing were also practiced. The population, which at the time of its conversion to Catholicism numbered about 200 people, was poor, hard working, friendly and open. They had made the first move by asking Fr. Origo for religious instruction and baptism.

There was never a permanent resident missionary in Yim Tin Tsai, which was a 45-minute boat ride from Sai Kung. Nevertheless, the tiny community was, for several decades, somewhat special. On January 14, 1868, Fr. Raimondi wrote that, all of its inhabitants "are converted and very fervent. They love each other exactly as did the Christians of the Early Church".

In 1874, during his second pastoral visit, Bishop Raimondi reiterated his appreciation for the community:

> *Everything is done here according to the Catholic spirit. The island is entirely Catholic; processions and feasts are celebrated. Their way of living reminds me of our rural Catholic [Italian] villages where faith and simplicity still reign.*

These were rare words of praise from Bishop Raimondi, a man not at all generous with such pleasantries.

In 1892, Fr. Pozzoni wrote that the community of Yim Tin Tsai, made up of 110 people, all from the same family clan, were "the mission's best Christians".

A special visitor to San On

Baron Hübner, former Austrian ambassador to Paris and Rome, stopped in Hong Kong on his journey around the world as reported in the book *Promenade Autour du Monde* published in Paris in 1874. It must have been the year 1870 when he visited, accompanied by Fr. Raimondi and Fr. Piazzoli, the district of Sai On.

For three days we lived and traveled in the same simplicity of means as the early apostles. We found ourselves in these spacious lands inhabited by pirates, some of whom are dropping their old ways and changing for the better by embracing the Catholic faith. We spent the first night in the village of Sai Kung; the following morning we became acquainted with a small island, called Yim Tin Tsai, whose inhabitants have all received baptism. That night we arrived at Ting Kok, the center of the Sai On mission. The fathers there have quite a spacious house, which though, is hidden among many trees because local superstitions do not allow them to be cut down.

In each Christian village, there is a small chapel, with or without the cross, according to the attitude of the local people. Next to the chapel there is a tiny poor shack that serves as a residence for the missionary during his frequent visits.

At Ting Kok, I said goodbye to the Fr. Procurator and to the Chinese priest who were continuing their inspection tour.

Baron Hübner continued to travel with Fr. Piazzoli, and it appears that the young priest made an impression on the Baron:

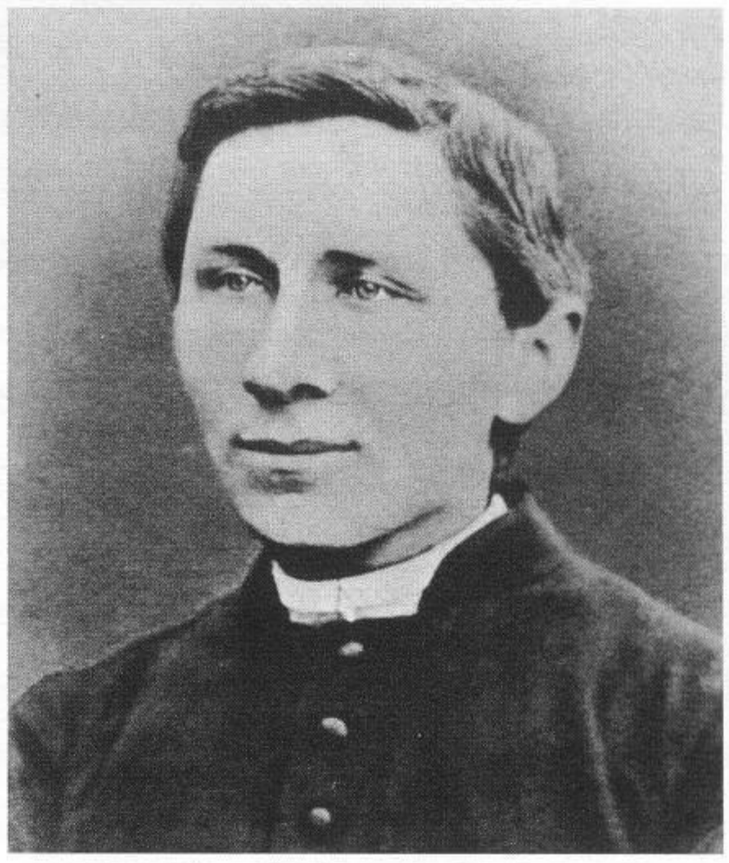
A young missionary, Fr Luigi Piazzoli of Bergamo, who was in charge of the district, accompanied me. He is just over 24 years old and has been



Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong. Among them the first two Chinese Sisters: Maddalena Tam and Anna Tam. Printed in 1878.

working here for about two years. The tropical sun, the fatigues and worries of the apostolic life have not yet left their mark on his handsome and bold face, or on the freshness of his youth. He is tall like the people of his native country. He walks in front of me with a joyful, brisk and quick pace. The stifling heat, which almost kills me, does not seem to affect him in the least. He must be already quite used to walking these paths under the sun, which becomes even hotter in mid-summer. He speaks about his toils, difficulties, disappointments and consolations, and the ups and downs of missionary life. He tells me of the suffering of his Christians and their clever ways of getting around the opposition of the Mandarins. He mentions their weaknesses and their devotion, their heroic courage and constancy. These are the first glorious poems, these are the first-fruits of the Chinese people's faith!

Baron Hübner, "Promenade Autour du Monde" (Paris, Hachette, 1874, vol. II)



Fr. Joseph Freinademetz, SVD.

Yim Tin Tsai

Yim Tin Tsai was one of the first Chinese communities visited by Fr. Joseph Freinademetz, SVD, the South Tyrol missionary who founded, together with Fr. John Baptist Anzer, the mission of the Divine Word Society in southern Shandong in 1881. He was canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 5, 2003. Fr. Freinademetz resided in Sai Kung from August 1879 to May 1881, as Fr. Luigi Piazzoli's assistant.

Various religious vocations have sprung from this community. The first priest from the island, Fr. Joachim Chan, was ordained on June 3, 1917. At the time, Sai Kung, Yim Tin Tsai and the other villages of the district were cared for by Fr. Emilio Teruzzi, assisted by Fr. Philip Lo, a Chinese priest.

Yim Tin Tsai is now deserted and the regular ferry to and from Sai Kung has long been discontinued. The last member of the Chan family left the island in the mid 1990s. The Church, which was completed in 1890, is the destination or many pilgrimages from different parts of the Hong Kong diocese. In 2006 the Church received a "Culture heritage conservation Award of Merit" under the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards scheme.

Every year, on May 1, on the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, the Church's patron saint, the Chan clan gathers in Yim Tin Tsai for a reunion of its members from various parts of Hong Kong and Britain. The gathering is currently presided over by Fr. Dominic Chan, Vicar General of the Hong Kong diocese, a native of the island.

