

## Book Review

### ***The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969* *The Diaries of the Maryknoll Sisters* *in Hong Kong, 1921-1966* by Cindy Yik-yi CHU**

Grace C. L. Mak

*The Hong Kong Institute of Education, China*

The Congregation of the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic (formerly known as the Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic) was founded in New York in 1912 for the purpose of conducting mission work abroad. The Maryknoll Sisters first came to Hong Kong and later to other parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Central Pacific. They arrived in Hong Kong in 1921, originally on transit to South China, but ended up staying in Hong Kong permanently and are best known for their contribution to the education of girls and women. *The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969* provides an account of the development of this mission group. With no pre-planned agenda, they responded to the changing needs of the community through their services in education and social welfare. They started a kindergarten which over the years grew into primary and secondary schools. These schools were among the pioneer effort by government and other mission groups in Hong Kong to nurture local women leaders and professionals. With a large influx of refugees from mainland China in the 1950s and 1960s, the Sisters expanded their work to relief and welfare. The development of the Maryknoll community is captured in six periods, each taking up a chapter in the book, most of which paralleled major turns in Hong Kong's development. Its history is therefore cast in and contributed to the broader social history of Hong Kong. *The Diaries of the Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1966* is a separate publication by itself, but can also be read as a supplement to *The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969*. The Maryknoll Mission has an excellent collection of archive materials, including the diaries of its Sisters from their early days in Hong Kong. The diaries were house reports, not personal diaries, which

recorded daily happenings, work and the people the Sisters met. They provide a fascinating account of social life in old Hong Kong through the perspectives of the Sisters, all the richer from their identity as foreigners and women.

These two books are a welcome addition to the literature on cross-cultural history, mission history, or social history of Hong Kong. Of appeal to this reviewer is their contribution to the literature on the education of girls and women in Asia. *The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969* joins a growing list of case studies on Christian missionary institutions in China, while *The Diaries* joins a rich and expanding pool of memoirs and biographies of distinguished women in Asia that are published internationally or in their respective societies. The personal stories of these women weave into the large history of the maturation of women as community leaders and professionals in the 20th century. This maturation has benefitted from educational expansion and industrialization which created opportunities for women. Like most other mission schools, the Maryknoll schools had a humble beginning and gradually grew into elite institutions. What is interesting about these two books is that they focus on local Hong Kong women not so much, the beneficiaries of educational provision, as the missionaries themselves (The focus on local women is better illustrated in the school history of one of the *Maryknoll schools entitled Maryknoll Convent School, 1925-2000*. Hong Kong: Maryknoll Convent School, 2000.). The Maryknoll Sisters were well-educated women serving in the professional capacities of teachers, social workers, and medical personnel. While changing the local people they served, these Sisters had also been changed by their association with the former (*The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969*, p. 149).

Both books are well researched and supported with multiple sources of first-hand evidence, including archive materials and interviews with Maryknoll Sisters. They recount the experiences of the Maryknoll Sisters in an intelligent and cheerful mood, much like the traits of the Sisters themselves. The reader would wonder if the Sisters' experience was not also punctuated by anxiety and possible tension with the local society. If these elements were present in the archive materials, the reconstructed history might have been more complex and realistic. Another interesting element which merits further exploration in future would be the mutual need between the missionaries and their clientele. Most studies on mission groups in Asia focus on their service to the local people; the more critical

ones assess their work as a mixed blessing - contribution to local development but paradoxically, possible intrusion into indigenous cultures. There is an allusion to a different interpretation in *The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921-1969*, namely, that “the people did not need the Sisters as much as the Sisters needed them” (p. 144), and China was their dream of overseas adventure. A study on mission work from this slant will offer another dimension to the literature.

*Biographical Note:* **Grace C. L. Mak** is the Director of Graduate Programmes at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She is also a short-term consultant to development education projects in Asia at the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the most recent one with a focus on rural girls' empowerment in China. Her research areas are women and development, basic education, and teacher education. She is the editor of *Women, Education and Development in Asia*.