

**FEMALE CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES AT WAR IN HONG
KONG AND THE CHINESE MAINLAND (1937–1945):
THE CASE OF THE CANOSSIAN SISTERS AND MOTHER
MARIA BIFFI**

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ABSTRACT The paper examines the leadership and agency of Catholic women missionaries in South China during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), focusing on the Canossian Daughters of Charity. While operating within a male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy, women religious played a central role in wartime education, healthcare, and humanitarian aid. Through a biographical study of Mother Maria Anselma Biffi (1884–1941) in Huizhou and an analysis of Canossian activities in occupied Hong Kong, this study explores how female religious authority was negotiated and exercised amid institutional constraints and wartime instability. Drawing on archival materials from the Canossian Archives in Rome, the Vatican Apostolic Archives, and the Historical Archives of Propaganda Fide—including mission reports, correspondence, and photographs—this article argues that women religious were not merely auxiliary actors within Catholic missions but key institutional leaders. Their activities highlight how female missionary leadership emerged at the intersection of Catholic spirituality, gendered expectations, colonial entanglements, and wartime humanitarian service.

KEYWORDS Catholic Women, Canossian Sisters, Mother Maria Biffi, Women's Missionary Agency, China Missions, War of Resistance against Japan

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INTRODUCTION

Set against the backdrop of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) and the Second World War (1939–1945), this paper examines the activities of the Canossian Daughters of Charity (Jiànuosa ren'ài nǚ xiuhui 嘉諾撒仁愛女修會),¹ a Catholic female religious congregation that played a significant role in education, healthcare, and charitable relief in both Hong Kong and Mainland China during one of the most turbulent decades of the twentieth century. The expansion of the Canossian Sisters from Hong Kong into the inland provinces of Hubei, Shaanxi, and Henan was part of a broader intensification of Catholic missionary presence in late Qing and early Republican China. As R.G. Tiedemann notes in his comprehensive survey of the period, this era saw a significant proliferation of foreign religious institutes that sought to establish stable social and educational infrastructures across the Chinese interior.² Historically, Catholic women religious have often been relegated to the margins of missionary historiography, viewed primarily as auxiliary figures within a male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, by employing a “gender lens,” this study argues that the Canossian Sisters were central actors in the management of social infrastructure and the “indigenization” of charitable practices.³ This integration of social welfare into the missionary identity is a hallmark of what Yates defines as the ‘social turn’ in twentieth-century missions. According to Yates, institutions like hospitals and schools were not merely peripheral activities but became the primary vehicles through which missions demonstrated their relevance to modernizing societies like China.⁴ At the heart of this analysis is Mother Maria

Biffi (1884–1941), whose tenure as Superior of St. Joseph’s Hospital in Huizhou 惠州 offers a revealing case study of “negotiated authority.” Through her leadership, the intersection of missionary ideals, professional medical competence, and wartime humanitarianism reveals how women religious exercised significant operational autonomy despite formal structural constraints. Pieragastini emphasizes that during the wartime period, missions that successfully integrated into local administrative networks were better positioned to survive the dual pressures of colonial collapse and military occupation. Mother Biffi’s management of St. Joseph’s Hospital exemplifies the broader Catholic strategy of engaging with local governance to secure protection and resources.⁵

The early twentieth century introduced profound transformations for Catholic missions in China. The collapse of the Qing dynasty and the rise of the Republican era reconfigured political authority, forcing missions to navigate complex networks of colonial influence

- 1 This is the official Chinese translation of their congregation’s name. See Rolf G. Tiedemann, *Reference Guide to Christian Missionary Societies in China: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 49.
- 2 R.G. Tiedemann, *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume Two: 1800–Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 231–45.
- 3 See Catherine Porter, *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Explorations* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 15–32; Xiaofei Kang, “Women, Gender and Religion in Modern China, 1900s–1950s: An Introduction,” *Nan Nü*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2017): 1–27; Beatrice Leung and Patricia Wittberg, “Catholic Religious Orders of Women in China: Adaptation and Power,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (March 2004): 67–82; Yu Zhang, “Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Local and Foreign Sisters and Gender Relations,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia*, eds. Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Beatrice Leung (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 1–37; Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Believer’s Tales: A Small Village in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 110–25.
- 4 See Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 125–38.

- 5 See Steven Pieragastini, “Colonialism, Imperialism, and Relations with Local Powers: China,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia*, eds. Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Beatrice Leung (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021), 1–30.

and local governance.⁶ For the Canossian Sisters, established in Hong Kong since 1860 and subsequently expanding into the Chinese Mainland, the management of schools, hospitals, and orphanages became a vital point of contact with Chinese society. The shift in missionary strategy initiated by *Maximum Illud* (1919) was further operationalized through the diplomatic efforts of Celso Costantini (1876-1958), who sought to de-Westernize the Chinese Church. As Bruno Fabio Pighin highlights, this period marked a critical transition in Church-State relations, moving toward a model that emphasized the development of a native clergy and a more direct dialogue with Chinese civil authorities, independent of European colonial protection.⁷ This “holistic model of care”—where physical relief was inextricably linked to a sacramental theology of salvation—facilitated a gradual acceptance of Western practices among local communities. As the Sisters moved beyond the convent enclosure to engage

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- 6 During the transitional phase at the turn of the twentieth century, the landscape of Catholic missions in China displayed significant diversity. The multifaceted nature of these missions was characterized by a diverse array of operational dynamics, regional disparities, and variances in missionary penetration across the vast expanse of China. This heterogeneity was palpable in the disparate degrees of success, cultural assimilation, and socio-religious impacts witnessed among different missionary initiatives, each shaped by local conditions, political situation, and the receptivity of indigenous populations. During the initial decades, while the number of Catholic followers increased, alongside a notable influx of foreign missionaries, at the same time a substantive intellectual endeavor unfolded, characterized by meticulous critical examination and condemnation of inadequacies in the evangelization process. Since the nineteenth century, France held a position of great privilege with regard to the missions. It was indeed considered the “Protector of Catholic Missions,” and since the Unequal Treaties were still in effect, the protection of missionaries of any nationality, including Italian, was entrusted to the French Consul. Discerning members within the Catholic community, including reformist clergy like Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940) and influential Catholic lay figures such as Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯 (1840–1939) and Ying Lianzhi 英斂之 (1867–1926), voiced their criticisms to Pope Benedict XV. They condemned the French, constituting a significant seventy percent of the clergy in China, for their ethnocentric inclinations and dismissive stance toward Chinese cultural mores. Chinese clergy faced discrimination, compelling many to relinquish their clerical roles. The evolving landscape of Chinese society and the changing needs of native Christian communities, in tandem with ongoing debates on traditional and modern evangelization approaches, thus, positioned China as an important center for rethinking missionary strategies. This shift gained formal recognition on November 30, 1919, through Pope Benedict XV’s apostolic letter, *Maximum Illud*. See Jacques Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958); Celso Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina*, Vols. I and II (Roma: Unione missionaria del clero in Italia, 1946); Vincent Thoreau, *Le tonnerre qui chante au loin: Vie et mort du Père Lebbe, apôtre des Chinois (1877–1940)* (Bruxelles: Hatier, 1990); Ruth Hayhoe and Yongling Lu, *Ma Xiangbo and the Mind of Modern China, 1840–1939* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Howard L. Boorman, ed., “Ying Hua,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); Agostino Giovagnoli, *Roma e Pechino: La svolta extraeuropea di Benedetto XV* (Roma: Studium, 1999); Cindy Yik-yi Chu, ed., *Catholicism in China, 1900–Present: The Development of the Chinese Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 7 See Bruno Fabio Pighin, *Chiesa e Stato in Cina: dalle imprese di Costantini alle svolte attuali* (Venezia: Marcianum Press, 2010), 45–62.

directly with the public sphere, they articulated a form of religious femininity that was both resilient and administratively robust.⁸

The outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan and the subsequent global conflict dramatically altered this fragile equilibrium. Italy’s entry into the war in 1940 placed Italian missionaries in an ambiguous political position, particularly in British-controlled Hong Kong and in regions affected by Japanese military occupation. As Steve Tsang notes, Hong Kong’s governance relied heavily on the collaboration of social and religious organizations to provide essential public services, creating a space where missionary groups could exercise significant social influence.⁹ Restrictions on movement, surveillance, and the disruption of international communications created new challenges for missionary institutions. Yet the Canossian Sisters continued to operate schools, orphanages, and hospitals, often relying on collaboration with Chinese religious women and lay assistants to maintain local networks of care. By collaborating with Chinese religious women and lay assistants, the Canossian mission

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- 8 The earliest social and relief work services for Chinese women were closely tied to the missionary activities and social services of Christian churches. Religious orders made significant contributions to women’s social work in Republican China in at least two ways: first, they provided direct or indirect social assistance and services to women, including relief, education, family support, and employment, which served as a source of inspiration and guidance for the development of women’s social work in China. Second, they played a key role in promoting the emergence and growth of civil women’s organizations, laying an important foundation for the widespread development of women’s social work. See Lü Hongping 呂紅平, “Minguo shiqi de funü shehui gongzuo 民國時期的婦女社會工作 [On Women’s Social Work in the Republic of China Era],” *Hebei daxue xuebao: Zhexue shehui kexue ban* 河北大學學報：哲學社會科學版 (Journal of Hebei University: Philosophy and Social Sciences) 38, No. 3 (2013): 29–33. Christian missions also demonstrated their commitment to gender equality and the education of women. In terms of education, the Christian Church invested heavily in China, primarily at two levels: one was the construction of institutional schools, and from 1831 to 1920, 7,382 elementary schools, secondary schools, universities, and colleges at all levels were built, enrolling nearly 300,000 students, including the first women’s university in China, the North China Union Women’s University. See Zuo Furong 左芙蓉, *Jidujiao yu jinxindai Beijing shehui* 基督教與近現代北京社會 [Christianity and Modern Beijing Society] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2009), 132.
- 9 See Steve Yui-Sang Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 63–75.

maintained a “sacred security”¹⁰ Mother Biffi’s role in Huizhou, coordinating medical relief and pastoral care, exemplifies this missionary resilience. Her ability to navigate the demands of both local authorities and ecclesiastical superiors demonstrates that female missionary agency was not merely charitable, but profoundly institutional and political.

Methodologically, this study is based on the critical examination of archival sources drawn primarily from the Canossian Archives in Rome, the Vatican Apostolic Archives, and the Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide).¹¹ The study also employs a critical examination of archival sources beyond a purely hagiographical reading. By adopting a gender lens, the research deconstructs the power dynamics within the mission, analyzing how female religious figures negotiated their authority. This approach aligns with recent scholarship on missionary agency, which emphasizes that women religious were central actors in the indigenization of Christianity. See, for instance, Harrison on the role of local networks in the indigenization of Chinese Catholicism, and Porter on how women religious leveraged professional expertise to negotiate authority within male-

10 Following Italy’s declaration of war on Great Britain and France on June 10, 1940, Italian missionaries in British territories, such as Hong Kong, were legally classified as “enemy aliens.” While the British colonial administration initially showed some leniency toward religious personnel, Italian clerics and sisters faced increased surveillance, restricted movement, and, in some cases, internment. This political ambiguity deepened after the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in December 1941. Although Italy and Japan were technically allies under the Tripartite Pact, Japanese military authorities remained suspicious of Western religious influence. The Sisters’ reliance on Chinese religious women and lay assistants was therefore not only a practical necessity due to personnel shortages but also a strategic move to “localize” the mission’s leadership, thereby shielding institutional activities from direct colonial or military interference and ensuring the continuity of healthcare and educational services. See Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China, and the Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*; Yu Zhang, “Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Local and Foreign Sisters and Gender Relations,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia*, eds. Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Beatrice Leung, 1–37 (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021); R. G. Tiedemann, “Catholic Religious Communities of Chinese Women,” in *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume Two: 1800–Present*, ed. R. G. Tiedemann, 587–99 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Agostino Giovagnoli, *Roma e Pechino: La svolta extraeuropea di Benedetto XV* (Roma: Studium, 1999).

11 These collections preserve mission reports, personal correspondence, and photographic documentation produced by the Sisters and their collaborators. Because many of these materials were intended for internal circulation or for communication with ecclesiastical authorities, they offer valuable insight into how the Canossian Sisters represented their own work and articulated forms of female religious authority within the missionary context. The archival analysis is complemented by contemporary press reports, including Chinese-language newspapers and missionary periodicals, which shed light on the broader social reception of missionary relief activities. Photographs and other visual records further shed light on the material dimension of the Sisters’ presence, revealing how institutions such as hospitals, schools, and pharmacies functioned both as sites of care and as visible expressions of Catholic charitable identity.

dominated missionary structures.¹² The analysis cross-references internal correspondence with contemporary press reports to understand not only the Sisters’ self-representation but also the broader social reception of their work. As Yu Zhang points out, the study of female religious orders in China reveals a complex negotiation of gender relations where both foreign and local sisters carved out spaces of authority. Zhang emphasizes that these women were not merely performing “women’s work” but were active participants in the institutional building of the Chinese Church, often exercising a form of agency that challenged traditional patriarchal expectations.¹³ Moving beyond hagiographic testimony, this article situates the Canossian experience within the broader academic dialogue on wartime humanitarianism and gendered religious authority. As Beatrice Leung and Patricia Wittberg have argued, Catholic religious orders of women in China often had to navigate a complex balance between their religious vows and the practical necessity of exercising authority in the social sphere. Their study highlights how these women adapted to local conditions to maintain institutional power even within restrictive hierarchies.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Xiaofei Kang argues, the period from the 1900s to the 1950s was a crucial era of transformation where women, through religious institutions, began to redefine their social and public roles in China. Kang emphasizes that gender was not a marginal category but a central dynamic in the modernization of Chinese religion.¹⁵ By placing Mother Biffi’s leadership within this framework, it highlights how figures like her stretched the structural limits of the mission, transforming the “auxiliary” role of the Sister into that of a key institutional leader in modern Chinese history.

12 Porter explores the concept of “missionary feminism,” suggesting that the mission field provided Western women with professional opportunities in medicine and education that were often unavailable to them in their home countries. She highlights how women religious negotiated their authority within patriarchal ecclesiastical structures by leveraging their specialized expertise. Harrison demonstrates how local Chinese communities—and specifically women within those communities—appropriated Catholic practices to create a distinct local identity. She argues that the success of missions often relied on these “hidden” networks of female believers who provided the social glue for the mission’s survival during periods of political transition. See Catherine Porter, *Women and Missions: Past and Present. Anthropological and Historical Explorations* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Believer’s Tales: A Small Village in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

13 Yu Zhang, “Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Local and Foreign Sisters and Gender Relations,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia*, eds. Cindy Yik-yi Chu and Beatrice Leung (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021), 1–37.

14 See Beatrice Leung and Patricia Wittberg, “Catholic Religious Orders of Women in China: Adaptation and Power,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, No. 1 (March, 2004): 67–82.

15 Xiaofei Kang, “Women, Gender and Religion in Modern China, 1900s–1950s: An Introduction,” *Nan Nü*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (August, 2017): 1–27.

PROMOTION, PROTECTION, AND EMANCIPATION:
CANOSSIAN SISTERS IN CHINA

The overseas mission of the Canossian Daughters of Charity started in 1860, when a group of Italian Sisters departed from Pavia to Hong Kong.¹⁶ Shortly after their arrival, they established a network of institutions that combined educational, charitable, and spiritual functions. These included a boarding house for European girls, an orphanage, a dispensary, a home for individuals with disabilities, and a catechumenate program.¹⁷ Responding to the requests of the Apostolic Vicars Luigi Piazzoli (1845–1904) and later Eustacchio Zanolli (1831–1883), the Sisters gradually expanded their activities to the Chinese Mainland. New foundations included orphanages in Nantou (1905) and Shanwei (1907), as well as the establishment of St. Joseph's Hospital in Huizhou in 1926. These institutions functioned as extensions of the Hong Kong mission and reflected a strategic model of missionary expansion in which evangelization was closely intertwined with social welfare, education, and healthcare.¹⁸

By the fiftieth anniversary of their foundation, the Canossian convent in Caine Road had become a major center of charitable and educational activity. The institution hosted 72 Eurasian and 191 Chinese orphans, while the English-language school served 286 students and the Chinese Pui Ching School enrolled eighty-nine pupils. A significant milestone was reached in 1910, when the English school obtained official recognition

16 The Catholic religious order of the Canossian Daughters of Charity was established in Verona, Italy, in 1808 by Magdalen of Canossa. The six pioneers who left for Hong Kong were the Superior Lucia Cupis, Maria Stella, Rachele Tronconi, Giuseppina Testera, Giovanna Scotti, and Claudia Compagnotti. See Ida Sala, *Storia delle missioni Canossiane in Cina: Hong Kong 1860–2000, Vol. III, 1910–2000* (Rome: The Canossian Archives of Rome, later as A.C.R., 2003), 7; Gianni Criveller, “The Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong and Beyond: Protection, Education, and Emancipation of Women,” in *The Catholic Church, The Bible, and Evangelization in China*, ed. Cindy Yik-yi Chu (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022), 22.

17 Criveller, “The Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong and Beyond,” 24.

18 Sala, *Storia Delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000, Vol. III, 1910–2000*, 13. Ibid., 16. In the following years, the Canossian Sisters established additional missions in the provinces of Hubei, Shaanxi, and Henan. Between 1868 and 1952, 275 Italian and Chinese sisters worked in mainland China, bringing evangelization and assistance to many in China in the face of epidemics, natural disasters, and war. The reputation of being “the sisters who never refuse anything to anyone” was earned in the first fifty years of ministry and remained a testament to their service, reaching its pinnacle during the Japanese occupation of the colony.

from the government's Department of Education. Until that time, students had taken the Oxford examinations; however, with the opening of the University of Hong Kong in 1911, they began to sit for local examinations. This development signaled a growing acceptance of Catholic educational institutions among Chinese families, who increasingly sent their daughters to these schools. The expansion of the Caine Road complex further strengthened the Sisters' activities. By 1910, a second building had been completed to accommodate the increasing number of boarders, orphans, and vulnerable children seeking refuge. 18 girls were also entrusted to the institution directly by the colonial government. During the following decade, the Sisters expanded their pastoral activities beyond the convent through hospital visits and community outreach. Typically, these visits were conducted by two Sisters: a Chinese nun fluent in the local language, who provided both medical assistance and evangelization, and an Italian Sister, who offered spiritual support and prayer. Each carried a bag containing bread, fruit, sweets, and holy water for emergency baptisms. Such practices reveal the integration of material aid, ritual action, and pedagogical engagement that characterized the Canossian approach to missionary work.

The mission in Wuhan, in Hubei Province, established in 1868, soon became one of the principal centers of Canossian activity in the Chinese Mainland. There, the Sisters managed schools, a hospital, a hospice, a catechumenate, and a novitiate.¹⁹ Archival documentation preserved in the Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith offers detailed insight into the scale of these activities during the early twentieth century. Records for the years 1920–1921 show that the Sisters administered 2,258 baptisms, including 1,491 girls, 101 adults, and 261 children. In addition, they performed 783 confirmations, of which 646 involved girls and 137 adults. The Canossian mission operated under a “holistic model,” where the relief of physical suffering was inextricably linked to spiritual salvation. In terms of sacramental theology, the administration of baptisms—often performed as emergency rites in the wards—was not merely a religious ritual but a fundamental part of their medical duty. This “theology of the body” posited that caring for the patient's physical wounds was the necessary precursor to spiritual care, asserting the dignity of the individual against the dehumanizing effects of war.²⁰

19 Ida Sala, *Storia Delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000, Vol. II*, 9.

20 Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132–45.

Beyond sacramental ministry, the Sisters operated a wide range of educational and charitable institutions that served diverse segments of the population. Their facilities cared for 2,017 nursery girls, 810 women and girls in various departments, 102 elderly or infirm individuals, and 32 residents in a retirement home. Educational activities were organized through several institutions, including St. Joseph's Boarding School (213 students), St. Mary's School (91 students), and St. Anthony's School (64 students). Through these establishments, the Sisters not only promoted literacy and academic learning but also sought to cultivate moral discipline and Christian values among young women.

Medical work constituted another central dimension of the Canossian mission. The dispensary recorded 12,790 individuals seeking treatment, with an additional 20,415 returning for follow-up care or medication. The hospital served a diverse population, including 1,760 Chinese men, 675 Chinese women, fifty-three Indian and Vietnamese patients, and 273 Europeans. The Sisters also carried out 657 surgical procedures under chloroform and 4,730 minor operations, indicating a level of medical organization that was notable for a female religious congregation operating in early twentieth-century China. These figures illustrate the broad scope of the Canossian mission, which combined evangelization with extensive social and medical assistance.²¹

The work of the Sisters attracted the attention of ecclesiastical authorities. Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854–1932), Prefect of the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* described their activities in Hankou by noting that Catholic nurses trained in the mission hospitals had become deeply involved in charitable initiatives in the city, contributing both to medical care and to the broader Catholic presence in local institutions:

Some conscientious people from Hankow, moved by compassion for the many miserable individuals who populate this great city, under the name of "Society of Benevolence," in addition to free schools, built a vast hospital equipped with all possible comforts. [...] There are Catholic nurses raised in our hospital, and even among the leaders, some of our employees hold top positions in its management. They are paid by us but spend part of their day in this hospital, paying for the purpose of educating and baptizing when needed. And they know very well how

21 Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith [A.P.F.], Vol. 761, Rub. 130, Prot. 129/1922 (1922).

to fulfill their duties while practicing the medical profession.²²

His remarks highlight the growing visibility and professional competence of women religious within the field of missionary medicine. The perception of the Canossian Sisters by Chinese society evolved from initial suspicion to pragmatic acceptance. Their consistent presence during military crises provided a sense of "sacred security" for the local population. The Sisters' training of local "Catholic nurses" facilitated a bottom-up acceptance of Western medical practices, which were valued for their efficacy in wartime care. By integrating Western medicine with a deep commitment to local social needs, the Sisters transitioned from foreign outsiders to indispensable institutional leaders within the local social fabric.

At the same time, the development of medical missions raises important questions about the relationship between humanitarian assistance and evangelization. The participation of Catholic nurses in both healthcare and pastoral activity frequently blurred the boundaries between charitable service and religious outreach. Medical institutions, while providing indispensable treatment, could also function as spaces in which spiritual instruction and conversion were encouraged. This dual purpose complicates the interpretation of missionary medicine: while motivated by genuine compassion, such initiatives also formed part of a broader strategy aimed at the spiritual transformation of patients and communities, therefore pointing to the potential tension between humanitarian relief and proselytizing objectives, particularly in situations where the vulnerability of the sick and the poor increased receptivity to religious influence.²³

The prominence of Wuhan as a missionary center was closely connected to its geographical and strategic position. Located along the Yangtze River, the city functioned as a major transportation and communication hub linking inland China with coastal regions and northern routes to Beijing. This centrality facilitated both missionary expansion and humanitarian outreach. Within this context, the Canossian Sisters established an orphanage and a dispensary in 1888, institutions that remained active until their closure in 1927. Leadership during this period eventually passed to Mother Natalia Piccioni (1887–1967),

22 Cardinal G.M. Van Rossum, Hankow, November 6, 1921, Vol.761, Rub.130, Prot.129/1922, A.P.F.

23 For a broader discussion on the social and cultural challenges in modern China, including the impact of substance abuse on the local population, see: Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

who succeeded Mother Vincenzina Bellocchio (1869–1959) as Regional Superior of Hubei in 1937, at the onset of the Japanese invasion of China. Her tenure coincided with a period of acute crisis, requiring resilience and adaptability. Monsignor Mario Zanin (1890–1958), the Apostolic Delegate to China, famously described her as “a daring pigeon,” playing on her surname, and suggesting her readiness to act in situations where hope appeared unlikely.²⁴ During the escalating violence of the war, Mother Piccioni directed the Sisters’ efforts toward urgent humanitarian relief. Air raids and military operations created large numbers of wounded civilians and displaced children. In response, she transformed the catechumenate into a temporary refuge for victims of bombing raids, where the Sisters treated the injured and offered assistance to those in distress. At the same time, she personally gathered children who had been separated from their families and organized their protection and care. As the number of orphans increased, she established a dedicated orphanage with an attached educational facility, providing a structured environment where physical safety, schooling, and religious formation could be pursued simultaneously.²⁵

The third Canossian mission in the Chinese Mainland was founded in Shaanxi Province. Evangelization in this region had been entrusted to the Priests of the Foreign Missions of Saints Peter and Paul, founded in Rome in 1871 at the request of Pope Pius IX (1792–1878). Their seminary, centered in Hanzhong, operated under the authority of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. Within this framework, the Canossian Sisters were entrusted with several key apostolic responsibilities, including the Holy Childhood program, catechumenates for women, schools, and hospitals. Departing from Wuhan on 20 February 1891, the Sisters reached Guluba in Chenggu County in May of the same year. There they established St. Joseph’s House, which became operational by 1897 and remained active until 1930. The institution hosted an orphanage, hospice, schools, catechumenate, village missions, and a dispensary. In 1916, the regional house in Hanzhong—known as Nazareth House—was opened, operating until 1953 and encompassing an elementary and middle school, an orphanage, a hospital, and a dispensary. A further institution, the Sacred Heart House in Chenggu (1933–1944), included schools of various levels, a women’s school,

24 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], Circular Letters, M. Teresa Sivio, “Mother Natalia Piccioni,” n.d., 1.

25 Ibid., 3–4.

a catechumenate, and an orphanage.²⁶

In 1937 Mother Maria Mombelli (1892–1964) became Regional Superior of South Shaanxi following the departure of Mother Piccioni for Wuhan.²⁷ Around the same time, Monsignor Lorenzo Balconi (1878–1969), Superior General of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan, drafted a document formalizing the incorporation of the Canossian Sisters into the Apostolic Vicariate of Hanzhong. The text defined the organizational structure and responsibilities of the Sisters within the mission. Their duties included the supervision of the Holy Childhood program, youth education, catechumenates for women, assistance to the elderly and infirm, and the management of schools, dispensaries, and hospitals. These services were to be provided without remuneration, as expressions of their religious vocation. The document also clarifies the hierarchical framework within which the Sisters operated. Spiritual services—including the celebration of Mass, the administration of sacraments, and confession—remained under the authority of the clergy. The direction of the Sisters’ work was subject to the oversight of the Vicar Apostolic, who retained authority over major decisions concerning the organization of missionary activities. Even the transfer of Sisters required consultation with and approval from the Vicar Apostolic, reinforcing the hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical governance. Financial matters were similarly regulated: the maintenance of the Sisters was to be supported by funds allocated by the Apostolic Vicariate, while the administration of their own resources remained under the authority of their major Superiors.²⁸ These arrangements reveal a missionary system characterized by clearly defined gendered roles, in which women religious played indispensable operational roles while remaining formally subordinate to clerical authority.

The province of Henan was evangelized primarily by the Society of Jesus.²⁹ In 1875, Bishop Simeone Volonteri (1831–1904) sent two Chinese women to Wuhan to receive training under the Canossian Sisters, so that they could return and manage a local orphanage. Their formation illustrates an early form of collaboration between European missionaries and Chinese laywomen in the field of Catholic charitable work. In 1883,

26 Sala, *Storia delle missioni Canossiane in Cina: Hong Kong 1860–2000*, Vol. II, 357–58.

27 Ibid., 421.

28 Lorenzo Balconi, February 17, 1937, Vol. 1266, Rub. 25/3–25/6, Prot. 608/1937, A.P.F.

29 Sala, *Storia delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000*, Vol. II, 443.

the Vicariate of Henan was divided into North and South jurisdictions. Bishop Volonteri remained Vicar Apostolic of South Henan and soon requested assistance from the Canossian Institute, drawing on his previous experience with the Sisters in Hong Kong. The Canossian Sisters arrived in Jinjiajiang 金家江 on 24 February 1892 and established the Holy House of Our Lady of Sorrows, which remained active until 1935. The institution included a Holy Childhood program and an orphanage dedicated to the care and Christian education of children. Under the leadership of Mother Rachele Paleari Monza (1848–1922), the mission developed steadily. By 1896 the local Tertiaries of Our Lady of Sorrows had joined the Sisters as collaborators, strengthening the network of charitable and educational activities.³⁰ The mission in South Henan thus reveals the gradual expansion of female religious participation in missionary work and the increasing involvement of Chinese women in Catholic social initiatives.

The final Canossian mission in China was established in Western Henan during the aftermath of the First World War. Bishop Luigi Calza (1879–1944) requested assistance from the Bishop of Pavia, Francesco Ciceri (1848–1924), specifically asking for Sisters who were already familiar with Chinese language and customs. Four pioneers departed from Venice on 19 April 1920: Maria Piazzini, Isolina Brugnoli, Giuseppina Ghioni, and Mattia Pisano.³¹ They arrived in Zhengxian 鄭縣 in June 1921 and established the regional headquarters of the mission. Soon afterward, they founded St. Joseph's Hospital, which became a central institution of medical care in the region. In 1932 the Sisters also founded the St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus School in Zhengxian and Luoyang 洛陽, offering kindergarten and elementary education alongside catechumenate instruction and family outreach programs. That same year they established the Sacred Heart Mission Hospital in Luoyang, a facility with sixty beds and five pharmacies that served tens of thousands of patients annually.³²

Beyond medical care, the Sisters managed orphanages, primary schools, and kindergartens, integrating education, healthcare, and spiritual formation within a comprehensive missionary framework. Father Assuero Bassi (1887–1970), Apostolic Prefect of Luoyang, entrusted the direction of these works to the Canossian Sisters, praising their

“intelligent zeal.”³³ The missionary network also relied on collaboration with local personnel. Twenty-four male catechists and eight female catechists assisted in religious instruction, while fourteen male and seven female teachers contributed to the educational system. Together, these actors formed a cooperative structure that combined spiritual formation with social advancement.³⁴ In 1937 Western Henan—also known as the Region of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus—was formally established as an independent ecclesiastical district, with Mother Margherita Torri (1896–1978) appointed as its first Superior. Having arrived in China in 1925, she possessed both pedagogical training and linguistic ability. Her knowledge of French proved particularly useful in a region where many administrators of the Chinese railway system were French nationals. She taught the language to local children aspiring to study in France and also offered music lessons, which she used as opportunities for religious instruction. Her educational work eventually led to her appointment as headmistress of the elementary school in Chin Niun Li and later as local Superior of the community.

The expansion of the Canossian educational and medical networks reflects what Kang describes as the unique capacity of women's religious groups to bridge the gap between private domesticity and public service. In the context of modern China, these religious spaces provided women with a legitimate platform for social activism and professional development that challenged traditional patriarchal boundaries.³⁵ By the 1930s, the Canossian network across Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland had developed into a complex system of educational, medical, and charitable institutions. Schools, hospitals, and orphanages addressed urgent social needs while simultaneously serving as spaces of moral formation and religious instruction. The decision to remain in occupied territories can be seen as a strategic exercise of agency. According to Leung and Wittberg, the survival and growth of female orders in China were frequently linked to their capacity to adapt their missionary strategies to the shifting political landscape, thereby securing a degree of autonomy from both the state and the male ecclesiastical structure.³⁶ Supported by a wide network of catechists, teachers, and lay collaborators, the Sisters' activities illustrate

30 Ibid., Vol. II, 449.

31 Sala, *Storia delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000*, Vol. II, 492.

32 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], Vol. 50-III, Folder 8, “Report,” Chengchow, 1945–1952, 32.

33 Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith [A.P.F.], Vol. 1142, Rub. 27/7-27/13, Prot. 3678/1933, Assuero Bassi, August 21, 1933, 747.

34 Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith [A.P.F.], Vol. 1142, Rub. 27/7-27/13, Prot. 3992/1934, Assuero Bassi, “Annual Report (1934),” 779–86.

35 See Kang, “Women, Gender and Religion in Modern China,” 1–27.

36 See Leung and Wittberg, “Catholic Religious Orders of Women in China,” 67–82.

the negotiation of religious authority, the expansion of female missionary agency, and the interaction between Western institutional models and local Chinese communities. The interaction between European missionaries and native collaborators was a defining feature of the Catholic presence. Tiedemann highlights the crucial role played by 'Catholic Religious Communities of Chinese Women, noting that native sisters often provided the essential linguistic and cultural mediation necessary for the survival of foreign-led institutions, especially during times of conflict.³⁷

MISSIONARIES AT WAR:
MOTHER MARIA ANSELMA ERMENEGILDA BIFFI (1884–1941)

Italy's entry into the Second World War on 10 June 1940 immediately altered the situation of Italian nationals residing in Hong Kong. As subjects of a nation at war with Britain, Italian missionaries—including the Canossian Sisters—suddenly found themselves classified as enemy nationals within the British colonial system.³⁸ Communication with Europe became increasingly difficult, and the movement of Italian religious personnel was closely monitored by colonial authorities.³⁹ These restrictions disrupted the normal functioning of missionary institutions and created new uncertainties for communities that relied heavily on international networks of personnel and resources.

According to the memoirs of Mother Ida Sala (1922–2014), the Canossian delegation on the Kowloon Peninsula was subjected to strict controls from the very first day of Italy's entry into the war. The Sisters were confined to the convent and permitted to move only within a limited area designated by the authorities. Police officials maintained official registers containing the names of the Sisters and issued instructions requiring them to remain within specific buildings. In response to these restrictions, some foreign Sisters were relocated to residences located inside the authorized zone, while Italian Sisters were transferred to the Caine Road convent. Those already stationed on the peninsula were gathered in the delegation house. At the same time, the military situation in South China deteriorated as

Japanese forces captured nearby territories, including Nantou.⁴⁰

Despite these constraints, the Canossian Sisters retained a limited degree of operational autonomy. Their status as women religious—combined with their reputation for charitable and medical work—often generated a measure of tolerance from colonial authorities and local officials. This ambiguous position allowed them to continue certain religious, educational, and humanitarian activities within the permitted zones. The wartime environment therefore created a paradoxical situation in which missionary institutions faced severe political restrictions while simultaneously remaining essential providers of social and medical assistance to local populations.

Within this broader context of war and instability, the experience of Mother Maria Anselma Ermenegilda Biffi offers a revealing example of female missionary leadership under extreme circumstances. In January 1941, the Canossian mission suffered a devastating loss. On 9 January a telegram reached Hong Kong reporting that the hospital in Huizhou (Waichow), Guangdong Province, had been struck during an aerial bombardment. Mother Biffi had been killed, and two Sisters were wounded:

Our mission in Hong Kong also paid, perhaps more seriously than the others, the tribute to the war, in the loss of Mother Maria Biffi, Superior of St. Joseph's Hospital in Waichow. She was hit during the bombing on January 8 of this year. Of the four surviving sisters, two were wounded, it is said not seriously.⁴¹

The circumstances of her death immediately transformed Mother Biffi into a symbolic figure within the Canossian community, representing both the risks and the dedication associated with missionary service during wartime. Yet archival materials also reveal that her leadership had already been widely recognized long before this tragic event.

Born in 1884, Maria Biffi entered the Canossian congregation at a time when female missionary work was expanding rapidly within Catholic global networks. Contemporary accounts portray her personality in striking terms. From a young age, she was remembered as possessing an energetic temperament that contemporaries described using traits

37 R.G. Tiedemann, "Catholic Religious Communities of Chinese Women," in *Handbook of Christianity in China: Volume Two: 1800–Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 587–99.

38 Pietro Badoglio, *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Milano: Mondadori, 1946), 37.

39 Sala, *Storia Delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000*, 2003, Vol. II, 57–58.

40 Sala, *Storia Delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000*, 2003, Vol. II, 60.

41 Vatican Apostolic Archives [AAV], b. 201, fasc. 492, ff. 126, M. Teresa Zambaldi, November 11, 1941.

commonly associated with masculine roles—physical courage, decisiveness, and initiative.⁴² Rather than being perceived as contradictory to her religious vocation, these characteristics were interpreted by fellow missionaries as qualities that prepared her for the demanding conditions of missionary life. Missionaries who worked with her later remarked that “Mother Biffi is more masculine than many men put together,”⁴³ a comment that reflects contemporary gendered perceptions of authority and leadership within missionary communities. Such descriptions, while shaped by the cultural assumptions of the period, also point to a broader phenomenon: the ways in which female religious leaders negotiated authority within institutions traditionally governed by male ecclesiastical hierarchies. Biffi’s career illustrates how missionary women could exercise significant responsibility in practice, particularly in the administration of educational and medical institutions.

Her missionary career began in Shanwei in 1914, where she served as local Superior. From this initial assignment she gradually assumed responsibility for increasingly complex institutions, first in Hong Kong and later in Huizhou.⁴⁴ These appointments required administrative competence, linguistic ability, and the capacity to coordinate diverse forms of pastoral and social work. In each location she was responsible not only for managing the internal life of the religious community but also for overseeing schools, charitable programs, and medical services that served local populations.

Huizhou became the central stage of her missionary work. The city occupied a strategically important location in Guangdong Province, connected both to river transport routes and to the Beijing–Canton railway system. Within this regional network, St. Joseph’s Hospital functioned as a key institution for both medical care and missionary outreach.

The administrative autonomy exercised by Mother Biffi in Huizhou can be understood within the broader context of the Church’s institutional evolution in Republican China. Pighin underscores that the establishment of Catholic social and medical institutions was not merely a charitable endeavor but a strategic diplomatic tool used to negotiate a legitimate legal and social standing for the Church within the evolving Chinese state apparatus.⁴⁵ Under Biffi’s leadership, the hospital developed into a complex institution

that included a catechumenate and a seventy-bed medical facility. Beyond administrative management, Mother Biffi also played an important role in the formation of younger Sisters. She encouraged a model of missionary preparation that combined spiritual formation with practical skills. Training emphasized not only religious devotion but also physical resilience, moral discipline, and the practical competencies necessary for missionary life. This approach reflected the growing professionalization of missionary work during the early twentieth century, particularly in the fields of healthcare and education. Her influence within the mission was widely recognized. Fellow missionaries described her as “the soul of the Huizhou mission,”⁴⁶ a phrase that captured both her administrative leadership and her personal dedication to the community.

This reputation became particularly evident during the escalating violence of the War of Resistance against Japan. As aerial bombardments intensified in the region, the hospital increasingly served as a refuge for wounded civilians and displaced residents. Mother Biffi coordinated the efforts of the Sisters and local helpers to provide medical treatment and emergency shelter.⁴⁷ These activities placed the community in direct proximity to the dangers of warfare. Testimonies later recalled that Biffi herself anticipated the risks associated with continuing the hospital’s operations during air raids. She once confided that she feared dying beneath the ruins of the institution she had built.⁴⁸ That premonition proved tragically accurate. On 8 January 1941, during an aerial bombardment, St. Joseph’s Hospital was struck and partially destroyed. Mother Biffi was killed beneath the rubble while attempting to assist the wounded. Contemporary reports described the devastation in stark terms. In a circular dated 12 January 1941, Father Ambrogio Poletti (1905–1973) wrote that she had “truly died working,” noting that the bombing caused massive casualties, including many women and children. Estimates suggested that hundreds of civilians may have perished in the attack.⁴⁹ Her death had a profound impact not only on the Canossian congregation but also on the wider Catholic mission in the region. Missionaries interpreted the event as evidence of the Sisters’ commitment to serving the Chinese population even

42 “Suora Italiana Uccisa e Ospedale Distrutto a Weichow,” *Missioni Cattoliche* (1941), 65.

43 The Canossian Archives of Rome (ACR), Vol. 10-VIII, Folder 3 (iii), M. Teresa Zambaldi, “Mother Maria Biffi,” January 20, 1941.

44 Ibid., 5.

45 See Pighin, *Chiesa e Stato in Cina*.

46 M. Teresa Zambaldi, “Amò fino al sacrificio della propria vita,” *Vita*, No. 5 (May 1941): 6–7.

47 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], Vol. 10-VIII, Folder 3 (iii), M. Teresa Zambaldi, “Mother Maria Biffi,” January 20, 1941.

48 Ibid.

49 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], Vol. 10-VIII, Folder 3 (iii), Rev. Ambrogio Poletti, “Mother Maria Biffi,” January 12, 1941.

in the most dangerous circumstances. At the same time, it highlighted the vulnerability of missionary institutions operating in war zones. Shortly afterward, Bishop Enrico Pascal Valtorta (1883–1951) traveled to Huizhou to escort the four surviving Sisters back to Hong Kong. In the months that followed, the worsening war situation eventually forced the closure of the Huizhou mission house.⁵⁰

From a historical perspective, the life and death of Mother Biffi illuminate several broader dynamics of Catholic missionary activity in wartime China. Her leadership demonstrates how women religious exercised significant administrative and humanitarian responsibilities within institutions formally governed by male ecclesiastical authority. At the same time, her work illustrates the expanding role of missionary medicine and education as central instruments of Catholic presence in Chinese society. More broadly, Biffi's career reflects the ways in which female missionaries navigated overlapping structures of power—colonial administration, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and local social networks. Through their management of schools, hospitals, and charitable programs, women religious such as Biffi occupied positions of practical authority that often exceeded the formal limits assigned to them within Church structures. Her experience therefore provides a valuable lens through which to examine the gendered dynamics of missionary leadership, the intersection of religion and humanitarian service, and the challenges faced by Catholic missions operating within the violent context of the Second World War in East Asia.

FEMALE MISSIONARIES IN OCCUPIED HONG KONG

While Mother Maria Biffi constitutes the central figure of this study, her experience must be understood within the broader context of the Canossian congregation and the network of Catholic women religious operating in wartime China. The outbreak of the Pacific War and the subsequent Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in December 1941 radically altered the social landscape. Tsang emphasizes that during this period, the collapse of British colonial authority forced religious institutions to navigate a highly precarious environment marked by food shortages, hyperinflation, and strict military surveillance.⁵¹ These circumstances illuminate the broader environment in which Biffi and her collaborators

50 Sala, *Storia Delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina. Hong Kong 1860–2000*, 70–71.

51 Steve Yui-Sang Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 120–35.

operated and reveal the strategies, risks, and forms of agency available to Catholic women religious during the Second World War.

On 25 September 1941, the Canossian community received the news that their foundress, Magdalene of Canossa (1774–1835), would soon be beatified in Rome. The announcement was welcomed with enthusiasm within the congregation. Yet the celebrations coincided with an increasingly unstable political climate in East Asia. Only a few months later, on 8 December 1941, Japanese forces launched their attack on Hong Kong following the assault on Pearl Harbor. One Sister later recalled the abrupt transition from anticipation to catastrophe:

Who could have imagined that all hell would break loose in a short time and that we would not even have time to take the decorations off the walls? We were completely unaware of what was going to happen to us. We went to sleep and in our blissful ignorance rested peacefully through the night, the last night of a well-defined phase of our lives, the night during which a new era opened up in front of us.⁵²

Studies carried out by the British Ministry of Defence concluded that it would be very difficult to defend the colony in the event of a Japanese attack, but in the mid-1930s it was nevertheless decided to build fortifications: in particular, the “Gin Drinkers’ Line”, a fortified line of bunkers, trenches and artillery emplacements modeled on the French Maginot Line, was built from 1936 onwards. At the outbreak of the Second World War, given the need to concentrate its forces in Europe and North Africa, the decision was made to reduce the Hong Kong garrison to a purely symbolic presence. In September 1941, however, at the suggestion of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, commander-in-chief of the British Far East Command, it was decided that an increase in forces in Hong Kong would have the dual effect of acting as a military deterrent to the Japanese, while at the same time reassuring the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) of British intentions to maintain an anti-

52 Sala, *Storia delle Missioni Canossiane in Cina: Hong Kong 1860–2000*, Vol. II, 76.

Japanese presence there.⁵³

The Japanese attack began on 8 December, 1941, just a few hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁵⁴ The Japanese immediately secured air superiority with a twelve-bomber raid on Kai Tak airfield, destroying four of the five military aircraft stationed there and almost all civilian aircraft on the ground. The British ground forces decided to withdraw from the Sham Chun River, marking the land border of the colony, to deploy the three battalions of the Kowloon Brigade along the heights of the Gin Drinkers' Line. However, this defensive line was quickly broken through at the Shing Mun redoubt on the morning of 10 December, and on the next day the evacuation of Kowloon itself began, under continuous Japanese air and artillery bombardment.⁵⁵

For the Catholic missionary community, the situation was particularly complex. Japan was allied with Italy, while Hong Kong remained a British colony under attack. Italian missionaries, therefore, occupied an ambiguous political position. On the one hand, their nationality associated them with a power allied to Japan; on the other, their long-standing presence in the British colony and their humanitarian activities made their status uncertain. During the wartime emergency, the "ambiguous political position" of the Sisters required a sophisticated navigation of local sovereignty. Following Pighin's analysis of Church-State dynamics, the Canossian institutions functioned as neutral yet politically significant spaces where the Church's international character met the rigid demands of wartime military governance.⁵⁶ The ambiguous status of Italian missionaries—allies of Japan but operating in British spheres—highlights what Pieragastini describes as the inherent tension between missionary religious identity and the geopolitical interests of their home nations. In this context, the Sisters' primary loyalty to the local Chinese community served as a vital shield

53 Oliver Lindsay and John R. Harris, *The Battle for Hong Kong, 1941–1945: Hostage to Fortune* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005); John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

54 For a detailed history on the Battle of Hong Kong, see Benjamin Lai and Giuseppe Rava, *Hong Kong, 1941–45: First Strike in the Pacific War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014); Tony Banham, *Not the Slightest Chance: The Defense of Hong Kong, 1941* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China, and the Japanese Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Lindsay and Harris, *The Battle for Hong Kong, 1941–1945*; Gao Tianqiang 高添強, *Xianggang rizhan shiqi* 香港日佔時期 [Hong Kong during the Japanese Occupation] (Hong Kong: Trinity Bookstore, 1995).

55 Lai and Rava, *Hong Kong, 1941–45*, 37–38.

56 See Pighin, *Chiesa e Stato in Cina*.

against both British and Japanese suspicions.⁵⁷ Contemporary reports describe how refugees increasingly sought shelter in missionary institutions during the early days of the invasion:

[...] The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception have been alerted to move to La Salle School, where they will work as nurses. [...] More and more of our pupils are coming to us to seek shelter at St. Mary's in case of danger. Entire families are asking for the same favor. It is a continuous procession of refugees with their luggage. [...] During the afternoon, bad news arrived: all the missionaries were arrested by the police, except the monsignor. No one knows where they have been taken.⁵⁸

As the fighting intensified, missionary institutions became spaces of refuge for civilians fleeing bombardment. At the same time, missionaries themselves faced increasing uncertainty. Reports circulated that many foreign missionaries had been arrested or detained by the authorities, contributing to an atmosphere of anxiety and confusion within religious communities. The Japanese offensive continued until 25 December, when Japanese troops penetrated a British field hospital at St. Stephen's College in Stanley, torturing and murdering more than sixty wounded soldiers there. That same afternoon, with the situation reaching the limit of resistance, British officers and Governor Young signed the surrender deed at the Japanese Headquarters on the third floor of the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong.⁵⁹ The battle for Hong Kong lasted eighteen intense days. It was the first time the British crown colony surrendered to an invading force during the Second World War.⁶⁰ The capitulation of the British to Japanese authority on Christmas Day meant, at least for a short time, the end of the bombing.

Within this environment, Catholic women religious had to adapt rapidly to new conditions. The experience of the Sisters of the Precious Blood illustrates the constraints imposed on missionary institutions during the occupation. Many of the Chinese Sisters had previously been engaged in missionary work in rural areas and were forced to remain

57 See Pieragastini, "Colonialism, Imperialism, and Relations with Local Powers: China."

58 Sala, *Storia delle missioni Canossiane in Cina: Hong Kong 1860–2000*, Vol. II, 79.

59 Lai and Rava, *Hong Kong, 1941–45*, 79.

60 Ko Tim Keung and Jason Wordie, *Ruins of War: A Guide to Hong Kong's Battlefields and Wartime Sites* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co., 1996), 41.

in the villages where they had been stationed when the invasion occurred.⁶¹ Schools run by the congregation were closed after the Japanese occupation, and only in May 1942 was Tack Ching Girls' Middle School permitted to reopen within the premises of the Motherhouse. Even then, it remained the only educational institution authorized to operate under the administration of the Chinese Sisters. The collaboration between Italian Canossians and Chinese sisters was central to the mission's success. Zhang argues that local sisters acted as indispensable cultural bridges, allowing foreign orders to navigate the complexities of Chinese social norms. This partnership created a unique feminine missionary space that was often more resilient and better integrated into the local community than the male-led ecclesiastical structures.⁶²

Within the restricted environment of the convent, the Sisters reorganized their activities. Responsibilities that had previously been distributed among a larger staff were now assumed directly by members of the religious community. Sisters served as principals, teachers, and spiritual guides for the students who remained under their care. Although the occupation severely limited resources and freedom of movement, the convent continued to function as an important center of education and religious formation. The school remained active throughout the occupation, sustained largely through the labor and financial sacrifices of the Sisters themselves.⁶³

The disruption of communication networks further complicated the situation. Contact with the Apostolic Delegation and other missionary centers was largely interrupted, leaving many communities isolated. Only occasional messages transmitted through organizations such as the Red Cross provided fragments of information about the situation of missionaries in other regions. One letter from Mother Bellocchio describes the anxiety produced by this silence:

[...] From Chengchow (Hanzhong), I heard months ago. [...] the three Italian bishops of Honan, Mons. Calza, Mons. Bassi and Mons. Massa with all their Clergy had been interned, and their conditions were simply frightful. Our sisters

61 For the history of the Chinese Sisters of the Precious Blood, see Cindy Yik-yi Chu, *The Chinese Sisters of the Precious Blood and the Evolution of the Catholic Church* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

62 See Zhang, "Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Local and Foreign Sisters and Gender Relations," 1–37.

63 Chu, *The Chinese Sisters of the Precious Blood and the Evolution of the Catholic Church*, 102–03.

expected to follow the same fate. From Hankow also complete silence, except for a 25 words message received through the Red Cross [...] The Canossian family in Hong Kong and Kowloon a total of 490 souls between religious and orphans, invalids, blind, and babies of the Holy Infancy, are living for the time being on the savings we had in the Banks.⁶⁴

The wartime destruction of infrastructure further restricted the Sisters' activities. Bombing during the siege damaged several buildings belonging to the Canossian institutions in Hong Kong. The houses on Robinson Road were partially destroyed, and the hospital at Canossa was completely demolished. As a result, the Sisters were forced to concentrate their remaining activities in three locations on Hong Kong Island: Caine Road, Wanchai, and the Sacred Heart Children's Hospital on High Street.

The experiences of individual Sisters reveal the practical strategies through which women religious attempted to protect the vulnerable populations entrusted to them. One example is Mother Maria Mari (1868–1942), who had been transferred in 1937 to serve as local superior at the Shaukiwan orphanage in eastern Hong Kong. When war broke out, she suddenly found herself responsible for a community of Chinese orphans without guidance from the regional house and with limited access to resources. As the situation deteriorated, she organized the evacuation of the children and the Sisters under her care. The group was transported by truck toward Stanley, passing through several military checkpoints along the way. The presence of orphaned children and women religious appears to have played an important role in securing the cooperation of the soldiers. After reaching the Carmelite monastery, the community found temporary refuge within the convent. Yet even there the threat of military intrusion remained. Accounts describe how Mother Mari confronted Japanese soldiers who entered the premises, explaining that the Sisters were responsible for vulnerable children and appealing to the soldiers' sense of restraint.⁶⁵ Through a combination of courage, negotiation, and symbolic authority as a religious woman, she succeeded in preventing further intimidation of the children.

Other Sisters also adapted to the harsh conditions of occupation. Mother Amalia

64 M. Vincenzina Bellocchio, Letter, 14 August 1942, Archivio della Nunziatura in Cina, AAV, b. 201, fasc. 492, ff. 185.

65 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], Mother Maria Mari, "Mother Maria Mari," 1946, 23–24.

Fumagalli (1899–1955), who had been working at the Shaukiwan house since 1938, continued caring for groups of orphaned girls despite the collapse of normal institutional structures. When Mother Mari's health deteriorated and she was recalled to the regional house, Fumagalli remained with a smaller group of orphans in order to prevent the convent from being requisitioned by the military authorities.⁶⁶

The experience of Mother Justina Siachongko (1879–1962), a Filipino Sister, illustrates another dimension of missionary adaptation. As food shortages intensified, she took responsibility for raising chickens and rabbits in order to sustain the community. Her nationality and distinctive appearance allowed her to obtain limited permission to move outside the convent in search of food. On one occasion, when confronted by Japanese soldiers who questioned her presence, she reportedly invoked the name of Mussolini in an attempt to demonstrate her affiliation with a country allied with Japan. Although initially marked by misunderstanding and language barriers, her interactions with local soldiers gradually developed into a pragmatic relationship. By providing eggs and rabbits, she gained a small degree of freedom of movement that allowed her to support both the convent and nearby institutions.⁶⁷ These episodes reveal the complex and often ambiguous relationship between the Japanese military authorities and Christian communities in occupied Hong Kong. While Japanese soldiers frequently intervened in the functioning of churches and religious institutions, the regime also allowed a limited degree of autonomy in certain circumstances. This relative tolerance may have been influenced by the authorities' desire to avoid alienating segments of the local population that maintained connections with foreign powers or with influential social networks.⁶⁸ Within this environment, the symbolic status of women religious could occasionally function as a protective resource. The image of the Sisters as caregivers for orphans and the sick often elicited a degree of respect or restraint from soldiers and officials. By strategically invoking their religious identity and emphasizing their humanitarian role, the Sisters were sometimes able to secure limited protection for the communities under their care.

Compared to other contemporary congregations, such as the Maryknoll Sisters, the

66 Garrè, M. Vittoria. The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], ff. 3, Obituary "Mother Amalia Fumagalli" (Hong Kong), 29 September 1955.

67 The Canossian Archives of Rome [A.C.R.], ff. 8–9, Obituary "Mother Giustina Siachongko," n.d.

68 Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, "Church and State in Japanese-Occupied Hong Kong," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2018): 5.

Canossian response to the Japanese occupation was defined by a strategic refusal to evacuate. This decision solidified their moral authority. Their ability to maintain schools and hospitals under surveillance demonstrates a unique form of "spiritual endurance" that allowed them to navigate the demands of both the Japanese military and the local Chinese community simultaneously.⁶⁹

The experiences of the Canossian Sisters in occupied Hong Kong therefore highlight the ways in which female missionaries responded to war through resilience, practical adaptation, and negotiation. Despite displacement, scarcity of resources, and limited communication with the broader Church, they continued to maintain schools, hospitals, and orphanages while navigating complex relationships with military authorities. Their activities reveal how women religious exercised forms of leadership that combined spiritual authority with pragmatic strategies of survival, enabling them to protect vulnerable populations and sustain missionary institutions in one of the most turbulent periods of Hong Kong's history.

CONCLUSION

The disruption of global communication networks during the Second World War profoundly affected Catholic missionary institutions in China. Correspondence between the missions and the broader Church resumed only in 1945, after years of isolation and uncertainty. In the meantime, many missionary regions experienced devastation. In Hubei, for example, the mission suffered near destruction during the final phase of the war. The first major air raid on Wuhan, on 12 December 1943, resulted in the deaths of four Canossian Sisters—Carolina Zoia, Anna Trombini, Maddalena Zandonai, and Maria Brambilla—together with the bishop and an elderly Chinese priest, Father Liao. Repeated bombings destroyed hospitals, schools, and mission buildings, while missionaries endured harassment, surveillance, and coercion from both local authorities and occupying forces. By 1944 many missionaries had effectively become prisoners, subjected to strict monitoring and relocation, and in some cases confined in facilities that functioned as concentration camps.

Despite these severe constraints, the Canossian Sisters continued their work wherever

69 Cindy Yik-yi Chu, *The Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, 1921–1969: In Love with the Chinese* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 85–102; R. G. Tiedemann, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, Vol. 2, 639–45; Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, 125–38.

possible. Medical care, education, and charitable assistance remained central to their activities, often sustained with the support of local collaborators. When hostilities ended, surviving Sisters gradually returned to devastated missions in Zhengxian, Luoyang, and South Henan. There they encountered destroyed buildings, shortages of food, and interrupted communication with their regional superiors. Nevertheless, they slowly resumed charitable and educational initiatives, rebuilding schools and caring for vulnerable populations. Some institutions, however, remained under local administration, and the long-term viability of the missions became increasingly uncertain. Ultimately, the Hubei mission was definitively closed in 1951, marking the end of the Canossian presence in that region of the Chinese Mainland.

The history of the Canossian Sisters in the Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong illustrates the complex roles played by female missionaries within the intersecting contexts of colonial governance, cultural encounter, and wartime upheaval. Through the establishment of schools, orphanages, hospitals, and dispensaries, the Sisters promoted forms of social and moral development that targeted populations frequently marginalized within existing social structures, particularly women and children. Their activities demonstrate that missionary work extended far beyond strictly religious instruction, encompassing education, healthcare, and social welfare.

Within this broader framework, the life and mission of Mother Maria Anselma Ermenegilda Biffi offer a particularly revealing perspective on female missionary leadership. Her trajectory—from her early formation to her service as Superior of St. Joseph's Hospital in Huizhou—reflects the ways in which women religious assumed significant responsibilities within missionary institutions. Biffi combined spiritual authority with administrative competence, overseeing the development of hospitals, catechumenates, and charitable initiatives that served both local Catholic communities and the wider Chinese population. Her leadership also required navigating demanding physical conditions and complex institutional responsibilities typically associated with male missionary roles. At the same time, Biffi's experience illustrates the gendered dynamics that shaped Catholic missionary work. Contemporary accounts frequently described her leadership through language that contrasted "masculine" and "feminine" qualities, emphasizing her decisiveness, courage, and capacity for organization alongside her perceived maternal care for the communities under her supervision. Rather than representing a contradiction, this combination of traits reveals how women religious could negotiate and expand the boundaries of female authority within

the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church. In this sense, Biffi's leadership embodied a flexible form of religious authority capable of responding to the practical demands of missionary life.

The wartime experiences of the Canossian Sisters in Hong Kong further illuminate the broader context within which Biffi's work must be understood. Following Italy's entry into the war, the Sisters initially found themselves restricted and monitored as enemy nationals within a British colony. After the Japanese invasion, they faced a new set of challenges, including displacement, shortages of essential resources, and the need to interact with unfamiliar military authorities. In these circumstances, the Sisters employed a range of pragmatic strategies to maintain their institutions and protect those in their care. Accounts of encounters with both British and Japanese authorities demonstrate how women religious mobilized their gendered and religious identities to negotiate space for their activities. By emphasizing their roles as caregivers responsible for orphans, patients, and students, they were sometimes able to secure limited protections or permissions that allowed them to continue operating schools and hospitals. These interactions highlight how missionary women functioned as intermediaries between local communities and political authorities, navigating complex colonial and military structures. The experiences of individual Sisters such as Mother Maria Mari, Mother Amalia Fumagalli, and Mother Justina Siachongko illustrate the diverse strategies adopted in response to wartime conditions. Whether organizing the evacuation of orphanages, maintaining educational programs under occupation, or securing food supplies for isolated communities, these women demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. Their actions reveal how missionary work required not only spiritual commitment but also practical problem-solving and negotiation within highly volatile environments.

Mother Biffi's death during the bombing of St. Joseph's Hospital in Huizhou underscores the profound risks faced by missionary women during the war. Her decision to remain with the hospital community during air raids reflects a deep sense of ethical responsibility toward the patients and residents under her care. At the same time, her death symbolizes the broader vulnerability of missionary institutions caught within the violence of global conflict. Archival sources—including memoirs, correspondence, and institutional records—highlight both the personal sacrifices of individual missionaries and the collective resilience of the religious communities to which they belonged. In line with Zhang's analysis of gender relations in the East Asian Church, Mother Biffi's leadership demonstrates how women

religious utilized their social and medical roles to achieve a degree of institutional power that was both recognized by the local authorities and essential to the Church's survival during the war.⁷⁰

Taken together, the experiences of Mother Biffi and the Canossian Sisters contribute to a broader understanding of the historical significance of women religious in twentieth-century China. The resilience of the Canossian Sisters during the conflict illustrates the shift toward institutional stability and humanitarian service that Yates identifies as crucial for the survival of missions in the face of twentieth-century nationalism and total war.⁷¹ Their activities demonstrate that women missionaries were not merely auxiliary figures within Catholic expansion but active agents who exercised leadership, managed institutions, and shaped local social networks. By integrating spiritual formation with educational and medical initiatives, they created spaces in which religious, humanitarian, and social objectives intersected. The Canossian mission thus reveals how Catholic women religious navigated the intersections of gender, colonial politics, and wartime disruption. Through resilience, adaptability, and strategic negotiation, they sustained institutions that provided education, healthcare, and spiritual support to diverse communities. Their legacy highlights the enduring impact of female missionary leadership and offers important insights into the broader history of Catholic missions in modern China.

70 Zhang, "Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Women in the Chinese Catholic Church: Local and Foreign Sisters and Gender Relations," 1–37.

71 Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*.

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戰爭時期（1937—1945）香港及中國內地的 天主教女傳教士：嘉諾撒仁愛修女會 與比菲修女的個案研究

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摘要 本文以嘉諾撒仁愛修女會（Canossian Daughters of Charity）為研究重點，審視抗日戰爭時期（1937–1945）華南地區天主教女性傳教士的領導力與主體性。儘管在男性主導的教會等級體制下運作，女性修會成員在戰時的教育、醫療保健及人道主義援助中發揮了至關重要的作用。通過對惠州的比菲修女（Mother Maria Anselma Biffi, 1884–1941）的傳記式研究，以及對日據時期香港嘉諾撒修會活動的分析，本研究探討女性宗教權威如何在制度限制與戰爭動盪中進行協商與實踐。文中利用羅馬嘉諾撒修會檔案館、梵蒂岡宗座檔案館及萬民福音傳播部歷史檔案館的檔案材料——包括教務報告、書信和照片，指出修女不僅僅扮演了天主教傳教事業的輔助性角色，而是核心的體制領導者。她們的活動突顯了女性傳教士的領導力如何在天主教靈性、性別化預期、殖民糾葛以及戰時人道主義服務的交織下形成。

關鍵詞 天主教女性 嘉諾撒修女 比菲修女 婦女差傳機構 中國教務 抗日戰爭

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