

# A HISTORY OF DEVOTION TO OUR BLESSED MOTHER OF SHESHAN

*Editor's Note: Among pilgrimage sites in China, Sheshan holds primary place. The Church on top of Sheshan hill was the first designated basilica in the Far East. Although the building suffered much damage during the Cultural Revolution, it has now been completely restored. This article is an extract from the book Feasts in Honor of Mary by Chen Baixi.*

The years 1860-63 marked a period of great distress for the churches of eastern China. In order to escape the turmoil of the Taiping uprising, some foreign missionaries gradually began to re-assemble around the Shanghai churches of Xujiahui and Dongjiadu. Many of them were in poor health which was only exacerbated by their journeys, and several missionaries died. On February 5, 1863 at the Catholic cemetery a funeral ceremony was carried out at which there were eleven coffins, those of five priests and six Brothers. Observing this phenomenon, the Jesuit Superior purchased part of the hill at Sheshan, and there erected a building to serve as a place of rest and recreation for the members of the Society.

In 1866 Sheshan fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the dean of the Songjiang district. In 1867 the dean built a small hexagonal pavilion at Sheshan and placed there a picture of the Blessed Mother painted by a Chinese Brother. He named it, "Mary, Help of Christians". On March 1, 1868 the bishop of Shanghai came to Sheshan to bless the pavilion dedicated to Mary. Between two and three thousand clergy and laity participated in the dedication ceremony, which marked the first public act of devotion to the Blessed Mother of Sheshan.

On June 21, 1870 an anti-foreign incident took place in Tianjin during which some missionaries died and a church was burnt down. Some young activists in Shanghai were of a mind to imitate the Tianjin incident. Magistrate Du of Shanghai added fuel to the fire by telling a crowd that there was a band of people in the area who plucked out the eyes and internal organs of children to make medicine. Of course, he meant the missionaries. It really looked like a persecution was imminent. The missionaries were afraid even to go out of doors for fear of becoming involved in some unforeseen event. At that time the Bishop was in Rome attending the First Vatican Council. As Vicar General of the diocese, the Jesuit Superior called an urgent meeting of the missionaries during which he suggested that a promise be made to God in the name of

all the Catholics in eastern China that if the church escaped persecution, the Catholics would build a church in honor of Our Blessed Mother on Sheshan hill. All the Jesuits gladly agreed to this proposal. So on July 4, 1870 the superior went to Sheshan, and before Our Lady's pavilion proclaimed this solemn promise.

Two or three days later, the magistrate of Suzhou and some Shanghai officials paid the superior a visit. They announced that Magistrate Du, previously critical of the missionaries, had now adopted a more civil attitude. And what's more, he denounced the violence that had taken place in Tianjin. He vowed that he would do all in his power to preserve social order in Shanghai, and not allow any disturbances to take place. Seeing this as an answer to their prayers, the Catholics fulfilled their promise and in a short time erected a church at Sheshan. Since the church was built half way up Sheshan hill, it was named "mid-mountain" church.

On June 24, 1924 a solemn ceremony was held in Shanghai's Xujiahui cathedral to mark the close of the first synod of the Chinese Catholic bishops. In the presence of all the synodal bishops, Archbishop Celso Costantini, the apostolic delegate, entrusted China to the protection of the Blessed Mother. On the following day, Archbishop Costantini led a group of 15 bishops and 10 priests to Sheshan, and there offered the same prayer again.

On September 16, 1935 Archbishop Zanin, the second representative of the Holy See to China, at the head of a group of bishops and clergy and lay members of Catholic Action again dedicated China to the protective care of the Blessed Mother at Sheshan.

In 1942 when China was suffering the ravages of World War II, Pope Pius XII specially designated the Church of Our Lady at Sheshan as a basilica as a sign of encouragement to the Chinese Catholics. Sheshan became a basilica similar to the one at Lourdes in France. It was the first basilica in East Asia.

On May 8, 1946 the Holy See bestowed a further honor on Sheshan. Bishop Haouisee of Shanghai was given permission to carry out a coronation ceremony for Our Lady of Sheshan. The ceremony was performed on May 18 of the following year with the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Riberi, Archbishop Paul Yubin and Bishop Haouisee officiating. About 60,000 bishops, priests, religious and laity attended the ceremony, during which, Archbishop Riberi, on behalf of all China's Catholics, again offered the country to the protection of the Blessed Mother. The coronation ceremony took place in the new basilica on the top of Sheshan hill.