

1976

Midwest China Oral History Interviews

Donalda Terhaar

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Terhaar, Donalda, "Midwest China Oral History Interviews" (1976). *China Oral Histories*. Book 78.
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DONALDA TERHAAR
ORAL HISTORY ABSTRACT

BORN: New Munich, Minnesota, 1900.

EARLY LIFE: education; selected to represent Benedictine Order at
University of Peking (Fu Jen).

CHINA EXPERIENCES: how the University of Peking (Fu Jen) originated;
first impressions of China; language school experience; Christianity
at the University of Peking; Benedictines give up the university;
response of Chinese to nuns and Christianity; value of China
experience.

INTERVIEWER: Sarah Refo Mason

DATE: 11-8-76

PLACE: St. Joseph, Minnesota

NUMBER OF PAGES: 40

+ Complementary archival and museum material from Donalda Terhaar is also
housed in the Midwest China Oral History, Archives, and Museum Collection.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: I wonder if we could begin with a description of your early life and how you began to enter the Benedictine Order.

TERHAAR: I came from a small town, New Munich, Minnesota, a village which had no high school. As my sisters and I finished grade school, Dad sent us to St. Benedict's Academy to get our high school. Here I became acquainted with the Sisters and their mode of life, which I learned to esteem highly. After graduation, I decided to return to St. Benedict's as a postulant to prepare myself for entrance into the community, and in 1922 I entered the novitiate. I started my teaching career at St. Mary's in St. Cloud, where I taught a fourth grade class for one year. Then I was recalled to St. Benedict's to help in the high school with teaching and prefecting while I continued my college education. I was there for several years and thought that was where I would remain. I was not looking forward to any big change until Father Francis Clougherty came from the Catholic University of Peking and talked to the community about the Chinese missions. Then things changed.

I: Do you want to tell about Father Clougherty's asking for missionaries?

TERHAAR: Yes, he talked in the assembly to all the Sisters. He spoke with enthusiasm about the great work the Benedictine

Fathers were doing with the young men at the Catholic University of Peiping. (Nanking--southern capital--was at that time the capital of China, and Peking--northern capital--changed its name to Peiping or northern peace.) Father Clougherty lamented the fact that the university was reaching only the young men and told us of the great need for a companion school to teach Christian principles to the young women of China. He painted a glowing picture of possible results--future educated Chinese Christian families that could spread their influence throughout the country. He appealed for just a few qualified Sisters to undertake this work, which would be under the auspices and administration of the university. Naturally, the Sisters were greatly impressed and felt honored to be asked to take up foreign mission work.

Mother Louisa Walz and her council agreed that the community was able to spare several sisters to undertake this work, but financially we would have to rely on charitable donations. We had just erected a 2,000,000 dollar hospital and the debt was staggering. The Bishop of St. Cloud promised to help from the parishes of his diocese. Then Mother Louisa announced that those who wanted to go could volunteer. Since enthusiasm was high and practically everyone talked of going, I said, "If everyone else goes, I'm going to stay back and take care of the place here.

After all, somebody has to stay home." But then Mother Louisa told us to make a novena to the Holy Spirit; at the end of the novena, we were to let her know whether we were going to volunteer or not. So I made the novena. During that time I decided that since this was a mission to start a school for girls to enter the university, those who went would have to be more or less prepared with an academic degree. Since there was really nothing to impede my going, I had better sign up for the mission. I handed in my name. Time went on, and on March 21, which is the Feast of St. Benedict, Mother Louisa called Sister Francetta Vetter in the morning and asked her to be the leader of the group to go to China. That afternoon she called me and asked me to go with Sister Francetta. We were the first two appointees for the mission. Out of nearly 135 volunteers, Mother chose six of us, five with degrees in home economics, English, history, math and foreign languages; and the sixth, a cook and home-maker.

I: Before we go to China, would you talk a little bit about the Benedictine Order and what the vows were that you took?

TERHAAR: The Benedictine is an old monastic order. We take the vows that other communities take of poverty, chastity and obedience, but we add two other vows to that:

the vow of stability, which means we will stay with the community to which we made our vows, and the vow of conversion of morals which means we will continue to strive for perfection.

I: Would you explain how this University of Peking was set up by different Benedictine abbeys and priories. Was it a complicated system?

TERHAAR: Around 1920 two Catholic Chinese lay men, Vincent Ying and Chen Yuan, were so greatly interested in higher education and especially in good moral training for Chinese youth that they appealed to Rome to authorize the founding of a Catholic university in China and asked the American Benedictines to undertake this work. The request came to the Benedictines at St. Vincent's Archabbey, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1924. The following year the university was established by Archabbot Aurelius Stehle and Dr. George Barry O'Toole, an Oblate of St. Benedict, who was teaching philosophy and moral theology at St. Vincent's. Dr. O'Toole became the rector, and Chen Yuan remained as chancellor of the university. Besides hiring Chinese professors to staff the university, Dr. O'Toole recruited faculty members from the various Benedictine abbeys in the United States and Father Adelbert Gressnig, a Belgian architect, to come and design the main building for the university campus.

This beautiful complex had just recently been finished when we, the Sisters, arrived in the fall of 1930. The Fathers gave us, for our use, a complex about two blocks down the street from the main university. Here we lived while we studied Chinese and did some individual teaching. Since part of the stipulation before our accepting the mission had been that we would not be responsible for the financial upkeep of the school, we felt no obligations toward the university. The contributions from home paid for our living expenses. However, this was at the beginning of the great depression, and money was very hard to come by.

I: Can you give me a little idea of where the students came from geographically?

TERHAAR: I think the students, the boys, were from all parts of China and some from elsewhere. In fact, I remember one of the Fathers telling us about some Chinese from Hawaii sitting under his window singing all kinds of songs about those "Chinks." The Mainland Chinese would never call themselves "Chinks." We had only about 60 students when we started our girls' school. They were from Peiping, Tientsin, Hangchow, but mainly right from the city.

I: What were your initial impressions of China? How did it differ from what you had anticipated?

TERHAAR: My impression of China changed drastically. All I had ever heard of China was that the people were poor and starving, that they "did away with" their girl-babies, and that life was drab and ugly. What a revelation, then, when the ship docked in the harbor of the large city of Tientsin, where we spent the night in a large mission station. From there we went by train to Peiping. There Father Oswald Baker met us at the station, took us through the Customs, and then brought us to our compound in the university car. This walled-in compound was typical of a middle-class Chinese home. "Chang" our gate-boy, welcomed us effusively in Chinese (which we didn't understand) and Father Oswald showed us our living quarters-- little buildings around two patios. Everything was quaint and different, primitive but interesting and attractive. The city, as we soon found out, was large and very beautiful. The interest of its historic places and monuments could never be exhausted. The foreign embassies had their own attractions, and the main business section had large stores where one could buy almost anything. These were the Imperial and Tartar sections of the city. The Chinese city was beyond these sections: first, street after street of colorful shops, and then finally the section where the poor lived. It is true, there were some poor hovels along the streets elsewhere, but mostly, people's homes are walled in and you do not see what lies beyond these walls.

The girls that came to our school later were all dressed in a common uniform and they were all clean and

neat. As for the unwanted babies, there was a French community of Sisters in the city who had an orphanage. They said occasionally they did find a basket with a baby girl on their doorstep, but they felt they came mainly from families who could not afford to feed and care for them. Those parents knew the child would be cared for by the Sisters.

I: Would you please describe your language school experience?

TERHAAR: We did not attend the regular language school in the city, because we were told Sisters had never gone there before. Also there were six of us who wanted to learn the language so it was more convenient (even if, in the end, it was not so efficient) to have one teacher from the school come to our home. He brought along some of the language sheets they used at the school. Instead of giving us the characters, they gave us the words in Romanization-- a spelling out of the pronunciation. The teacher would say the word and we would have to imitate the sound and learn its meaning. Then he would give us some words and ask us to try to use them or try to answer his questions. What we learned was the Mandarin Chinese, the speech of the educated. This is relatively simple, since some of the southern dialects have as many as seven or eight sounds or

intonations while the Mandarin has only four. Even that was hard enough for us. One has to catch the right pitch and interpret according to the way it is used. We could tell that this was a natural problem because we would sometimes see two Chinese talking and writing the character in their hand with their finger to let the other see what he was saying. We never learned enough to be that proficient. Sometimes it could be quite funny when we were starting. I remember one day when the teacher asked us to tell him something. I made a statement very confidently, only to have him laughingly say, "No, no, no!" I had wanted to say, "I am sitting on a chair." Instead I said, "I am sitting on soap."

I: Was this pretty discouraging? Or did you feel pretty confident about it?

TERHAAR: I don't know exactly how much progress we made, but it did come down to that we were able to communicate with the students both in class and outside of it. Naturally, our aim was to teach them English. Therefore we would be speaking in English most of the time, but very often they would answer us in Chinese. The intercourse, then, was in the two languages, partly Chinese and partly English, because the girls were shy about speaking English until they felt a bit more safe with it.

I: Maybe we can get back to a few questions about the university itself. This was back when the universities were registered with the Chinese government, so it was not allowed to have any religious courses. Were the religious instruction and the church services quite separate?

TERHAAR: I don't think that the university curriculum had religion in it, but we could have instruction, or we could teach what we wanted to outside of the regular hours.

I: And were church services well attended by the students?

TERHAAR: No, this was a voluntary matter. Most of the students were pagan. They came to us because they knew we were Americans, and they wanted to learn English. Only four of the 20 students who lived in our dormitory were Catholic. They came to our little chapel with us for Mass when they wanted to. They could also attend services at other churches in the city.

I: Were there any programs to try to convert students or other people?

TERHAAR: Not in the beginning. Our primary purpose was to get them familiar with us and to establish a relationship of trust. Our church services, at that time, were all in Latin; there was neither English nor Chinese. Since

we were there to establish a girls' university, we thought we would gain most by letting them come to know us, to become aware of our ideals, our aspirations, our love of God and neighbor put into action. Then if they became interested in our religion, they would come to faith on their own accord. Our school in Peiping was in existence only three years, and during the third year the girls heard that we were not staying after the school year was over. So, although there was interest in our religion, they were not inclined to make any change. Therefore, there were no actual conversions then.

I: I wonder if you could say something about the acceptance of nuns in China where the family organization was so strong and how a Chinese woman related to you.

TERHAAR: In Peking, people were used to sisters. The Sisters of Charity had a big orphanage for more than 1,000 children. Not far from us there was a school staffed by the Franciscan Sisters for the children of Chinese diplomats. There was also a large hospital run by a French Order of Sisters. So the Sisters were a common sight in the city. I think people took our life-style for granted. But I heard a story about the Sisters of Providence who were the first American group that went to China, to Kaifeng. There at least the dress was a curiosity. The Bishop had pre-

pared two Chinese girls to live with them and help them get acquainted. The sisters would occasionally feel their habits pulled up in the back. The girls were investigating to see if the sisters wore trousers under their habit. Because in the interior the Chinese women all wore trousers and a jacket, these girls wanted to see if the Sisters also had trousers. It wasn't quite right if they didn't.

I: Could you explain why the Benedictines gave up the mission at the University?

TERHAAR: It was entirely financial. The Benedictines had put up the large university building at considerable expense; they had rented the property of a former Mongolian prince for the girls' school, which we were supposed to help pay for and couldn't; and they had to pay the salaries of the Chinese teachers for both schools. It was an enormous undertaking, and the monasteries here in the United States--especially during those years of depression--were not equipped to take care of it. The Benedictines, not being a missionary community, did not get the help from Rome that a number of other societies were getting. So they felt they could not continue. Then the Holy Father gave the University to the Society of the Divine Word, who are a missionary community. This society had been getting its regular support from Rome as well as part of the annual

missionary collections from the United States. They were better equipped to carry on this work. The Benedictine Fathers who had worked in China came from various abbeys. No single abbey could take care of the University financially, and there was no single authority to specify what each of the abbeys was to contribute.

I: The fact that the Benedictine communities are autonomous did, then, contribute to the problems.

TERHAAR: That's right. Both the Fathers and the Sisters deeply regretted giving up the work. They had loved working with the students and the teachers and would have enjoyed continuing.

I: The Benedictine community answers to no one. Is that right?

TERHAAR: Every community answers to Rome, but each community that is autonomous takes care of its own affairs. To take on other outside obligations is a bit difficult.

I: What is the kind of direction that comes from Rome?

TERHAAR: Merely the regulations that are given to the church all over.

I: Did the university have a particular goal in its education of these students? Did they go into certain kinds of professions or religious work?

TERHAAR: Not necessarily. In 1933 when the Benedictine Fathers left, the University included schools of arts, sciences, and education. It had approximately 100 faculty members and 1,100 students. The religious element was mainly to give them ideas about the Catholic religion and moral training. As I mentioned before, Father Clougherty's contention was that the boys were getting good moral training, but he felt this would not be effective unless there were girls getting the same type of training. This would lead to the establishment of good Catholic homes. Unfortunately, we left before this became a reality, and during the years of the war which followed, the students were dispersed so that we could not keep in contact. Hopefully, the education they received helped them in whatever they did later. The girls who came to us, and those who were recommended to us, had just started their high school work. So we started with the upper middle school which, in our terms, is the second, third and fourth year of high school. We started with the second year and added the third and fourth the following years. Each class had between 20 and 30 students. We graduated our first class before we left.

I: And was the work continued then?

TERHAAR: Yes, the work was continued. The Society of Divine Word Fathers had taken over the University when the

Benedictine Fathers left in 1933, and in 1935 when we moved south to Kaifeng, the Holy Ghost Sisters came to Peiping to continue the school for the girls.

I: When the five years had passed, you decided to go home. Did you have regrets about it?

TERHAAR: Yes. But the fact that we had moved away from Peiping to a different location was a big help. Had we remained in the city, I doubt that I would have come back to the States then. Our school was beautifully situated, and the city was most interesting with the Summer Palace, the Winter Palace, the Temple of Heaven, and the Great Wall a short distance away. All these were historically beautiful and really meant a lot. It was hard to leave it all, but I had a lot of bronchial trouble. The doctor had told me I would never overcome that while I stayed in China.

I: Had you made some close Chinese friends? Was it possible to have a close relationship with the Chinese people?

TERHAAR: We were in close contact with our students only. With them we really had quite a close relationship. Besides teaching the English classes, Sister Ronayne and I both had an office in a special little building where we could have our students come for individual help anytime they wanted to. We were busy with somebody all the time,

helping them with their school work or just talking. They told us about their families, or they would bring us little Chinese trifles and tell us what they meant or how they were made. Their main interest, however, was America. They always had questions about what was going on there, how the people lived, or why we did things as we did them. There was an eagerness to know, as there is an eagerness in all Chinese to learn as much as possible. Yes, religion also entered our conversations, but while the girls themselves seemed open enough to accept what we said, we could see that traditional attitudes of fear and superstition in the family would make it extremely difficult--almost impossible--to change. One of our girls who later came to the United States was here for several years before she felt free enough to become a Catholic. This would be true of any Christian religion.

I: Did you feel the other sisters and priests, too, had a respect for the Chinese people and didn't look at them paternalistically? How did they feel about the Chinese people?

TERHAAR: I think the Americans had a great respect for the Chinese. The Chinese, also, I think really respected the priests and the sisters--a very nice relationship.

I: Were there efforts being made that you were conscious of to build a Chinese Catholic church or a Chinese Christian church? Was that one of the important goals that the Benedictines worked for?

TERHAAR: Evangelization was not the primary emphasis of the Benedictines in China. Rather than actual missionary work of conversion, the Benedictines looked upon the establishment of the University as their service to the Chinese community. There was no need to build a Catholic church; it was already established, and the Apostolic Delegate from Rome lived in the city. So missionary work was not the primary emphasis of the Benedictines.

I: What did you do upon returning to the United States?

TERHAAR: The first two years after my return were spent in visiting our schools and in talking to sodality and mission groups about my experiences in China. Our work in Kaifeng, in those years, was with more of the poor people and in giving catechetical instructions, as well as doing individual teaching in English. My aim was to keep the people here interested in our Chinese mission and aware of people less fortunate than we are in this country.

Then I started teaching languages at Cathedral High School in St. Cloud. This I continued for 30 years! Next I had two years of teaching French and Spanish at St. Mary's

High School in Nauvoo, Illinois--a girls' boarding school under the direction of another Benedictine community. It was a pleasant interlude because I returned to Cathedral High School for three more years of teaching before I retired.

I: How do you think the time spent in China has affected your outlook and perspective?

TERHAAR: I can't imagine what my life would have been like without that experience, and I can never thank the Lord sufficiently for granting me this privilege. It gave me a more universal outlook; it broadened my view of life and opened my mind to values beyond the day to day happenings in local areas. I came to appreciate other peoples and other cultures. It has helped me tremendously in my teaching foreign languages and foreign cultures to high school students. I am grateful for my China experience.

I: Thank you, Sister Donalda. Our time together has been short, but we appreciate this introduction to the Benedictine work in China.