

SHI XIANZHI (石獻智) was born on 06 June 1913, in Yangzhou, Jiangsu (China). She was a descendant of Shi Gefa, a loyal and trusted minister of the imperial court during the declining years of the Ming Dynasty. Her father Shi Bushan was the general manager of an electric light bulb factory in the city of Bengbu, Anhui, where Shi and her siblings spent their early childhood.

When Shi turned sixteen, her father enrolled her at Chongzheng Girls' School, a Catholic school operated by the Ursuline Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, a religious congregation founded in Parma (Italy) in 1575. Having been raised in a life of comfort, she resented being placed in a foreign and poor environment and did not hide her ill feelings from the sisters. The delegate of superior general in China, Mo. Maria Assunta Franzelli, noted that she possessed "a proud and disdainful character, tenacious and stubborn in her ideas, unable to accept discipline." However, as the months passed, Shi started to cooperate more with her teachers and excel in her studies. She began to feel attracted to the faith of the sisters and later accepted their invitation to attend catechism classes.



At the end of her second year at Chongzheng, Shi expressed her desire to become a Christian to her father. Shi Bushan reacted vehemently and withdrew her from Chongzheng. He transferred her to Chimin Girls' High School in Shanghai, a school for non-Christians ran by the French sisters of the Society of Helpers. Likewise, in accordance with Chinese patriarchal practice, he arranged her betrothal to a member of the wealthy Cui family of Zhenjiang without informing her.

Her father's action put Shi in a major dilemma. By that time, she was not only determined to become a Christian but also to join the Ursuline Missionaries. On her return to Yangzhou, she found out that the marriage arrangement had already been finalized by her parents. Furthermore, she was reminded that a father's authority could not be defied. However, Shi was resolved that on no account would she accept the arrangement. Her father warned her of the serious and solemn nature of a rupture in an already settled marriage contract, one that would threaten the reputation of both clans. Her father even begged his daughter on his knees to give up her personal preference and agree to the marriage. Distraught, Shi spoke to her mother about her heart's desire. Fortunately for her, she received the approval and consent of her mother on the very eve of her wedding day. She quickly left her home to pursue her own life. On discovering what his daughter had done, her father reacted furiously and publicly disowned her. But to avoid the reproach of the bridegroom's family as well of society at large, he ordered his servants to dig a grave and erect a headstone with this epitaph: "Here lies Shi Xianzhi – died of a sudden illness."

Disinherited and penniless, Shi proceeded to Bengbu where the Ursuline Missionaries took her in. On 15 September 1931, she was baptized with the names Maria Agnes (瑪利雅妮). After completing studies at Chimin in 1934, she participated more earnestly in the educational ministry of the Ursuline Missionaries. On 07 July 1937, on the very day the infamous "Marco Polo Bridge



Incident” brought about the Sino-Japanese War, Shi boarded what was to be the last Italian mail steamer to leave China for Europe to begin her novitiate at the congregation’s motherhouse in Parma.

Not long after professing her first vows on 25 March 1940, Shi received the summons to return to China. In 1941, she passed the entrance examination at Fujen Catholic University in Beijing. She graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Chinese literature in 1945. By that time, the Ursuline Missionaries had established Xinxin Girls’ High School in Xuzhou, Jiangsu, and the congregational leadership appointed Shi as its headmistress. She carried out her duties with the greatest zeal and effectiveness.



In 1951, the Ursuline schools in Bengbu and Xuzhou were taken over by the Communists and placed under government control. That autumn, all foreign sisters were ordered to leave China. Before leaving, Mo. Franzelli summoned all the Chinese sisters to Bengbu and announced the decision of

their general leadership to appoint Shi as the new delegate superior. Shi accepted this new responsibility in the midst of such difficulty. Working in a harsh and difficult environment, she took care of the other Chinese sisters, directing their life, studies and prayers. In addition, she found ways and means to help young sisters leave China and go to Italy for advanced studies.

In the late evening of 08 September 1955, Abp. Gong Pinmei Ignatius of Shanghai was arrested along with many indigenous priests, religious (including a few Ursuline Missionaries), and lay Catholic leaders. This heralded the beginning of the direct persecution of the Catholic Church in China by Mao Zhedong’s Communist government. Under these trying

circumstances, Shi did her best to provide for the needs of the imprisoned Ursuline Missionaries, supporting them with love in their witness for the faith. On 15 February 1958, a brigade of the People's Police searched the Shanghai house where Shi surreptitiously lived with a few sisters. After sealing the front door of the house, Shi was handcuffed and taken to the Public Safety Department of Hefei, Anhui. She remained silent during much of the interrogation, repeatedly answering any question with "I don't know." She was charged as a counterrevolutionary and imprisoned at Shanghai's already overcrowded Tilanqiao Prison under the name "Criminal no. 144". In September 1959, after one year and seven months in jail, she was transferred to Anhui and brought before a People's Tribunal. She was sentenced with five years of hard labor at the Baihu Farm Settlement. There her identification was changed to "Criminal no. 152".

Conditions were harsh and difficult at the Baihu Farm Settlement. Hu Meiyu Rosa, a Catholic and former inmate of Shi, described the situation there: "This farm covered an extensive area of land, accommodating twelve divisions, each big division containing six teams. The greatest number of prisoners held at the camp ranged from fifty to sixty thousand persons. In 1959, when we first reached the settlement, it did not even contain a proper tent because the settlement had only just been established. All we had by way of housing was a rough straw roof with no surrounding walls, not even a mud wall. As for food, we could only feed off wild grass or wild vegetables: medicine and medical care simply did not exist." Hu also gave an eye-witness testimony of Shi's final months:

During the first few months of our initial labor, I did not have any opportunity at all to talk with Mo. Shi. All I learned from the other Catholics was that she was an Ursuline sister, suffering from a serious case of heart disease. Under the harsh living conditions of that time, she was even then unable to come with us to cut the crops or to plant seedlings. Each time we had finished our work and returned, we would always see her at the entrance of the dining hall picking

vegetables or sweeping the floor. She would frequently prepare for us a container of hot boiled water and hide it under a coverlet, saying, “I only work at home and my work is far lighter than yours. Whenever the dining hall has hot water, I go and ask for a container or otherwise the minute you come home, other people may well push forward and you would lose an opportunity to get any.” A glass of boiled water, especially if it were hot, was regarded at that time as very precious. As for us Catholics, we would each beg the other to take it, each of us being glad to let another person enjoy a drink. Our mutual generosity could be seen even in the disposal of a drop of water. Mo. Shi’s glass of hot boiled water did indeed warm the hearts of everyone.



Fortunately for me, I was also taken ill exactly one week before Mo. Shi passed away. At that time, she had had several heart attacks, obliging her to sit up supported by several pillows, incapable of taking any rest lying down. Our bedsteads were extremely narrow, about sixty centimeters wide, comparable to the traditional heatable brick bed, covered on the outside with clay. We would be squeezed closely against each other, so that even turning over on one’s side involved the cooperation of the two people next to you on either side. Mo. Shi’s bedstead was exactly opposite to mine. Because I was ill, I was unable to go out to work for several days....

At that time, none of us possessed a single holy article, let alone the possibility of asking a priest to come and administer the Last Sacraments, with friends and relatives gathered round our deathbed. However, Mo. Shi faced death with perfect composure and peace. She was like a schoolchild just released from school, looking forward to her reunion with father and mother. She knew that I

was a recent convert and encouraged me to persevere in my faith until the end, for she said that it was God who had chosen us and never should we betray the gift of grace....

Under her inspiration and guidance, I jotted down several lines of verse: "I live on the verge of death. To live one more day is to approach the grave nearer by one day. During the course of my life, I walk step by step, coming closer to death, with only the breath of life to divide life from death. What of life! What of death! To live is to live for Christ so that death comes as a blessing. This meeting with God is the highest ideal of our human existence." Greatly moved, she said to me, "It is through God the Holy Spirit that you have learned to understand the true significance of life on earth as well as the meaning of death. I am a nun of the Ursuline Order. Should an opportunity arise for you to write a letter one day to the mother general of our order in Rome, please tell all of them that my soul sings praises to the Lord and that right up until the moment of my death I have kept all the rules of our religious congregation." Her words moved me so deeply, that I could hardly restrain my tears.

On 28 December 1960, Shi suffered a fatal heart attack and died immediately. According to Hu: "A few days later, we received word that Mo. Shi had been transferred to the hospital of the local farm settlement. There she died soon afterward. I still remember that she once gave me a pillow made of eiderdown. Not long after, it was reported to the authorities and the overseer ordered me to hand it over. Even today, when I recall what happened, my heart continues to be filled with sadness." It was not until spring of 1961 that the Shi family was notified of her death. Her younger brother at once applied for permission to take away her remains. The official reply was not given until two years later, stating that permission to take away her remains would be given only after he obtained a letter of introduction from the local government. Sadly, as no official records could definitively indicate its whereabouts, the exact location of her burial place remained unknown. Several years later, officials of the city's Public Safety Department opened the sealed door of Shi Xianzhi's room in Shanghai. They

confiscated all her clothes and belongings and considered them as the property of a deceased counterrevolutionary.

The *fama martyrii* of Shi Xianzhi persisted long after her death among members of the Ursuline Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and Catholics from China and Taiwan. Upon receiving the decree *competentia fori* on 28 January 1989, the diocese of Parma (where the generalate of Ursuline Missionaries is located) initiated the diocesan inquiry into Shi Xianzhi's reputation for martyrdom. Supplementary inquiries were undertaken in the dioceses of Los Angeles (USA) and Fukuoka (Japan). On 02 May 2008, the Congregation of the Causes of Saints issued the decree validating the diocesan and supplementary inquiries.

INFORMATION ON THE CAUSE

1. DIOCESE OF COMPETENT BISHOP: Parma (Italy)

2. ITER:

- ❖ publication of decree “competentia fori”: **28 January 1989**
- ❖ publication of decree “nihil obstat”:
 - opening of diocesan inquiry:
 - closing of diocesan inquiry:
- ❖ validation of diocesan inquiry: **02 May 2008**
- ❖ consignment of Positio to CCS: -----
- ❖ meeting of theological consultants: -----
- ❖ congregation of CCS Cardinals and Bishops: -----
- ❖ promulgation of decree on martyrdom: -----
- ❖ beatification: -----
- ❖ promulgation of decree on a miracle for canonization: -----
- ❖ canonization: -----

3. POSTULATOR: Rev. Augusto Luca, sx

4. PETITIONER: Orsoline Missionarie del Sacro Cuore, Borgo Orsoline, 2, 43100 Parma, ITALY

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