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Father Benedict Chao, Trappist monk in China who survived the Japanese occupation and Mao terror

In the 1950s Father Chao settled in Hong Kong with other Cistercian monks and with their own hands they built the 'Trappist Haven Monastery'

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Father Benedict Chao

Father Benedict Chao, who has died aged 108, was a Chinese Trappist monk and the last surviving link with a brutal suppression by Mao's communists of the Cistercian monasteries of Hebei, a northern Chinese province near Beijing.

The Our Lady of Consolation Abbey in Yangjiaping, the first Cistercian monastery in China, had been founded in the mountains of Hebei by Trappist monks from the French Abbey of Notre Dame de Sept-Fons in 1883. Father Chao was born in 1918 in Chengting (now Zhengding), Hebei, and in 1941, aged 28, he entered the abbey's daughter house, Our Lady of Joy Abbey, which had been established at Chengting in 1928.

During the second Sino-Japanese war of 1937 and subsequent Japanese occupation of China, the Trappist monks of Hebei faced severe hardship as Japanese troops stole their grain and other food; in 1937 the monastery of Our Lady of Joy was occupied by the Japanese, resulting in several monks being imprisoned and killed.

The relative peace following the Japanese withdrawal from China in 1945 was short-lived, however; in July 1947, during the Civil War between Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek and Communists under Mao Zedong, Communist forces overran the monastery of Yangjiaping, stripping it bare and subjecting its 75 monks to a mock trial by a "Peoples' Court", when they were beaten with clubs, tortured and accused of being "oppressors of the people" and collaborators with the Japanese and Nationalists.



Mao: his Communist forces attacked Fr Chao's monastery – Bettmann

Subsequently, after burning down what remained of the monastery, the Communists deported the monks and sent them, with wrists bound by chains or wire, on a forced march of some 100 miles through the mountains of northern China, during which some 33 of the 75 monks died of exhaustion or maltreatment or were executed.

Although the Communists also attacked Our Lady of Joy Abbey, killing two monks, the others, including Father Chao, fled and found refuge at Xindu near Chengtu in Szechwan, an area of south-western China still under Nationalist control, where they re-established their community.

They remained there for two years, until Christmas Day 1949 when the Communists occupied the monastery and its surrounding land. A couple of the young monks were severely beaten and three were killed after being brutally tortured. However, the elderly abbot had managed to arrange for a group of monks, including Father Chao, to travel to Canada, where they were given refuge in the Monastery of Notre-Dame-des-Prairies in Manitoba.



Our Lady of Joy Abbey, a monastery of the Cistercians of Strict Observance (Trappists), on Lantau Island, Hong Kong – Getty Images/iStockphoto

There they hatched a plan to re-establish their community in the British colony of Hong Kong, and in 1951 the Hong Kong government gave the Trappists 73 hectares of empty land on Lantau island. There Father Chao and seven other monks of the former Our Lady of Joy community, joined by some of the survivors from the Our Lady of Consolation community, built a monastery with their own hands. Originally named the “Trappist Haven Monastery”, it was officially inaugurated in February 1956.

In order to become self-supporting, the monks began rearing cows and producing milk, butter and cheese, products which became highly valued by Hong Kong residents for their creamy taste. Although the dairy closed in the 1980s when milk production moved to Yuen Long in the New Territories with processing operations managed by a private company, a few remaining cows can still be seen roaming around Lantau.

In 1974 Father Chao was elected as the third prior of the community, a position he held until 1998. Two years later, in 2000, the Cistercian order recognised the 20-strong community as an autonomous abbey, and it resumed the name Our Lady of Joy.

Although the monastery itself is closed to the public, its grounds and gardens provide a calm spiritual oasis for the people of Hong Kong.

Father Benedict Chao, born 1918, died July 31 2026

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2026/08/16/benedict-chao-china-communism-mao-cistercian-monk/>