Exhibit shines light on China's secret religions
Lu Nan photos at Loyola show Catholics under cover

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When Jamason Chen, a photography instructor at Loyola University, first saw Lu Nan’s black-and-white photographs, he knew their topic — the rural, underground Chinese Catholic church — was sensitive.

The Chinese communist government under Mao Zedong for years banned religion. But the strong faith of the people in the photographs, now on display at the Loyola University Museum of Art, is obvious, Chen said.

In one image, two old women, with poverty and age etched on their faces, pray at a handmade wooden cross on a loved one’s grave.

Another photo depicts a tiny child carrying a painting of Jesus down a dirt path toward a small group of thatched-roof houses in the distance. All that are visible behind the massive painting are the child’s feet and his fingers holding it up.

“When I saw these photos, I thought, this could be present in any faith because it shows people devoted to something they believe in,” Chen said.

Sixty photos by Lu will be on display in the museum’s Harlan J. Berk Ltd. Works on

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Photos of China’s secret religions

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Paper Gallery until May 1.

The photos, which have been on display since Feb. 12, have surprised people, said Pamela Ambrose, director of cultural affairs at the art museum. When people consider communist China, they do not realize such a “stronghold of faith” exists in the country, she said.

“They express a certain simple piety,” Ambrose said. “There are no grand baroque churches there to worship in or liturgical objects like we have here. It’s a very simple expression of strong faith.”

For Chen, seeing the photographs brought back memories of growing up in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

The communist government outlawed religion during the revolution, and the faithful often were arrested, murdered or accused of being spies. Places of worship were closed and sometimes used as government storage buildings, Chen said.

The underground Catholic church developed during this period, especially in rural areas, such as those depicted in Lu’s photos, where the government did not have as much reach, Chen said.

“Even when closed, the church still existed,” Chen said. “People practiced at home or just carried the faith with them.”

Catholic churches, like other religious institutions, are now allowed to operate under state supervision. State-sponsored churches have no diplomatic ties to the Vatican or the pope in Rome, as both are seen by the government as foreign influences, said Father Francis Li, pastor of Chintown’s St. Therese Catholic Mission.

Unofficial churches still operate secretly, and millions of people still profess loyalty to the pope, Li said.

“It’s still a concern for the church in China and outside of China,” said Li, who grew up in China during the end of the Cultural Revolution. “I think we are still suffering spiritually because there is no spiritual unity.

“We are one church but two parts. But there is more hope than there ever has been. People are more upbeat.”

Members of St. Therese, many of whom grew up in China and still have family there, frequently pray for Chinese Catholics, Li said.

Youqin Wang, director of the Chinese language program at the University of Chicago, said projects such as the Loyola photo exhibit are crucial for helping people remember history.

Wang grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution and now researches the era.

When Wang discusses the era and its lingering effects, her students, many of whom grew up in China after the revolution, are stunned. Because the economy and standard of living has improved in China, many young people do not know about the revolution, and their history books do not teach them, Wang said.

“They really think we made these things up to demonize Chairman Mao,” she said. “When they know the truth, they get very angry. They say they have been cheated.”

In recent years, more people have been able to produce books and documentaries and photographs showing the effects of the revolution, said Wang, whose research website is banned in China.

Lu’s photos for years were shown under different names because of the sensitivity of their topic. The Loyola exhibit is the first in which all 60 photos are shown under his real name, said Don Heider, dean of the School of Communication, where the photos were first shown in the fall.

Loyola now owns the photos, which Lu printed in a lab in Beijing, Heider said.

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