

An International Conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China: A Report

Peter Barry

In June 2004, an international conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China took place in a split session at two venues, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It was jointly organized by the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Holy Spirit Study Centre of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, and the Research Center of Catholic History, Fu-Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. This writer was a respondent at the first session, and an interpreter at the second session.

The first session took place on the leafy campus of Taiwan's Fu-Jen Catholic University, outside Taipei, June 10-11, 2004. Over the two-day period 16 scholarly papers were presented. Sixteen respondents then offered their comments and suggestions. The papers were presented in either Chinese or English. The second session was held on June 14 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, located on the hilly slopes above Tolo Harbor in Hong Kong's New Territories. Eight scholarly papers were delivered at this session. The two sessions of the conference brought together scholars from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West, both Christian and non-Christian.

In his keynote speech in Taiwan, Cardinal Paul Shan of Kaohsiung set the tone for the conference. In broad brush strokes, he painted on the canvas of imperial and nationalist China the history of Catholic missions in that country. Beginning with the Franciscan, John of Montecorvino, during the Yuan Dynasty, he covered 700 years of history, up to the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy in 1946. Cardinal Shan did this under five headings: 1. The leftover wounds of the Protectorate over Catholic missions, 2.

Great misunderstandings over unsettled questions from history, 3. Prophetic pioneers within the Church itself, 4. Reflections and expressions of regret on the part of the Church, and 5. The importance of objective research into the Boxer Movement.

Bishop Joseph Zen then gave some background leading up to the staging of the present conference. At the time of the canonization of the 120 Chinese martyrs on October 1, 2000, the reaction of the Chinese government was quite negative. It announced that some of the foreign missionaries declared saints were in fact criminals, that the Western powers made use of the Church to occupy China, and that the Boxer Movement (during which many of the newly named saints died) was a patriotic movement to rid China of the foreign invaders. Bishop Zen, admitting that he was not very familiar with the history of the period, called for a conference to be held, which would present the conflict between the Boxer Movement and Christianity in a balanced way. The result was this present conference.

Both speakers cited Pope John Paul II's message to the conference in Beijing (October 2001) commemorating the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in that city, in which the Holy Father asked forgiveness for the mistakes of missionaries in China in the past.

The Taiwan Papers

The 24 papers presented at the conference were rich in content and varied in aspect. In this brief survey, only the topics of the papers can be highlighted.

The first presenter was Father Luciano Morra, SJ. In his paper, "Developments in relations among the Vatican, China and the Catholic Church in 19th century China," Father Morra covered areas of both communication and conflict. Morra concluded that the French bishop of Beijing, Alphonse Favier, played a big part in keeping the Vatican and China apart, in that he influenced the Vatican to abandon its plan to send an apostolic delegate to China. Favier was in favor of maintaining the status quo of the French Protectorate. Elisa Giunipero, a doctoral candidate from Italy, followed with a paper entitled, "The Boxer Movement through the eyes of European Missionaries." Using material from the archives

of Propaganda Fide in Rome, she covered her topic under three aspects: the reasons for the hostility towards Christians, the opinions and behavior of the missionaries during the crisis, and the attitudes of the missionaries towards the indemnities.

In his paper, "The Boxer Movement and the Catholic Church in Southern Mongolia and Northwest China," Dr. Patrick Taveirne described the effects of the Boxer Movement on the CICM missionaries and on their communities in those areas. Seven CICM missionaries from the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands met violent deaths at the hands of the Boxers. Using both Chinese and Western sources, Dr. Taveirne spelled out the political and economic background of the areas where the CICM missionaries worked. He described land disputes, which arose, and typical incidents of Boxer attacks on individual missions. He also gave thorough coverage to the question of indemnities.

In a paper entitled, "The Boxers and the Catholic Church," Franciscan Father Han Chengliang focused on Boxer activities in the neighborhood of the Hanzhuang Catholic Church in Shandong Province. A fellow mendicant friar, Dominican Father Miguel San Roman, followed Father Han. He talked about Boxer activity among the Dominican Missions in Fujian Province, and concluded that there was practically none. At this point, Father Gabriel Li Zhen, former president of Fu-Jen University and chairperson of that session of the conference, evoked the loudest outburst of laughter heard at the conference, when he remarked: "That was probably because they couldn't understand the language!" This remark must be seen against the background of the most popular dialect in Taiwan, Taiwanese, being originally from Fujian.

Dr. Karl Rivinius, in his "Mission and the Boxer Movement in Shandong Province, with particular reference to the Society of the Divine Word," pointed out that the first two SVD missionaries, Anzer and Freinademetz, assigned to Shandong in 1890, opted for German protection over their missions, rather than French protection. Then after the murder on November 1, 1897 of the two SVD missionaries, Henle and Nies, the Germans, who were looking for a concession in China, used the murder of the missionaries as a pretext to occupy Jiaozhou Bay in Shandong. Indemnity payments also helped the Church to expand its network of mission stations. This led to further attacks on the Catholic missions by members of

the Big Sword Society and the Boxers, or a combination of both. At the same time, the Yellow River flooded its banks in 1898, forcing many of the local people to flee their homes and lands. Then the lack of a harvest in 1899 caused a famine in Shandong Province. The people blamed the missionaries and foreign engineers for these disasters because they disturbed the local “fengshui.” After Yuan Shikai was appointed governor of Shandong in 1900, he chased the Boxers into Zhili and Shanxi before they could do further damage in Shandong. Rivinius admits that the punitive actions undertaken by German troops, and indemnities exacted for damage done, were often excessive.

In his paper, Professor Thomas Luo Yu, of the History Department of Fu-Jen University, described the havoc wrought by the Red Sword Society on the Catholic Church in Henan Province. Later Professor Wu Huifang of the National Taiwan Haiyang University weighed the pros and cons of the accuracy of oral accounts material in her “The Unearthing of Historical Materials in Researching the Boxer Movement and Constructing Historical Fact – The Example of Oral Accounts Material.”

Using both Western and Chinese testimonies, Father Angelo Lazzarotto, in his “Alberico Crescitelli (Guo Xide): A Profile,” outlined the life of this Italian missionary, who was one of the 120 saints canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 1, 2000. From a review of the evidence, Father Lazzarotto exonerated Alberico Crescitelli of all immoral behavior, and declared him worthy of sainthood. The author cited material provided by two Holy Spirit Study Centre researchers, Anthony Lam and Gianni Criveller, to point out that the accusations against Saint Alberico were just repetitions of spurious rumors prevalent at the time.

In “The Background for the Reason Why the Martyrs in Taiyuan during the Boxer Movement Were So Numerous,” Anthony Lam examined the characteristics of the people of Taiyuan, the special qualities of the Shanxi Catholic Church, the attitudes of the local officials, and analyzed their influence on the whole affair. The author cited Qing government archival material, reports and records of church personnel and of anti-Christian intelligentsia from those days. He consulted the description of events as recorded in the local gazetteers of the time. He also interviewed Catholics in Shanxi, whose relatives were killed during

the Boxer uprising. They transmitted family memories of those events to Lam.

Dr. Peter Ng Tze Ming of Chinese University, Hong Kong, in "Some Scenarios of the Impact of the Boxer Movement on the Work of Christian Education in China," presented three examples: Timothy Richard's founding of Shanxi University, the establishment of the Yale-China Association, and the amalgamation movement among Protestant denominational universities in China. Dr. Ng showed how the Boxer Movement indirectly helped the development of Christian education in China because indemnity funds were used to start Christian educational institutions. The author claimed that, after the suppression of the Boxers, this helped to assuage the anger and ill feeling of the people towards the foreign missionaries.

Author and title of paper only are given here for the other five Taiwan presenters. They were: Cha Shijie: "The Boxer Movement and the North Church," Lin Tongfa: "Shandong Governor Li Bingchong's Inquiry into the Boxer Problem," Chen Dehan: "The Conflict Between the Boxers and the Church," Wang Jianchuan: "Religious Faith Among the Boxers," and Gu Weiyong: "The Boxers and Taiwan, with a Special Focus on Li Chunsheng."

The Hong Kong Papers

After the venue of the conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China moved to Hong Kong's Chinese University, the first speaker was Dr. Jean-Paul Wiest. In his paper, "Representations of the Boxers in Christian Theatre," Dr. Wiest described a little known incident of the Boxer massacre of Christians in June 1900 in a village in Hebei Province, called Xiaohancun. One of the Boxers, who participated in the massacre, had learned martial arts from a Xiaohancun Christian named Wang. Master Wang was not in the village when the massacre took place, but the Boxers killed his son, his son's wife and their children. In 1902, Father Vincent Lebbe witnessed an extraordinary act of reconciliation in Xiaohancun. The Boxer, now repentant, returned to ask forgiveness from his old martial arts master for causing the death of his son. Accepting Christ's command to forgive one's enemies, Master Wang embraced the former Boxer, and became his

godfather when he was baptized into the Church. He gained a spiritual son in place of his physical son. Father Lebbe wrote an account of the incident for the French Catholic press. Henri Gheon, a Catholic playwright, was moved by Father Lebbe's account, and turned it into a play. The play was immensely popular in Catholic circles in the first half of the 20th century, and had a positive effect on French Catholics and on their view of missionary work in China.

Gianni Criveller, in his paper "China, the Holy See and France: the Giulianelli Mission to the Chinese Emperor and Its Aftermath (1885-1886)," described the failed attempt on the part of the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations at that time with China. The failure was due to the opposition of the French government, ever jealous of its protectorate over Catholic missions. Criveller described the mission of Francesco Giulianelli, an Italian priest, who carried a letter from Pope Leo XIII to the Guangxu Emperor. Robert Hart, Inspector of Customs, arranged a meeting between the Emperor and Giulianelli. This took place on April 8, 1885. The Pope's letter was submitted to the Zongli Yamen (the Foreign Affairs Office at that time). The Emperor instructed Li Hongzhang, head of the Zongli Yamen, to continue negotiations leading to the possible setting up of diplomatic negotiations. The Zongli Yamen deputized a Catholic employee of the Customs Office, John George Dunn, and sent him to Rome to continue the negotiations. Pope Leo XIII received Dunn on February 4, 1886. However, due to pressure from the French government, which threatened dire consequences for French Catholics should a papal representative be sent to China, the Pope backed down. "With tears in his eyes," the Holy Father had to give a negative answer to the invitation from Beijing. Pope Leo called this incident "the greatest pain of his pontificate." Criveller added several appendices to his paper; one of these was Pope Leo's letter to the Guangxu Emperor. Despite its failure to establish diplomatic relations with China, Dr. Criveller's paper shows that the Vatican was at least aware of the accusation of links with imperialism, and made the attempt to extricate the Catholic missions in China from the French Protectorate.

In "A Church in the Blood of Martyrs: Towards a History of the Russian Orthodox Mission in China," Priest Dionisy Pozdnyaev described the murders of 222 Chinese Orthodox Christians during the Boxer uprising.

China scholar, Professor Tang Kaijian, of Guangdong's Jinan University, in a paper entitled "The Missionary Work of the CICM Order on the Border Area between Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia in the Late Qing Period," described the successes and the failures of the missionary work of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Congregation around the time of the Boxer Movement. Professor Tang's paper included an investigation into the matter of indemnities following the destruction caused by the Boxers.

Another China scholar, Guo Shiyong, of the Institute of History at the China University of Politics and Law, delivered a paper entitled "Wu Tingfang Before and After the Boxer Movement." In it, he presented the activities in the United States of China's ambassador to Washington, Wu Tingfang, during the Boxer crisis. Wu was accustomed to giving speeches in which he would ask his American audiences to put themselves in Chinese shoes. In a down-to-earth way, he asked them to imagine how they would feel if a Confucian missionary came to New York, preached Confucianism, denigrated Christianity, purchased land and built Confucian temples, and tried to convert Americans to Confucianism. He pointed out that that's what Christian missionaries were doing in the interior of China, and this was why some people, like the Boxers, wanted to get rid of them.

Professor Tao Feiya, from the History Department of Shanghai University, in his paper "Another Look at the Boxer Movement: The Historiography Exemplified in Conferences Held in the Last 20 Years," summarized research into the Boxer movement presented at conferences held in China in 1980, 1990 and 2000, plus a fourth conference held in England in 2001. He welcomed the participation of foreigners at these conferences because they bring a valuable perspective of their own, which is frequently lacking in China-only conferences. Professor Tao looked forward to more collaborative efforts on the part of Chinese and Western scholars.

Father Louis Ha, editor of the Hong Kong diocesan newspaper *Kung Kao Pao*, in a paper entitled "Charity and Hatred – Orphanages in 19th Century China," covered the Catholic missionary activity of founding orphanages. He refuted the charge often levelled at the nuns running the orphanages, namely that they used the eyes and other body parts of abandoned babies to make

medicine. He cited the example of Westerners using alcohol to preserve bodies and body parts for the sake of medical study as a possible cause for the misunderstanding that arose among the Chinese populace regarding the orphanages.

In "The Boxer Movement and Local Religious and Secret Societies," Professor Chan Fang Chung, director of the Research Center of Catholic History at Taiwan's Fu-Jen Catholic University, suggested that to a great extent the Boxer Movement was a religious one. The Boxers believed in their own folk religion. Therefore, Christianity was an enemy religion, which the Boxers had to attack and exterminate. Prof. Chan cited much evidence to prove his thesis. One example was an incantation recited by the Boxers, which begins: "The gods help the Boxers, the movement for righteousness, only because the foreigners disturb the Central Plains. They encourage people to believe in their religion, and in their God; they do not believe in the gods, and they ignore the ancestors..." This prayer-like chant was an example of the religious nature of the Boxer Movement. The Boxers had to make war against the enemy religion present in their midst, namely Christianity. Prof. Chan concluded, therefore, that the movement was not only anti-foreign, but also anti-Christian.

The above brief summary does not do justice to the richness and variety of the papers presented at the conference. Readers will have to wait for the publication of all the papers from the conference, tentatively scheduled for the fall of this year (2004). Since the papers were delivered in either Chinese or English, a substantial summary of the contents of each paper will appear in the opposite language. The conference was remarkable for the fact that scholars from many different backgrounds presented papers. The variety of perspectives made for an interesting and multifaceted picture of the Boxer Movement and its relations with Christianity in China. The fact that scholars from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the West, as well as Christians from all three main branches of Christianity, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, could meet and discuss a controversial historical topic in an amicable manner proves that such conferences are not only possible, but that they are the wave of the future. May more such fruitful exchanges take place in the years to come!