Blood of Martyrs, Seed of Christians: An Analysis of French Catholic Missionary Discourse after the Boxer Uprising, 1900–1910

Antonio J. Mendoza
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Guotong Li
Department of History

Abstract
The Boxer Uprising (1898–1901) was an anti-foreign and anti-Christian uprising that culminated in a war against foreigners throughout Northern China during the summer of 1900. Missionary writings have played a prominent role in the writing of the history of the uprising, but the missionary sources employed have been predominantly American, British, and Protestant. In 1992 James L. Hevia, one of the most prominent historians of imperialism in China, presented a discursive history of the uprising, in which he argued that the writing of missionaries after the uprising did not merely seek to represent the events of the uprising but intended to create a history of the event that justified missionary acts of vengeance by placing them within a metanarrative of Boxer atrocity and Western retribution. In this paper, I extend Hevia’s analysis to French Catholic missionary writings on the uprising in order to determine whether or not the metanarrative of atrocity and retribution that he identified in Anglophone Protestant missionary writing dominated Francophone Catholic missionary writing as well. This examination reveals a divergence in French Catholic narratives that challenges Hevia’s characterization of missionary writing after the Boxer Uprising and the general interpretation of missionary discourse on the Boxer Uprising in modern Chinese historiography.

For those who have known the facts and who have passed through a war of awful memory, the matter of loot is one of high ethics.¹

So many people, even among the mandarins, are innocent of the atrocities committed! We love and will
always love our poor Chinamen. Pray for them and for us!²

Both excerpts above were written by leaders of Christian communities in China after the Boxer Uprising. The first is the conclusion of “The Ethics of Loot,” an article written by Gilbert Reid (1857–1927), an American Presbyterian missionary, in defense of the looting committed by foreigners after the Boxer Uprising. In the article, Reid defends looting, and even apologizes for not having looted more after the arrival of the foreign armies in Beijing. The second, is the conclusion of the account of the siege of the Beitang [Northern Cathedral] in Beijing during the Boxer Uprising presented by Alphonse Favier (1837–1905), the Bishop and Vicar Apostolic of Beijing, in the Annales de la Propagation de la Foi [Annals of the Propagation of the Faith] (1822–1974), a French Catholic missionary journal. Of the two accounts, only the writings of Reid and men like him figure prominently in the general picture of missionary discourse after the Boxer Uprising as it is presented in modern Chinese historiography. In this article, I seek to challenge the general picture of missionary discourse on the Boxer Uprising as one focused on retribution—a picture based largely on Protestant sources—through the use of French Catholic sources.

Literature Review
The first and oldest category of histories treating missionaries during the Boxer Uprising focuses almost solely on the missionary experience. Historians of this category do not concern themselves with missionary representations of their experience during the uprising or the worldview that informed these representations. Due to the lack of critical attention that they devote to the attitudes of missionaries and the culture that informed these attitudes, many historians of this tradition identify missionaries, foreigners, and Chinese Christians as the protagonists in their narratives of the Boxer Uprising. For example, the account of the siege of the Beitang, in Kenneth Scott Latourette’s A History of Christian Missions in China (1967) emphasizes the bravery of the 3400 Chinese Catholics who held out against the Boxers there for two months.³ The work of the historians of this group is, however, useful in the analysis of
the discourse of Catholic missionaries in the wake of the Boxer Uprising, because, unlike other historians, they paid attention to Catholic sources. These studies provide historical context that lays a foundation for the interpretation of Catholic discourse. A History of Christian Missions in China is one of the few studies in English that devotes substantial attention to both the Protestant and Catholic missions in China. More recently, R.G. Tiedemann’s “The Church Militant: Armed Conflicts between Christians and Boxers in North China” (2007) shed light on the story of Catholic military resistance to the Boxers during the uprising.4 Despite the attention paid to Catholic sources by historians in this category, however, their research has not analyzed discourse, and as a result, there remains a great deal to be done with Catholic sources.

The second category of histories that touch upon missionaries during the Boxer Uprising comprises histories that are primarily concerned with Chinese experience during the uprising. These studies situate China at the center of the narrative of the Boxer Uprising, and the two predominant figures of this tradition are Joseph Esherick and Paul A. Cohen, whose studies, The Origins of the Boxer Uprising (1987) and History in Three Keys (1997), respectively, form the foundation of present-day English language-scholarship on the Boxer Uprising.5,6 The analysis of the early tensions between German Catholic missionaries and proto-Boxer organizations in Shandong during the late 1890s in Esherick’s The Origins of the Boxer Uprising makes comprehensible the larger conflict between Boxers and Christians that occurred in 1900. Similarly, Cohen’s analysis of the uprising as experienced by ordinary Chinese makes it clear that the causes of the uprising were much more complex than the mere anti-Christian and anti-foreign sentiment to which the historians of the first category attributed it. These studies are useful in the analysis of missionary discourse for the historical context that they provide, but they deal with missionaries and their discourse only in a peripheral fashion.

The third category of histories concerning missionaries during the Boxer Uprising are histories that deal directly with missionary discourse on the Boxer Uprising. These studies are either primarily concerned with or devote substantial attention to missionary representations of their experience during the uprising. The ways in which missionaries
reconciled their calls for violent retribution with their religion of “peace” and “love” was explored in “Ends and Means: Missionary Justification of Force in Nineteenth Century China” (1974) by Stuart Creighton Miller.\(^7\) In her 1984 monograph, *The Gospel of Gentility*, Jane Hunter demonstrates that in the wake of the Boxer Uprising, American female missionaries were often in conflict with their male counterparts on the subject of Western military intrusion into China by citing the writings of such women as Luella Miner, who after the uprising went so far as to say that unlike the invading allied powers, the Boxers, at least, did not engage in rape.\(^8\) For their analyses of missionaries’ interpretations of their role in China and justifications of their actions these studies are extremely valuable to understanding the missionary representations of their experiences.

The primary study of this sort with which this paper engages is James L. Hevia’s “Leaving a Brand on China: Missionary Discourse in the Wake of the Boxer Movement” (1992). He argues that the discourse of American and British Protestant missionaries in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising did not simply seek to represent the events of the uprising, but to create a history of the event that justified their actions in its aftermath and shape future discourse.\(^9\) Hevia identified two principle metanarratives in his discussion of missionary discourse after the Boxer Uprising, and they both come from the Christian Bible. Hevia first identifies the metanarrative of suffering, death, and resurrection—paralleling the story of Jesus Christ in the New Testament; he then proceeds to identify a metanarrative of atrocity and retribution—from the stories of the triumph of the faithful over heathens in the Old Testament.\(^10\) According to Hevia, missionary writers employed these metanarratives to explain their own experience during the uprising and to give meaning to the experience of the Christian missions as a whole. The metanarrative of suffering, death, and resurrection played out in writings that described how Christian Missions were besieged and exterminated by the Boxers only to be restored with the reintroduction of missionary activity after the Boxers’ defeat. The “atrocity and retribution” metanarrative was exemplified in these same stories, by the retelling of the horrifying acts of the Boxers before relating how the Christians triumphed over these pagans.
In identifying these metanarratives, Hevia’s project was one that was concerned uniquely with the effects of British and American Protestant Missionary narratives on early twentieth-century discourses. The exhaustive number of accounts he analyzed gives weight to his conclusion that these metanarratives were a major part of Anglo-American Protestant missionary discourse. All the same, while Hevia claimed to be uninterested in establishing the range of missionary opinion, Hevia neglected the missionaries who dealt with the largest number of Christians in China, the Catholics. In failing to employ French Catholic sources in his analysis, Hevia exemplifies historians of the third category, who do not employ Catholic or non-English sources in their analysis. This represents a major gap in the scholarship on missionary discourses, because while Protestant missionaries outnumbered Catholic missionaries in China during this period, the number of Chinese converts to Catholicism outnumbered the number of converts to Protestant Christianity by a ratio of about eight to one. In this paper, I analyze French Catholic missionary discourse on the Boxer Uprising in order to challenge the dominant narrative of missionary discourse as it has been presented by Hevia and many other historians.

**Historical Context: Christians and Boxers**

The Christian missionary movement in China relevant to the discussion of missionary discourse began with the Western incursions into China under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) after the Chinese defeat in the First Opium War (1839–1842). As a result of their victory, the British forced China to open previously closed ports to merchant and missionary activity. Military victories like this one coupled with growing missionary movements in Western countries, amplified American and European missionary activities in China over the course of the nineteenth century.

Despite their increasing privileges and presence, however, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries made little headway in winning converts. In the year after the Boxer Uprising, 1901, the Protestant missions in China counted only 85,000 converts, while Catholic missions had a more impressive but still relatively small 720,540—at this time, the population of China was around 400,000,000. There were many possible reasons for the comparative Catholic success. First, there had
been a Catholic mission in China previously during the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries. This mission was expelled after the “crisis of rites”
between the Catholic Church and the Qing Emperor—a religious quarrel
beyond the scope of this project—but the remnants of the Catholic
Church in China continued to operate clandestinely until Catholicism
was allowed in China once again after 1844. Additionally, Catholic
missionaries attracted a large number of converts due to their willingness
to interfere, on their converts’ behalf, in lawsuits. Finally, the relative
tolerance by Catholic missionaries of the original culture of their Chinese
converts may have facilitated conversion. For the Protestants, a
conversion was meant to be all-consuming, whereas Catholics would
permit their converts to occasionally flirt with their supposedly
repudiated traditions. In any case, most Chinese were suspicious of the
goals and methods of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries in their
ttempts to win converts in China. Thus, despite their relatively small
size, the Christian communities in China entered into conflict with non-
Christian Chinese frequently during the nineteenth century.

Conflict between Christian missionaries and Chinese society would
reach a high point with the Boxer Uprising, an anti-Christian and anti-
foreign movement that originated in Shandong Province, China’s
northeastern peninsula, in the late 1890s. This movement’s spread to
Zhili province in Northern China, where the Qing capital of Beijing was
located, is when it took on the character for which it is most remembered.
On June 13, 1900 a large number of Boxers arrived in the capital where
they destroyed symbols of Christianity and foreign power, including the
Nantang [Southern Cathedral], where several hundred Chinese Catholics
who had taken refuge died in a fire. Foreign diplomats and Protestants
fled to the legation quarter, while the nearly three-thousand Catholics
still in Beijing took refuge in the Beitang [Northern Cathedral] along
with forty-three French and Italian marines. On the twentieth of June, the
capital troops and the Boxers attacked the foreign legations and the
Beitang, and on the twenty-first a declaration of war was issued by the
dynasty against all foreign powers in China. It took until August 14, 1900 for an alliance of eight nations—
Britain, France, America, Japan, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and
Germany—to fight its way from the coast to Beijing. Widespread
looting followed the capture of Beijing, along with punitive military expeditions which were launched to punish the Boxers and the populations thought to have supported them. American Protestant missionaries faced a great deal of criticism for what American commentators perceived as their greed and bloodlust after the uprising.21

Despite or perhaps because of contemporary criticism, missionaries and their sympathizers portrayed their experience during the uprising as one of pure victimization. A cursory glance at sources from the period reveals that this was not the case. There were Chinese Christians who converted with the intention of abusing the power possessed by missionaries to intervene in their legal affairs, and these “converts” were not necessarily “innocent” victims of the Boxers. Additionally, many Chinese Christian communities were able to resist Boxer attacks. The Catholic communities of Northern China in particular were often able to repulse the Boxers and survive.22 Of course, there were Christian communities exterminated by the Boxers and there were Christians killed by the Boxers who had never engaged in any of the abuses attributed to them. The point is that the innocent Christian martyr felled at the hands of the irrational Boxer is not a universal representation of the events of the Boxer Uprising.

The missionary accounts examined in this study contain representations of the Christian experience during the Boxer Uprising that emphasize the victimization of Christian communities, but in examining these missionary accounts I am not concerned with the factual accuracy of the events that they represent; it is the representations of the uprising in French Catholic discourse that I analyze here.

Analysis: French Catholic Missionary Narratives
Despite their obvious importance to the missionary effort in China, historians have ignored French Catholic sources in histories of missionary discourse. Hevia’s study of Anglo-American Protestant missionary discourse in the wake of the Boxer Uprising shed light on missionary efforts to construct a narrative that justified their violent actions, but Hevia’s neglect of French Catholic sources leaves the reader wondering whether or not this narrative dominated all missionary discourse. There were far more Chinese Catholics in the most sorely hit
provinces during the Boxer Uprising, and that there were about eight times as many Catholics as Protestants in China immediately after the uprising. As for casualties, while about 46 Catholic clergy died compared to between 186 and 188 Protestant missionaries, Latourette estimated that around fifteen times as many Chinese Catholics perished during the uprising as Chinese Protestants. An analysis of French Catholic missionary discourse is an obviously important component of the analysis of missionary discourse on the Boxer Uprising.

This paper examines French Catholic missionary discourse in several prominent Catholic missionary journals in the wake of the Boxer Uprising. The text that occupies the most prominent place in this analysis is the January 1901 edition of the Annales de la Propagation de la Foi [Annals of the Propagation of the Faith] (1822–1974)—henceforth the APF—a French Catholic missionary journal intended to inform those in metropolitan France about the activities of Catholic missions around the world. The APF were published six times a year. This journal was the printed record of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, a hierarchical missionary organization. In the 1860s, this journal had nearly a million subscribers throughout France, and collected 3.5 million francs in revenue from them annually. The January 1901 edition discusses the experiences of French Catholics in China during the Boxer Uprising and includes a firsthand account of the siege of the Beitang, provided by Alphonse Favier (1837–1905), the Bishop of Beijing and Vicar Apostolic, who was present in the cathedral during the siege of Beijing. Other journals consulted are the January 1901 edition of the Annales Catholiques [Catholic Annals] (1871–1920)—henceforth the AC—an article from June 1900 from the Revue Chrétienne [Christian Review] (1854–1926)—henceforth the RC, and the 1910 edition of the Annales de la Congregation des Missions Lazaristes et de la Compagnie des filles de la Charite [Annals of the Congregation of Vincentian Missions and the Daughters of Charity] (1831 – 1965)—henceforth the ACMLCC. These sources reveal that while the New Testament metanarrative of suffering, death, and resurrection was at least as prevalent in these Catholic accounts as in Protestant accounts; the Old Testament metanarrative of atrocity and retribution is nowhere to be found in these journals.
Catholic writers largely attributed the horrors experienced by Christians during the uprising to the irrational hatred of the Christian faith on the part of the Chinese. Indeed, in the introduction the APF announced “Who does not yet know of this drama of blood that has lasted eight months and of which we have not yet seen the end? Catholic bishops, missionaries, and Europeans of all denominations and all nationalities, native priests, charitable sisters, catechists, and virgin Christians, fifty thousand new converts killed in hatred of the faith.”

Descriptions like this one of the atrocities suffered by Catholics fit within the “suffering and death” segment of the “suffering, death, and resurrection” metanarrative and the “atrocity” segment of “atrocity and retribution” metanarrative, but while suffering, death, and atrocity are present in these narratives, retribution is almost nowhere to be found. Catholic journals did not echo the sanguinary tone of their Protestant counterparts and were more willing to be critical of their home countries in Europe in assessing the Boxer Uprising and its causes.

The first journal to examine is the APF. The APF compilers considered European intrusion into China as a possible culprit in triggering the Boxer Uprising:

The true cause [of the uprising] might be sought in the overly hasty introduction of the processes of modern industry, changing the everyday working conditions; in the multiplicity of railroads, opening a country that wished to stay closed, and above all in the occupation of certain parts of the empire by European nations All of which made the Chinese fear the invasion of their country, and the loss at any given moment of their customs.

In the excerpt below, taken from another French Catholic missionary journal, the AC, the attack on Chinese tradition, the introduction of European industry, and the European military occupation of much of China are considered as possible factors in igniting to the Boxer Uprising:
“Celestials” seeing themselves invaded from all sides by European intrusion, frustrated in their patriotism to see concessions made to foreign powers, and above all the construction of railroads that terrify them, which were imposed on them after their defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, have come to the point of being frightened and revolting. Are they completely wrong? What would we have done in their place? Only the means that they have taken are as misguided as they are barbaric and deserve repression.28

While the AC critiques the methods of the Boxers—i.e. violent revolt and attacks on Christians and foreigners—the journal does not condemn what it considers to be anti-imperialist sentiment in China. Yet another Catholic author conveys the same sentiment present in the previous two accounts in the RC:

One can, with justice, ask oneself if in the presence of the policies of European peoples, ready to distribute among themselves her mines, her railroads, sending mission upon mission into the old empire, the sense of danger that courts Chinese society has not agitated these enormous masses who have decided to beat back the foreigner far away in crushing him under their numbers.29

All three of these publications express a sincere, if patronizing, concern for the future of China. Alphonse Favier, states in his concluding remarks of his account of the siege of the Beitang: “We hope that [God] will yet pardon China. So many people, even among the mandarins, are innocent of the atrocities committed! We will always love our poor Chinamen. Pray for them and for us!”30 It is clear from this statement, that while the writers of these journals considered the Chinese to have done wrong in allowing the Boxer rebellion to come to pass, they did not wish harm upon them. Protestant journals and writings from this period on the other hand were rife with calls for retaliation. There is no parallel
between the Protestant missionaries call for blood after the uprising and the writing found in these journals.

One should not doubt, however, that the atrocities endured by those in the Beitang were any less terrible than those in the countryside or the foreign legations. Favier’s testimony bears witness to this fact, in this anecdote about an ill-fated courier: “The 10th of August, one of them once again sacrificed himself... Poor young man! He was skinned alive, and the Boxers displayed his head and his skin from our sanctuary wall.” 31 Another story of atrocity, also from the APF, relates the experience of a P. Quirin, who along among four missionaries in southern Hunan Province was able to escape from the Boxers. Quirin tells of the destruction inflicted by the Boxers after they had killed one of his fellow missionaries: “This task accomplished, the pagan horde set itself to burning down the Church, the [bishop’s] residence, the houses of Christians, and the neighboring orphanages that contained almost two hundred daughters of the Holy Childhood Association.” 32 Catholic accounts of the Boxer Uprising were as concerned with presenting the atrocities that they had experienced at the hands of the Boxers as Protestant accounts were. What distinguishes Catholic accounts is that the story of Boxer atrocities is not used to justify looting or violent revenge. Thus, given Catholics’ similar experience of violence during the uprising one cannot claim then that Protestant missionaries were driven to bloodlust by some sort of greater experience of atrocity. 33

The narrative of the French Catholics in the APF and AC is not completely divorced from that of the Anglo-American Protestants discussed by Hevia. The “resurrection” of the metanarrative of “suffering, death, and resurrection” is clearly apparent in Catholic writing on the Boxer Uprising. The Church of China, no matter what state she was in, had survived; this is the solace provided by most French Catholic narratives of the uprising. Alphonse Favier, the leader of the Catholic community in Beijing, described with a sense of sadness how seven churches and one cathedral had been reduced to nothing in Beijing, but concluded by presenting reader with the lone image of the Beitang, reduced nearly to rubble, but still standing. This was an image of the enduring life of the Catholic Church in China. The Beitang, the Church in which Favier and three-thousand Chinese Christians fought for their
lives for two months, was the only Church that survived in Beijing, but this was enough to rebuild the Catholic Church in Northern China.\textsuperscript{34}

Catholics, for the most part, echoed the sense of triumph presented in Favier’s account of the uprising in later writings on its effects on the Catholic mission in China. Five years after the uprising, in a section of the \textit{APF} discussing recruitment of new missionaries for the church of China, an editor wrote: “What’s more, the terrible events of 1900, far from cooling apostolic zeal, in our Christian countries have done nothing but stimulate it.”\textsuperscript{35} One can see this conviction in the words of Catholics immediately after the uprising in the \textit{APF}:

\begin{quote}
In short, the destruction is close to total. Forty years of work has been annihilated, but the courage of missionaries is not, and we will begin again, assured of success, because “the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.”\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Here Favier compares the blood of martyrs to the seed of Christians, an analogy frequently employed by Catholics in assessing the impact of the Boxer Uprising. Ten years after the event, Catholics still referred to the blood of the martyrs of the Boxer Uprising as the seed of Christians.\textsuperscript{37} The praises of those martyrred during the uprising and prayers for the salvation of China echoed louder in these particular Catholic missionary narratives than any call for retribution against China and the Boxers.

\section*{Conclusion}

In researching the history of Christian missions in China, there is a temptation to talk about “missionary discourse” as though this is a single thing. It is not. What this paper has set out to prove is that the metanarratives of Protestant missionary discourse identified in James L. Hevia’s article “Leaving a Brand on China” were not universal. Of course, this paper has not proved that they could not be applied to any Catholics, or that there were not Protestant Christians who also did not exhibit these narratives, but this paper has shown that the major Catholic publications that it examined were likely trying to establish a discourse of regeneration and forgiveness in the wake of the Boxer Uprising.
It should be made clear that the Catholic Church in China was not innocent in the aftermath of the uprising. Like other foreigners, the Catholics profited from the massive Boxer indemnity that crippled the economy of China during the early twentieth century, and Alphonse Favier himself was accused of looting after the uprising. However, this paper does not seek to pass judgment on Catholics or Protestants; it only seeks to fracture the image of a monolithic “missionary discourse.”

Although both Protestant and Catholic establishments both saw themselves triumphant in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising, only Protestants emphasized the need for retribution. Perhaps the greater amount of time that the Catholic mission had spent in China or the integration of celibate clergy into local Catholic communities made Catholic clergy care more for the Chinese. In any case, the discourse of these journals was a different, and while Protestant missionaries may have sought vengeance in the wake of the Boxer Uprising, Catholic missionaries seemed content that the blood of martyrs would be the seed of Christians.

Endnotes

The actual figures for Chinese Christians in China in 1901, the year after the Boxer Uprising are 720,540 for Catholics and 85,000 for Protestants. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 567.

The author discusses Chinese Muslims in making his point, but if his findings can be extended to Catholic interactions with other Chinese, then they would explain a great deal about Catholic successes. Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 238.

Westerners called the members of this movement Boxers, due to their martial arts practices, but the Boxers—as I will refer to them throughout this paper—referred to themselves as the *yihequan* or “Boxers United in Righteousness.”


Latourette provides the following estimates for native Christian deaths: more than 30,000 for Chinese Catholics, and 1912 for Chinese Protestants. Ibid, 512 – 513, 516 – 517.


“Coup d’œil général sur les travaux de l’apostolat en 1900,” *Annales de la propagation de la foi : recueil périodique des lettres des évêques et des missionnaires des missions des deux mondes, et de tous les documents relatifs aux missions et à l’Association de la propagation de la foi 73* (1901) : 8. (All quotes presented from this journal have been translated from French by me.)


“The final part of that quote is a Latin phrase meaning, “We give thanks to the lord our God.” “Coup d’œil général sur les travaux de l’apostolat en 1900,” 11.
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