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# Heaven in Conflict: Franciscans and the Boxer Uprising in Shanxi

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**HEAVEN IN CONFLICT:  
FRANCISCANS AND THE BOXER UPRISING IN SHANXI**  
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**Event/Venue:**

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**Date/Time:**

Thursday, 12 March 2015 – 11:45 am-12:40 pm

**Talk:**

[SLIDE 1: Title Slide]

- Thanks to Dale for organizing this, and I should up front warn everyone that I read a lot of martyrdom narratives, so I really don’t notice when I veer into realms some might view as a bit grisly. So, I express my contrition in advance if sections of my presentation are not well matched with eating and digestion. . . .

**Introduction: Heavenly Battle and the Earthly Famine**

I’d like to begin with two contradictory assertions, and then take you to a small Franciscan mission in northern China in the year 1900. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.”<sup>1</sup> And in another vein, George Orwell is said to have remarked that, “People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”<sup>2</sup> Both of these comments responded to the vicissitudes of violent oppression and protection caused by **governments**; my book redirects our category of inquiry into the realm of **private** and **collective spiritual belief**. Scholars have until now described China’s dramatic Boxer Uprising as a violent Chinese response

to foreign political invasion and aggression, but my research reveals that the majority of the participants in the 1900 Uprising were far less interested in **political** battles than **spiritual** ones. So today I would simply like to provide a few examples of what my book argues was the main cause of China's most intense conflict with the West.

[SLIDE 2: Lord Guan Print] One of China's most famous novels is *Sangguo yanyi*, 三國演義 or "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," which became a popular opera performed in front of Boxers, and even in the Forbidden City, in front of the **emperor** and **empress dowager**. In one of the more celebrated passages, Lord Guan exemplifies the spirit of Chinese gallantry:

Wielding his green dragon halberd, Lord Guan mounted his horse, Red Hare, and rode out with his men. . . . Guan on his saddle, briskly charged down the slope with his halberd pointed downward. His phoenix eyes rounded and his silkworm eyebrows bristled as he dashed through the enemy line. The northern army divided **like waves** as Lord Guan descended on Yan Liang. Yan was still beneath his standard when he saw Guan charging toward him. And by the time Yan knew who it was, Lord Guan and his swift horse, Red Hare, were already upon him. Yan Liang was too slow, and like a rising cloud Guan raised his halberd and pierced him. Quickly dismounting, Lord Guan decapitated Yan Liang. Tethering the severed head to Red Hare's neck, he **vaulted** to his saddle, **raised** his halberd, and **fled** through the enemy troops as if no one was there.<sup>3</sup>

By the time the Boxers watched this scene dramatically acted on the stage in the late nineteenth century, Lord Guan had become a commanding figure in the **pantheon** of Chinese **popular gods**. Boxers invoked his spirit to **possess their bodies** before attacking

churches and Christian missions, believing that they were then **impervious** to bullets and blades. With Lord Guan's divine help they would charge into battle and attack Christians much like Lord Guan beheaded Yan Liang.

[SLIDE 3: St. Michael the Archangel – Chinese Dragon] When the Catholic missionaries went to China they had their **own** version of Lord Guan – Saint **Michael the Archangel**. In the book of Revelation we read: “And there was a great battle in heaven,” and “Michael and his angels fought with the **dragon**.”<sup>4</sup> In popular Catholic devotion, Michael the Archangel is often invoked on the heavenly battlefield:

O glorious prince St. Michael, chief and commander of the heavenly hosts,  
**guardian** of souls, **vanquisher** of rebel spirits, servant in the house of the Divine King and our admirable conductor, you who shine with excellence and superhuman virtue, **deliver** us from all evil.<sup>5</sup>

It was meaningful to Roman Catholic missionaries who went to China, because **China** was known by the Chinese as the “**land of the dragon**,” which was what Michael had vanquished in the heavenly conflict. The significance of this carried even more weight in the minds of the Franciscan missionaries who went to Shanxi, because they were from the Italian Province named after Saint Michael the Archangel. So, the first thing to remember is that most **Chinese** believed in popular gods **at war** with enemy spirits, while the **missionaries** believed in the spiritual warfare between Michael and the **dragon** – both sides envisioned their **own side** in conflict with the numinous beings on the **other side**. And natural disasters made matters worse.

[SLIDE 4: Print of Chinese Famine] A few years before the height of Boxer violence in 1900, the plains of northern China stopped raining, crops failed, and the

enduring **drought** resulted in widespread **starvation** and large crowds of **out-of-work vagabonds** drifting through villages and loitering in local temples to watch operas about popular gods battling with rival spirits. The famine was **horrible**; by 1900 around **9 to 13 million** people had died. Corpses **lined roadways** and were **scattered on village roads**. A report in the *North China Herald* noted that, “elm trees were stripped of their bark, the lower branches of the willows stripped of their leaves, and caterpillars and snails were eaten when they could be gotten.”<sup>6</sup> Not only were people eating **bark and insects**, but also **cannibalism** was rampant. By the summer of 1900, young men and women began to form into units who trained martial arts and practiced spirit possession rituals. [SLIDE 5: Boxers and Red Lantern] The men called themselves the “**Fists of Righteous Harmony**” and the women were named the “**Red Lanterns**.” **Foreigners** called them the “**Boxers**,” and these new military groups blamed the Christian “gods” for the famine. One Boxer sign read:

The gods help the fighters, the Fists of Righteous Harmony, as the foreign devils have disturbed the central plains. They force their religion and only believe in Heaven (viz., the Lord of Heaven). They don't believe in the gods or the Buddha, and they neglect their ancestors. Their men are improper and their women immoral. . . . The **heavens won't rain** and the **earth is scorched**, all **because of the foreign devils the skies are blocked**.<sup>7</sup>

From their point of view, the only way to bring back the rain was to eliminate foreigners and their religion, as well as any Chinese who were Christian. While the Chinese and Christian gods were **battling above**, they now set themselves to fighting a battle **here on earth**.

## Who Were the Boxers?

[SLIDE 6: Boxers and Jinci Temple] One of my objectives in **this book** is to provide a more extensive description of Boxer belief and culture **in Shanxi**, where they killed more missionaries and Chinese Christians than in any other province. By reading through the writings of the local Confucian, Liu Dapeng, we gain a **vivid image** of Boxer activities, especially at their central headquarters in Shanxi, the famous **Jinci Temple**.

Liu wrote:

Again and again they gathered at Jinci Temple, each carrying some sort of weapon. They wore a **red scarf** on their head, a **red belt** around their waist, and **red leggings** around their shins. They came in threes and fives, shoulder to shoulder, and entering the temple of ancestors (Haotian) they worshipped the heavenly spirits, lit fireworks, and paid homage to their chief. There were the young as well as those who had been capped (i.e., after the age of twenty), in all equaling several hundred people. They were as if in a **drunken frenzy**. Once gathered they formed lines and set out, the leaders bearing red flags with slogans on each side: ‘**Protect the Qing and exterminate foreigners**’ and ‘Carry out the **work of Heaven**.’<sup>8</sup>

The Boxers gathered at temples to worship popular deities, they wore red, and they carried a banner that expressed their **support** for the Qing emperor; they were **not rebels**, as some have suggested, but rather they were committed to the expulsion of foreigners, which they called “**the work of Heaven**.”

Other than martial arts practice and religious rites, the Boxers also created a massive campaign of **anti-Christian mythologies** that stirred hysteria throughout northern China. The rumors spread by Boxers were quite **creative**:

1. That Christians cut out **paper figures of men** that later came to life and killed non-Christian Chinese.
2. That Christians hired poor beggars to drop **poison into village wells**.
3. That Christians **marked the doors** of non-Christian homes with a red mark that **curled the inhabitants to illness or death**.
4. That missionaries collected human blood, eyes, and women's nipples to perform **magical spells**.
5. Perhaps the most disturbing myth disseminated by the Boxers was that foreign missionaries **cut the hearts out of the children** in Catholic orphanages.<sup>9</sup>

All of these rumors, and the mythology that the **Christian "gods"** were the cause of the drought, attracted increasing numbers of displaced peasants to join temple Boxer groups to fight against the perceived **threat**.

[SLIDE 7: Red Lantern/Boxer Prints & Barnabas de Cologne] Among the new areas of research in this book is a **more extended study of women** Boxers, the **Red Lanterns**. I've dedicated a large portion of the narrative to the beliefs attached to these usually **pre-teen and teen women** who supported the male Boxers by **casting spells and curses** against missionaries, Chinese Christians, and foreign diplomats. One of the Franciscan friars, Fr. Barnabas Nanetti da Cologne, OFM, described these women in one of his journal entries on July 5, 1900.

There are women boxers called *Hongdengzhao* (Red Lanterns), all **dressed in red** and **carrying red lanterns** everywhere. They're **from 11 to 14 years old**, are unmarried, and like the young men **they rage in a hypnotic sleep of evil**, though even more so than the males. Based on their pagan beliefs **they believe they are also invulnerable**, and what is more important, **they think they can fly**, and destroy and burn with an invincible power. They are strictly forbidden from using anything European, or even made in the European way, such as canvas, matches, oil, and so forth. Even touching them [a Western object] is considered unclean. . . and many such things have been vandalized.<sup>10</sup>

Like the male Boxers, the Red Lanterns wore red and believed they were impervious to blades and bullets, but they also were believed to have the ability to **fly**.

[SLIDE 8: Red Lantern at Beitang Battle] Several of Liu Dapeng's writings discuss Red Lantern flight. After the women completed their ritual invocations they entered into a trance, "and then they immediately **tumbled to the ground**. Soon after falling down they rose and began to move about. . . ." Liu recounts one Red Lantern who "was able to **ascend in her room as if in flight**," which reportedly so **frightened the girl's parents** that they **locked** her in and would not let her out of the house.<sup>11</sup> The typical role of a Red Lantern woman Boxer was to remain behind the attacking Boxer men, recite curses while holding a red lantern, and cast spells against their enemies; a famous Chinese print from this era depicts a Red Lantern above a scene of battle. Her **right hand** holds a **red lantern**, and from her **left hand extends a magical whip** that forms a **protective barrier** around the attacking male Boxers. Other Red Lantern magic included **fire starting** and **predicting the future**.<sup>12</sup>

## Franciscan Women & Alternative Method of Heavenly Combat

[SLIDE 9: FMM Sisters] My book looks at the experiences of women on **both** sides of the “heavenly conflict” – the Red Lantern Boxers **and** the Franciscan sisters who travelled to China from Western Europe to establish Chinese schools, orphanages, hospitals, and **foremost** in their minds, **convert** China to Roman Catholicism. I speak most about **two** Franciscan women: Sr. Marie-Hermine de Jesus, FFM, and Sr. Maria Amandina, FMM. Their letters home during the worst months of the Boxer Uprising tell us **much** about what was in their minds and around them as their situation grew more **severe**. Marie-Hermine, the Mother Superior of the small Shanxi convent, wrote this in a letter on June 25, 1900:

Drought continues to torment China – from all sides more alarming news. Missionaries of the vicariate wrote to the bishop begging him to help relieve their Christians, many of whom have already died of starvation; . . . every day unfortunate women covered in rags come and kneel at our feet, begging us to give them clothes and food for themselves and their children. With a heavy heart and tears in my eyes, I can only distribute very little. Mission resources are so **few**, and mouths so **many**! Our orphanage currently has **260**, and each day brings new recruits – Chinese women to whom have been entrusted the care of foster children for up to six, seven or eight years, can no longer keep them because of the low wages they receive. The price of millet, the ordinary food of the poor, has more than tripled. What shall we do if the **five or six hundred children who are nursing** right now are all returned?<sup>13</sup>

These sisters worried about what might happen to the 260 Chinese children in their orphanage if the Boxers overcome their mission, and even more, they agonized over the **5-600 nursing infants** in their care. Sr. Maria Amandina wrote to her blood sister back home: “Before my letter reaches you we may **already be expelled or massacred.**”<sup>14</sup> They knew of the rumors about them – that they killed children for magic potions – and they grew more fearful for their own lives.

[SLIDE 10: Fogolla & OFM/FMM Groups] The Franciscans made a fateful decision, however, that determined their fate in June 1900. One of the two bishops in charge of the Shanxi Catholic mission was **Francesco Fogolla**, OFM, a rather **portly friar** from Tuscany who was known in China for his exceptional fluency in the Chinese language. As the Franciscans became more certain of a Boxer attack, they convened a meeting to decide how to confront the danger. While the **Jesuit** missionaries **elsewhere in China** decided to take up arms and defend their missions, **Bishop Fogolla** advised **no armed resistance** there at the **Franciscan** mission. He said, “Catholic churches are **not military bases**, and cannot contain swords and guns.”<sup>15</sup> Hearing his words, all discussion of physical resistance was **abandoned**; they would resist with **prayer**. Shortly after this meeting, nearly all of the Franciscans were **seized, tortured**, and then **killed** at the west entrance of the local governor’s headquarter in the provincial capital. It was one of the bloodiest events in China’s long history, and a local historian, Gin Geping, estimates that the toll of the Sino-Missionary conflict in Shanxi was extreme: 191 foreign missionaries were massacred, 6,060 native Chinese Christians were killed, 225 churches and mission structures were destroyed, and 20,000 Christian homes were razed.<sup>16</sup>

[SLIDE 11: Martyrdom Images/Yamen Gate] Almost all of the **30,000 people** who died during the Boxer Uprising were either **Chinese Christians** or **Western missionaries** – while most books outline the **political** causes of the violence in 1900, mine turns its attention what the **participants themselves envisioned and discussed** – a “**heavenly conflict**” between Chinese gods such as Lord Guan, and Western deities such as Michael the Archangel. The Boxers in Shanxi fought the earthly part of that battle with guns, swords, and magical spells, while the Franciscans fought in the purely **spiritual** realm. **Curiously**, while there are no more Boxers in Shanxi, China, the Christian population continues to grow at an **astounding** rate. Let me end with one account of the deaths of the seven Franciscan sisters:

In a harsh voice Yu-Hsien ordered the yard to be cleared and the prisoners were dragged out to the tribunal, the people hurling insults at them as they passed down the streets. Yu-Hsien did not even pretend to hold a trial. He himself gave the order to kill and dealt the deathblow to the two bishops with his own hand. On their knees the nuns . . . sang the *Te Deum* [**a hymn**] as they knelt with heads bowed to the executioner. ‘They were tranquil,’ some pagan spectators said afterwards. ‘They lifted up their veils for the death blow,’ and added, ‘it is a shame! These European nuns were so good.’<sup>17</sup>

They were executed **one by one**, as their chorus diminished **one voice at a time**. [SLIDE 12: Von le Fort & Francis Poulenc - Carmelites] The dramatic image of this event was retold in Europe, and may have inspired the stirring narrative about **Carmelites** singing in chorus as they died in a **similar way** at the guillotine in Gertrud von le Fort’s novel,

*The Song at the Scaffold* (1931). This same story was **also** dramatized in Francis Poulenc's 1956 opera, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

I'll end a bit abruptly here and answer any questions – there is **much more** to this history than what I've said **here**, but I'll leave the **rest** of the story to the book. . . .

You might wonder why I conduct research and write on the topic of Christian martyrdom – this is a good question for discussion. But, by way of a brief “postface” to my remarks today – since the word “martyr” means “witness,” I view my work as a way to, actually, help the martyrs be martyrs.

[SLIDE 13: Closing Slide] Thank you.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Selected Political Writings*, Edited by Dennis Dalton (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Harold Ristau, *At War with Peace: A Chaplain's Meditations from Afghanistan* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguoyanyi 三國演義* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) (Yangzhou 揚州: Jiangsu guangling guji keyinshe 江蘇廣陵古籍刻印社, 1996), 110

<sup>4</sup> Revelation, 12: 7.

<sup>5</sup> From the Chaplet of St. Michael; Ann Ball, *A Litany of Saints* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Correspondence, North Jiangsu, *North China Herald*, 60: 929 (30 May 1898).

<sup>7</sup> TDA, Shanxi Boxer Announcement, Guanxu 26th Reign Year (1900), Notice 1. Also see Qiao Zhiqiang, *Yihetuan zai shanxi diqu shiliao*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Liu Dapeng, *Jinci zhi*, in Qiao Zhiqiang, *Yihetuan zai Shanxi diqu shiliao*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony E. Clark, *Heaven in Conflict*, 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> Nanetti da Cologna, *Nel Settentrionale San-si*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Liu Dapeng, *Qianyuan suoji*, in Qiao Zhiqiang, *Yihetuan zai Shanxi diqu shiliao*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> See Anthony E. Clark, *Heaven in Conflict*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> AFMM. Letter from Marie-Hermine de Jesus, FMM, 25 June 1900.

<sup>14</sup> AFMM. Letter from Maria Amandina, FMM, 24 January 1900.

<sup>15</sup> Li Di, *Quanhuoji*, 333.

<sup>16</sup> Qin Geping, *Taiyuan jiaoqu jianshi*, 312.

<sup>17</sup> Goyau, *Missionaries and Martyrs*, 37.