

Ferdinand Hamer, Martyr in China

In the late summer of the year 1900 the West was horrified by the news of the misdeeds of the Boxers in China. The Boxers not only besieged the embassies of the civilized world in Beijing, but had also assassinated thousands of Chinese Christians, Chinese priests, and European missionaries. A century later, in the year 2000, a symposium was held in Shandong to commemorate the uprising. On 1 October, the national holiday of the People's Republic of China, Pope John Paul II proclaimed the canonization of 120 people who had been killed in China for their beliefs.¹ The canonization evoked a furious reaction from the Chinese authorities. In their opinion this was a typical example of Western post-colonialism! The Dutch catholic society was also quite surprised as – among the 120 canonizations – they missed Bishop Hamer. Ferdinand Hamer, who in July 1900 had been assassinated in the most atrocious way. Ferdinand Hamer, the very example of the missionary-martyr....

Research > China

By Harry Knipschild

Just over twelve months ago I began my research on the life and work of Ferdinand Hamer in China. In this article I will give special attention to one aspect to the missionary work of Hamer, namely the continuous periods of extreme drought on the north of China. In *History in three keys. The Boxers as event, experience and myth* (New York, 1997), Paul A. Cohen explains in detail the enormous influence of natural phenomena on the life and actions of the Chinese farmers in the Shanxi and Shandong provinces. Working with oral sources and authentic documents of the Boxers and American missionaries and sisters, the American historian explained the reaction of the local farmers to the flood of the Yellow River in 1898 and the extreme drought in the period thereafter. The Chinese peasants experienced the catastrophes as a disturbance of the harmony of heaven, so they gave it a religious meaning. They blamed the foreigners for the crop failures and the ensuing hunger; on their flags they carried their device: 'Support the Qing; destroy the foreigners'.

In periods of extreme drought there was not much work to be done in the fields. The peasants, therefore, had ample time to unite in groups or gangs. In the years of the Sino-Japanese War (1894), unofficial groups for self-defence, with such names as the Big Sword Society and the Plum Flower Boxers, were frequently called on to perform a protective

function in Shandong. These groups were always antagonistic towards the Christian religion.

After 1894, the West behaved more and more in an imperialistic manner. In this respect the German apostolic vicar (Bishop) of Shandong, Johann Anzer, played a prominent part. He manipulated the opinion of Emperor William's Germany to his advantage, resulting the German annexation of the seaport town of Qingdao after the murder of two missionaries. He also built a church in the birthplace of Confucius. In response, the farmers united into new gangs, Boxers United in Righteousness. The Boxer Uprising started in Shandong and, fed by lack of rain, spread to Beijing and further inland.

The Belgian Mission in the North

After the treaties of Tianjin and Beijing in 1860, Theophile Verbist, chaplain of the Belgian army and director of the Belgian section of the Holy Childhood, founded a new missionary congregation with the intention to save the Chinese children and, especially, their souls. Pope Pius IX assigned the CICM congregation (also called Scheut after the village of their main residence, near Brussels) the whole of Mongolia. In 1865, the first four missionaries, accompanied by a servant, departed from Belgium for the Far East. They hardly had any opportunity to prepare themselves - for instance, they no knowledge of the Chinese language.

The Belgian pioneers crossed the Great Wall near Beijing and arrived in the village of Xiwanzi. They started working with the help of a few Chinese priests, with Latin as their lingua franca. Ferdinand Hamer, aged twenty-five, was by far the youngest member of the group. Unexpectedly, his young age quickly became an advantage, as he was reasonably quick in learning the Chinese language and able to acclimatize to the long, cold Mongolian winters, the local food, and the Mongolian way of living. In contrast, two of his companions, including Verbist, died from spotted typhus within a few years.

Less than thirty years old, Ferdinand Hamer, the son of a grocer in Nijmegen, became a veteran of the Mongolian mis-

sion in an inhospitable and dangerous territory - dangerous, indeed, as it soon became clear that most of the Chinese were inimical to the faith of the West. But each year, new young men from Belgium and the Netherlands arrived in Mongolia – men who were prepared to sacrifice everything for their ideal: the conquest of Chinese souls. They brought with them Western knowledge and technology, Western medicines and medical science; they founded orphanages and schools; and they felt supported by European military supremacy along the Chinese coast. Moreover, the missionaries had money at their disposal, which was essential for buying all sorts of goods, for buying food, and for buying land on which to build churches and other buildings.

In 1878, the CICM mission was extended to the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Ferdinand Hamer, now thirty-eight years old, was designated the first Bishop of that enormous territory by Pope Leo XIII. In 1889, he was transferred to 'Western Mongolia' (Ordos), a mission area where many organizational problems had to be solved. In the end, it was not until 1891 that he could make a start there, as his serious stomach complaints forced him back to Europe for a time. While in Europe, he managed to collect enough money to build a huge church in his episcopal village of Sandaoho, not far from the Yellow River.

The first years of the 1890s brought extreme drought to the north of China (an offshoot of the Gobi desert). The Chinese farmers, who had settled north of the Chinese wall, died in great numbers. Hamer, however, had money at his disposal, so instead of building his church, he bought food. In his letters home he was able to report: 'From all sides the poor people have come flocking in, hoping to be received into the bosom of the Church and get some temporal relief. During the last two months we have acquired more than two thousand people asking to be baptized, people which, under normal circumstances, would never have the idea to become Christians without being animated by necessity'. In other Mongolian areas, where the mission did not have much money, more than a thousand Christians were slaughtered. The years 1891 and 1892 were a sort of pre-Boxer uprising.

Hamer and the Boxer Uprising

A new drought, only seven years later, aggravated the situation in the Ordos mission. By then, the financial resources had been depleted, and any available money was invested in agricultural land in order to give the converts a solid base.

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¹ Among them was the French missionary Chapdelaine, whose untimely death in 1856 gave the French an alibi to invade China, in cooperation with the British, and force the Qing government to ratify the 'unequal' treaties of Tianjin and Beijing (1858/1860). From then on, missionaries were allowed to travel inland and preach the Christian faith, while the Chinese were able to live according to the 'religion of the West'. The French Emperor, Napoleon III, was now the acknowledged protector of all European missionaries and converts of the Qing emperor.



Ferdinand Hamer,
50 years old

Because of the imperialistic behaviour of a new generation of missionaries, however, the hate of the non-Christians towards the converts had grown considerably. Within the mission itself there were conflicts of power: the Catholic mission did not want to cooperate with a new nearby Swedish protestant mission. When the mission purchased a new piece of agricultural land, problems with both the Mongolian authorities and the people arose: while missionaries and converts cleared this piece of land along the Yellow River, several of the original residents were killed.

In the letters that Hamer wrote to his family, it is easy to see that he was fully aware of all the oncoming dangers. In June 1900 he reported, 'Still no rain. What is going to happen here? Everything is as barren as in mid-winter. The wind is dry and full of desert sand. It is impossible to work on the fields. The people have nothing to eat and, unless we have heavy showers very soon, they will have no hope again for this year'. This time, Ferdinand Hamer had no money to buy any additional food, which could have turned the drought to his advantage. Only a few weeks later, the 'heathens' invaded the village where the Bishop, now almost sixty years old, had recently taken up residence. They killed many hundreds of converts and sold the women to Muslim traders. The invaders also seized Hamer and took him to a Chinese magistrate for trial, after which they burned him alive. Ferdinand Hamer became a martyr in China.



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