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To cite this article: Qu Guiping (2020) Converts vs Ordinary Villagers in Late Qing Civil Trials, and the Rise of the Boxers, *Social Sciences in China*, 41:2, 144-163, DOI: [10.1080/02529203.2020.1769313](https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2020.1769313)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2020.1769313>



Published online: 16 Jun 2020.



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Converts vs Ordinary Villagers in Late Qing Civil Trials, and the Rise of the Boxers

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清代乡村民事官司，主要涉及户婚田土债等细故。乡民发生日常口角纠纷，“打官司”是解决纠纷的常见方式，也是龃龉争吵中产生怨忿的宣泄通道。细故不细。如果州县官对民事细故处置不当，可能引发乡村冲突。中国乡村民事细故官司审断可谓乡村治理的敏感区。19世纪60年代以后，在不平等条约体系下，西方传教士深入华北乡村腹地传教。为了尽可能多地吸纳教民，传教士给教民提供“政治庇护”，深度干预乡村民事司法诉讼，在民教官司中偏袒教民，造成“教曲民直”的普遍“冤抑”。平民通过“打官司”宣泄口角纠纷怨忿的通道被严重阻塞，怨忿逾久难平，无以发泄，终致酿成义和团的暴力冲突。

关键词：义和团 民事细故 打官司 教曲民直

Village civil cases in the Qing Dynasty mainly dealt with households and marriage, land, and debts, etc. It was not uncommon for village disputes to end up in court, which functioned as a vent to release the sense of grievance felt by the disputants. Seemingly trivial cases were thus not trivial at all for those concerned. Prefectural or county officials' mishandling of a petty civil case could spark village conflicts. As a consequence, such trials were seen as a sensitive issue in rural governance. After the 1860s, the unequal treaties had allowed Western missionaries to proselytize deep into the North China countryside, offering "political protection" for their converts in an attempt to maximize their number. The missionaries interfered extensively in village judicial actions, taking the side of their converts in civil lawsuits that pitted church members against ordinary people. This led to a general situation of "deceitful converts against honest men," making the latter feel they were the victims of injustice. The channels that would have allowed the ordinary villagers to vent their grievances via litigation were thus blocked up. Their accumulated resentment burst its barriers and finally exploded in the violence of the Boxer Uprising.

Keywords: Boxers (*Yihetuan*), petty civil cases, litigation, deceitful converts win against honest people

I. Problematic

The Boxer Uprising or *Yihetuan* Movement has never lost its attraction for researchers. Perspectives on this issue have becoming increasingly broad: as well as the traditional subjects—the external factor of imperialist invasion and the changes in the *Yihequan* (Righteous and Harmonious Fists, or Boxers), the *Meihuaquan* (Plum Blossom Fists), *Shenquan* (Holy Fists) and other martial arts bodies—they include cultural differences between China and the West, the social and ecological environment and structure, hunger and famine, martial customs in Shandong, superstition, race, myths, folk rituals, rumors, etc.¹ Although scholars have studied the question of court cases between converts and other people,² few of them have discussed in depth the role of such cases as a key factor in the rise of the Boxers. One important reason for this is that lawsuits between converts and ordinary people were confined to petty spats and squabbles over households, marriage, land, properties, debts, theft, robbery, etc., whereas the Boxer Uprising was full of fierce and bloody clashes that spread across the whole of the North China countryside. “In the spring and summer of 1900, just in the thirty or forty counties under the Jinan, Dongchang, Tai’an and Wuding Prefectures and Linqing under Zhili, hundreds of churches and more than 2,000 church properties were burned down or demolished, 290 converts were killed, and the churches and the converts suffered about 1.6 million silver taels of damage.”³

The villagers’ indignation with volcanic force, yet nearly all the legal cases between them and the converts involved trivial matters. Linking the two may seem somewhat farfetched. According to one scholar, “The great majority of the conflicts between converts and ordinary people at the time the Boxer Uprising were, from the legal point of view, civil disputes to do with trivial problems at the level of social life, with petty squabbles or arguments over property... We have discovered no crimes committed by the missionaries or the converts—no murders or rapes or looting of property. Even converts who did wrong things... didn’t necessarily deserve death.”⁴ In other words, neither routine disputes nor petty squabbles would have sufficed to provoke a towering hatred of missionaries and their converts among the common people, and still less would these things have led to bloodshed. Some Westerners also raised the same question. In 1899, just before the Boxer Rebellion, the German missionary Joseph Freinademe, a witness of the conflicts between the converted and the rest

1 See Xiang Lanxin, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study*; Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*; Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*; R.G. Tiedemann, *Violence and Fear in North China: Christian Mission and Social Conflict on the Eve of the Boxer Uprising*.

2 Lawsuits involving the people vs the church (*minjiao zhengsong* 民教争讼) refers to civil cases between converts and the unconverted. “(Ordinary) people” refers to the latter.

3 Shandong Local Gazetteers Compilation Committee, *Records of Ethnic Minorities and Records of Religions in Shandong*, p. 655.

4 Hou Yijie, “The Boxers: Under the Banner of ‘Exterminating the Foreigners,’” p. 88.

in Jimo, Shandong, trying to understand why the “heathens” had attacked the converts, got them to express their grievances. He made the following record:

One accusation was that ten years ago, the whole village had killed his pig and cooked it. One of the villagers who ate it at the time became a Christian; when asked to pay for the pig, he refused. A second grumbled that some Christian had built a wall on his land, but the wall was not straight. If measured with a plummet, it was in the territory of the heathen....

When he heard that all the reasons the “heathen” gave for their “accusations” were about “routine trivia,” Freinademe thought they were lying. He wrote, “Are these complaints sufficient grounds for comprehensive opposition to all Christians? ... Clearly, they (the heathens) are just trying to find an excuse to cover up everything they did and confuse the public, especially in Qingdao. But the purpose of this persecution is to torment and intimidate Christians and make them renounce their faith.”⁵ Paul Komasky, another German priest, agreed that if such trivia was associated with the fury against the foreigners, it was as absurd “as if all the water in small puddles were to converge into a sea or a volcanic eruption could be explained by the light in a pothole.”⁶

Indeed, although the lawsuits between the converted and the ordinary people were over “trivial and insignificant matters” and “petty nuisances,” the violent conflict of the Boxer Uprising had a tragic effect on the whole of North China, shocking people at home and abroad. Large-scale social upheavals only become reasonable and justified under the strong stimulus of historic events, such as the military invasion of Western powers, the feverish dissection of China, defeat in the Sino-Japanese War and other “insults and humiliations,” which ignited the “raging flames” of the Chinese people’s hatred of foreigners.⁷ Admittedly, famine and hunger, cultural differences between China and the West, the custom of valuing a martial spirit, superstition, race, myths, folk rituals, rumors, etc., were all indispensable contributing factors; without this, the Boxers were just a mob of thugs, who killed converts in order to “seize their property and make a profit.”⁸

While not denying the fact that in their violent clashes, some Boxers were brutal, greedy and opportunistic, or that a variety of factors led to the Boxer Uprising and that the movement was influenced by major historical events, we confront a historical paradox: compared with these factors, the “unimportant” and “undervalued” role of litigation between converts and

5 Augustin Henninghaus, *Freinademe of the Society of the Divine Word: His Life and Influence, and the Missionary History of Southern Shandong*, p. 152.

6 Paul Komasky, “The War and Missionary Activities in China,” p. 230.

7 The German priest Paul Komasky took the common view of the Boxer Uprising, holding that the Chinese people’s volcanic anger was rooted in their isolationist national conceit and blind anti-foreign exclusion, together with the armed aggression of the imperialist powers (see Paul Komasky, “The War and Missionary Activities in China,” pp. 222-244.

8 Hou Yijie, “The Boxers: Under the Banner of ‘Exterminating the Foreigners,’” p. 88.

ordinary people played in the rise of Boxer Rebellion goes far beyond current understanding and evaluation. Such litigation has always been eclipsed by the grand historical narrative, whereas in fact it hides the core code of the Boxer Uprising.

II. Trying Petty Civil Cases: A Sensitive Issue in Rural Governance in the Qing Dynasty

Village litigation under the Qing referred specifically to legal cases arising from civil disputes, generally referred to as “going to court” (*da guansi* 打官司). Petty civil cases tended to involve trivial matters like “households, marriages, land, debts, theft, robbery,” etc. The rural population’s daily lives and production were carried out in the village community. Limited production resources, close living, the multiplicity of social relations and the separation among people with different status, the complexity of social composition and many other reasons meant that conflicts and disputes among the villagers were inevitable. Rural China was “a competitive society composed of many actors with different interest claims and conflicts. As a result, disputes break out all the time.”⁹ “Robberies, attacks, fights and quarrels are everywhere.”¹⁰

Throughout the Qing dynasty, violent conflicts and even bloody and fatal fights between villages, clans, and different groups were not uncommon. Many of these incidents were related to the petty disputes and quarrels in the countryside. K. C. Hsiao has noted that from the 19th century on, many of the bloody fights in rural areas were over trivial matters. For example, “Armed conflict broke out between two villages in Shexian County, Anhui, in 1850 over seeking a woman’s favor.”¹¹ Elizabeth J. Perry also found that a series of revenge killings in pre-1949 rural Huaibei in Anhui were caused by disputes about crops, livestock, money, etc. Clans would fight over tiny incidents.¹² Furthermore, many of the frequent fights and murders that caused heavy casualties in both northern and southern rural China were due to petty disputes and minor conflicts. In Guangdong, “Disputes that started from trivial things like felling a tree, stealing an ox, seizing the bank of a pond, encroaching upon a fallow field, occupying mountainous land or picking mulberries often developed into big fights... and ended up in terrible disasters.”¹³ In Dongchen Village and Wu Village (beside Danyang Lake) in Dangtu County, Anhui, “fights over cutting water caltrop leaves broke out between the two villages, resulting in heavy casualties.”¹⁴ In Xiaogu Village and Xingboliu Village in Quzhou County, Hebei, about a hundred people took part in a brawl over watching an opera.¹⁵

9 Hiroaki Terada, *Rights and Grievances: Civil Justice and the Civil Law Order in the Qing Dynasty*, p. 193.

10 Huang Liuhong, *The Complete Book of Happiness and Benevolence*, p. 1b.

11 K.C. Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the 19th Century*.

12 Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*, p. 89.

13 Lang Jinze, “The Surge in Fighting in Guangdong Province,” p. 54.

14 “Many Villagers Injured in Fighting over Strict Dividing Line in Cutting Water Caltrop Leaves,” p. 5.

15 “Local News: Villagers Fighting in Quzhou (Hebei),” p. 1.

Prompt resolution of the villagers' daily "petty grudges and grievances" and arguments in the rural areas could avoid some of these fierce but unnecessary conflicts. For this reason, the village community had a set of self-generated mediation mechanisms encouraged by the authorities. "For a long time, through the mediation of village leaders, disputes within a village were usually solved by means of negotiation."¹⁶ "In normal circumstances, they tried to find a solution not involving the magistrate's *yamen*, as going to court would have cost money or hindered production; the means adopted for this purpose included mediation, arbitration and conciliation."¹⁷

If a village dispute could not be mediated within the community, civil cases would be referred to the county or prefectural governments for judgment; that is, the villagers would have to "go to court." This had a broader remit and was more authoritative than community mechanisms. The villagers' litigation could be "for their own interests or to vent their anger, or because mediation had failed."¹⁸ "Disputes had to be heard firstly by the clan; if the clan could not come to a decision, the parties would take their case to the authorities."¹⁹

Compared with the community's spontaneous dispute mediation mechanisms, the trial of civil cases in the prefecture and county governments had a broader and more authoritative role in quelling disputes. On the one hand, "Because of the weakness of community organization, it was usually not possible to handle the settlement of disputes inside the community."²⁰ On the other, many disputes occurred with groups that were "outside the community," and were therefore not amenable to the capacity and scope of community mediation; such cases could be between natives and visitors, between locals and immigrants, between villages, and so on.²¹ "There was an expectation that litigation could in itself prevent the escalation of disputes and inhibit the intensification of contradictions, and in a certain sense it did play such a role."²²

Admittedly, the extent to which litigation could play a role in resolving everyday disputes does not go undisputed. The traditional view has long reminded us that rural China was a society without litigation,²³ and villagers "would rather nurse a grievance than risk filing a case before the magistrate."²⁴ Therefore, it was believed that since the villagers were afraid of litigation and unwilling to go to court, civil trials and mediation could only play a relatively limited role. However, in recent years, scholars have considerably revised the traditional view, with many of them pointing out that in fact, under the Qing, "Numerous cases were tried at

16 Martin C. Yang, *A Chinese Village: Taitou, Shantung Province*, p. 161.

17 Qu Tongzu, "The Role of Law in Chinese Society," p. 7.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

19 Wei Xi, "A Biography of the Wan Clan," p. 445.

20 Hiroaki Terada, *Rights and Grievances: Civil Justice and the Civil Law Order in the Qing Dynasty*, p. 193.

21 K.C. Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the 19th Century*.

22 Hiroaki Terada, *Rights and Grievances: Civil Justice and the Civil Law Order in the Qing Dynasty*, p. 193.

23 See Fei Xiaotong, *Earthbound China: Child Bearing Institution*, pp. 54-58.

24 K.C. Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the 19th Century*.

the prefectural and county level.”²⁵ In fact, the national authorities set up a unified system across the country that directly opened the door to access to litigation. The system employed one prefectural or county official for every 200,000 people, with residents sending in an average of over a thousand petitions per month.²⁶ The number of ordinary villagers taking their case to court was sufficient to make legal proceedings an integral part of the collective memory of most villages.²⁷

The number of lawsuits taken to prefectural and county courts by ordinary villagers shows that they were familiar with litigation and had high expectations and claims for its use in the protection of their rights and interests. Certainly, whether one won or lost a case was a matter of great moment, not only for the legitimate interests of the parties concerned, but also for their “face” in the countryside. There were a great many arguments in the villages and people were ready to spend time and money in court on disputes of little material value, but felt to be of importance for personal or family prestige.²⁸ In rural North China, someone who was “good at litigation and mediation” would be honored by the villagers. In the 1930s, Xiao Huisheng of Houjiaying Village in Changli County, Hebei, had received plaques from 38 nearby villages. When he worked at the county Telephone Office, the neighboring villagers used to come to him for help in litigation.²⁹ Guo Junxuan, a member of the gentry in Linxian County, Shanxi, was regarded by local people as a “great man”; many of the common people asked for his help because he was able to write complaints and take over the entire process of litigation.³⁰

In addition, civil trials were important channels for the settlement of disputes and resolution of conflicts, as well as venting grievances provoked by arguments and frictions. “Four or five lawsuits out often involved trivial quarrels between neighbors or family members; momentary anger would find rash expression in the filing of a lawsuit.”³¹ But “If the case was tried in a clear and fair way, the parties might repent and the disputes be resolved.”³² Conversely, if the local officials were lazy and slack, or the trial was unclear or the judgment unfair, conflicts between the parties might be aggravated, leading to “a greater grievance” and even clashes between villages. One commentator observed, “The local officials’ métier was to oppress

25 Shigeo Nakamura, “Was Traditional Chinese Law a Mere ‘Model?’”, pp. 106-174.

26 Hiroaki Terada, *Rights and Grievances: Civil Justice and the Civil Law Order in the Qing Dynasty*, p. 193.

27 Philip C.C. Huang, *Law, Society and Culture in the Qing Dynasty: Expression and Practice of Civil Law*, vol. 1, pp. 9-10.

28 Sidney D. Gamble, *North China Villages: Social, Political, and Economic Activities before 1933*, p. 117.

29 Xu Yong and Deng Dacai, eds., *South Manchuria Railway Company Survey of Rural China (I)*, vol. 5, pp. 80-82.

30 *Biographies of Famous People in Northwest Shanxi*, 1941, p. 9, file no. A22-1-4-1, Shanxi Provincial Archives.

31 Wang Huizu, “Beneficial Advice on Governance: Relieving Litigation,” p. 6.

32 *Ibid.*

and exploit the villagers. They ignored civil affairs, and the common people's cases were not settled for years on end; the masses never even glimpsed an official. With nowhere to take their complaints, they were forced to resort to fighting."³³

In this sense, civil trials can be described as a sensitive area of grassroots governance in China. When the two adjacent villages of Weicheng and Yuanjiaqiao in Baoding, Hebei, province took a case to court involving the construction of a long embankment, "The county court judged that Yuanjiaqiao Village had won the case. Weicheng Village was dissatisfied, and started a violent armed brawl with Yuanjiaqiao Village, leading to a serious situation."³⁴ At the beginning of the Jintian Uprising under the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, "Putting the Guixian County Hakka under Jintian was the biggest motive force lighting Jintian's prairie fire."³⁵ But the "biggest motive force" was not unrelated to the laziness and slackness of local officials. A conflict arose when Wen Ayu, a Hakka, competed with a local for a "beautiful woman." Wen kidnapped a native beauty who already had a marriage contract. The local man brought the case before the magistrate but they ignored it, sparking unprecedented large-scale fighting between the two communities. The Hakka couldn't beat the locals; "Their houses were burned and they suffered heavy casualties," resulting in their becoming converts to the God Worshipping Society.³⁶

Local officials with rich experience of governance dared not make light of civil lawsuits. In *Pingping Yan*, Fang Dashi warned local officials that "Court cases concerned with household, marriage, land, money, theft, etc., are all trivial matters from the perspective of the court, but they are far from trivial from the people's perspective, because they concern their immediate interests. A prefecture or county will have few serious cases but many petty ones. If only the former were taken seriously, how many murders or robberies would you see in a year? ... Governance in ancient times paid meticulous attention to tiny details."³⁷ Wang Huizu also reminded local officials that they needed to attach great importance to the endless lawsuits, saying "Major local cases of murders and robbery are not common. It is the unceasing civil lawsuits that are the most complicated and urgent and that should be taken as the most important task by the government."³⁸

Western missionaries went deep into the rural hinterland of North China to preach. Enjoying extra territoriality, they rashly strode into the sensitive area of grassroots governance and became immersed in Chinese village-level civil court cases. The frequency of legal cases involving religion and even the Boxer Uprising are inextricably related to this behavior of theirs.

33 "On the Evils of Recent Fighting in Guangdong," p. 1.

34 "Local News: Mass Fighting in Baoding (Hebei)," p. 9.

35 Quoted from Jian Youwen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, p. 208.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Fang Dashi, *Pingping Yan*, vol. 3, p. 132.

38 Wang Huizu, "Beneficial Advice on Governance: Saving Trouble."

III. Western Missionaries' Meddling in the Sensitive Area of Grassroots Governance: Major Interference in Civil Cases

1. *Why Western missionaries meddled in the sensitive area of grass-roots governance*

Western missionaries started their activities in China before the Opium War, not during the war. However, before the war, since their work was banned by the Qing government, the missionaries focused on obtaining legitimacy for their missionary activities. After the war, with the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, which lifted the ban on foreign activities,³⁹ missionaries were able to flock into the interior of China in large numbers, expanding their activities and “shifting their focus to the common people.”⁴⁰ The original introduction of Western religions in China had produced only a fraction of converts among rural residents. According to Esherick, in the century from the beginning of missionary activities to 1949, Chinese Christians were never more than a tiny minority (less than one percent) of the Chinese population. A major reason for this was that converting to Christianity meant a break with traditional culture and their immediate social setting; few Chinese were willing to do this.⁴¹ “In the eyes of the common people, Christianity was a heterodox cult.”⁴²

For the missionaries, the number of converts was an important measure of performance, and those, especially the Catholics, who attracted the most followers were regarded as “capable.”⁴³ In attracting as many converts as possible, they “were backed by the world’s most powerful nations”⁴⁴ and, whenever possible, “took advantage of the strong support of secular forces,”⁴⁵ including “material assistance” and “political shelter.” This was actually an “interest-driven mode of attracting converts,”⁴⁶ who were “attracted by the material and political benefits offered by the foreign religion rather than by the religion itself.”⁴⁷ Tempted by such “benefits,” some poor villagers converted to the foreign religion in order to get “limited material assistance” that would allow them to survive the famine. In Guanxian County, Shandong, some villagers recalled, “The reasons for our religious worship were mainly the famine and having no means of support. There was a saying, ‘Why did we convert? For a couple of strings of cash.’” Others recalled that in Linqing in Shandong, “The poor lost hope because of the famine. They only converted because the church gave them occasional relief, otherwise they would not have done so.”⁴⁸

39 Prince Gong (Yixin), “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 45b.

40 Xiang Lanxin, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study*, p. 28.

41 Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, p. 94.

42 Xiang Lanxin, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study*, p. 31.

43 Ding Richang, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 32b.

44 Xiang Lanxin, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study*, pp. 29-30.

45 D.G. Warnecke, “German Press Comments on Missionary Activities in China,” p. 255.

46 Liu Dapeng, “Qian Yuan Suo Ji: Converts,” p. 32.

47 R.G. Tiedemann, *Violence and Fear in North China: Christian Missions and Social Conflict on the Eve of the Boxer Uprising*, pp. 173, 178.

48 Lu Yao, ed., *Collected Documents of the Boxer Uprising: Shandong University Survey (I)*, pp. 233, 494.

The assistance of secular forces and the resources of “famine relief” being limited, it is safe to say that it was protection in lawsuits that had the greatest drawing power for the villagers. Warnecke, a German, commented, “They (the Chinese assistants to the Catholic missionaries) told the parties concerned to register and join the Catholic Church so that you’ll be one of us, and our priest will take your case to the court. We can guarantee there’ll be no problems because we’re backed by the French.”⁴⁹ In Hongtaoyuan, Guan County, Shandong, according to some villagers, “Some villagers converted to avoid being bullied. Catholicism was powerful, able to win lawsuits.” In Guozhuang Village, Pingyuan County, northwest Shandong, “The poor did so (converted) for food and clothing; the rich, for whom this meant nothing, for power.”⁵⁰

Owing to the inducements provided, the number of converts in North China kept increasing. “At the beginning, only a few Chinese believed in the foreign religion, but then their numbers grew. In the Guangxu reign period, they were increasingly numerous, so that by the year 1900, they were to be found even in remote corners or on poor land.”⁵¹

2. *Deceitful converts were even protected in court cases against honest men*

The missionaries provided “judicial protection” to the converts to attract more followers. Their behavior, however, touched on a sensitive area of rural governance in China: civil litigation. “Since the Holy See, with the help of the French Minister in Beijing, successfully obtained for its bishops and priests the rank, status and power equal to those of senior Chinese officials, and helped empower them to attend the proceedings as an equal or even superior person to the local officials in all matters involving Chinese Catholics and their friends...”⁵² the missionaries “kept intervening in common people’s petty issues.”⁵³ “Tiny spats were often referred to the consul or directly to the local magistrate so as to overawe others.”⁵⁴

Many local officials were “either timid and incompetent, or hoped to get in good with the foreigners”; their greatest fear was a diplomatic dispute that might provoke trouble. They “flouted the law and didn’t grasp the rules.”⁵⁵ “Whenever converts and common people took a case to the magistrate’s court, the priest would speak for the converts and even intimidate the others in a variety of ways. The local officials, afraid of provoking trouble and humiliation, tended to wind up the proceedings with a compromise, so that the rights and wrongs of the case were never resolved.”⁵⁶

As a result of missionaries’ interference in cases involving disputes between the converts and non-converts, the phenomenon of “deceitful converts vs honest men” was not uncommon:

49 D.G. Warnecke, “German Press Comments on Missionary Activities in China,” p. 255.

50 Lu Yao, ed., *Collected Documents of the Boxer Uprising: Shandong University Survey (I)*, pp. 574, 955.

51 Liu Dapeng, “Qian Yuan Suo Ji: Converts,” p. 32.

52 Immanuel Gner, “A New Perspective on Chinese Unrest: A Discussion of Missionary Activities,” p. 266.

53 Prince Gong (Yixin), “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 45b.

54 Zhang Tingxiang, *Miscellaneous Records of Things Heard and Seen at the Buyuanfu Studio* (Selected), p. 641.

55 *Ibid.*

56 Li Bingheng, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 154.

Officials “well knew that the converts were in the wrong, but put the blame on ordinary people.”⁵⁷ “People in Shanxi are gentle and timid. They certainly never had any intention of troubling the church. Careful scrutiny of old and new cases indicates that the converts were in the wrong and the common people had right on their side.”⁵⁸ “In cases of disputes between converts and the common people, the common people lost out while the converts won.”⁵⁹

This situation aroused much discontent, with indignation exacerbated by the fact that in many cases “vagrants and ruffians,” who had clearly done evil deeds and whom the villagers looked down on, were also “protected” once they joined the church. Early on, when he was handling cases concerning church members in Tianjin, Zeng Guofan presented a secret memorial to the throne, saying, “the French Catholics only hope to attract a multitude of followers, without inquiring into their morality. Their acceptance of converts is much too lax. Therefore, virtuous people are few among them, and the majority are of bad character.”⁶⁰ A Shandong governor also noted that “Among the converts are robbers, murderers, defaulters on debt, and wrong doers who fear they may be accused...”⁶¹ After the Boxer Uprising was suppressed, Arthur H. Smith, an American missionary, admitted that “both officials and common people believed that Catholicism provided shelter for wrongdoers.”⁶²

It can be seen that in the sensitive area of grassroots justice in the North China countryside, missionaries who did not know the local conditions and could not distinguish the good from the bad were interfering in lawsuits between converts and ordinary people by blindly favoring their followers and even sheltering “vagrants and ruffians” whom the villagers considered immoral. This led to a long-term build-up of suppressed popular resentment that could not be quieted.

3. *The increase in court cases between converts and ordinary people*

The political protection provided by missionaries to their followers also sparked a continuous increase in legal cases involving converts and ordinary people.

As mentioned above, not a few “vagrants, scoundrels and evildoers” joined the church; they were renegades from the traditional rural order, who lorded it over people “who feared losing their wealth.”⁶³ “Honest and hard-working villagers were often at their mercy.”⁶⁴ Conversion seemed to give such men “an amulet for litigation” after they converted. Like tigers let out of a cage, they would take advantage of the situation to throw their weight around, perpetually provoking disputes and thus increasing the number of lawsuits between converts and common people. “This kind of person usually had a great many resentments; once they converted, they

57 “Report from Tai’an Prefecture,” February 9, 1900, p. 399.

58 “Zhang Zhidong, Governor of Shanxi Province, Sets up the Commission for Religious Cases,” January 24, 1883, p. 32.

59 “Zeng Guofan: Secret Memorial to the Throne,” p. 40a.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, ed., *Archives of Religious Affairs and Religious Cases in the Qing Dynasty*, vol. 6 (1): 1896-1899, pp. 241-242.

62 Arthur H. Smith, *China in Convulsion*, p. 26.

63 Arthur H. Smith, *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology*, pp. 213-214.

64 Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, p. 80.

did a lot of damage, becoming reckless and violent.”⁶⁵ “People who were not satisfied with their lot in life wanted to get their own back upon conversion, and would even accuse their fathers or brothers and regard their neighbor as a foe.”⁶⁶

Some converts who had no obvious misdemeanors before they entered the church “put on foreign airs” because they “had an amulet that protected them in lawsuits.”⁶⁷ “A popular saying was, ‘On joining the church, rats become tigers’...They oppress the countryside and bully the common people.”⁶⁸ In daily life, converts “ran amuck in the countryside while enjoying protection.”⁶⁹ They took advantage of the opportunity to profit at the expense of ordinary people, and were frequently totally unreasonable. “Relying on this amulet, they picked unreasonable quarrels,”⁷⁰ “making the unreasonable reasonable and ceasing to pay back debts.”⁷¹ As a result, quarrels and friction between converts and ordinary people were commonplace, and frequently ended up in court; “The converts, relying on the power of the church, would take the ordinary villagers to court.”⁷²

This can be further illustrated by the following cases.

An oral statement given at Zhangzhuang Village, Gaotang County, Shandong, reported that:

The land of the convert Fan Laoba is adjacent to that of the common villager Zeng Xuecheng. Fan took a case to the county court over the cultivation of a disputed plot measuring about one *mu*. At first, the county magistrate awarded the plot to Zeng, but later, after a visit from Fan, the priest took a sedan chair to see the magistrate and had a violent argument with him. The priest kicked the table over and the magistrate reversed the verdict in favor of Fan.⁷³

In Linyi County, Jinan,

The other year I (oral testimony—author’s note) planted potatoes Chinese yamon a plot of 0.8 *mu*, and they grew very well. The convert Zhao Jiancheng saw how well they were doing, and said, “The potatoes are great; they’re mine now.” I was so angry I took him to court. In the end he won the case without spending any money. I had to sell five or six *mu*

65 “Discussion of Harmony between Converts and Common People by American Missionary Gilbert Reid,” p. 780.

66 “Report from Tai’an Prefecture,” February 9, 1900, p. 399.

67 Lu Yao, ed., *Collected Documents of the Boxer Uprising: Shandong University Survey (II)*, p. 1072.

68 Ding Richang, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 33a.

69 “Reasons for Quarrels between Converts and Ordinary People,” *Chinese and Foreign Daily* (or *Zhongwai Daily*), September 6, 1899, pp. 212-213.

70 “Zhang Zhidong, Governor of Shanxi Province, Sets up the Commission for Religious Cases,” January 24, 1883, p. 32.

71 Ding Richang, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 33a.

72 “Chiping County Chronicles: The Rise of the Boxer Rebellion,” quoted from Ji’nan Branch of the Chinese History Society, ed., *Selected Documents on Modern History of Shandong*, p. 100.

73 Lu Yao, ed., *Collected Documents of the Boxer Uprising: Shandong University Survey (II)*, p. 803.

of my eleven mu land and spend two or three hundred strings of cash *Qian* (penny) without seeing the magistrate in the city. This has ruined my life.⁷⁴

Again in Linyi County, Jinan,

“If your land borders his (the convert’s), and the shadow of a tree on your land falls on his, he would claim your tree as his. You dare not do anything to him. If you go to court, you’re sure to lose.”⁷⁵

Under such conditions, lawsuits between converts and ordinary people were increasingly frequent. “Lawsuits spring up everywhere all of a sudden, just like mildew coming up in August without any reason.”⁷⁶

IV. As Ordinary People Found Petty Cases Hard to Win, Their Accumulated Grievances Ultimately Became Unbearable

As mentioned earlier, when dealing with petty civil lawsuits, prefectural and county officials examined, verified, tried and handed down a verdict impartially according to law, while not abandoning the principle of mediation. The trial and judgment served as protection for the rights and interests of people who had been wrongfully accused and provided an outlet for grievances arising from rural disputes.

To achieve their utilitarian aim of attracting converts, Western missionaries became “deeply involved in civil cases despite coming from afar,” “knowing little about the people or the land, and not having a deep understanding of Chinese human relationships.”⁷⁷ “They failed to realize that someone who oldconstructed private grudges was not a good type of person,”⁷⁸ and under estimated the impact of petty civil matters on the normal life of the villagers. They failed to grasp the logic behind “trivial matters are not so trivial,” and knew even less about the purport of the petty squabbles in rural culture. Bursting on to this sensitive area, they made a great fuss and adopted an arrogant attitude, interfering recklessly in lawsuits and “arguing with officials over legal cases simply on the basis of what their followers had told them.”⁷⁹ Worse, “Priests took over the management of cases for their converts. A summons could

74 *Ibid.*, p. 1086.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 1087.

76 Arthur H. Smith, *China in Convulsion*, p. 26.

77 Tao Zhijun, “Reply from Guangdong Governor Tao Zhijun to Timothy Richard of Christian Literature Society for China,” *Sin Wan Pao*, July 22, 1901, p. 761.

78 “A Letter from Shandong Governor Zhang Rumei to Germany’s Prince Henry and the Governor of Jiaozhou Leased Territory, Paul Jaeschke,” p. 353.

79 Tao Zhijun, “Reply from Guangdong Governor Tao Zhijun to Timothy Richard of the Christian Literature Society for China,” p. 761.

be issued based solely on a letter from a priest even when no charge had been brought.”⁸⁰ Consequently, the “missionaries” were repeatedly deceived by their followers. “Converts from the prefectures and counties would generally deceive the bishops in the provincial metropolis, who in turn would go to the capital to deceive the minister of the relevant country.”⁸¹ “The translators made up stories to stir up the priests, saying that someone was slandering the foreign religion; since the priests, being unfamiliar with the land and the people, were unable to investigate the details of the case, they would promptly hand that person over to the officials. In fact, this was done by despicable converts to pursue their own ends through misinformation...All kinds of provocations and deceptions were carried out by these wretched converts, which led to the missionaries being unjustly wronged; how unfortunate! Their good intentions in preaching the word became grounds for popular dislike.”⁸² Some Westerners called their behavior “foolish.”⁸³

In civil lawsuits between the converts and the common people, the channels for the latter to vent their resentment were blocked because “legal redress was closed to them.” Even in cases where it was clear that “The converts were in the wrong and the ordinary people right,” prefectural and county officials found it hard to uphold justice, “They single-mindedly protected the churches and oppressed the people, just trying to get the case over and done with.”⁸⁴ In dealing with some church cases involving “multiple forms of extortion, officials ended up ordering the ordinary villagers in the case to settle it by hosting a feast, letting off crackers and kowtowing.”⁸⁵ Litigation not only failed to dispel resentment, but also created new injustices and grievances.

The grievances of the common people thus derived from the various links of these petty civil cases. The converts made up problems out of whole cloth, producing quarrels and resentment; the common people complained of injustice when they lost a case in which they were right and the converts wrong; they felt shamed and humiliated when, on losing a lawsuit, they had to provide a feast and give compensation; and they were outraged when the missionaries “sheltered” vagrants, ruffians and even criminals without distinguishing the good from the evil. The build-up of resentment led to a situation where “Ordinary people’s cumulative grievances became unbearable, so that they were almost ready to take the missionaries down with them.”⁸⁶

Over time, the fact that there was no legal outlet for the people’s wrath meant that dramatic changes in the countryside were inevitable. Zhang Rumei, Governor of Shandong, wrote

80 Yuan Shikai, “Notice Persuading the Religious and Irreligious People,” p. 485.

81 “Zhang Zhidong, Governor of Shanxi Province, Sets up the Commission for Religious Cases,” p. 32.

82 Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, ed., *Archives of Religious Affairs and Religious Cases in the Qing Dynasty*, vol. 6 (1): 1896-1899, pp. 241-242.

83 D.G. Warnecke, “German Press Comments on Missionary Activities in China,” p. 255.

84 Liu Dapeng, “Qian Yuan Suo Ji: Converts,” p. 34.

85 Yuan Shikai, “Notice of Persuading the Religious and Irreligious People,” p. 487.

86 Ding Richang, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 33a.

in his memorial to the throne, “The priests oppress the common people everywhere. The people’s indignation is mounting to an unbearable level. I fear they may fight like cornered beasts, taking risks and provoking serious incidents.”⁸⁷ Li Bingheng, another Governor of Shandong, noted that “The common people’s righteous anger, long suppressed, has become unbearable. They don’t fear the magistrate’s office and think they can vent their anger through private fights. This has resulted in mobs gathering to commit acts of provocation and burning down churches.”⁸⁸

As a result, the “petty grievances and resentments” of the disputes between the converts and ordinary villagers were not easy to dispel; rather, they gathered like the surging magma that finally produces a volcanic eruption. The Laishui County anti-Christian case, which sparked simultaneous uprisings in Beijing, Tianjin and Baoding and shocked people at home and abroad,⁸⁹ was precisely the result of the “cumulative grievances” built up in the lawsuits between the converts and ordinary people. The latter, having no outlet for their grievances and having been ruined by such legal cases, turned to the Boxers to seek revenge, as in the example below.

At the Laishui-Dingxing border, a lot of villagers had converted. A military *juren* (someone who had passed the provincial military examination) would frown at them angrily whenever he met them, but they were not afraid of him. Over time, as neither gave way to the other, their dislike turned to enmity. One day, the *juren* took went to court against a convert, but did not receive justice. He was ordered to give away 400,000 cash and provide a feast of twenty tables. This humiliation made him keen to seek revenge, but he had no strategy for doing so. At that time the Boxers had just begun to rise in Shandong. Hearing that they had some unusual skills, he spent all he had on hiring several Boxers who came to his village to teach followers who could help him...He called on the people to burn the churches and kill the priests. The neighborhood flowed with rivers of blood and the streets were piled high with corpses. Alarms sounded repeated warnings of the calamity that had occurred.⁹⁰

Again, in the religious case in Shanghe, Jinan, in which 108 converts were killed, the reason for the conflict was “a quarrel between an ordinary villager and a convert over the purchase of hair bindings.” The historical document gives the following account:

One Zhang, a convert, backed by the church, shortchanged Li, an ordinary villager, while

87 “Shandong Governor Zhang Rumei: Memorial to the Throne,” p. 353.

88 Li Bingheng, “Memorial to the Throne,” p. 154.

89 According to record of the Qing official Luo Zhengju, Laishui County case led to the Boxer Uprising occurring simultaneously in Beijing, Tianjin and Baoding. See “Remains of Official Documents in Dingxing County (Selected),” p. 361.

90 “Full History of the Religious Case in Laishui,” *Chinese and Foreign Daily (Zhongwai Daily)*, June 5, 1900, pp. 268.

buying hair bindings at Genglou fair. This led to a lawsuit between the two. Li, who lost the case, set up a feast at the fair. Before it started, Zhang forced Li's family and associates to drape themselves with dog skin and barking like a dog, set off firecrackers, and play drums and music, and had the Li family serve food and drink. People were furious and invited more than 2,000 Boxers to take revenge.⁹¹

The seemingly trivial was not at all trivial to the people concerned. The petty disputes between the converts and ordinary people gave rise to the butterfly effect. "People only know that the conflict originated in trivial matters, but they do not know how long these things have been building up."⁹² Liu Dapeng, a *juren* in Taiyuan County, analyzed this phenomenon in-depth: "The greater the power of the converts, the deeper the hatred of the common people. This is why the Boxers sprang up all over China in the Gengzi year of the Guangxu reign...Given that the court was unable to punish the converts and the officials were afraid to, the Boxers took action, and even people not in the Boxers wanted to get their hands on the converts and slay them. This is not cruelty but divine punishment born of rage and carried out at the hands of the Boxers."⁹³

V. Conclusions

Academic interest in the study of the Boxer Movement has never faded; the event has profoundly affected China's historical process. However, "There are noteworthy differences in the study of the Boxers. In fact, no other major event in the modern history of China has attracted such a large number of different opinions."⁹⁴ The common villagers involved in the Boxer uprising are either "sanctified," as possessing a "strong anti-imperialist patriotic national spirit," or demonized as "blindly xenophobic" and "ignorant" mobs "lacking in judgment," "easily stirred up" and "killing for money."

In the Boxer Movement, the behavior of ordinary villagers, as the main actors, must have its "rational elements" and "its own reasonable logic." Researchers need to abandon all kinds of value suppositions, strive to return to the real historical scene, listen to the voice of the common people, and try to see things from their perspective and analyze issues from the vantage point of their behavioral logic. That is precisely the approach this study has taken.

In recent decades, a number of research findings in legal history have shown us that throughout the Qing Dynasty, when villagers had quarrels or disputes, they frequently went to court to protect their legitimate rights and interests. This also afforded them a channel

91 "Documents in the People's Armed Forces Department, Shanghe County," 1957, quoted from Lu Yao, ed., *Collected Documents of the Boxer Uprising: Shandong University Survey*, p. 1095.

92 "Treaties Are the Most Important Factor in Handling Religious Cases," *Shun Pao*, June 4, 1901, p. 734.

93 Liu Dapeng, "Qian Yuan Suo Ji: Converts," p. 32.

94 Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, p. 2.

for venting the “petty resentments” aroused by these trivial disputes. If local magistrates mishandled civil lawsuits, more serious village conflicts might occur. Therefore, the judicial field of petty civil cases was actually a sensitive area of rural governance.

Under the unequal treaty system, Western missionaries could attract converts by providing them with the political protection of their extraterritorial status. At the same time, however, their immersion in rural civil disputes and local affairs resulted in a growing volume of lawsuits pitting the converts against ordinary villagers. Even though most such cases were about everyday trifles, the lawsuits were important to the villagers. In the face of the obvious injustice of the disputes with the converts, ordinary people, who inevitably cherished enormous resentment against the missionaries and their converts, had no channel for venting their anger. As small grudges escalated into great grievances, their rage finally broke its bounds, and the Boxer Uprising erupted in violent conflict. “Something infinitesimally tiny can grow into a mighty torrent; something infinitesimally slight can augur endless misfortunes. The diametrical opposition between converts and ordinary people is the origin of the disastrous enmity between China and foreign countries.”⁹⁵ The essential reason for the Boxer Movement’s sudden eruption is that it furnished an outlet for ordinary people’s long suppressed resentment over petty civil cases against the converts.

“Trivial things matter” to the people concerned. The fact that trifling matters escalated reveals the haughty disdain of the missionaries for petty grassroots disputes and their ignorance and contempt for the sensitivities of Chinese grassroots governance. Most importantly, it shows the results of their “meddling” in local affairs. Regardless of their initial motivation, they disturbed the balance of the rural judicial order in China.

“Renounce extraterritoriality...and your missionaries can live and preach where they desire,”⁹⁶ the Qing Grand Secretary Wen Xiang had warned the Western powers before the Boxer Uprising. The suppression of the movement prompted in-depth reflection in China and abroad. Hart further pinpointed the problem with the missionaries in China, saying that “above all, the missionary should completely reject any form of interference in judicial and local affairs; he should teach his flock to outdo the pagans in terms of respecting the law, supporting local authorities and avoiding anything illegal.”⁹⁷ A Chinese proposal stated, “The common run of cases involving converts and ordinary people should not be referred to consular officers. All the cases should be handled by Chinese officials impartially, with no undue weight given to either, and the same should apply to cases of negotiation...”⁹⁸ All of this is based on recognition of the importance of lawsuits over trifling matters in rural China.

95 “Reasons for Quarrels between Religious and Irreligious People,” *Chinese and Foreign Daily (Zhongwai Daily)*, September 6, 1899, pp. 212-213.

96 Quoted from Robert Hart, “*These from the Land of Sinim*”: *Essays on the Chinese Question*, p. 130.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

98 “Treaties are the Most Important Factor in Handling Religious Cases,” *Shun Pao*, June 4, 1901, p. 734.

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