

St. Ann Wang and Companions

BORN 1886; DIED 1900
(COMPANIONS ALSO DIED IN 1900)
MARTYRS
FEAST DAY: JULY 9

CHRISTIANITY HAS A HISTORY in China that stretches back to the seventh century, but the difficulty in communications and periodic political turmoil in both China and Europe (including the religious barrier created by Islam) prohibited organized evangelization before the thirteenth century. These missions did not succeed; only the invention of ocean-going ships made effective efforts possible. The first large-scale missions to bring the Gospel to China began in the sixteenth century. Things went well for several decades but, influenced by the ferocious persecutions of Christians in Japan and the hostility of invaders from the north, persecution of missionaries began. These continued sporadically over the next several centuries, especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and grew ever more ferocious as the nineteenth century progressed.

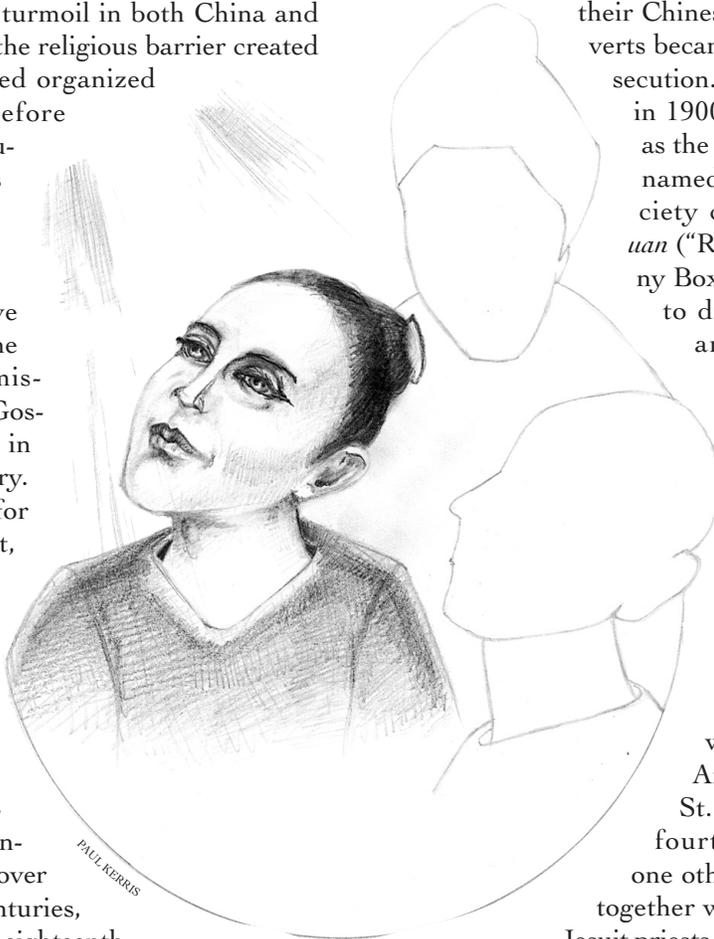
This period coincided with rapacious commercial activities by European trading powers,

especially Great Britain, which forced China through an 1842 treaty to continue to import the highly addictive opium. Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, came in much larger numbers, and were far more successful than in earlier centuries. However, the economic exploitation of China meant that, when crises occurred, both the European missionaries and their Chinese Christian converts became targets of persecution.

One such crisis in 1900 became known as the Boxer Rebellion, named for a secret society called *Yi Ho Chuan* ("Righteous Harmony Boxers") established to drive all Europeans out and destroy Christianity. Within a few months, five European bishops, twenty-nine priests, nine nuns, and twenty to thirty thousand Chinese Catholics were martyred.

Among these was St. Ann Wang, age fourteen, and fifty-one other lay Catholics, together with their French Jesuit priests, most inhabitants of one village.

Ann was born in Majiazhuang, in the Chinese province of Hebei (northeast of Beijing), the scene of many martyrdoms. She was the daughter of Catholics; when she was five, her



mother died and her father married another Catholic woman. Ann was promised in marriage at eleven, but made it clear that she did not wish to marry, and the marriage did not occur.

Three years later, Ann was among those Catholics captured by a group of Boxers, who demanded that they renounce their faith or be killed. The captives ranged in age from nine to seventy-nine. They were given a night to decide what to do. Ann's stepmother immediately decided to renounce her faith, and tried to persuade Ann to do likewise. Ann refused, saying, "I believe in God. I am a Christian. I do not renounce God. Jesus save me!" All the captives, including their two Jesuit priests, spent the night in prayer in their village church. In the morning, the Boxers brought them out to be executed in public. A nine-year-old, St. An-

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drew Wang Tianqing, was threatened before his mother, St. Lucy Wang, who espoused her faith and said that the Boxers would have to kill both of them. St. Andrew knelt down, smiled up at his mother, and was beheaded before her eyes.

Ann remained kneeling in prayer facing the church as a Boxer approached her. He offered her freedom if only she would renounce her faith. Lost in prayer, she did not hear him, and he poked at her forehead with his finger. She then stood and said: "Do not touch me. I am a Christian. I prefer to die rather than give up my faith." The Boxer replied by promising her marriage to a wealthy man and a comfortable life if she would renounce her faith. She refused and responded that she was already promised in marriage, pointing to a church in a nearby village — that is, she was betrothed to Jesus. At that, the soldier chopped off one of her arms and again demanded that she deny her faith. Ann did not respond, and he cut off her other arm. At that, she knelt, radiant with joy, saying, "The door of Heaven is open." She whispered Jesus' name three times, exposed her neck to the ax, and was beheaded.

Another martyr, St. Chi Zhuzi, also had his arm cut off, and the executioners then flayed (skinned) him alive. Before this happened, he cried, "Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you that I am Christian."

Martyrdoms in China have continued throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Over a period of nearly three hundred years, from 1648 to 1930, eighty-seven Chinese Catholics — mostly lay men, women, and children — and thirty-three missionaries to China who were martyred have been raised to the altar as canonized saints. Their lives are a history of Catholicism in China, written in letters of blood on pages of heroic fidelity.



*Jesus crowned with thorns,
by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962*