

‘Sketches of missionary life’: Alexander Robert Crawford in Manchuria

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‘To have friends coming to one from distant parts – is not this a great pleasure?’¹

Alexander Robert Crawford was always a wanderer. Born in Paris in 1868, he was educated as an adult in Belfast, graduating in classics from Queen’s University Belfast in 1890, and spending the next two years in the Presbyterian General Assembly’s theological college. He studied for a year at Princeton, returning to graduate M.A. from the Royal University of Ireland in 1894. During his 57 years he visited the United States, Russia, Canada, Japan, and China, as well as travelling extensively throughout Europe. A courageous individual, he was determined from an early age to devote his life to the conversion of China, a task that exacted a heavy personal toll. Crawford was based in Kirin Province in Manchuria, in the north-east of China, and spent much of his time in the Russian controlled town of Kirin. He arrived in 1895, but was forced to temporarily flee the country in 1900 as a result of the Boxer rebellion. He returned to China from Ireland in 1902 with his new wife, Anna Graham of Portadown, remaining there until 1913, working through a ferocious outbreak of plague in 1910 in addition to the more usual difficulties facing missionaries abroad. The Crawfords lost two infant sons in China, and their return to Ireland was prompted by his deteriorating health.² They lived in Belfast, where Robert worked as the editor of the children’s religious magazine *Daybreak*, in addition to his responsibilities as dean of residence for Presbyterian students at Queen’s University. He died in November, 1935.

In this essay I wish to examine certain aspects of Crawford’s life and work in Manchuria, in particular his relationship with Chinese converts to Christianity, and his responses to other European workers in China. Although Crawford’s primary purpose was to further Christian endeavour in China, he was aware of the often complex issues surrounding the position of expatriate Europeans. He was highly conscious of the impact, deliberate as well as incidental, of his residence in

1 Confucius, *The Analects*, chp. 1, quoted in C.C. Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe* (New York, 1955), p. 3. 2 Before Crawford married he noted prophetically in a letter to his mother: ‘Dr and Mrs Christie have lost their little baby of three months old, of infant cholera. There are very few of the Mission families who have not lost little ones in this country. Though the climate suits adults it doesn’t seem to suit children.’ A.R. Crawford, M.A., *Sketches of Missionary Life in Manchuria: being extracts from letters home of Rev. A.R. Crawford, M.A., Missionary of the Irish Presbyterian Church* (Belfast: 1899), p. 148.

Manchuria, and many of his early letters home were edited and published in 1899 in a volume entitled *Sketches of Missionary Life* (a text produced in the hope of raising interest in Presbyterian efforts abroad). The published letters attest to a curiosity about all aspects of Manchurian life, and a respect for the culture, yet also noted some anxiety regarding the erosion of that culture through European settlement. Crawford's other great passion was mapmaking; he was in fact elected a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1914 for his work in mapping Manchuria. As he travelled to remote districts, distributing bibles, preaching, and testing those who wished to convert,³ Crawford conducted a meticulous survey of uncharted territories, an action that placed him firmly within the ranks of secular Europeans in China.⁴ His experiences in Manchuria, then, indicate how difficult it was for missionaries to maintain a single-minded approach to their work. Despite his best efforts, he became embroiled in civil disputes, when his privileged position as a European Christian was abused by converts in order to gain legal leverage. These issues were brought home with particular force by the Boxer Rebellion: race became the most important criteria in selecting just whom among the Christians would be removed to safety. Ethnicity also impacted upon relations with other Europeans: the assistance granted by the Russians during the missionaries flight from the Boxers both linked the 'foreign devils'⁵ together in the minds of the Chinese, and put pressure upon the missionaries to publicly support the Russian military and economic presence in China. Finally, Crawford's passion for mapping further opened the interior for exploration by Europeans, and linked Crawford with individuals who had a purely exploitative intent in China. These, and other issues, made his role as missionary an ambiguous one.

Although at times uncomfortable, this was not an unusual position for missionaries to find themselves in. The association between missionary work and imperial advance has been well documented by scholars. Authors such as Brian Stanley and T.O. Beidelman have identified an explicit connection between the acquisition of a population's souls, and their material resources.⁶ Although the association may not be as clear-cut as some have argued – in Africa for instance,

³ The distances involved were considerable, some 10,542 miles from 1895 to 1900, all by 'Chinese boat and cart'. D/2003/B/2/2/1. All manuscript references are to Crawford's papers in the Public Record office of Northern Ireland. ⁴ In his early years, Crawford travelled with gold-diggers, quantity surveyors, and Russian soldiers, sharing both the cost of expeditions, and information about the interior. Although uncomfortable about his association with these individuals, who had a rather different purpose in China from his own, Crawford nevertheless rarely lost an opportunity to expand his knowledge of the terrain. See his *Sketches*, pp. 15 & 23, and letters D/2003/B/3/7/1 & D/2003/B/2/5/1. ⁵ D/2003/B/3/2/53. ⁶ B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Leicester, 1990), and T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: a socio-historical study of an East African mission at the grassroots* (Bloomington, 1982); R.A. Bickers & R. Seaton (eds), *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Surrey, 1996).



Figure 1. Crawford (front, in dark jacket) with unidentified mission workers, Kirin

Christian churches occasionally became the focal point for nationalist protest – Christianity is nevertheless seen as one of the first, and most important, means of alienating support from older practices and traditions, and creating a population amenable to the value structures of the new rulers. In certain regions, especially Africa and India, this model might be said to operate relatively straightforwardly. In China however, the situation was far more complex, due to the great influx of overseas settlers. The nineteenth century had seen an increase in the number of foreign residents, drawn by trade as well as religion, and there had been a series of conflicts with various international powers.⁷ The Opium and Arrow Wars of mid-century had eroded Chinese trading rights, and by the 1870s Western traders had established firm footholds in Chinese ports. The territorial ambitions of the West also found explicit expression when China lost considerable portions of her own empire: part of Turkestan fell to Russia in 1881, Tonkin to France in 1885, and Upper Burma to Britain in 1886. At the same time, China was confronted by a power much closer to home: Japan. In the early 1890s the two countries wrangled

⁷ China was of course herself an imperial power of some significance, continuing to contest territorial rights in Korea and Manchuria throughout the nineteenth century.

over control of Korea, a conflict that erupted into the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5, and ended in the humiliating defeat of China. The Western powers took swift advantage of China's weakened state to secure further concessions, with France, Russia, Britain and Germany negotiating favourable trading terms, access to resources such as coalfields and mines, and permission, in the case of Russia, to extend the Trans-Siberian Railroad across northern Manchuria to Vladivostok. Thus by the close of the century China was bound by treaties with the Western powers that significantly eroded domestic control, and she had to endure settlement by foreigners in increasing numbers. The various powers, furthermore, conducted a series of agreements between themselves, offering privileges to each other within China in return for support there and elsewhere, and even agreed separate spheres of influence, awarding great swathes of territory to each other in the event of the break-up of the country.⁸ This concern to secure economic interests in China was underpinned by the so-called 'Open Door' doctrine of 1899. This American proposal called for 'equality of commercial opportunity among the powers in China irrespective of spheres of influence', and further distanced China from active intervention in her own economic affairs.⁹ The final complicating factor by the end of the century was the make-up of China's rulers. Although the Manchus who conquered the country in the seventeenth century were in power, the majority of the population were Han.¹⁰ Little wonder, then, that China in the late nineteenth century was a country ready for conflict.

Despite the tensions wrought by these developments, China was, from a European perspective, a land of opportunity. For the missionaries, the country was a vast territory of lost souls, ripe for the picking. For entrepreneurs, it held the promise of immense wealth, through trade and the exploitation of natural resources. But for imperial powers, it represented a prestigious challenge, a rich and cultured country whose possession, even partial, would reflect true world status.¹¹ These desires ensured a constant pressure upon the Chinese, creating an anxiety and resentment that was to find expression in the Boxer rebellion of 1900. As in many colonial or quasi-colonial relationships, however, some of the native population resigned themselves to the likelihood of a permanent European presence, and sought whatever advantage might accrue through association with them.¹² In particular, some Chinese intellectuals, students, traders, and elements in the military wanted selective modernisation that would enable China to engage with the Western powers on a more equal basis. On a basic level, Europeans enjoyed the legal privilege of 'extraterritoriality' (foreign exemption from Chinese jurisdic-

8 See C.C. Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe*, pp. 3–14; P. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience an Myth* (New York, 1997), introduction. 9 P.J. Bailey, *China in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2001), p. 123. 10 C. Mackerras, *China in Transformation, 1900–1949* (Essex, 1998), p. 5. 11 J. Osterhammel, 'Britain and China, 1842–1914' in A. Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: the nineteenth-century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 146. 12 V.G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Humankind* (London, 1988).



Figure 2. Crawford and his wife (front right) and child, with Elder Song, and unidentified female mission worker.

tion), a benefit that proved a significant attraction to some Chinese. Although Christian missionaries were not especially prosperous, they nevertheless found themselves the target of ambitious individuals, who sought their support in legal disputes and quarrels. Crawford and his fellow workers were sensitive to accusations that they were being used in this manner, but frequently found themselves embroiled in clashes between Chinese converts and the local governors. These confrontations were often violent, and indicated the levels of resentment against Christians in China. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, there had devel-

oped a clear perception that Chinese Christians used their church contacts for material motives. This did have a basis in fact, so missionaries were continually on their guard to detect potentially untruthful applicants for admission to their churches. The first rule of Crawford's Presbyterian mission, for example, was to refuse to deal with those 'who come on account of law-suits . . . A similar prohibition against those whose motives are of material gain, or those who, being their own masters, do not abolish their idols.'¹³ The missionaries therefore had a lengthy probationary period for intending converts, in order to weed out those who sought immediate benefit. But it was not always possible to identify such individuals, despite best efforts. The problem arose because Christians did indeed enjoy certain privileges in China. In 1858 Christian missionaries had been given permission to spread the gospel without molestation, and the rights of Christians were to be upheld in law. Because the obvious aim of missionary work was to replace an old system of worship with a new, converts were forbidden to take part in, or support, celebrations that honoured 'false gods'. These individuals were therefore exempt from contributing to community celebrations: this, and their implicit criticism of such events, caused great resentment in local areas. There was furthermore a perception that Christian missionaries interfered in legal disputes that involved converts, placing pressure on magistrates to find in the convert's favour even in the face of compelling evidence against him.¹⁴ Although it was the Catholic Church that was most often accused of this practice, all of the Christian missionaries were presumed to act in a similar manner, to a greater or lesser extent.¹⁵

The perception was apparently held by converts as well as non-Christians. In 1898 Crawford bemoaned the fact that he could not get on with work because of constant appeals for justice from converts. 'Several things have tended to distract us – difficulties that members or inquirers [those who had expressed a wish to convert, and who were 'on probation'] have got into, or cases of persecution in which we are asked to interfere, as otherwise the sufferers can get no redress from the authorities. It is most difficult to know just how far to go, so as not to allow these Christians to be unjustly downtrodden, and at the same time not to have recourse to the arm of the law more than one has a right to, in work which aims at exerting a purely spiritual influence.'¹⁶ It would appear however that the necessity to secure converts, especially in the face of stiff opposition from competing Christian churches, ensured that a certain number of individuals entered the church with mixed motives. Crawford became reluctantly embroiled in one such case involving a man named Liu, a shopkeeper whom the missionaries believed joined the church in order to have 'foreign' support in his various transactions. In August 1898 Liu apparently provoked a fight with soldiers as a result of a dispute over money, and marched on the Chinese governor general's office to demand redress.

¹³ A.R. Crawford, *Our Mission in Manchuria* (Belfast, 1900), p. 16. ¹⁴ Tan, *Boxer Catastrophe* p. 35. ¹⁵ J.W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 200. ¹⁶ Crawford, *Sketches*, p. 108.

Crucially, he did this not in his own name, but in the name of the Presbyterian church. Crawford had therefore to attend a hearing with the governor, adjudicate, hand down a judgement (that Liu and the soldiers should be reprimanded, but not punished), and then spend the following afternoon entertaining the officials at the mission house. The problem did not end there, though. Infuriated by the challenge to his authority implicit in Crawford's judgement, the governor confided that he had lost face through Liu's demands at his gate, and Liu would have to be publicly punished. To this Crawford agreed, apparently in an attempt to demonstrate the missionaries impartiality, although he felt himself manipulated by the governor. On being told to report to the governor for punishment, Liu 'came here to ask me to let him off, as he feared being given over to the hand of the devil, as he put it.'¹⁷ Now certain that Liu was using the church for his own interests, Crawford refused to intervene, and Liu was paraded through the streets, after having received twenty strokes. To crown his conduct, Liu 'preached to the people as he was paraded around', firmly linking the missionaries with his humiliation, and his brawl. The Presbyterian mission of which Crawford was a part was, on this as other occasions, caught up in what has been described as a system of 'informal empire' in China.¹⁸ This was characterised by legal, economic, and administrative rights enjoyed by foreigners, but not by the Chinese. As Europeans, missionaries were inevitably regarded as part of the elite, however much they tried to distance themselves from those whose interests lay in exploiting extraterritoriality or the Open Door policy. In some ways, the privilege granted to foreigners in China was a mixed blessing for the Presbyterian mission, as it drew them into disputes such as those described above. For example, the local officials rarely lost an opportunity to subtly humiliate the missionaries, requesting their intervention in disputes involving Chinese converts. Moreover the gentry had seen the foreigners steadily usurp their power, lending an additional air of tension to these encounters.¹⁹ For their part, the missionaries had to respond to these complaints with every indication of willingness, if they were to avoid accusations of favouritism. Given the fact that some converts blatantly abused the authority conferred by close association with the mission, it was hardly surprising that Crawford and his colleagues spent so much time establishing the grounds for conversion presented to them.

But that is not to minimise the problems facing Chinese Christians. Crawford was acutely aware of the genuine threat of persecution facing converts, and of the necessity to protect them from resentful authorities. He believed that the only way Christianity would gain a foothold in China was through the creation of what he called a 'native church'. Thus those men who had proven their Christian steadfastness were raised to the senior status of elders within the Church, and were active in the field with their European brothers. Chinese workers were crucial to the missionary endeavour, not least in their ability to speak (in many cases) several

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–9. ¹⁸ Osterhammel, *Britain and China*, pp. 148–9. ¹⁹ I would like to thank Rosemary Tyzack for clarification on this and other points.

Chinese dialects. As such, they were invaluable church workers, and Crawford in particular recognised the value of their contribution. Yet there remained a deep-rooted unease that centred on race. When the Boxer rebellion caused the missionaries to flee Kirin, distinctions buried in peace rose again to the surface. Crawford was most concerned about the situation of the native Christians, believing, quite rightly, that they would suffer most in any attacks.²⁰ He recorded his unease in his journal, which reveals a sense of guilt at the European abandonment of their Chinese fellows:

During the morning Ch'entsai (Evangelist at the Street chapel) came over, bringing me \$100 which I required. He and the others were of course much disconcerted at the prospect of our leaving Kirin, and it was little one could do or say to comfort them . . . I could only tell Ch'ên that in case of an attack on the Chapel they should make their escape. As to the Xtians [Christians] I advised that they should go as far as possible to a quiet place in the country.²¹

There was however one individual whom Crawford believed should not be left behind. A Mr Sung, an elder in the church, had been the victim of a severe beating in 1895. The missionaries had purchased land to build a hospital in his name, and although permission had been granted by the British ambassador at Peking for the building to go ahead, it had been blocked by the local authorities. They put Sung on trial for 'selling to the foreigners without giving notice to the authorities', a charge denied by the missionaries, who had written proof from the Consul at Newchang. Sung received one hundred 'stripes' – 'inflicted by means of a wooden lath about an inch wide . . . the strokes were given always in the same place viz. at the top of the right leg' – and the missionaries were warned not to interfere.²² It was clear that Sung and his family were highly likely to be a target for the Boxers, and they were therefore brought along with the Europeans when they fled northwards to the Russian settlement at Harbin – from there they intended to take a train to Valdivostok. Even in this crisis, though, crucial racial differences were maintained. The barge on which the missionaries and other Europeans travelled towed a smaller boat behind, intended for the accompanying Russian Cossack escort. The Sung family travelled with the soldiers, not with the missionaries. When the travellers arrived at Harbin, they were granted accommodation in an empty Russian schoolhouse. 'Here we had two large rooms, empty except for the school forms, in one of which the ladies and children lived and slept, while we men were in the other – two smaller rooms behind accommodated the Sung family and the servants.'²³

20 'But the brunt is falling, and falling heavily, on the native Church. In all our stations much valuable time is taken up with hearing and discussing and trying to settle such cases of persecution.' Crawford, *Mission in Manchuria*, p. 11. **21** D/2003/B/2/5/1. **22** D/2003/B/3/2/53. **23** D/2003/B/2/5/1

The ambiguous position of these individuals was a problem not easily resolved. Friendly relations with the local population were crucial for the success of European enterprises,²⁴ and at a most basic level, Crawford found himself heavily dependent upon converts in his efforts to learn enough Chinese to preach, as his fellow missionaries were too busy to spare the time to teach. Yet he found the notion of too close a relationship with those whom he sought to win to the church disturbing. Throughout his letters there is a clear sense of respect for Chinese culture, and for the Chinese themselves, yet they remain forever too different to be comfortably thought of as true fellows. A letter to his sister Mary, written in 1900, indicates the sense of isolation felt by missionaries, despite the teeming population around them. Mary had apparently neglected to ask specifically after one of the missionary's wives: 'It seems that in writing to Mr Gillespie you made no reference to Mrs Gillespie, but only asked for the children . . . I must also tell you (what perhaps you know but can hardly realise) how life out here tells on ladies who [. . .] for years never have any company but a fellow missionary's wife. The Chinese can never be to us what our own fellow countrymen are – especially Chinese women – and the isolation tends to an exaggerated self inspection and a tendency to brood over anything which seems like a slight to oneself or husband.'²⁵

If Crawford and other missionaries were torn over their relationship with converts, there was little ambiguity on the part of many Chinese towards those who had converted. Well before the rebellion, Chinese Christians were a frequent cause of resentment, a resentment that was often given practical expression through beatings and confiscations. Unable or unwilling to attack the missionaries themselves, soldiers and officials vented their displeasure on the Chinese converts. Crawford and others believed that this persecution was directed from the highest levels, although proof was impossible to come by. The clichés of the inscrutable oriental came strongly to the fore at these moments. The missionaries found it frustrating to deal with individuals who welcomed them with great charm and civility to various social functions, but then denied all knowledge of an official sanction of violence against Christians while apparently being both well informed about, and indeed implicated in them. After Elder Sung had been badly beaten over the alleged illegal sale of land to the missionaries, Crawford called on the vice-

²⁴ Crawford worried that that an apparent openness to the Chinese would have dire consequences for both races. Even in the anxiety surrounding European flight from the Boxers in 1900, he noted the following incident with disapproval: 'Mr Daniel, the chief engineer of the Railway in Kirin, came to T'wanshantzu to say farewell to his wife. As he stood on the bank bidding his last adieux he threw his arm (to our considerable astonishment) round the neck of his Chinese interpreter, in a free and easy sort of way, and stood for a good while in this position. I hardly think that this fashion of treating the Chinese as bon comrade raises them in the estimation of the people. It only proves to them how completely the interpreters have sold themselves over to Russian interests. These interpreters are in the habit of shaking hands with and speaking with the Russian ladies quite as unreservedly as a European would.' D/2003/B/2/5/1. ²⁵ D/2003/B/3/7/9

governor in Kirin, seeking reassurance regarding the future of the mission station. Although the official duly gave his word that they were in no danger, Crawford remained uncomfortable:

Remember that this man is extremely thick with the Governor who is the chief cause of all our troubles, and may be himself for all we know, as bitter against us as any one in spite of all his show of friendliness. To know the heart of such a man is as impossible as to know what there is at the centre of the earth.²⁶

In 1898, Crawford met the 'suave' Chinese magistrate of a nearby district at dinner, and enjoyed a cordial conversation. But almost immediately afterwards, Crawford was told of a severe beating given to an inquirer who was left unable to walk: this incident took place as the missionary exchanged pleasantries with the magistrate over their meal. Further investigation revealed that the magistrate 'gave orders in all the places he passed through on his return from the capital to curse and beat all the Christians they met, only not to take their lives.'²⁷ Much of Crawford's time was in fact taken up in the investigation of these cases, which rarely came to a satisfactory conclusion. Officials denied all knowledge, and pledged their full support to punishing the perpetrators, although soldiers in particular were rarely brought to justice. When the Boxer rebellion broke out, but before actual attacks on missionaries had taken place, placards encouraging the people to act against the 'foreigner' began to appear. Although there was an official denial of any knowledge of them, the district governor made no effort to halt their spread (the placards urged people to copy and distribute them, claiming that 'those who transcribe one such placard [will receive] immunity from his sins, and those who transcribe 10 a similar privilege for his native village, for 100, a whole district').²⁸ The missionaries were reluctant to remove these placards themselves, as they feared inciting a hostile backlash against their work, so had to suffer the indignity of seeing vividly painted denunciations of themselves as they moved through their missionary districts.

In addition to the uncertainty over Chinese motives in wanting to convert, and in determining official attitudes towards the missionary effort, the Presbyterian workers faced had also to fend off advances from another group with ulterior motives. The Russians, who wished above all else to ensure the success of their railway expansion in China, actively sought the assistance of the missionaries at local level to ensure cordial relations. It was often difficult to maintain a distance between the missionaries and the Russians, especially as in the early years of his work Crawford frequently felt obliged to accept an escort of Russian soldiers, offered to him for his protection. This caused problems in terms of creating links with ordinary people, not least in that inn keepers would often refuse them

accommodation in isolated areas, forcing Crawford to camp out in the cold. When rumours of the approach of the Boxers reached Kirin, Russian officials in the town swiftly placed their troops at the disposal of Crawford and his workers. Indeed, a company of 15 Cossacks accompanied the party on their barge when they fled. In return, however, the missionaries were expected to take the Russian side in the conflict, an unwelcome presumption. When Crawford's party finally reached the Russian town of Khabarovsk, en route to Vladivostock, they noted with mixed feelings evidence of a rush towards war:

[17 steamers laden with troops and equipment passed on the river] In the exuberance of youth we cheered the troopers as they passed. They were allies of our own nation and they seemed to us to be on the side of law and justice rather than of anarchy. If asked, however, what way their presence would affect the Cause for which our hearts were suffering, we should have been at a loss for an answer.²⁹

The refugees were treated most cordially in Khabarovsk, but rapidly found themselves drawn more closely into the Russian campaign than they might have wished. One of the Russian officials made the suggestion that 'some of our doctors should offer their services and remain at the base so as to allow their own doctors to go to the front.' Although this strategy implied that the missionaries were part of the Russian war effort, they were only willing to go along with it because 'we of course thought that in the case of our being soon to return to our stations it would be an advantage to be on hand.' The scheme came to nothing: 'It is more than probable that it had been pointed out to him that the presence of English doctors might be open to objection',³⁰ but it is an indication of the often precarious position of missionaries who claimed to have no material interests in a country, but who in moments of crisis became part of a general European campaign. In the flight from Kirin, Crawford also reflected on the Russian response to the Boxers. Noting that they had placed surprisingly small numbers of troops at important points along the railway, he speculated that this was part of a greater plan: 'That Russia should in this way purposely invite attack in order to give herself a *casus belli*, or the opportunity of annexing the country, I can hardly bring myself to believe.'³¹ Even with these doubts, he and his fellow missionaries remained heavily dependent upon Russian assistance, travelling by boat with a guard of Cossacks,

²⁹ D/2003/B/2/5/1, July 14. ³⁰ D/2003/B/2/1, July 16. ³¹ D/2003/B/2/5/1 Crawford's Journal, July 7. Later in his journal, however, he noted that the Russians were most anxious to ensure that no war took place, as they feared the loss of the railway. 'He [the Russian Consular Agent] also expressed the wish that when we should have the occasion we would make known the friendly help we had been given by the Russians, in order to try and counter-balance the false views which are current regarding the Russian Government.'

and staying in Russian accommodation at all of the halting-points on their journey.

There has been a good deal of debate over the precise cause of the Boxer rebellion.³² However, resentment against foreign missionaries, and the intrusions of foreign political powers, certainly acted as a powerful rallying cry. The rebel group, known as the 'Boxers United in Righteousness', acquired their nickname because they practiced a ritualistic kind of boxing believed to bestow magical powers. Although the group clashed with German Catholic missionaries in 1897, it was to be other factors that gave the Boxers impetus for national action. Between 1887 and 1900 China suffered a series of droughts and floods, and there was widespread harvest failure. These developments were blamed on the foreigners, who became the focus of Boxer attacks. The movement was widespread, but almost entirely leaderless, drawing its support from among the peasantry. However, Empress Cixi, regent from 1875 to 1889, had returned to power in 1898. Although conservative in her politics, she and her court decided in 1900 to support the activities of the Boxers, largely in an attempt to reduce the influence of the foreign powers.³³ This appeared to give official sanction to Boxer activity, and ensured that the movement spread widely. As rebellion flourished, the Europeans moved swiftly, with Britain, Germany, France, Russia, the United States, Japan, Italy, and Austria-Hungary sending a combined force to recapture the city of Tianjin, near Beijing, which had fallen to the Boxers in the summer of 1900. This force put down the rebellion ruthlessly, and China suffered not merely the humiliation of defeat, but the considerable burden of payments for the costs to the allied forces in prosecuting the war.

Foreign concerns over the potential threat represented by the Boxers was well founded. A good deal had been invested in the country, and the struggles over trading and territory that had characterised Chinese affairs for decades had resulted in particular advances, especially with regard to technology. Primarily developed for economic and security needs, the relatively sophisticated network of communications that existed in China ensured that contact was well maintained between missionary workers, at home and abroad. Despite the great distance separating Crawford and his fellow missionaries from Ireland, they kept in constant communication with their families and each other, mainly through letters, but also through telegrams, and occasionally, the telephone.³⁴ Thus residents in the various mission stations found themselves with access to the most modern of telecommunications, despite the often primitive conditions in which they lived and worked. This factor

³² This confusion extends even to its name. It should more accurately be described as the 'Boxer Uprising', as the Boxers were not rebelling against the Chinese (Manchu) government. Their protest was directed against the foreign presence, and to a lesser extent against Chinese Christians, as they were believed to have gone over to the foreigners.

³³ Bailey, *China in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 34-43. ³⁴ Kirin was well equipped with telephones, principally due to the Russian presence.

was to assume a particular importance on the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, and may in fact have saved a good number of European lives. The Boxers also recognised the importance of the communications network, associating it not merely with the increasing power of foreign forces in China, but with a modernity they despised. In many parts of the country, the cutting of telegraph lines was often the first act of rebellion.³⁵

In a certain sense, the Boxers were correct in their association between European encroachments and modern technology. The Kirin mission station was a substantial settlement, with a school, chapel and hospital, and the mission station was located close to a Russian military base on the edge of the town. On 30 June, the rumours that had been circulating about outbreaks of violence were confirmed. The news came in a telegram to Dr Grieg, a mission doctor, and was received by a party of croquet-playing missionaries. The message, from an outlying mission station, warned of the approach of the Boxers, and asked for information regarding the situation in Kirin. Crawford and his companions prepared a reply in Latin *Fama sine tumultu, muscovii auscilium proferimnt* ['Rumours but no trouble, the Russians have offered help'],³⁶ but did not send it, as the situation rapidly deteriorated. What is extraordinary is the number of communications that passed between the missionaries and others in the few hours before they fled Kirin. In less than a day, they had sent or received nine or ten telegrams, made at least one telephone call, wrote more than four letters (in addition to a 'home mail', sent in the morning before the warnings began to arrive), and sent messengers to alert fellow workers to the danger. What is even more surprising is the fact that Crawford states that almost all of these messages got through, most on the same or the following day. Although these communications fulfilled an important purpose in warning fellow missionaries, they also had the unfortunate effect of confirming hostile Chinese suspicions that the foreigners were in league with each other, a belief that Crawford and his co-workers had difficulty dispelling on their eventual return to Kirin.

The many messages sent and received by the Presbyterian missionaries points up several other issues, in addition to the importance of modern technology. The most striking is the close relationships between the various missionaries, and the concern each felt to warn their fellows of potential danger. It is not surprising to find that representatives of the same church hastened to alert each other to developments, but this concern was extended to European workers of other churches. What is especially noteworthy is the effort made by Crawford to ensure the safety of the Roman Catholic missionaries, a prophetic effort, as Catholic missionaries formed a majority of the European workers murdered during the rebellion. It is estimated that approximately 30,000 Chinese Catholics were murdered, and a further fifty Catholic missionaries were killed. The Protestant churches had a heavier

35 Mackerras, *China in Transformation*, p. 17. 36 D/2003/B/2/5/1 Crawford's Journal, describing his journey from Manchuria to Russia as a result of the Boxer Rebellion.

loss of missionary lives – 135 missionaries and fifty-three of their children – but considerably fewer Chinese Christians, at around 2,000, than their Catholic counterparts.³⁷ On the day he left Kirin Crawford wrote to 'the RC Bishop Lalonyer advising him to go to the Russian colony', and then sent a telegram, fearing that a letter would not arrive as swiftly.³⁸ Crawford's action reflected his own belief in the necessity for European Christians to present a united front in China. Unlike many other workers, he believed that the importance of mission work was the Christianising of China, rather than a narrow focus upon which particular church achieved the greatest success rate. He viewed all the Christian missions as sharing a common goal, rather than being in competition with each other for souls, as was common in missionary endeavours in Africa and India. It is interesting however to note that it was easier for this liberality to be maintained while in China. Back in Ireland, it was necessary to be rather more circumspect when describing the benefits of association with other churches. Thus in his address to the Presbyterian General Assembly Crawford stressed the necessity for close co-operation with fellow Christians, but tactfully ignored the Catholic dimension:

A matter of immense importance is that out there the Christian forces present a united front. In Manchuria, not only are we organically united with the Scottish missionaries of the U.E Church, so that the Chinese don't even know that we come from different churches, but the only other society at work in Manchuria, that of the Danish Lutheran Church is also co-operating with us in a most cordial manner. Still more significant – we are beginning to see quite plainly that the Chinese Christians are not content to perpetuate 'our unhappy divisions'. They are speaking of the "Christian Church of China".³⁹

Only in China, it would appear, could Europeans be liberated from religious prejudice, and admit a common goal. In Crawford's letters home he details social meetings with ministers and priests of various religions, to whom he offered hospitality in Kirin. 'Yesterday we had a visit from three Roman Catholic priests, who are here from different stations for their annual conference. I had not met any of these gentlemen before. They had met several of our missionaries, but in many cases they only knew the Chinese name,⁴⁰ and inquired of me the English name. They seemed pleased to meet with one who spoke their mother tongue (French).'⁴¹ However, the apparent merging of Christian churches into one undifferentiated mass fuelled Chinese suspicions at the highest levels regarding their impact, and confirmed Christianity as 'a seditious, socially destabilizing heterodoxy'.⁴²

³⁷ Stanley *Bible and the Flag*, p. 139. ³⁸ D/2003/B/5/1. ³⁹ D/2003/B/2/4/1 'Foreign Mission Speech in General Assembly' by R.A. Crawford, probably 1913. ⁴⁰ Most of the mission workers took Chinese names, to ease communication. Crawford was known as 'Pastor Tu'. ⁴¹ Crawford, *Sketches*, p. 169. ⁴² S. Bayly, 'The Evolution of Colonial

Despite the Chinese assumptions regarding the close links between Christian missionaries, and Crawford's anxiety on behalf of his Catholic fellows during the Boxer rebellion, the missionaries of different churches were nevertheless wary of potential encroachments on their congregations. Although Crawford maintained a liberal attitude towards association with missionaries of other churches, many of his Presbyterian fellow workers were a good deal more suspicious. New arrivals to the district were scrutinised closely, and their motives questioned. The Chinese converts proved an important source of information with regard to the movements of European missionaries, as they swiftly brought news of potential interlopers to the Presbyterians missionaries:

Having heard that a foreign priest was in the city, I took the 'boy' with me the following morning, and went to call at a certain inn. On arrival, I found that there were three priests, among them M. Grillon, the Bishop of Moukden. They received me very cordially, and we conversed a good while. I hope the Roman Catholics and we may manage to live at peace with one another. As yet, they have no adherents in this place. The evening of the same day they called on us on our return from a visit to the Arsenal.⁴³

Crawford's letters contain tallies of the numbers of converts claimed by the various churches in Manchuria, and it was clearly a point of pride amongst mission workers not merely to save a soul, but to snatch one from a rival mission. One letter records his immediate superior's disappointment that the Presbyterians 'lost' a convert to the Roman Catholics – two brothers had become Christians, one a Presbyterian, and the other a Catholic, and each mission appears to have high hopes of securing the sibling⁴⁴ – but when the European missionary movement as a whole was threatened, the churches tended to pull together.

Robert Crawford was a genuinely liberal individual, who recorded his impressions of the Chinese in an even-handed manner. Unlike many other missionaries, he had a great deal of respect for Chinese tradition, and his hope was to encourage the spread of Christianity among a percentage of the population, rather than eliminate native faith altogether. He met with a degree of success in this objective: as early as 1899 the missionaries could point to a total of 7,920 converts, 467 of them in Kirin.⁴⁵ Crawford was above all a missionary, devoted to spreading Christianity throughout China. But he was a missionary in the mould of David Livingstone rather more than Mary Slessor, as his obvious delight in the exploration of foreign countries showed. For Crawford, and others like him, missionary work allowed for the expression of deeply held religious beliefs while also satisfying a very secular curiosity about the world.

Cultures: Nineteenth-Century Asia' in Porter (ed.), *Oxford History of the British Empire*, p. 463. ⁴³ Crawford, *Sketches* p. 37. ⁴⁴ D/200/B/3/3/20. ⁴⁵ R.H. Boyd, *Waymakers in Manchuria: The Story of the Irish Presbyterian Pioneer Missionaries to Manchuria* (Belfast, 1940), p. 186.