

The Boxer Rebellion

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A

Excellent treatment of a subject that is not often written about by students in this course. Good work

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[A] Introduction

At the turn of the 19th century, the European powers were competing with each other in their imperial ambitions throughout the world. One such place was the Far East, where the imperialists were battling for spheres of influence. The Boxer Rebellion was said to be a reactionary Chinese movement initially against the Manchu monarchy, but later on was supported by the latter to eradicate the invading foreign imperial powers of Europe. *The Boxer Rebellion was the last failed attempt in monarchical China to repel foreign influence and integration into the world socio-political, and economic system.* The purpose of this essay will be to discuss the origin of the Boxers, the reasons for which the empire was crumbling, a brief description of the sequence of events during the rebellion, and the international relations dynamics related to the rebellion.

[B] The origin of the Boxers and nativism

The notion that the Boxer rebellion was the first instance of Chinese nationalism is a correct one. It lays the ground work for explaining the political ambitions of the peasantry and gentry (Qing monarchy and subordinates) of China in the late 19th century. The 19th century, as Suishen Zhao puts it, was one hundred years of humiliation and defeat ranging from the Chinese defeats in the Opium War and the resulting self-strengthening of 1864-1895, to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, and of course the catastrophic Boxer Rebellion of 1898-1901.¹ Western practices and ideologies were seldom adopted into Chinese culture but the idea of nationalism was an exception. The

¹ Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 17.

Chinese brand of nationalism was fuelled by nativism, which Zhang explains “is hypersensitive to perceived foreign insults and may easily result in nationalist xenophobia, which holds that other nations or nation-states are either inferior or threatening and must be dealt with harshly”²

But what caused this nativism? Many scholars believe that the Qing monarchy was incompetent and corrupt. Zhao points out the pathetic track record of the Qing monarchy (and the Republic of China after 1911) in international relations as they had signed 709 unequal treaties with the foreign powers during the span of 1842-1919.³ Gelber mentions in his book that excessive amounts of public funds were used to build a new summer palace for the empress while the navy’s shells were being filled with sand instead of gunpowder during the Sino-Japanese war.⁴ The cost of that war was 120 million taels and Japan imposed an indemnity upon China of US\$ 200 million, which bankrupted the government.⁵ Observers such as Karl Marx pointed out that Chinese government operated only at three levels namely “regulating the usage of water, a fiscal policy of domestic plunder, and a foreign policy of plunder abroad”⁶

It is without doubt that the peasants suffered at the hands of their own leaders. Theft and banditry were running rampant in the north-eastern region of China due to poor economic infrastructure and natural disasters ranging from drought to flood. The interesting topic to discuss is how the government was able to save itself from blame by

² Ibid. 253.

³ Ibid. 47.

⁴ Harry G Gelber, *The Dragon And The Foreign Devils* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 218.

⁵ Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 166.

⁶ Harry G Gelber, *The Dragon And The Foreign Devils* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 218.

diverting the attention of the peasantry to the foreign encroachments and the missionaries. This is when the Boxers come in to play.

The origin of the Boxers is a complicated subject to explain correctly but a mix of the theories proposed by Tan, Esherick and Cohen can suffice. Chester Tan studied this topic by critically analysing the work of Steiger and Lao Nai-Hsuan. Steiger believed that the Boxers (I-Ho Tuan) were a loyal, law-abiding volunteer militia consisting of heretical groups such as the Eight Diagram Sect, White Lotus Society etc., that was governed by the monarchy.⁷ The view of Lao Nai-Hsuan was that the Boxers (I-Ho Chuan) were a branch of the Eight Diagram Sect and were a secret society which was often punished by the Qing dynasty.⁸ Between these two scholars it is clear that the Boxers were a secret society but Steiger differs from Nai-Hsuan as he states that the Big Sword Society was part and parcel of the Boxers and perpetrated the act of slaying native Christians in 1896.⁹

The Big Sword society was actually an independent group who were employed by the local elites and middle class in order to protect their land and revenue interests from thieves and bandits in the Shantung and bordering regions.¹⁰ The Catholic Church was growing and prospering in China at the expense of the state. The anti-bandit Big Sword Society was maintaining order (due to the weak state) for the missionaries and converts while the Church exerted its influence on the state by having settlements and lawsuits

⁷ Chester Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 36-37.

⁸ *Ibid.* 43.

⁹ *Ibid.* 37.

¹⁰ Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of The Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 113.

made in favour of converts.¹¹ The Big Sword Society clashed with the Church when many bandits who survived attacks in 1895 became Christians in order to save their lives and continue their wrongdoings under the safety of the Church.¹²

This was when the European missionaries and the nations that backed them realized that there was a serious weakness in the monarchy and that it should be taken advantage of. The Big Sword Society would clash with newly converted bandits and their supporters and the Church would complain to Foreign Ministers to complain to the courts. In 1897, two German missionaries were allegedly killed by Big Sword followers and this gave European aggression the spark needed to encroach in China as much as possible.¹³ At this time a large number of the Big Sword Society's leadership were executed. The Boxers and the Big Sword Society were now targets of the European powers and the Christian mission in China. The Boxers, as known to us in history, are a product of all the above mentioned dynamics and more. Their recruits included peasants, former Big Sword members, the Eight Diagram Sect, Princes and so on. It is due to famine, natural disasters such as drought and floods, weak tax distribution, massive unemployment, illiteracy, and the lack of a lawful society that the Boxers united under the ideal of nativism. Their subsequent barbarism, although not justified under Confucian doctrines, was to be understood as their way to complain to the monarchy and the foreigners that change was needed.

¹¹ Ibid. 113.

¹² Paul A Cohen, *History in three keys: the Boxers as event, experience, and myth* [book on-line] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, accessed 28 June 2007); available from: <http://0-hdl.handle.net/innopac.lib.ryerson.ca/2027/heb.00361>; 19; Internet.

¹³ Ibid. 20.

[C] Foreign encroachment and the weak Qings

The time was ripe for Europeans to exert their power upon the Chinese empire and take advantage of the ports and land resources to expand their spheres of influence. After the murders of the German missionaries, the Germans retaliated by burning villages to the ground and demanding that the imperial authority grant them a preferential lease agreement (for 99 years) to Kiaochau (city of Tsingtao and Kiaochau Bay), Shantung province, railway and mining grants, and indemnity for the murdered missionaries.¹⁴ The Russians were impressed by the many concessions granted to the Germans. The Russians, Germans and French had intervened on behalf of China to sign a peace treaty with Japan after the war, which gave the powers an excuse to have China return the favour in the times of need.¹⁵

The Russians had loaned China 400 million francs via France to help the government pay for the indemnity to Japan. This gesture was returned when the Courts approved the lease of Port Arthur, Talienwan (Dalny), and the construction of a railway connection between the Greater Siberian line and the latter.¹⁶ This ice free port was granted to Russia and was conceived as a threat to the balance of power and so Britain demanded and got rights to lease Weihaiwei (a port opposite Arthur) and secured a non-alienation to any other power of the territories of the Yangtze Valley (the richest lands in China).¹⁷ The French demanded and received rights to Kwangchouwan (leased as coaling

¹⁴Paul Clements, *The Boxer Rebellion* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1967), 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 34.

station for 99 years), the right to construct a railway from Tongking to Yunnanfu, and the promise of non-alienation to any other power of the Kwangtung, Kwangsi and Hainan provinces.¹⁸ Japan took the province of Fukien and to sum it all up, the US secured its trade interests in China by sending a note of Open Door policy to the Treaty Powers to make sure that all parties cooperate and maintain their respective spheres of influence.¹⁹

The sheer weakness and lack of political shrewdness of the Qing regime truly makes one reflect on how an empire should not be run. In between the land-grabbing schemes of the Powers, the Emperor Kuang Hsu was starting to see a need for drastic reforms. The virtual carving up of his country was worrisome not only to him but the entire populace from the peasants and the Boxers to the literati. The Emperor hired Kang Yu-Wei, a progressive and modern intellectual from Canton to carry out the reform of everything Qing. Edicts of reform were distributed throughout the land and involved modernization and reform of the military, the educational system, and the social, political and civil systems.²⁰ The 100 hundred day reform, as it came to be known, ended in failure. The literati and gentry were being undermined and downsized by the authority of the edicts of Emperor Kuang Hsu. Many military men were rendered useless, civil servants lost their jobs, and the Confucian methods were to be replaced by modern thinking. The people of the empire were not ready for such a swift change of mindset and the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi understood that and took advantage of it in a bloodless coup d'etat.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid. 34

¹⁹ Paul Clements, *The Boxer Rebellion* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1967), 37.

²⁰ Ibid. 57.

²¹ Ibid 56.

The failure of the hasty reform by the Emperor proved very costly to the empire and relations with the foreign powers who saw this as a severe setback to the progress that could have been made. The Empress was shrewd and wasted no time in having many of the leaders of the reform movement executed.²² She reinstated the positions of those civil servants who had lost their privileges. The Empress still did not taste any real success in improving the situation of the backward society that she ruled. Her goal was to maintain a stranglehold on power and to keep her empire united at any cost.

[D] The wrongdoings of Tzu Hsi

The Boxers at this time were just a frustrated and united front with a simple agenda of resisting foreigners with sporadic attacks on converts and Churches. Recruitment was becoming easier as the magical, invulnerable brand of Boxer propaganda was very appealing to the famine-stricken and unemployed peasantry and ex-military men. They gained influence and notoriety when they were officially sponsored and given the duty of maintaining local militias and forcefully removing the foreigners from Chinese soil.²³ The government lead by Empress Tzu Hsi started to influence the Boxers and their supporters with a court order declaring war on the Foreign Powers due to allegations that the foreigners had been stealing Chinese land, committing blasphemous acts against Chinese religious beliefs, oppressing the poor and weak, and therefore the I-Ho Tuan should burn Churches and kill Christians.²⁴

²² Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), XXXi.

²³ Victor Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 225.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 225

Empress Tzu Hsi had played her cards in a way to satisfy the gentry and the conservative values that they shared while supplementing her slow-modernizing and under funded military with the newly appointed local militias of the Boxers. Her aim was to maintain the status quo of Qing rule over China while gently suppressing dissent from the peasantry and obtaining the upper hand over the Foreign Powers in terms of influence and control over the people. With an empire destined to fall at a rapid pace, it is a wonder how the Empress was so overly optimistic about the capabilities of her regime. Some say that religion is the opium of the masses and perhaps power is the opium of monarchs.

The cunning and deception of the Empress was well demonstrated in the case of how she dealt with Yu Hsien, the Governor of Shantung. He was known to be a Big Sword Society member and active leader who tolerated the actions of the society and promoted recruitment. He was called to Peking to serve as an advisor to the Empress and Yuan Shikai took Hsien's place. This was a very shrewd move by Tzu Hsi as she took away a problematic Governor from the troubled region of Shantung and replaced him with a loyal, foreign drill-trained and modernization-inclined Yuan Shikai.²⁵ This gesture was to assure the Foreign Powers that order would be maintained in chaotic Shantung. While Shikai was governor, Hsien carried out attacks on foreigners by proxy. When the French complained about it, the Empress ordered Shikai to quell the violence which he did.²⁶ It becomes clear here that the Empress had no loyalties to the Boxers in particular. She would endorse them when she deemed necessary, and would punish them

²⁵ Victor Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 240

²⁶ *Ibid.* 240.

when she felt it served her political purposes. A group that could be used and abused as the Boxers certainly could not have been headstrong.²⁷

[E] The Peking confrontation

The stage was being set for an all out war against the Foreign Powers as the Boxers were given the green light to kill Sugiyama Akira who was the Chancellor of the Japanese Legation on 11 June 1900 and the German Minister von Ketteler on 20 June 1900.²⁸ On 13 June the Boxers entered Peking in large numbers. Prince Tuan, the President of the TsungliYamen, forged a document that was sent to the Empress as an ultimatum from the Foreign Powers. The ultimatum was written to be favourable to the deposed Emperor which infuriated the Empress and she quickly instructed the court to announce a declaration of war against the foreigners as Tuan intended.²⁹ Chester Tan states that many of the motives behind the quick declaration could include: to increase anger and hatred of the people towards the foreigners, to stimulate the patriotism of the people, to eliminate the menace of foreign troops near the capital, and to deprive the Powers of witnesses as to what was happening and who was doing it.³⁰ By 20 June, the Boxers besieged the Foreign legations in Peking and the war began. A peculiar aspect of the declaration of war document was that it did not demand the active support of all the provincial governments and as it turned out, the southern provinces stayed out of the

²⁷ Victor Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 223.

²⁸ Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of The Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 302-303.

²⁹ Ibid. 302.

³⁰ Chester Tan, *The Boxer Catastrophe* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 239.

northern conflict.³¹ It is perhaps for this reason that peace agreements after the war went smoother than if the entire empire fought against the Foreign Powers.

Most of the anti-Christian carnage happened after the declaration of war as thousands of Christians, Protestants and many missionaries were killed mercilessly by the Manchu army and the Boxers.³² The easiest targets were the converts and the missionaries and so the death toll was very high. Foreign diplomats were held hostage in Peking by the Manchu and Boxer forces while the Foreign Powers were left to strategize on how to attack and save the diplomats. An alliance of the military forces of Britain, America, Italy, Germany, Russia, Japan, France and Austria was dispatched in what was called the Seymour expedition to Tientsin (city close to Peking).³³ The Foreign Allies captured a neutral fort (Taku) and slowly advanced towards Peking but were repelled by the imperial and Boxer forces. The losses of the allies were 228 men killed and 62 wounded.³⁴ A second force was sent out on 4 August which consisted mostly of Japanese, Russian, British and French men totalling 18,800. The Germans were not very interested in the relief as they were of their ports in the north. By 13 August the Allies defeated the opposition and saved the remaining Legations.³⁵ The Foreign Allies went on a patrol to restore order to Peking and surrounding areas by indiscriminately killing anyone that they suspected to be Boxers. The Foreign troops returned the favour of savagery by raping, looting the people suspected of harbouring Boxers and burning down their villages.³⁶

³¹ Ibid. 303.

³² Ibid. 305.

³³ Paul Clements, *The Boxer Rebellion* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1967), 134.

³⁴ Ibid. 135.

³⁵ Ibid. 136.

³⁶ Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of The Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 310.

It was after all these horrific deeds that the Foreign Powers informed the Qings and the court about the price that China had to pay for the expenses and suffering that the Powers had to go through. It is rather ironic how the Foreign Powers acted like victims during the rebellion and war and then took out revenge on many innocent people during the aftermath of the war. They basically acted as savage as the Boxers yet had the audacity to ask for monetary compensations.

To discuss how many times the Foreign Powers deliberated, redrafted and perfected their demands to the Qing government would be too tedious a task. What is important is that all the Powers were finally able to agree upon whom to punish and how much monetary compensation was required to recover the losses of the Powers. Prince Tuan was exiled. Yu Hsien was executed along with the forced suicides of a few Boxer-supporting Princes. The monetary indemnity of 450 million taels (four times the annual revenue of the government) was to be paid within 39 years at 4% per annum interest.³⁷

[F] Conclusion

The restoration of order in Peking came at a heavy price to the people of China and the Qing dynasty. The dynasty eventually dissipated by 1911 but what did gain strength was the notion of nationalism. It was blurred during many instances before and during the Boxer rebellion but and the end of the day, that spark remained and set the groundwork for the advent of the Republic of China. The communists romanticized the exploits of the Boxers to inspire the masses. The Boxers were probably the most

³⁷ Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of The Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, 311.

misunderstood and confused nationalists known to man. Their allegiance to political groups flip-flopped but what was always consistent about them as of 1898 is that they were anti-foreign, anti-Christian, and traditional conservatives who used violence when they deemed necessary. The Boxers went from being a secret heretic society - to being bandits - and then to being a local militia in service of the Empress. Always misunderstood and always misled, these ideological men were the engine that drove the hunger for regime change. It was because of their antics combined with the anti-progressive dynasty that the Imperialist nation-states of Europe united together to achieve their economic and political goals in China. These were the same countries that fought each other in two subsequent wars that resulted in the loss of tens of millions of lives and debts beyond imagination. It is truly remarkable how greed and power can unite soon to be enemies to cooperate with each other. But hints of strategic planning to maintain the balance of power can be demonstrated by the way the Foreign Powers went on a Port leasing and encroaching frenzy just before the rebellion. This is the beauty of international relations and geo-politics.

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