

SEMESTER V
UGHISH 505: MODERN TRANSFORMATION OF CHINA(1839-1949)
Topic

The Boxer Rebellion

E-LEARNING MATERIAL PREPARED BY

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The Boxer Rebellion of 1898-1900 is one of the best known aspects of Chinese history. Strong anti-foreign sentiment permeated not only the court under the empress dowager, but the scholars, the officials, the gentry, and the people at large. Half a century of foreign humiliation, in war as well as in peace, had deeply wounded their national pride and self-respect. The presence of haughty foreign



A French Cartoon of 1898 criticising other powers for their Colonial interest in China
(<https://lexloiz.wordpress.com/2011/12/15/the-boxer-uprising-and-china-inland-mission/>)

ministers, fire-eating consuls, aggressive missionaries, and self-seeking traders constantly reminded them of China's misfortune.

This gnawing sense of injustice generated a burning desire for revenge until it burst out in a vast anti-foreign movement. There were, of course, larger social, economic, political, and religious factors which contributed to such an outbreak.

The Boxers were a semi-religious peasant group. According to I.C.Y Hsü,

"Boxers" was the name given by foreigners to a Chinese secret society called the I-ho ch'lian, or the "Righteous and Harmonious Fists," since members of this organization practiced old-style calisthenics. The I-ho ch' uan was an off shoot of the Eight-trigram Sect CPa-kua chiao), which was associated with the White Lotus Sect, an anti-Ch'ing secret society, which fomented the rebellion of 1796-1804.

The name came from the ritual gymnastic-like movements that were part of their preparation for battle. Boxers came to believe that these rituals made them invulnerable to bullet or sword. The Boxer uprising was not actually a rebellion. The term 'rebellion' implies that they wanted to overthrow the Qing (Ch'ing) or Manchu government of China. The Boxers, in fact, wanted to support the Qing, but were opposed to foreign influence in all forms and wanted to drive the foreigners, their works and their Christian religion out of China. The Boxer Rebellion was almost entirely limited to northern China. The event that gained worldwide attention during the Boxer uprising was the siege of the western legations, when the Boxers surrounded the diplomatic residences of the Western powers in Beijing (formerly Peking). Eight foreign nations combined to lift the siege. Although the Boxers failed to drive out the foreigners, the uprising remains an important episode in the emergence of mass nationalism in China'.

China has a long history of peasant rebellion and tradition of secret societies. The Boxers are part of both. Their background is obscure. An early historical reference to the Boxers can be found dating back to 1808. They were at that time linked to one of the larger secret societies, the **White Lotus**. The Boxers also appear to have had links to the , **Big Sword Society**, an anti-Christian group that had rituals similar to those of the Boxers. There are different translations of the Boxer name, including **Fists of Righteous Harmony** ,**Righteous and Harmonious Fists** or **Boxers United in Righteousness**.

The main characteristics of the Boxers

The Boxers were mostly peasants from Shandong and Zhili in northern China. Almost all the Boxers were adolescents, with local leadership provided by Chinese monks, peddlers and soothsayers, many from the class who had led local peasant uprisings in the past. There were female Boxers known as Lanterns. The Boxers were either illiterate or semi-literate. They appeared to get some of their ideas from travelling operas and sensational stories. They were fiercely anti-Christian and anti-foreign; whether or not they had been at one time anti-Qing is open to debate. They were told that their Boxer rituals made them invulnerable. After 1898 Ci Xi provided them with Imperial support in their attacks on Christians and foreigners.

Theories about the Boxers

There is a range of opinions among historians about the origins and aims of the Boxer movement. The two main points of view relate to whether the Boxers originally were formed to oppose the Qing dynasty or to support it. The most widely held view is that the Boxers began as an anti-Qing movement; in other words, they were opposed to the existing government of China. This was linked to their early association with the White Lotus society. By the 1890s they had changed from opposing the Qing to supporting them. The Boxers did, however, retain their opposition to the foreigners.

The alternative view is that the Boxers were recruited by the Qing as a militia to help oppose the foreigners. The events in Shandong in 1899 when the local governor recruited some of the Boxers seem to support this view. Since opinion among historians is divided, we need to consider both the alternatives. The difficulty in deciding between these two quite different points of view arises because of the sources available to historians. Many of the sources we have about the Boxers come from Chinese officials, some hostile to the movement, others sympathetic to it. Other information comes from the European missionaries, who were among the Boxers' prime targets.

The background of the Boxer Movement

Natural calamities: The Yellow River dominated the vast plain that is the macro-region of north China. It had shifted its course in 1852 and flooded regularly from 1882. A major flood in 1898 affected more than a million people. This was followed by a severe drought in 1900. The Boxers blamed the foreigners, saying that Western technology and the construction of Christian churches had angered the traditional spirits.

Foreign encroachment: Imported foreign cotton was cheaper than the Chinese product. Local handicrafts also suffered. Both these factors led to growing unemployment. By the end of the 19th century, the country was beset by bankruptcy of village industries, decline of domestic commerce, rising unemployment, and a general hardship of livelihood. The foreigners were blamed for many of China's ills. Apart from that as the pace of foreign encroachment accelerated in 1897-98, a sense of imminent extinction grew. It was reflected in the speech of K'ang Yu-wei. In his lecture before the National Protection Society in

Peking on April 17, 1898, he registered his anxiety. He mentioned that the foreign powers may colonize China like Burma, Annam, India.

By 1898 foreign countries had sliced off bits of China and there appeared to be a real risk that China might be broken up and shared out as colonies among the foreign powers.

Anti-Christian feeling: The Western missionaries and their Chinese converts challenged all the old traditions. I.C.Y Hsü mentioned that,

'Imbued ,with the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, the Chinese resented the invasion of Christianity under the protection of gunboats.'

Hsü also mentioned that the Treaties of Tientsin in 1858 had allowed its free propagation in the interior, and the Conventions of Peking in 1860 also granted missionaries the right to rent and buy land for the construction of churches. Protected by the flag and the treaties, the missionaries moved about freely in China, although they had great difficulty winning converts.

These challenges were not simply a matter of religious belief. China had a long tradition of tolerating and adapting foreign beliefs, but the Christians defied many of the local social and political conventions, therefore, challenging the very fabric of Chinese society. For example, missionary doctors threatened local practitioners and the foreigners insisted on building their churches in such a way as to challenge traditional spiritual beliefs.

The gentries were also against Christianity . To them Christianity was a symbol of socially disruptive, delusive, heterodox sect. According to I.C.Y HSÜ,

“Christianity, as a Hheterodox" faith in China, became a basic cause and focus for antiforeignism.”

Economy :

The influx of foreign imports after the Opium War created a depressant effect on the native economy, and the fixed 5 percent ad valorem customs duty ruined China's protective tariff. Foreign cotton cloth sold for only one third of the price of the Chinese cloth, driving native weavers and textile manufacturers into bankruptcy. Handicraft household industries fared especially badly in the face of foreign competition, casting many workers into unemployment. The hardships of life accelerated during the Taiping period; with widespread famine and starvation, destitute people became bandits, vagrants, or troublemakers. While many of those in extremity at first blamed their misfortune on the Taipings, they ultimately transferred their hatred to foreigners for having inspired the rebels with the alien Christian ideology. In the post-Taiping era, further expansion of foreign trade resulted in an ever-increasing foreign domination of the Chinese markets, and during the Self-strengthening period (1861-95) large numbers of foreign-style enterprises and industries, as well as considerable foreign capital, were introduced. In 1899 China suffered a trade deficit of 69 million taels and a government budgetary imbalance of some 12 million taels (101 million expenditure versus 89 million revenue). To meet the deficit, the court increased taxes and solicited provincial contributions, the burden of which ultimately fell on the people. When life became un bearable for all too hard-pressed people, they sought alleviation in banditry and secret societies. ' Moreover, the foreign device of the railway worked havoc on the traditional communication systems. The two old north-south trunk lines-the Grand Canal and the land route from Hankow to Peking- lost out in

competition with railways, and thousands of bargemen, carters, innkeepers, and businessmen were thrown out of work. With the commutation of tribute rice from the south to cash payment in 1900, the Grand Canal

became all but obsolete, effecting the decline of the cities and the livelihood of the people along its banks.

That condition triggered the rebellion also. By the end of the 19th century, the country was beset by bankruptcy of village industries, decline of domestic commerce, rising unemployment, and a general hardship of livelihood. Many attributed this sorry state of affairs to evil foreign influence and domination of the Chinese economy. It was not surprising that hostility developed toward foreigners and things foreign.

The role and motivation of the Empress Ci Xi in encouraging the Boxers: The Boxer uprising was a peasant movement, but the entire affair would have been different had it not been for the Dowager Empress Ci Xi. She had taken power from her nephew in a palace coup in 1898 as part of a reaction against the reforms that were attempted during the famous **100 Days of Reform**. It is fair to say we will never know Ci Xi. Her rise to power was based upon plots, lies, half-truths, bluff, murder, sexual favours and sexual blackmail. She supported the Boxers as they attempted to kill all the foreigners in Beijing, but the Western armies arrived and defeated the Boxers. Nevertheless, Ci Xi, in later years, had no trouble convincing some of the women she would have happily seen butchered that she was a kind and tender person.

As the Boxers began their attacks, the Western powers were slow to realise that the Dowager Empress intended to support the Boxer raids. Ci Xi hoped to use the Boxers to either drive out the foreigners or at least loosen their grip on China. Her decision was influenced by a number of hard-line, anti-foreign conservatives at court, notably Prince Tuan (T'uan). With hindsight, support for the Boxers was the greatest single political miscalculation of Ci Xi's life. Nevertheless, it proved to be a typically devious tactic and even though the Boxers failed, she survived. If the Boxers had failed badly from the outset, she could have turned on them instantly and denounced them as local bandits; yet when the Boxers had some early success, causing the foreigners to complain, she replied that they were outlaws and she was trying to control them. If the Boxers succeeded she would take the credit; if the Boxers failed they would take the blame. Even though the Dowager Empress was manipulative in the extreme, Ci Xi also genuinely responded to the feelings of the people.

NATURE

From May of 1900 Boxer raids increased. As a response, 2100 foreign troops under the British admiral, Seymour, moved towards Beijing from Tianjin by rail to help defend the diplomatic legations. They came under attack by Boxers and only got half way; they had to fight their way back to Tianjin. Between June 13 and 14 the Boxers attacked Christians and foreigners in Beijing and Tianjin. The Qing government told the foreigners that their diplomats in Beijing were well-defended by Imperial troops and there was no need to send troops. On 20 June Clemens von Ketteler, the German minister in Beijing, was killed by Boxers. The following day the Dowager Empress declared war on all the foreign powers. The Imperial court authorised the Boxer attack on the foreign diplomats in Beijing, suggesting four possible motives for this action. The court wanted to; vent anger against the foreigners, stir up patriotic feeling among the Chinese people, remove the foreign military presence from the Qing capital and finally perhaps eliminate foreigners as possible witnesses to Imperial involvement.

The siege of the diplomatic legations in Beijing lasted from 29 June until 14 August, when Indian troops, part of the British Army, broke through to relieve them. There were 475 civilians inside the diplomatic compound, with 450 troops from all nations and 3000 Chinese Christians. There were also 150 racing ponies. The ponies were important because they provided the defenders with a supply of fresh meat. During the course of the

siege sixty-six foreigners were killed and 150 wounded. As with all of China's other clashes with the West, the Boxer uprising was crushed by superior foreign weaponry and technology. The Boxers, despite all their rituals, were not invulnerable to bullets. By the time the uprising was brought under control, however, 250 missionaries across China had been killed. When the foreign troops arrived in Beijing, Ci Xi was smuggled to safety. After the peace terms were arranged she returned to the capital. Qing officials promoted the myth that the uprising had been a rebellion, with the hope of limiting the penalty the Western powers might impose. The Qing propaganda was only partly successful. The terms of the settlement, known as the Boxer Protocol, were that; ten high Qing officials were executed and 100 others were punished. The area of the legation in Beijing was enlarged and more troops brought in to defend it. An indemnity or fine of **\$333 million was to be paid by China over forty years.** It could have been worse. The Boxer uprising was limited to northern China. Chinese officials in other parts of the country had managed to ignore Ci Xi's call for war. As a result, a peace treaty was made that kept foreign troops out of key regions in central and southern China.

The consequences of the Rebellion

The Boxer uprising has been described as a catastrophe, based on the fact that despite the loss of life the Boxers appeared to change very little. The uprising seemed to be a desperate and fanatical response by peasants to forces beyond their comprehension or control. It resulted in the Chinese people facing an even greater tax burden, as the Imperial government raised the money to pay the massive indemnities imposed by the foreign powers. In the short term it was a catastrophe; however, in the longer term the Boxer Rebellion triggered some major historical changes. The Boxers did have a victory of sorts. Their action prevented the foreign powers from going through with the partition of China; without the Boxers, China may well have been carved up in 1900.

The Boxer uprising was also a clear reflection of an emerging nationalist movement, which transformed China in the twentieth century. The decisions made by Ci Xi and her court during the uprising indicated that the Qing dynasty was incapable of ruling China. The Boxer Rebellion accelerated demands for reform and revolution. **The overthrow of the Qing in 1911 can be traced back to the uprising of 1898-1900.**

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