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### The Boxer Rebellion

Usually when tradition finds itself fact-to-face with the contemporary, a struggle ensues. Oftentimes that conflict is violent. Sometimes it is deadly. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, groups of Chinese peasants attempted to rid their country of the major foreign powers struggling to control it. Known as The Boxer Rebellion, the uprising was rooted in resistance to nonnative presences and was led by bands of farmers and workers that eventually murdered a number of Westerners and lay siege to an area of Peking before they were defeated, leaving China worse than before.

There were several reasons for the uprising. Resentment was one. The Chinese had been defeated in the Opium Wars and the Sino-Japanese Wars by external forces with personal interests. At that time, English demands for tea were met primarily with supplies from China. In order to offset the resulting trade imbalance, especially with India, the British produced opium in India and smuggled it to China, which caused a major addiction problem in the latter country. Efforts by Chinese authorities to end the trade and expel the foreign peddlers sparked a backlash by the British. They swiftly retaliated with military force and defeated the Chinese. As a result, England compelled China to sign unfair treaties, and Chinese hatred for outsiders grew (Dikotter). Similarly,

the Chinese considered other treaties signed around this time with other countries, such as the United States and France, unfair. Furthermore, Japanese aggressions toward China, mainly over control of Korea, but later for other reasons, too, prompted further hostile feelings. In the First Sino-Japanese War, China possessed the military might to defeat its enemy, but because of leadership and logistical problems, it lost several major battles on land and at sea (“First Sino-Japanese”). Christian missionary efforts to convert citizens throughout China, but especially in the north, contributed to the tensions between locals and outsiders. Chinese traditions were questioned, neglected, and even criticized by converts, and some missionaries pressured local authorities to side with those converts in civil disputes and legal matters (“Boxer Rebellion”). Industrialization and natural disasters, such as severe drought-and-flood cycles, promoted further unrest. As a result of these factors, China was in disarray.

These reasons contributed to the uprising, but who were The Boxers, exactly? The Boxers were a group of peasants who hated foreigners and what they represented. Called the I Ho Ch’uan, which means righteous, harmonious fists in Chinese, (English speakers called them Boxers) these individuals were a secret society of soldiers, farmers, and workers who practiced martial arts and believed their training gave them magical powers, including a imperviousness to bullets (Ebrey). According to David Silbey, author of *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*, China had a history of such secret clubs, and like those before them, The Boxers had an agenda. They wanted to rid China of “corrupting influences” and compel the rulers, the Qing dynasty at the time, to “drive out modern ‘decadent’ influences.” While the Boxers may have had clear goals, they did not have a definite leadership structure, Silbey added. Each group may have had a captain,

but there was no national figurehead. This was a weakness and strength, he added. Without leadership, the group's efforts were poorly organized, but then again, with no one person to blame and arrest, it was difficult to dismantle the Boxers. No one knows for sure how many Boxers there were, but their numbers may have reached 1 million ("David Silbey").

However disjointed and haphazard the group may seem, it was still able to instigate and play a key role in an important historical clash between the old and the new, the native and the foreign. The Boxers embarked on a mission to eliminate the enemy that ended in brutal fighting with foreign soldiers. According to several sources, hostilities began in the countryside in the early summer of 1900 as members of the group, prompted to action by conflicts with Christian missionaries and converts and frustration with summer droughts, roamed through territories and attacked churches and other property and killed foreign missionaries, engineers, and telegraph workers – anyone who represented in their eyes the evil influences of the outside world. In early June, the uprising pushed into the city, and Boxers, aided by the imperial military, attacked Peking's legation section, where the embassies and housing of foreign diplomats existed. Among the countries represented there were Great Britain, the United States, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia, and Japan. A foreign military force of about 450 soldiers, consisting of troops from those countries mentioned, created a compound by linking some of the embassies. The soldiers quickly moved the diplomats and other civilians in the area within the fortifications for protection (Hickman). Soon, a coalition of some 2,000 foreign troops arrived and confronted The Boxers. The Chinese forces prevailed, killing more than 300 of their enemy. In mid July, another international force

arrived – this time numbering at least 20,000 – and advanced on Peking. By mid August, the foreign forces had overcome The Boxers and forced them to flee. Continued raids over the next year eventually put an end to the rebellion. In addition to the combat casualties, nearly 300 missionaries and almost 19,000 Chinese Christians were killed (Hickman).

As a result of the uprising, The Boxers hurt China more than helped it. The combined foreign powers there forced Chinese leadership to pay more than \$300 million in damages and permit the permanent stationing of foreign troops in Peking and other places. The overlapping spheres of control and influence that the foreign nations created afterward contributed to the downfall of the Qing dynasty about a decade later. The uprising “... cemented the collapse of the Chinese dynasty, and that’s when the revolutionary elements in China saw both the fecklessness of the dynasty and the nasty imperialism of the West,” Silbey added.

In conclusion, China’s history includes many important tales of struggle and conflict, but the story of The Boxer Rebellion is especially intriguing. The imperialist notions of several late 19<sup>th</sup> Century powers sparked an uprising that ultimately, and perhaps ironically, aided rather than hindered those powers in their quests to control China.

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