

Below is a reprint of an article from the December 2008 issue of Global Stamp News entitled "The Boxer Rebellion" written by Dennis Murphy.

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Dennis Murphy | Associate Editor

The Boxer Rebellion



During the summer of 1900, a strange peasant movement was afoot in northern China, working its way from village to village. Western missionaries on the scene began sending disturbing letters to their respective legations in Peking. Their letters described local peasants engaging in martial arts training, special breathing exercises and the chanting of esoteric prayers. The peasants also performed strange rituals where individuals or even entire groups seemed to fall under the possession of spirits, gyrating and foaming at the mouth before passing out. More troubling yet was that the villagers,

emboldened by the experience, began threatening the Western missionaries and their Chinese converts. They were being told to either leave or be killed.

Large numbers of foreigners began entering China after Britain defeated Chinese forces in the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60. As a consequence, China was forced to tolerate the importation of opium into China by British merchants. Before long, other Western powers were engaged in a free-for-all to carve off their own pieces of the Middle Kingdom. Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Austria-Hungary, The Netherlands and the United States all staked out their "Spheres of Influence" on Chinese soil. Whenever one Imperialist nation won a new concession from the beleaguered Chinese, the other nations immediately demanded similar treatment.

Foreign nations owned territories in China, known as "Concessions" or "Treaty Ports", that were independent of Chinese jurisdiction. Each Concession had its own local administrations replete with police forces and post offices issuing stamps. Even when foreigners committed crimes outside the boundaries of the Treaty Port, they were still from Chinese law and had to be turned over to their own nation for any legal proceedings.

The Chinese Government bitterly resented this encroachment of its sovereignty, but there was little it could do. Each concession to the Western imperialist brought new misery to the Chinese peasants. The foreigners introduced railroad onto the land and steam boats on the rivers to more efficiently transport goods. This resulted in large numbers of Chinese laborers being put out of work. These laborers existed, under the best of conditions, only a meal away from starvation. They understandably blamed the foreigners for depriving them of their livelihood.

The presence of railroads was particularly disturbing to rural peasants. They held strong beliefs in a spirit world coexisting along side the material world. When laying out the foundation of a house or selecting a gravesite, for example, Chinese peasants were careful to consult the principles of feng shui. They would go to great lengths to ensure they did not disturb those invisible forces of the neither world. The arrival of the railroads saw the indiscrimi-



Boxer Damage to Legation Quarter.



Capture of Taku Fort at Tianjin.

nate laying of steel track, like a great scar being gouged on the land. The rails were laid in straight lines without the slightest consideration of the supernatural forces they might be defiling. This caused the peasants to become frightened and angry because they knew that heaven had been offended and there was bound to be



Garrison of U.S. Soldiers Beijing.



German depiction of the war in China.

aroused the most extreme feelings of horror and revulsion in the hearts of the missionaries bent on saving the "beaten" Chinese soul. Those Chinese peasants who did convert to Christianity were obliged to abstain from most village activities. The other villagers accused them of being "rice Christians", taking up the foreign religion in exchange for food from the missionaries. Chinese Christians became outsiders in their own ancestral villages and were viewed with suspicion and contempt by their neighbors.

The peasant's misery was further exacerbated in 1898 when the Yellow River, long known as "China's Sorrow", broke its levees and flooded vast areas of northern China displacing millions of people and causing widespread starvation. For the peasants who had been dreading the inevitable manifestation of Heaven's displeasure, this was surely it. Dispossessed peasants saw their whole world being turned upside down. And they came to believe that the source of

all their problems were the hideous, big nosed, white skinned "Yang Guizi" ("foreign devils") who ravaged their land with impunity and disrespect. Some of them decided it was time to take action.

No one knows for sure just exactly where the Boxer movement originated or even who were its early leaders. The name "Boxer" was given by Westerners who observed them practicing martial arts. The Boxers called themselves the "Yihequan" meaning the "The Harmonious Fists". They practiced martial arts and chanted special prayers which they believed made them impervious to foreign bullets.

For more than two hundred years, the Chinese had seethed with resentment under the foreign rule of the Manchus, who had swept out of the north and conquered China in 1644. The Manchus named their new Dynasty the "Qing" ("ching") meaning "pure". Every Chinese male bore the shame of the Manchu occupation by the hairstyle he was required to wear, on pain of death. Shaved in the front, the rest pulled back into a queue, it was a daily reminder of the humiliation he was obliged to endure.

Many secret societies, such as the Boxers, were formed during this period with the ultimate goal of overthrowing their Manchu conquerors. And yet, the very Manchus who oppressed China's people seemed utterly helpless to turn back the

flood of foreigners pouring into their country. The peasants came to detest the Western "foreign devils" even more than they hated the Manchus.

At the time of the Boxer Uprising, China was ruled by a woman known as the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager had begun her life in the Imperial Court as a second tier concubine. She quickly grasped the political dynamic of court life. Using her beauty, charm, intelligence, ruthlessness and instinctive grasp of human nature, she rose through the ranks of Imperial concubines to become the absolute ruler of China.

Unlike the Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty, she never aspired to assume the title of Monarch. Instead, she preferred to rule China through weakling puppet emperors that she placed on the throne. Although she was a master of court intrigue and politics, the Empress Dowager was never able to grasp how to deal effectively with the menace of the foreign powers she regarded as a plague upon her nation.

With the advent of the Boxer movement, she believed heaven had delivered the means to sweep the foreign vermin from the land. She soon sent agents to meet with the Boxers and steer their resentment away from the Manchu rulers and, instead, to focus their anger against the foreigners. Somewhere along the way, the Boxers' slogan became "Support the Qing, kill the foreigners".

a divine retribution rain down upon them. The intrusion of Christian missionaries seriously threatened the structure of traditional village life. Missionaries generally viewed the rituals of rural China with severe disdain. In particular, those rites honoring a family's ancestors, incorrectly dubbed "Ancestor Worship",

areas of northern China displacing millions of people and causing widespread starvation. For the peasants who had been dreading the inevitable manifestation of Heaven's displeasure, this was surely it. Dispossessed peasants saw their whole world being turned upside down. And they came to believe that the source of



Peitang or "North Cathedral".



Postcard view of British Legation Beijing.

By late 1899, the growth of Boxer societies had reached a critical mass. They began openly attacking Western missionaries and their converts in the villages throughout north China. These attacks were sometimes made with the cooperation of local officials who shared a hatred of the foreigner's presence in their land. Hundreds of missionaries were killed while more were forced to evacuate the region. Thousands of Chinese Christians were slaughtered without mercy.

Emboldened by their early successes, the Boxers set their sights on eradicating all foreigners from the land. From all over north China, groups of Boxers

began marching toward the foreign enclaves in Tianjin and Beijing. Along the way, Boxers destroyed whatever railroad tracks, telegraph lines, schools, churches and shops selling foreign goods that they encountered.

While the Boxers were rampaging throughout the countryside, most of the foreigners residing in the cities chose to ignore the early reports of atrocities that reached them. The foreigners' insouciance was the result of their own arrogance and a generally held belief that the Boxer movement was a "Chinese matter". The foreign residents convinced themselves that the Boxers would soon be put down by Imperial forces. What they did not understand was that the Boxers were being secretly encouraged and aided by the very Chinese government they expected to handle the situation.

As the first groups of Boxers began arriving in the major cities, their early targets were the foreign residences on the cities' outskirts, which they put to the torch. Finally shaken from their complacency, the foreign residents in Beijing fled to the relative safety of the Legation Quarter compounds, which were located adjacent to the Imperial Palace. They were soon joined by hundreds of terrified Chinese Protestants. Most Chinese Catholics sought sanctuary in Peitang, the fortress-like North Cathedral located in another district of Beijing. As the number of Boxers in the capital swelled and the reality of the danger could no longer be ignored, British authorities, belatedly, sent out a plea for help by telegraph, just before the lines were cut.

In the city of Tianjin, Boxers quickly swarmed over the Chinese quarter and occupied it. The foreign enclave was able to hold the Boxers at bay, thanks in great part to the efforts of a young American mining engineer named Herbert Hoover. Hoover took charge of organizing makeshift fortifications that, ultimately, saved the foreign community. That resourceful engineer would later become the 31st President of the United States.

Meanwhile in Beijing, the various foreign communities haggled over which country should lead their defensive effort. The British won out and quickly assumed overall command of the Legations' defense. Each legation had its own small contingent of military guards. Merging their forces under a unified command greatly enhanced the effective utilization of available resources. Even so, the situation looked hopeless. There were only 507 legation guards and volunteers that would have to face more than 20,000 Boxers.

On June 20, 1900, large numbers of Boxers began massing around the Legation Quarter. At 4:00pm they began shouting "Sha! Sha! Sha!", meaning

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" Thousands of screaming Boxers, mostly armed with spears and swords, charged the compound walls. Though vastly outnumbered, the Legation guards held their ground, directing murderous rifle and machine gun fire against the assailants. So many Boxers were killed by the defenders' devastating fusillade that their piled up bodies eventually became an impediment to the attackers. Eventually the attack faltered and the Boxers fell back. Against all odds, the guards had held the fortification at a loss of sixty troops.

The Boxer attackers never successfully breached the walls of the diplomatic quarter, though the defenders eventually pulled back somewhat to a more easily defensible perimeter. The Boxer offensive soon settled into a siege that lasted for fifty-five days. The Boxers engaged in a type of psychological warfare against the defenders by creating a nerve-wracking, round-the-clock cacophony of bullets whizzing by, gongs being beaten, enemy jeers, cannon shells exploding and the popping of endless strings of firecrackers.

Amid such noise, sleep became almost impossible and exhaustion took its toll on the defenders. While a few of the defenders did crack under the strain, many others discovered reserves of strength they never knew they possessed. Most of the defenders found relief from the tension by throwing themselves into the work of strengthening the fortifications. Women spent their time cutting up bolts of beautiful Chinese brocade cloth and sewing the material into sacks for sandbags. Men filled the bags and stacked them, raising the level of the walls by 10 feet. Everyone pitched in and contributed to the common defense.

Considering the numbers involved, the Boxers should have easily overrun the foreign legations. What saved the situation were the high level of discipline among

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the foreign residents and the lack of a coordinated leadership among the Boxers. Less obvious at the time but extremely critical to the Legations' survival was the fact that some Chinese officials privately disapproved of the Boxer attack and quietly worked to blunt its effectiveness.

During the siege, the Empress Dowager had become convinced that the Boxers would ultimately prevail. On June 21st, she made the cardinal mistake of formally declaring war upon the foreign nations. This would result in disastrous consequences for China.

An international relief force comprising of 20,000 troops from eight nations was dispatched to China. In the absence of any communication from Beijing, the Eight Nation Alliance believed the Legations had fallen to the Boxers. They therefore opted to relieve Tianjin first, taking Taku fort in the process. From Tianjin they marched to the capital. On the 55th day of the siege, the Alliance forces arrived in Beijing and dispersed the attackers. They were astounded to discover that most of Beijing's foreign community had survived the maelstrom. Once the Legations were secured, Alliance troops engaged in a disgraceful rampage of looting the Imperial Palaces, vandalism, rape and indiscriminately shooting anyone they remotely suspected of being a Boxer.

As the foreign troops marched into Beijing, the Empress Dowager hastily changed from her elegant robes into the simple blue jacket and trousers of a Chinese peasant woman. In this disguise she escaped from the palace on a donkey cart, bringing the puppet Emperor along with her. Once safely removed from the capital, she announced she was making a "tour" of the southern provinces. She did not return to Beijing until the terms of China's capitulation, known as the "Boxer Protocol", had been agreed upon.



Stamps of the British China Expeditionary Force.

The terms of the Boxer Protocol were harsh. The Empress Dowager, however, reassumed control of the nation without suffering any personal retribution. A number of Chinese officials were made scapegoats for the Empress Dowager's miscalculation and were either executed or disgraced. China was forced to pay war reparations to the western powers totaling 67.5 million pounds of silver, with interest, spread out over a period of 39 years.

To meet this obligation, extra taxes were levied on the population already burdened with exorbitant taxes. Imperial troops were ordered to roundup the remaining Boxers. In their haste to supplicate Western demands, many innocent people were arrested and beheaded.

The humiliation China was forced to endure sounded the death knell for the Qing Dynasty. Although the Empress Dowager did not live to see it, in 1911 a relatively bloodless revolution overturned the weakened Qing dynasty in a matter of months.

Today, many Chinese regard the Boxer Rebellion as a patriotic movement. In fact, the Chinese do not even refer to the



The battle for Beijing.

episode as the "Boxer Rebellion". The Chinese view of the events that took place in 1900 can be summed up by what they call it—"Ba Guo Lian Jun", meaning (the invasion of) the "Eight Nation Alliance".

Author's comments: One day on our recent trip we took a pleasant walking tour through the district that had been Beijing's Legation Quarter. Only a few of the original buildings remain. One outstanding example is St. Michael's Church, built in 1901 on the grounds of the French Legation. A wedding party of Chinese Catholics was gathering in front of the church. We couldn't help but wonder if their ancestors might have been among those who found refuge in the Legations during the summer of 1900.

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