

# A closer look into the boxer rebellion

War



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Boxer Rebellion was one of the many periods of history that has almost been forgotten by Western historians despite its importance and impact in Chinese history. Eventually, information regarding this rebellion had resurfaced which some historians have considered to be mythical in the sense that some historians have concentrated the information regarding the Boxer Rebellion only on certain portions that they have deemed to be beneficial to the current society of the country.

In line with this, this paper aims to provide an analytical report justifying that the Boxer Rebellion, although may have begun as a political and economical uprising, most of the efforts done during the Boxer Rebellion was to prevent Western culture and tradition from tainting Chinese culture, particularly in terms of religion. This paper will also provide evidence to justify as to why many historians have considered the current image of the Boxer Rebellion to be a myth.

In order to present the analysis report with regards to the Boxer Rebellion movement comprehensively, a brief overview of Chinese society during the period when the Boxer Rebellion arose should be first discussed. The Boxer Rebellion first gained attention in the year 1898 (Ch'en 290). During this time, China was currently under the governance of the Qing dynasty. Unlike the Ming dynasty before it, the Qing dynasty was not comprised of Manchus, foreigners from Manchuria who obtained governance on China as a result of conquest.

The Manchus, as how the Chinese called them, were viewed as both privileged and idlers, with majority of the Manchus consuming one-third of the total revenue of the country (Purcell i-ii). It was also during this period a

shift on the basis of the country's economy from land acquisition to credit acquisition. In fact, Mark Elvin, author of "The Pattern of the Chinese Past" that was published in 1973 stated that usury, which was the term given to the act of controlling economic resources, became a "a more important source of social and economic power in the countryside than ownership of land" (as cited in Wakeman, Jr.

202). Apart from this, international trade and commerce that were previously banned during the Ming dynasty were re-established (Van de Van 230). Despite the shift in economic power, many members of the lower class in Chinese society still did not enjoy the independence enjoyed by the richer farmers and land owners because the practices of the moneylenders did not provide those the peasants with what they had considered to be essential to their way of life.

Instead, they viewed this change in the economic power in Chinese society as a fragile and false link between the Manchu rulers and the Chinese subordinates. As such, most of the uprisings that had occurred during this period of time have been linked to peasantry revolts whose goals centered on the quest to equalize the land and resources (Wakeman Jr. 202-03). The above stated situation the China during the period of the Boxer Rebellion may have been the reason why many have associated this movement to be another peasantry revolt against the Manchu government.

This was also supported by the fact that majority of the Boxers, as how they were called, were young male peasants, and that their revolt actions included stampeding into the cities and burning down blocks of the finest stores and offices of moneylenders (Liu 102). Furthermore, there have been

<https://assignbuster.com/a-closer-look-into-the-boxer-rebellion/>

only limited accounts on the Boxer Rebellion movement with these limited resources depicting the members of the Boxer Revolt as being hostile (Ch'en 290). While the characteristics of the Boxers were similar to that of other peasant revolts against the Manchu government, the aims and objectives of the Boxers Revolution was nothing similar.

In fact, for a brief period in time, the Manchu monarchy – headed by Empress Dowager Cixi – supported the Boxers Movement (Liu 102). This is primarily due to the aims and objectives of the Boxers Movement. Because of the re-opening of international trade routes, many of the Chinese began to develop as sense of Xenophobia, which is, the fear of foreign rule. As international foreign trade blossomed, foreigners began to come in not just with raw items and other commodities, but also their own beliefs, particularly Christianity (Ch'en 290-91).

Unlike the Westerners, the Chinese have patronized and supported their current government despite themselves being foreigners as well. This was because when the Chinese were brought under the rule of the Manchus, it was the Manchus and not the Chinese who assimilated themselves to the culture and society of Chinese to the point that if one would compare a Manchu and a Chinese side-by-side, only subtle differences can be viewed between them (Purcell 2). This is not the case with the Westerners who have been known to subtly invade other countries through the process of "cultural imperialism.

" Cultural imperialism has been defined as the process of a foreign country to impose in a coercive manner, usually through political and economical methods, their beliefs, customs and traditions to another country, usually

<https://assignbuster.com/a-closer-look-into-the-boxer-rebellion/>

one that they have deemed to be more inferior than they were (Dunch 302). In the case of China, through its trade activities with European countries, has been viewed to be a country that was static, as compared to the European countries where advancements in technology was at its peak (Purcell 3).

As a result, missionaries began to flock into China and began to establish schools in the Shandong province (Liu 103-04). Eventually, many of the Chinese have slowly begun to view these foreign missionaries as a threat to their cultural identity, especially after the missionaries were slowly being granted diplomatic and military support from the Qing dynasty monarchy. The Manchu monarchy increased the ranks and privileges of the foreign missionaries. One example of this was the bishop situated in the Shandong province was given the rank by the Empress Dowager Cixi similar to that of the Chinese governor of the province.

On top of that, the Monsignors and the priests situated in various parts of China were regarded to have the same political power as the Chinese prefects and magistrates. Because of the political power that was granted to the foreign missionaries, they were able to handle their missionary work in a more convenient manner. Not only could they not be touched by members of the local government within the area that they are ministering, but also they had the authority to protect those who have been converted into Christendom against any actions made by local authorities that they consider as harassment on the part of their converts (Liu 104).

The members of the Boxers have viewed the actions of the Catholic missionaries as a way not just to make their mark in their culture, but also as a slow, but steady method of overthrowing their monarchy and their

<https://assignbuster.com/a-closer-look-into-the-boxer-rebellion/>

government and invading them. The Boxers viewed Christianity as a form of heresy and against the teachings of both Confucianism and Taoism, which are the prominent religions in China during this period (" History in Three Keys" 8). It was for this reason that the Boxers launched a propaganda movement against foreign missionaries.

As far as the Boxers were concerned, their propaganda movement was justified by the literary pieces that were centered in both Confucianism and Taoism. Perhaps the most influential of these lyric pieces was a lyric poem which they have believed was composed by the god Chi-Kung, who shared it to the Boxers through the medium. The poem referred to the Chinese Christian converts as people " who have lost all their senses" and whose " aim was to engulf the whole country" and to " deceive our Emperor" (Ch'en 292).

The propaganda literature distributed by the Boxers echoed the message of the poem of Chi-Kung. These literature included notices that they boldly advocated, such as the message that " The heresy [heresy referring to the missionaries and their converts] has no respect for either gods or Buddhas" (Ch'en 293). Based on these propaganda, it is clear that the Boxer Rebellion Movement's aim was to wipe out foreign missionaries by any means possible in order to protect their beloved emperor and his family as well as the common people of China (Ch'en 293).

Sadly, the government that they were trying to protect did not share in their vision. In the end, the Qing dynasty suppressed the Boxer movement and all forms of literature associated with the movement (" History in Three Keys" 15). There were a number of reasons as to why history presented the Boxer

Rebellion more as a political revolution as opposed to a movement to protect the culture, government and people of China during the 19th century.

One reason for this was that, as mentioned, all documents pertaining to the Boxer Movement, especially those that supported the Boxer Movement were destroyed. What were left were official documents and other forms of literature that were written by those who opposed the Boxer Revolution Movement. These documents depicted the Boxers as a group of illiterate individuals who were afraid of advancement and progress (" History in Three Keys" 15).

But the primary reason for the difference of the viewpoint regarding the Boxer Rebellion Movement was on the historians themselves. While it is true that majority of historians document events that had occurred in a particular area during a particular period based on facts in order to provide the readers an objective viewpoint that is as accurate as the facts and evidences may allow them to, there remains some historians who have been considered by their colleagues as " mythologizers" (" The Contested Past" 82).

These kinds of historians have been described as those who have a clear understanding of the past events and have access to the same evidences and facts that are available to historians, sociologists, anthropologists and the like. The difference lies in the manner on how they utilize these facts and evidences in their writings. Instead of providing the reader an objective, play-by-play account of the events that had occurred during a particular point in time, mythologizers have been known to utilize the facts and evidences to create an account of a historical event to serve another purpose.

These purposes include political reform and psychological formation of the reader (" The Contested Past 82-83). Examples of this can be found with regards to the manner on how various authors whose works have long been considered as historical accounts on the Boxer Revolution. In one account which was entitled " The Boxers' Conquest of the Westerners," the Boxers were described as a group of individuals who were superstitious and irrational.

In fact, not much attention was actually given to this over the more noble reason for the revolt, which was the protection and preservation of Chinese culture from the changes being imposed by foreign missionaries. As a result, this historical account presented the Chinese as a people who, in a period when everyone else were trying to advance themselves, remained superstitious by believing that gods and deities still correspond through mediums in order for the people to do their bidding as well as a country whose people remained ignorant and even barbaric (" The Contested Past" 84).

Chen's Duxiu's essay is another example of mythologization of the Boxer Revolution. In his essay, he firmly addressed and justified that the Boxer Revolution was brought about by the influence of Confucianism, Taoism and other religions present in China during that period of time has led to the Boxer Uprising. Duxiu further stated that since these religions are still prevalent in China to this very day, it would not be long before another Boxer Revolution will take place (" The Contested Past" 85).

While this does have some truth in it, it is also not entirely accurate because Duxiu failed to take into consideration that one of the main reasons why the

<https://assignbuster.com/a-closer-look-into-the-boxer-rebellion/>



Boxer Revolution erupted was because of the imminent overthrow of the current monarchy ruling China brought about by the government itself by providing political power to a certain extent to the foreign missionaries. This allowed them to be in a position to choose on whether they would follow the rulings of the local government where they were ministering.

In fact, the term "Boxer" Revolution by itself may be considered to be a form of mythologization. In his article, Lu Xun had presented it as a metaphor to present the ignorance of the Chinese during the 19th century in his statement "[...] if the Chinese don't learn the military art of using rattan shields, how can they protect themselves against firearms[...]" (as cited in "The Contested Past" 86). To summarize, the Boxer Revolution that occurred during the Qing dynasty was brought about by a number of historical events.

The first was the experience of the Chinese towards foreign invasion. Although they were currently being ruled by foreigners from Manchuria, they did not fear that this would bring about a loss of their cultural identity and heritage. This was because the foreign rulers assimilated themselves into the Chinese culture and traditions to a point wherein Manchus living in China were not that different from the Chinese. The second historical event was the re-opening of international trade routes by the Manchus during the Qing dynasty that have been closed during the Ming dynasty.

While this benefited the country economically with traders bringing in rare commodities in exchange for Chinese goods, it had also paved the way for European missionaries to enter the country, bringing in Christianity into China. This event has caused many of the converts to turn their backs from local customs and traditions, hence, their own cultural identity. The third was

the decision made by the Manchu government through Empress Dowager Cixi to grant the foreign missionaries some form of political power. This proved to be the biggest threat viewed by the Boxer Revolt.

The decision made by the Empress Dowager has not only provided the foreign missionaries some form of leniency which would allow them to practice their faith and to convert Chinese into Christianity more freely, but it also allowed the foreign missionaries not to adhere with the local government in the various provinces where they were ministering. This is because the political power granted by the Empress to the foreign missionaries has caused them to have the same political powers as those in the local government, if not higher.

Based on the evidence presented, the preconceived notion that the Boxers were predominantly made out of peasants is inaccurate. On the contrary, the evidence have suggested that the Boxer Revolution was actually a movement that was composed largely of educated individuals and since education was a privilege that was enjoyed by the elite during this period of time, it can be assumed that the Boxer Revolution was a revolution created by the elite.

This conclusion has been based on the development of the aim of the Boxer Revolution which was to wipe out the foreign missionaries in order to preserve and protect the Emperor of China and its people. They had based this on literary pieces that were usually accessible only to the elite. Among these forms of literature were the plays, poetry and teachings of Confucius and Tao.

It will be highly illogical to state that the Boxers were mainly comprised of illiterate individuals since the only way for these to become the basis of the Boxers Movement is if and only if these someone who is literate, that is someone who could both read and write, would be able to not only understand these forms of literature but would have the capacity to disseminate these information to others.

Also, the preconception that the Boxer Revolution was a revolt against the Manchu government has been disproved by the information presented in this paper as well. While it may be true that the Boxer Revolution was ultimately suppressed by the Manchu government, among the objectives of the revolution movement was to protect their Emperor and Empress Dowager. They had viewed the actions of the foreign missionaries as a step closer for cultural imperialism to become rampant in the country.

Cultural imperialism refers to the act of members from a foreign country to bring in their own customs, beliefs and traditions into another country and would slowly assimilate this to the citizens of that particular country, usually through some form of political force. The most common method used for cultural imperialism is through religion. This was the case in the Boxer movement.