

# Case Study – The Boxer Rebellion

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The Boxer Rebellion was an explosion of anti-Western feeling in China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rebellion was violently suppressed and was a decisive factor in the collapse of the ancient Manchu Qing dynasty.

## *Key features and issues of the modern world*

Political and social features – the feudal nature of Chinese society

Forces for change – attempts to reform the Chinese state, trading concessions imposed by foreign powers

The impact of change – resentment and rebellion against foreigners

## *Ideas and their significance*

Autocracy – the Manchu Qing dynasty

Imperialism – China as a weak power, unable to resist European demands for concessions

Nationalism – the development of Chinese nationalism

Terrorism – tactics used by the Boxers, and retaliation by European forces

## *Individuals and groups*

Historical context to Boxers. Personal background, values and attitudes of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi. Significant events and achievements – CiXi's refusal to accept and pursue reforms

## *Events*

Factors – reasons for the siege of the foreign compound in Beijing

Impact of the events on China – harsh settlement terms imposed by the powers quicken the demise of China, leading to the revolution of 1911

## **Overview**

Compared with Western industrialised nations, China was severely underdeveloped. Few officials realised the need for change and even fewer were able to carry out reforms in the tightly controlled government and education system. Confucianism was the national religion that held the social classes together but also meant that the country was unable to modernise without sweeping changes. Under pressure from imperialist powers and their military superiority, the Chinese were obliged to open their ports and markets to European traders and bankers. Britain's victory over China in the Opium Wars is an example of China's forced opening of its ports as part of foreign concessions and granting of trading rights.

## **America Opens the Door**

The USA had recently acquired the Philippines in 1900 and was now a force to be reckoned with in the Asia-Pacific region. Rather than a military incursion into China, the Americans introduced an "Open Door Policy" although opposed by the Chinese gave way for more foreign trade into China. American businesses seeing China as new opportunities soon quickly followed their European counterparts and settled in China, increasing anti-foreignism and fuelling claims that Western powers were queuing up for a slice of China.

## **Reforming the Dynasty**

After a series of Japanese military conquests against China in the late 1890s, many clubs formed as small groups of intellectuals saw the backwardness of China and called for reforms. Emperor Guangxu supported many of these reforms including terms in limiting the Dowager's power. At this point, the Dowager CiXi intervened and staged a palace coup holding the Emperor as a virtual prisoner and knocking back all reforms.

## The Growing Crisis

Anti-foreign sentiment was on the rise, especially hostility towards Chinese missionaries and converts who were seen as undermining the cultural Chinese values. The Yellow River floods and Shantung famine which killed over a million people in 1898 were blamed on the foreigners in China. With the near collapse of local industries due to cheap foreign imports, the atmosphere was dangerous.

## 'Righteous and Harmonious Fists'

In 1898 a secret society began to form, whose members called themselves the 'Righteous and Harmonious Fists' (Boxers) after the practice of Boxing and other forms of ritual combat. The Boxers started with a slogan of 'defeat the Qing, expel the foreigners'. Thousands of young men flocked to the cause, believing that they had magical powers such that the foreigners' bullets could not harm them. Foreigners, especially foreign missionaries, were singled out for attack. It seems that the movement was coordinated by the Chinese government to send a message to the foreign powers.

## Foreign Intervention

Despite the gravity of the situation, foreign legations (diplomatic compounds) were slow to organise concerted action. Misleading reports and diplomatic intentions delayed foreign responses, until Russia announced that it no intentions on Chinese territory that foreign troops began to arrive in large numbers. Almost two months after the beginning of the siege of foreign legations, an eight-nation force was despatched to rescue the survivors. The German Kaiser Wilhelm the 2<sup>nd</sup> encouraged them to be merciless as the barbarian of Attila the Hun. A hasty attempt by the foreign military contingent sent from Tienstin to lift the siege was repulsed. It was not until mid-August that a large Allied force representing nine European nations as well as the USA and Japan entered Beijing to end the siege and exact fierce reprisals by plundering and killing.

## Consequences of the Rebellion

The Qing Court was defeated and was forced to sign the Boxer Protocol in September 1901. In an attempt to save the dynasty, CiXi claimed that the Boxers attempted to overthrow the Qing and as a result executed members of the Chinese court and Boxers in an attempt to soften the foreign reprimands. CiXi fled to southern China where generals have averted further foreign humiliation by not joining the anti-foreign forces. China remained 'intact' but even more severely weakened as the Western powers exploited the country with increasing trade under the Open Door Policy.

## End of the Manchu Qing Dynasty

The Empress was forced into making concessions and further reforms in 1907 and in 1908 Emperor Guangxu was probably murdered a day before CiXi died herself. The infant Emperor, Puyi succeeded to what was the last throne in China's dynastic rule which had lasted over 2500 years with 268 being under Qing rule. A rebellion led by Doctor Sun Yat Sun on 10 October 1911 spread from Wuhan and toppled the Imperial government and in February 1912, China was declared a republic.

## Key Terms

**Confucianism:** A system of ethics based on the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, which stresses the importance of personal virtue and the honouring of family obligations.

**Annexing:** Taking possession of land and people that once belonged to another country, or which may have existed as an independent state.

**Open Door Policy:** A policy of admitting all nations to a country on equal terms, especially for trade.

**Coup d'état:** Seizure of power usually by force or arms.