

## Breaking Barriers with Education:

### The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program

#### **The Boxer Rebellion**

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China remained largely isolated from the Western world. While China did have noteworthy interactions with select countries, such as the visit of Marco Polo in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the voyages of Zheng He in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Lu), they did little to fundamentally change China's societal foundation.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point. While the Qing, the last of China's feudal dynasties, remained immersed in its glory, the Western world had greatly surpassed China economically and technologically after the Industrial Revolution (Pomeranz). The Qing's deterioration repeatedly surfaced during a series of military conflicts. For example, after Lin Ze-xu burned illegal shipments of opium at Humen, Britain retaliated with the two Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), both of which China lost (Zhang). In 1894, China lost again in the First Sino-Japanese war and had to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki that forced China to recognize the independence of Korea, cede Taiwan to Japan, and open its ports to Japanese trade ("Treaty of"). Thereafter, several imperialist powers divided China into spheres of influences.

In response to the internal instability and economic collapse, a group composed of mainly peasant youth emerged in northern China. They performed superstitious rituals that they believed made them impenetrable by any weapons and named themselves the "Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists," which the West dubbed as the "Boxers." Initially, they opposed the Qing government for social problems and conflicts between ethnic groups. After China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese war, however, the Boxers rallied around a new slogan to "Support the Qing, Destroy Foreigners." They destroyed any foreign-made products and killed anyone with even the slightest connection to the West, even if it was simply owning an imported pen or matchbox ("Boxer Rebellion"). Seeking to expel the foreigners, the imperial family allied themselves with the Boxers and declared war on eleven countries on June 21, 1900. The Boxers then began a

siege on the foreign legation district in Beijing, destroying churches and killing Western missionaries. Similar chaos also occurred in provinces outside of Beijing.

In response, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States organized an international force of 20,000 troops to end the siege. The Boxers retaliated fiercely, but they were no match against the well-trained foreign troops (Chai). After two months of fighting, the international force occupied Beijing on August 15, 1900. The imperial family fled to Xi'an and demanded the Qing army to exterminate the Boxers.

On September 7, 1901, the eight countries forced China to sign the Boxer Protocol, which dictated an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver to be paid back within thirty-nine years. Other articles included additional indemnities from the local governments, the destruction of military forts near Beijing, the establishment of reserved quarters in Beijing for foreign legations, the amendment of commercial treaties, and the punishment of parties supporting the Boxers.

### **The US During the Boxer Rebellion**

By the late 1800s, the United States' agricultural and industrial output had dramatically increased, and it possessed one-half of the world's manufacturing capacity (White). However, it still had less influence in China than other powers like Great Britain or Russia. Therefore, in 1899, Secretary of State John Hay proposed an open-door policy that aimed to "secure international agreement to the U.S. policy of promoting equal opportunity for international trade and commerce in China, with respect for China's administrative and territorial integrity" ("Secretary of") to set the U.S. on equal ground with the other nations.

During the Boxer Rebellion, the United States allied with seven other countries to subdue the Boxers. In particular, the United States Marines played a key role in defending the legations during the siege (Plante). During negotiations about the Boxer Protocol, however, Hay realized that an immense indemnity could trigger an economic collapse in China, which would hurt all its trading partners. Therefore, he inflated the American claim to be double the actual loss to use the excess amount as a bargaining tool against the other powers to scale down their claims. However, the other countries disagreed, and China ended up with the original debt (Hunt).

## Rise of Immigration Restrictions

The violence of the Boxer Rebellion resulted in the reinforcement of restrictions on immigration, and the addition of more stringent limitations led to the ghettoization of Chinese communities. However, xenophobia in the United States towards Chinese immigrants was not a recent development. Previously, the United States had signed the Burlingame-Seward Treaty in 1868 that protected commerce conducted in Chinese ports and guaranteed the protection of Chinese citizens in the United States. Most importantly, the treaty allowed the almost unlimited immigration of Chinese workers.

This lax attitude changed with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. To assuage white workers who attributed declining wages and poor economic conditions to Chinese laborers, the act suspended the immigration of Chinese workers for ten years and designated Chinese immigrants as ineligible for naturalization. When the act expired in 1892, Congress voted in favor of the Geary Act to renew it for another ten years and add restrictions requiring Chinese immigrants to register and obtain a certificate of residence if they do not wish to be deported.

When the excluded Chinese challenged the laws through the American judicial system, they were disappointed time and time again. Numerous states and territories denied Chinese people the right to testify, and those who lived in areas without such restrictions were often dismissed as liars before ever appearing in court (Blakemore). In the rare case that Chinese people successfully testified, they were still unable to make substantive progress. For instance, in *Fong Yueting v. the United States*, the Supreme Court ruled in 1893 to uphold the Geary Act and deny the writ of habeas corpus for those without a certificate of residence.

After the Boxer Rebellion, Congress expanded the prohibition to cover Hawaii and the Philippines despite strong objections from the Chinese government and made the extension permanent in 1902 (“Chinese Immigration”). A decade later, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 that banned immigration from the “Asiatic Barred Zone” that included essentially all of Asia (Lee), which illustrates how the xenophobic attitude of the United States regarding Asian, not only Chinese, immigration did not fade with time.

The increasingly rigid immigration laws severely affected Chinese families both in China and in the United States. Families were separated across an ocean, and peasants remained mired in the deep economic recession after the Boxer Rebellion because they could no longer seek job opportunities in America. Under the mounting anti-Chinese pressure, Chinese immigrants

already in the United States created Chinatowns in urban cities like San Francisco and Chicago to seek refuge in close-knit communities. However, residents in Chinatowns faced substandard housing, overcrowding, legalized segregation in educational establishments and public facilities, and increasingly violent riots and boycotts from anti-Chinese politicians and labor leaders (Jorae). Therefore, the Boxer Rebellion dealt a lasting blow to Chinese communities domestically and abroad through the passage of even more restrictive immigration legislation.

### **Anti-American Boycotts**

The rise in exclusionary legislation led to a surge of anti-American sentiment in China that materialized in the 1905 boycotts. After the Boxer Rebellion, various groups, following the general trend of resisting established authority, began to take violent and nonviolent action to counteract foreign encroachment (Wong). After the passage of restrictive immigration laws, dejected laborers spoke of brutal working and living conditions, and visitors from other social classes were offended by their mistreatment at America's entrance ports (Chen).

Because the Chinese brought back to the mainland the sentiment that the United States was treating them unfairly, anti-American sentiment in China rose to new heights. On May 10, 1905, the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce passed an ultimatum calling for a boycott in two months if the American government still refused to improve its immigration policies. Notices of compliance soon arrived from influential guilds all over the country, and people from all social strata eagerly participated. Laborers left American factories, merchants canceled orders for American products, students circulated anti-American placards, and educated women left their American homes (Ts'ai). The boycott exponentially grew in range and commitment, and with the installment of new communication tools such as cables and telegraphs, received international recognition. In a matter of months, overseas Chinese communities in Hawaii, Canada, Singapore, Panama, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and even several cities in the US such as San Francisco pledged their support for the boycott (Meissner).

However, American officials were outraged and demanded the boycott be suppressed, arguing that the United States was protecting Chinese interests against the encroachment by the Europeans and the Japanese. Local officials across China varied in their degree of compliance, but by August 1905, the imperial government issued an edict rigorously suppressing the boycott

("Papers Relating"). Nevertheless, the 1905 boycotts increased antagonism and mutual suspicion between China and the United States, creating tension that would last well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Creation of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program**

The 1905 riots prompted Edmund James, then-President of the University of Illinois, to propose an exchange program bringing young Chinese students to the United States to mend the rupture in relations. In a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, James argued that "the nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation will be the nation which for a given expenditure of effort, will reap the largest possible returns in moral, intellectual and commercial influence."

Roosevelt supported James's proposal and remarked to Congress that such a program would help China "gradually adapt itself to modern conditions." Furthermore, an educational project could potentially improve US-China relations after the 1905 boycotts, expand American influence over China politically and economically, and promote America's international image. Therefore, despite fierce controversies, Congress voted in favor of authorizing the modification of the Boxer indemnity from \$24,440,778.81 to \$13,655,492.69.

Although Qing government officials pushed to use the excessive payment to build railroads, mines, and a bank in the Manchurian provinces, the U.S. was determined to use the excess indemnity solely for educational purposes. Ultimately, the settlement was made on American terms, and Congress passed a bill creating the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program. Per the articles, starting in 1909, China was required to send at least a hundred students annually to the U.S. for the first four years and at least fifty students starting the fifth year. Out of the students, 80% were required to study agriculture, engineering, sciences, and banking, and 20% were required to study law, politics, finance, economics, and education (Zhou).

The scholarship program nurtured a generation of brilliant students who would go on to make a wide range of significant advancements in both the U.S. and China. Among them was Hu Shih, a graduate of Columbia University, who proposed a new vernacular language called "Baihua" that became the official language of China in 1922. Hu Shih also became the main leader of the New Culture Movement, which denounced the outdated part of traditional culture and claimed that "Only Mr. D (Democracy) and Mr. S (Science) can save China." Later, he served as an ambassador to Washington from 1938 to 1942 ("Hu Shih"). There was also Liang

Shiqiu, a prose writer who pursued graduate studies at Harvard and Columbia University. When he returned to China, Liang strongly opposed using literature as a propaganda tool and advocated for the freedom of speech (“Liang Shiqiu”).

The alumni also included the founders of many fields in science and technology in China. In physics, Qian Xuesen, a graduate of MIT, contributed to the development of the first atomic bomb in the U.S. and led China’s first successful test of atomic and hydrogen bombs (Wines). In chemistry, Hou De-Pang succeeded in the first industrial use of the Solvay process in Asia (“Hou Te-Pang”). There was also Lin Huiyin, an outstanding female architect who along with her husband Liang Sicheng, studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1949, they proposed a new city plan for Beijing to protect ancient architecture, such as the Circular City of Beihai Park, from demolition (Slotnik).

However, the social elite constituted the majority of the program, so the new ideas of democracy and freedom did not spread to all levels of society. In addition, because the majority of scholarship recipients were required to study polytechnic subjects, there was more emphasis on reforming China economically rather than socially. As a result, the program did not offer enough of an impetus to fully change China into a democracy like the United States

Nevertheless, in the face of resentment and agitation, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program still successfully served as an olive branch that both countries quickly accepted. Furthermore, the program successfully bridged Chinese and American culture and helped the U.S. take a leadership position in the world. Following America’s example, other countries such as Great Britain and France also forgave or remitted their shares of the indemnity (Zhou).

## **Conclusion**

The Boxer Rebellion served as a major turning point in US-Sino relations as one of the most direct responses to Western imperialism and the racist legal regime in America. However, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program fostered intercultural exchange and led to the repairing of relations, which presented when the two countries fought together against the Axis powers during World War II. However, the collaboration was temporary as the United States condemned the newly-established Communist Party of China for allying with the Soviet Union. America responded the same way it had after the Boxer Rebellion by passing restrictive immigration legislation like the Immigration Act of 1924, which enacted a total prohibition of

immigration from China with few exceptions. Unresolved tensions broke through the surface, and the United States and China delved into another era of mutual distrust, competition, and tense standoffs that only worsened with each passing decade.

Therefore, to improve US-China relations, both countries should refrain from the use or threat of force and instead look to efforts to resolve differences through peaceful means. Historical precedent demonstrates that hostile actions such as banning immigration and economic boycotts only bring temporary benefits and cause greater harm in the future. The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, on the other hand, proves that a consistent and firm educational approach has potential for success. China, while still not a democracy, is much more open and progressive than it was during the Qing dynasty. However, many Chinese people today have little idea of the aid the United States offered China during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and instead treat America as the enemy. Thus, the impact of the scholarship program also illustrates that a mostly polytechnic education aimed primarily at the social elite is not enough to change an entire society. To pave the way for sustained collaboration, both countries should build upon the precedent set by the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program to offer more educational and cultural exchange opportunities to correct the misconceptions their citizens have of the other country and fully bridge any differences.

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