

came patrons of a peasant secret society, the Boxers. This turning of the Manchu court to active support of a fanatical cult was an obvious act of intellectual bankruptcy.

### *The Boxer Rising, 1898-1901*

In northwest Shandong on the floodplain of the Yellow River, the rather dense population had become so poor that few gentry lived in the villages, and banditry had become a seasonal occupation that inspired intervillage feuds. The Qing government and gentry were losing control. During the 1890s aggressive German missionaries had attracted converts to Catholicism partly by supporting them in lawsuits against non-Christians. After their seizure of Shandong as a sphere of influence in 1898, the Germans' arrogance heightened the anti-Christian sentiment that had long been accumulating as Christian missions spread into the interior while the European powers and Japan repeatedly humbled the Chinese government. Antimissionary riots had led the foreigners to exact such onerous penalties that Qing policy required magistrates to avoid antagonizing the missionaries and their converts. In this situation Shandong peasants defended their interests through secret societies. In southwest Shandong, for example, the Big Sword Society became a force for bandit suppression. In 1898 a disastrous Yellow River flood followed by prolonged drought put the villagers in dire straits. North China became a tinderbox.

Joseph Esherick's (1987) masterly study of the Boxers' origins pinpoints the combining in northwest Shandong of two peasant traditions—the technique of the martial arts or “boxing” (featured in operas and storytelling and visible today in movies of *gongfu* combat) and the practice of spirit possession or shamanism. (We may recall from Chapter 2 that the king of the Shang dynasty had acted as the chief shaman.) The Spirit Boxers, who later took the name Boxers United in Righteousness, put together these two elements. After appropriate rituals, Boxers went into a trance, foamed at the mouth, and arose prepared for combat because they were now invulnerable to swords or bullets. Anyone could be possessed and so for the moment become a leader. No hierarchic organization was necessary. The aim was the simple slogan, “Support the Qing, destroy the foreign.” Once ignited in the propitious circumstances of the times, the Boxer movement spread across North China like wildfire. The Manchu princes, and even the Empress Dowager for a time, felt they heard the voice of the common people, the final arbiter of

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Chinese politics. They proposed to work with the movement, not against it, and so get rid of foreign imperialism.

In the sequence of events, each side aroused the other. Legation guards in the spring of 1900 went out shooting Boxers to intimidate them. By June 13-14 Boxers broke into Beijing and Tianjin, killing Christians and looting. On June 10, 2,100 foreign troops had started from Tianjin to defend the Beijing legations but got only halfway. On June 17 a foreign fleet attacked the coastal forts outside Tianjin. On June 21 the Empress Dowager and the dominant group at court formally declared war on all the powers. As she said, "China is weak. The only thing we can depend upon is the hearts of the people. If we lose them, how can we maintain our country?" (By country she meant dynasty.)

The Boxer Rising in the long, hot summer of 1900 was one of the best-known events of the nineteenth century because so many diplomats, missionaries, and journalists were besieged by almost incessant rifle fire for eight weeks (June 29-August 14) in the Beijing legation quarter—about 475 foreign civilians, 450 troops of eight nations, and some 3,000 Chinese Christians, also about 150 racing ponies, who provided fresh meat. An international army rescued them, not without bickering, after rumors they had all been killed. The Empress Dowager, with the emperor safely in tow, took off for Xi'an by cart. The allied forces thoroughly looted Beijing. Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a field marshal, who terrorized the surrounding towns, where many thousands of Chinese Christians had been slaughtered; 250 foreigners, mainly missionaries, had been killed across North China. Vengeance was in the air.

But the Chinese provincial governors-general who had led the effort at self-strengthening also coped with this crisis. Li Hongzhang at Guangzhou, Zhang Zhidong at Wuhan, and the others had decided right away in June to ignore Beijing's declaration of war. They declared the whole thing simply a "Boxer Rebellion," and they guaranteed peace in Central and South China if the foreigners would keep their troops and gunboats out. This make-believe worked. The imperialist powers preferred to keep the treaty system intact, together with China's foreign-debt payments. And so the War of 1900, the fifth and largest that the Qing fought with foreign powers in the nineteenth century, was localized in North China.

The Boxer protocol signed in September 1901 by the top Manchu prince and Li Hongzhang with eleven foreign powers was mainly punitive: ten high officials were executed and one hundred others punished;

the examinations were suspended in forty-five cities; the legation quarter in Beijing was enlarged, fortified, and garrisoned, as was the railway, and some twenty-five Qing forts were destroyed. The indemnity was about \$333 million, to be paid over forty years at interest rates that would more than double the amount. The only semiconstructive act was to raise the treaty-based import tariff to an actual 5 percent.

### *Demoralization*

The Confucian-based system of government stressed the impeccable conduct of rulers, officials, and leaders in family and community as the sanction for their superior position and privileges. To an unusual degree, China was governed by prestige. Emperors might in fact be knaves or fools, but the imperial institution was sacrosanct. Official pronouncements were aimed at maintaining and improving the image of the power-holders. Losers were stigmatized as lacking in morality, which accounted for their losing out. A man's maintenance of his good name was as important as his life, an idea that applied even more to women. People whose reputations had been blackened could redeem themselves by suicide. In the society as in the government, reputation was all-important. In this context where moral opinion outranked legal considerations, demoralization could be a stark fact of immeasurable significance. Loss of confidence, sense of humiliation, personal or collective loss of face, consciousness of failure in conduct—there were many forms of this disaster in the nineteenth century.

In the most general sense, then, the last century of the Qing stands forth in retrospect as a unified period surcharged with demoralization on many fronts. The century began with the inordinate corruption of the Qianlong Emperor's favorite, Heshen, which besmirched the emperor's reputation. At the same time the failure of the banner men to quell the White Lotus uprising was a defeat for the dynasty, which had to recruit new troops from the Chinese populace.

If we skip along touching only highlights of moral disaster we must note the rise of the opium trade at Guangzhou and its expansion along the southeast coast. Long since denounced as immoral, opium caused a fiscal crisis when it led to the outflow of silver and upset the silver/copper exchange ratio, to the detriment of peasants who had to pay taxes by purchasing silver with copper coins. China's acceptance of British terms at Nanjing in 1842 could be advertised by the negotiators as skillful deflection of the foreign menace, but the whole empire could see that

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