Robert Bickers shows how the history of British and European imperialism in China helps explain the ferocious Boxer War of 1900.

THE BOXER RISING began in the obscurity of the north-west regions of China's Shandong province in 1899. It finished as an international crisis. The Chinese siege of the foreign legations in the capital city Beijing from June 20th to August 14th, 1900, gripped the world's press. It fed and still feeds a steady stream of memoir and narrative to willing publishers.

The `Boxer' became an international figure. But the episode began in 1899 when young Shandong farm boys, made idle as drought followed flooding, started practising `spirit boxing', a martial art which was acquiring new features including individual `spirit possession' and invulnerability rituals. They then set out to right a world gone wrong. Boxer beliefs, circulated through placards and pamphlets and rehearsed in doggerel and rumour, restated common prejudices and exacerbated long-standing rural tensions by scapegoating Chinese Christian converts and their foreign missionary mentors. They believed that church spires pierced the sky and prevented the rains and that the withdrawal of converts from communal ritual life unbalanced the world. Exterminating the foreign would surely bring the rain and also save their Qing rulers from foreign aggression.
The rains came in early July, but by August 14th, 1900, British and other armed forces had also arrived and were camped in the ruins of Beijing, having lifted the fifty-five-day siege of the legations and of the city's Roman Catholic Northern Cathedral (the Beitang). The port city of Tianjin, gateway to the capital, was levelled after its own siege. Numerous small towns and villages on the north China plain had seen vicious destructive warfare, and foreign troops launched raids to `punish' residents living in the sites of alleged Boxer activity deep into 1901. Russian troops would not be evacuated from Manchuria until forced out in a Russo-Japanese war fought mostly on Chinese territory. The Qing court -- which had taken the Boxers as allies and declared war on imperialism on June 21st, 1900 -- fled to China's north-west city of Xian, where it remained until October 1901. At least 220 foreign missionaries were dead, some executed at the order of Qing officials, while hundreds of foreign soldiers and probably tens of thousands of Chinese Christians, soldiers and civilians were killed in battle or cold blood, or died of disease or starvation as the conflict disordered north China. `Invulnerable' Boxers had been cut down by foreign soldiers (who would not spare any captives) and by Qing troops angry at the impotence of Boxer magic or cynically using them as cannon fodder. The September 1901 Boxer Protocol imposed a huge indemnity on the Qing state and established permanent foreign garrisons in the capital to guard a legation district that was removed from Chinese control and turned into an internationalised enclave.

Popular xenophobia and elite opportunism have often been blamed for the outbreak of what even one sympathetic foreign observer, the Inspector-General of China's Maritime Customs Service, Ulsterman Sir Robert Hart, called `mid-summer madness'. But there was much method and deliberation in such elite and mass `madness', and while attention in recent years has focused on understanding the anthropology of the Boxer movement and its roots in Shandong popular culture, research is in progress on the rational deliberations which led a powerful coalition at the Qing court to align itself with a mass movement in a bid to be rid of the foreign peril. It is as well, then, to focus on the history of foreign intrusions which fed Chinese worries. After all, British forces had
camped out at Beijing before, in 1860, and had first seen Tianjin from their warships in 1840. Popular and elite resistance had cost Britons dearly at times, but British power had always won out. The use of armed force in China was wearisomely familiar to British diplomats, but its origins lay not in any lack of formal relations between the Qing empire and the British state, but in fact from the very intimacy of the relationship.

That intimacy is easily forgotten. The handover of the former British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China in 1997 was accompanied on the Chinese side by an unprecedented barrage of noisy propaganda that stressed the place of Hong Kong in the imperialist assault on China after 1840. Where British observers stressed the triumphs of the Hong Kong economy and its legislative and legal foundations as legacies of British rule, the Chinese debate mostly emphasised the illegality of the seizure in the first place, rooted as it was in the ‘unequal’ 1842 Treaty of Nanjing that ended the First Opium War. There was little common ground. British memories of colonialism tend to be short and roseate, and many Britons were surprised that memories of the nineteenth century were alive and well in China in 1997. The importance for modern Chinese nationalism and the national psyche of what is construed in China as ‘national humiliation’ is indeed singular. The seizure of the obscure island of Hong Kong was one such humiliation, the occupation of Beijing in 1900 was another.

Hong Kong was just one part of a network of leased territories, British concessions and settlements and international settlements in China. British gunboats patrolled Chinese rivers as part of the Royal Navy’s China Station (established in 1844). British steamship companies ran coastal and river services while trading firms operated national business networks. Efficient conditions for foreign trade were guaranteed, as foreign observers saw it, by the creation after 1858 of a foreign-run Maritime Customs Service. Sir Robert Hart was a servant of the Chinese state, but his tenure of the Inspector-Generalship was rightly seen as an indicator of British control. Missionary organisations made opportunistic use of treaty clauses to set up stations in the Chinese interior and proselytise through a range of evangelical, educational and medical initiatives. Underpinning this British presence was the principle of extraterritoriality, by which British subjects
in China came under the jurisdiction of their own consular representatives rather than Chinese law. The system was open to abuse and was extended in practice to include British-owned property and even British goods in the hands of Chinese agents.

By 1900 British interests still formed the largest sector of the overall foreign presence, but the treaty port world was international, and most favoured nation clauses were granted to all who had signed treaties with China. So when farmers in Shandong started to practise Boxer rituals and then to attack Christian converts, they were in part reacting to the growth in China over the sixty years since the Nanjing treaty of this network of concessions and settlements, as well as to local manifestations of the foreign presence. The direct impact on small rural communities might be minimal but the claustrophobia and fear this foreign web caused was quickly communicated throughout the country to all levels of society.

The foreign impact was most visible and potent in the coastal cities. Although the British Minister was based in Beijing, and Hong Kong was formally incorporated into the British empire, the capital city of the British presence in China was Shanghai. By 1900 2,691 Britons (half of those resident in China outside Hong Kong) lived in the city's British-dominated International Settlement, which formed one of its three administrative units, the others being a French concession and the Chinese-administered city and suburbs. The Shanghai Municipal Council, which administered and policed the settlement, was staffed mostly by Britons and answered to nine representatives (seven Britons, one American and one German) elected by the foreign ratepayers. In 1900 the council was chaired by Edbert Ansgar Hewett (P & O), and contained representatives of such China interests as Jardine Mathesons, E.D. Sassoon and the Chartered Bank, and local British settler interests including the waterworks and a dockyard firm. A Chinese population of 352,000 (out of about 900,000 in the city as a whole) effectively lived under foreign rule. In 1899 the council had extended its territory from 2.75 to 8.35 square miles, bringing more Chinese residents into the settlement, and some hothead local lobbyists wanted to see further extensions, preferably in the context of a British-dominated Yangzi protectorate.
In the International Settlement British residents mixed the pan-imperial pomp of Britain's eastern empire (Sikh policemen, colonial architecture) with institutions of local administration imported directly from the UK. Like colonial communities elsewhere they laid out a bund (a raised riverside embankment), built clubs, schools, hospitals and a cathedral (Holy Trinity), marked out race tracks, patronised theatres, joined Masonic lodges, walked in their public gardens and listened to the municipal band. The city had the headquarters of the China Inland Mission, as well as leading commercial firms and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. It had its newspapers (the North China Herald, founded 1850), a library, commercial publishers such as Kelly and Walsh, cultural societies and sports clubs. In its learned societies there were discussions and debates on Chinese history and culture, while for those less academically-minded the Amoy Road gaol (built in 'solid lasting British style') could hold 140 prisoners. There were foreign department stores (Lane, Crawford and co., Hall & Holtz), watchmakers, restaurants, dairies and a full range of service industries (law, insurance). Shanghailanders organised a Shanghai Volunteer Corps, a local militia charged with the task of protecting the settlement if need be until British forces could be landed from naval vessels or dispatched from Hong Kong. They were inspected annually by a representative of the commanding officer of British forces in China and Hong Kong, who found them in April 1900 to be 'a fine body of citizen soldiers in whose hands the great mercantile interests of Shanghai are in good keeping'. A distinctive settler culture, typical of that created by overseas Britons, developed -- militaristic and fiercely protective of its independence.
As the population figures suggested, however, Shanghai remained a Chinese city. On the surface there was much that was European, especially the buildings reflecting the variegated nature of the foreign community, but appearances were deceptive. The International Settlement was built on Chinese labour, expertise and capital. Shanghai was a lively and important centre of Chinese cultural and commercial innovation. Foreign trading firms sought access to supplies and markets by establishing alliances with Chinese businessmen. Other foreign entrepreneurs -- such as Briton Ernest Major, who founded Shanghai's first Chinese newspaper the Shenbao (1872) and the illustrated magazine the Dianshizhai huabao (1884) -- created and fed new Chinese markets. Real estate firms made fortunes from Chinese residents or for Chinese investors. Foreign companies sought capital as well as market expertise and raised finance through share issues. It gets difficult in fact to distinguish between British and Chinese interests. Yet such intimacies often co-existed with informal social segregation and, quite frequently, there was an absence of meaningful communication between Chinese and Briton. Meanwhile the British-dominated authorities discriminated against its Chinese residents by denying them access to municipal parks and gardens, and by refusing them the right to vote or stand for election to the council. The International Settlement prided itself on being a 'model settlement', and Chinese observers looked to it for demonstrations of the practices of Western municipal administration, but the relationship between the foreign and the Chinese was uneasy. 1900 passed off peacefully in Shanghai, but local tensions over the settlement erupted into violence in 1905.
Shanghai's lobbyists talked loosely about their ambitions for greater autonomy, and their actions and words rightly worried Chinese observers. But the foreign danger was not confined to the coastal cities. Mission societies were active in treaty ports such as Shanghai, but their chosen field was rural China, and the impact of the missionary sector of the British presence was felt most strongly there. The modern mission presence in the country dated back to September 1807 when the Protestant missionary Robert Morrison arrived in Canton. His twenty-seven years in China produced a path-breaking Chinese-English dictionary but no more than a dozen converts. Yet the treaty of Nanjing facilitated the extension of Protestant and Catholic activities. Missionaries set up operations (including churches, schools and printing presses) in the newly opened treaty ports. The Qing state was forced to accept toleration of Christianity in 1858, while under a clause in the 1860 Sino-French treaty missionaries acquired the right to reside in the interior and purchase land and buildings. By the end of the century there were around 530,000 Catholic and some 80,000 Protestant converts. These numbers were insignificant in relation to the population of the Qing empire, but the impact was intense.
In the twenty years before 1900 Protestant missionary activity greatly intensified as 272 new centres were opened, while the number of stations rose from 132 to 498. Few parts of China were without some form of mission presence, or without some form of resistance, sometimes bloody, to that presence. Reports of ‘mission cases’ bedevilled smooth diplomatic relations. In the most spectacular incident -- the Tianjin massacre of 1870 -- ten French nuns, one priest, the French consul, his deputy and sundry other French and Chinese unfortunates were killed in an incident related to local rumours about child kidnapping and the removal of eyes by the nuns at a Catholic orphanage. British and French churches were destroyed and gunboats quickly despatched. War with France was feared, and the Qing court was soon riven by divisions over how to deal with the incident, which was eventually settled by a mission of apology to France. Most incidents were smaller in scale and in implications, and the majority involved tensions between converts and their local communities. In fairness, it should be said that the mission record was hardly uniformly negative, and Chinese converts were not all ‘rice-Christians’ seeking economic or other benefit from their relations with Westerners. Most missionaries did not see themselves as agents of broader British interests in China; but it was impossible to disentangle their activities and impact from that of the broader British and foreign presence.

The British establishment in China, then, was multifaceted and divided. It included official representatives in the consular service and armed forces, missionaries and the traders, bankers and landlords who filled the ranks of the Shanghai oligarchs, together with their servants of empire: shop clerks, engineers and police constables. Baghdadi Jews from India, overseas Chinese from the Straits Settlements, Sikh policemen and Eurasians from Hong Kong all lived and worked under British protection in China. There was a confident sub-imperialism, articulated and served by such aggressive all-rounders as J.O.P. Bland (1863-1945), who worked in the Customs, for settler imperialism through the Shanghai Municipal Council, and later for finance imperialism through the British and Chinese Corporation. Bland also worked from 1896 to 1910 as a contributor to The Times, and as a freelance author and commentator thereafter. He lobbied for a British ‘forward policy’ on the Yangzi in the 1890s, noting the movements and gains of Britain’s European rivals, but was on leave during much of the Boxer crisis: otherwise his shrill voice might have been heard arguing for further settlement extension in Shanghai, bent as he ever was on ‘stratagems and spoils for the glory of the Raj’. There was also fear and uncertainty about the British position of course, but in the first fifty years of the British presence in China there seemed little limit to potential spoils for such Shanghai adventurers.
These British certainties as well as the nineteenth-century treaty settlement were destabilised by the entry of aggressive new actors onto the scene in the 1890s: firstly Japan, and then Russia and Germany. In the aftermath of the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war, a punitive indemnity imposed on China set off a scramble among European loan consortia to lend China the funds it needed. The lobbying support of national governments was earnestly sought, and to British surprise a Franco-Russian group was awarded the first such loan in 1895, although an Anglo-German group at least secured the second. Such loans threatened the British status quo. Competition intensified in late 1897. On November 1st, two German Catholic missionaries were hacked to death by Chinese assailants in an incident rooted in local ill-feeling towards the mission presence in that part of Shandong. The Kaiser happily seized this opportunity to order German warships to occupy the port of Jiaozhou. A Sino-German treaty of March 6th, 1898, confirmed the seizure and granted preferential rights in Shandong to Germany. German expansion thereafter was effectively stymied by the local Chinese authorities, but with the German navy-administered colony of 'Kiautschou' (Jiaozhou) another slice of the Chinese melon had been taken. Before too long Russia had seized Dalian (Port Arthur), and Britain the port of Weihaiwei, which was ruled as a leased territory until 1930. These moves also accelerated the feeding frenzy for railway and other concessions. Chinese intellectuals feared that the hour of national extinction had arrived.
This was the situation into which the Boxers emerged. It explains the vacillations and hesitancies of the official Qing response -- and the ultimate decision of the court to try to use the opportunity presented by the popular rural movement to strike back at foreign aggression. But it also explains why British military personnel were already on the spot, why they had few qualms about storming and seizing the Dagu (Taku) forts which protected the route to the capital, and why Britain's Admiral Seymour launched his expedition to relieve the legations on June 10th, thereby effectively invading China's sovereign territory and giving the Qing a perfectly legitimate casus belli. Seymour provided the immediate reason for the formal Boxer war, but the treaty system itself and the pressures exerted by Shanghai settlers and foreign diplomats alike had served to raise tensions. Regardless of the established practice of the Qing state and its predecessors of making foreigners administer themselves, it is impossible to argue that the establishment of foreign-controlled enclaves on Chinese soil was anything but derogatory to its sovereignty and increasingly to its dignity. The men and boys from Shandong who targeted the foreign legations certainly did not have the treaty establishment in mind, but the overall impact of such encroachments, and latterly the heightened activities of concession hunters and diplomats, was profoundly unsettling for the local and national Chinese elites who took the Boxers as allies.

The robustness of the identities of these British communities was underlined by the ways in which the Boxer events became integral parts of the communal myths they lived by until their demise.
after the Second World War. 1900 seemed to give the China-British an imperial legitimacy, and it was taken as their own equivalent of the 1857 Sepoy mutiny. One telling event took place on June 17th, 1931, when a memorial service was held at the Canton Road cemetery in Tianjin. Military officials, consular representatives, military detachments and a band gathered together with other foreign residents in the city for a ceremony: the playing of Chopin's `Marche Funebre' was followed by the recital of a `Memorial Prayer', the singing of Rudyard Kipling's poem `Lest We Forget' and the decoration of gravestones with potted flowers by Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. What was not being forgotten was the siege of the Tianjin foreign concessions by Boxer forces and regular Chinese troops between June 17th and July 13th, 1900. This act of communal remembrance was in itself hardly striking or unusual, but noting it reminds us that British relations with China were more than abstract or confined merely to diplomatic exchanges.

In Beijing, British diplomats maintained one bullet-riddled wall in the legation, on which someone had daubed that ubiquitous injunction `Lest We Forget' as a physical memorial of the siege. The motto was carefully tended and periodically repainted until, in the interests of diplomacy, it was removed in 1947. At least one public British memorial remains. Towards the Admiralty arch end of the Mall in London is a statue dedicated to Royal Marines Light Infantry casualties in South Africa and China. On the sides are bas-reliefs of fighting during the siege of Tianjin. Like many such British memorials it is submerged into the London background. We are perhaps more conscious of the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square than of the mute mementoes that surround us and remind us of the colonial centuries. In China the emphasis lies squarely with remembrance, in Britain with forgetting.

FOR FURTHER READING:


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