

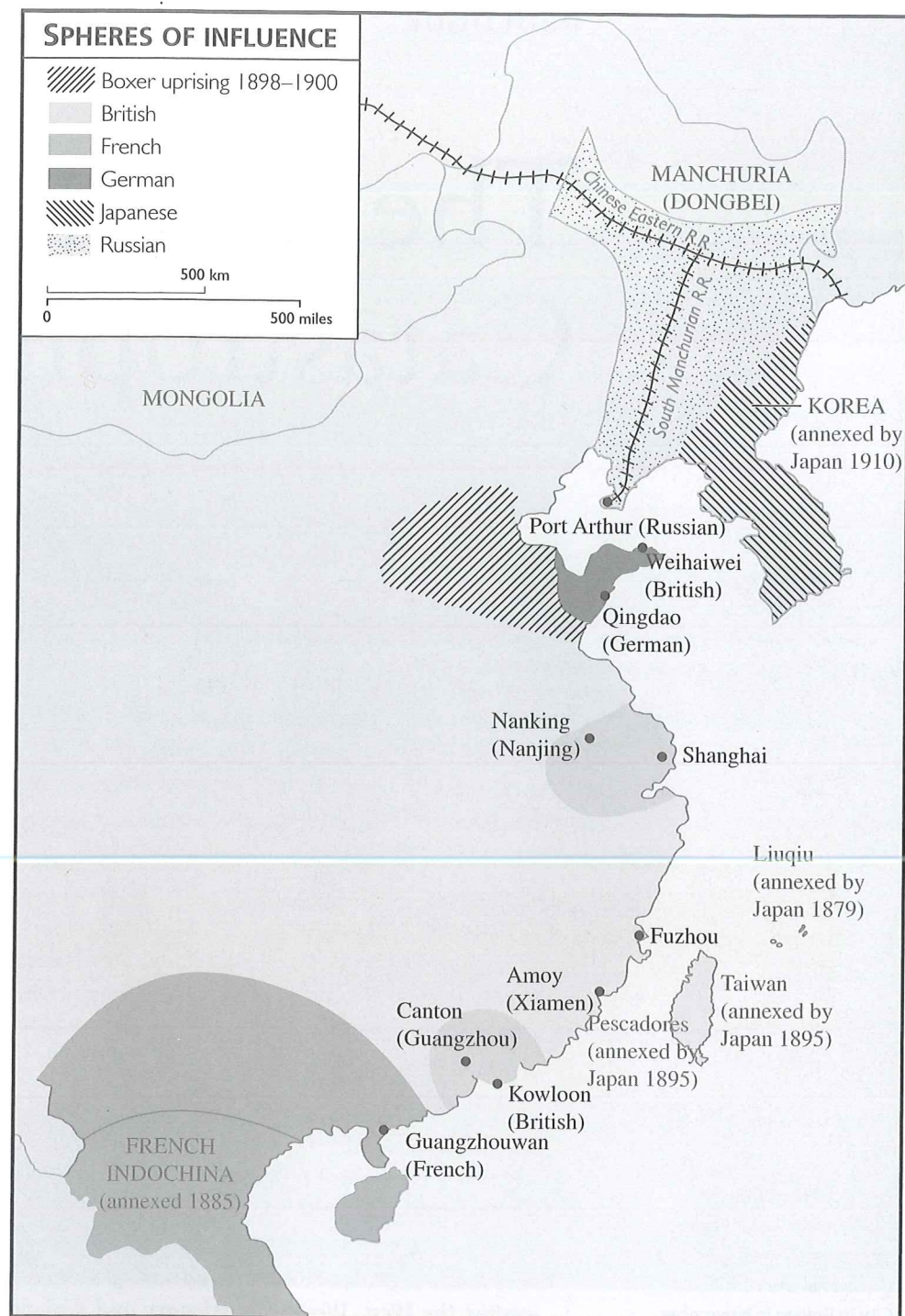
The Boxer Catastrophe

They were mostly adolescent gangs who attacked Christian converts, missionaries, and churches. Rising out of drought conditions and anti-foreign feeling in northern China, these so-called Boxers were ragtag groups that terrorized local communities from 1898 to 1900. Had the government been strong and prosperous, as it had been a century and a half earlier, it most certainly could have suppressed them. But China was weak and close to bankruptcy after more than half a century of wars against outside aggressors (Great Britain, France, and Japan) and decades of trying to put down internal rebellions. China was also limited by its status as a semi-colony after Western powers forced a "treaty system" upon it in the mid-nineteenth century—a system that gave various economic and political rights and privileges to Westerners and in the process cut back on Chinese rights.

In the closing years of the 1890s a new threat arose from Western imperialist nations; they began to demand large chunks of territory to lease for periods of twenty-five to ninety-nine years. "Carving up the Chinese melon," it was called. In its wretched state, China had few options. China's ruler, the Empress Dowager Cixi, apparently at her wit's end, tragically decided that she might use the Boxers as a force against the West. Western missionary and diplomatic demands that China subdue the Boxers thus went nowhere. At last, when the Boxers surrounded the foreign ambassadors' quarters in Beijing and put them under siege in the summer of 1900, eight nations (Japan and seven nations from the West, including the United States) sent a relief expedition to lift the siege. The Boxers melted away into the North



Foreign troops from the eight-nation Allied Powers temporarily occupy the grounds of the Forbidden City in Beijing in November 1900. Their year-long occupation, marked by killing, destruction, and looting, followed their suppression of the Boxer movement.



China plain and the Empress Dowager fled. But the Westerners stayed for another year.

The Western position, led by the missionaries, was that China had to pay for not quelling the Boxers. Forty-five thousand Western and Japanese troops were in China by late 1900. They spent their time

burning, raping, looting, and beheading. Missionaries joined in the looting; one, an American missionary named Gilbert Reid, wrote an essay in a leading American magazine rationalizing missionaries' looting of Chinese property: "To confiscate the property of those who were enemies in war may be theoretically wrong, but precedent had established the right. For those who have known the facts and have passed through a war of awful memory, the matter of loot is one of high ethics."

But the low point came in September 1901, when China was forced to sign the Boxer Protocol, an agreement that punished Chinese who had been linked to the affair and made various political and military demands. The most crushing burden was a huge indemnity—the West would make China pay, literally. The total was 450 million taels (about U.S. \$333 million in 1901 dollars). The Protocol specified that China was to pay the indemnity in gold in thirty-nine annual installments. By the end, with interest payments, China would have paid about one billion taels. Mark Twain's punning joke about the punishments and the indemnity had, from a Western point of view, considerable reality: "Tails I win, heads you lose."

For a government that had already been unable to function well for lack of money, the indemnity was crushing. As China entered the twentieth century, it did so degraded, humiliated, and impoverished.

China and the West

In his essay, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," published in the *North American Review* in 1901, Mark Twain attacked with sarcasm and wit the missionaries who had taken revenge on the Chinese for the Boxer troubles by looting property and then trying to rationalize their looting. Twain recounts the actions of the Rev. Mr. Ament who personally collected indemnities in localities where Ament's own converts had been killed; Ament put the number at 300. For each of these he collected 300 taels and then reportedly assessed fines that amounted to thirteen times the original indemnity. All of the money, he claimed, would be used for "propagating the Gospel." He argued that missionaries were not vindictive and that they were doing nothing "that the circumstance did not demand." He suggested that Protestants were less bloodthirsty than Catholics, who not only took money from the Chinese but beheaded Chinese to equal the number of Catholics killed.

Our Reverend Ament is the right man in the right place. What we want of our missionaries out there is, not that they shall merely represent in their acts and persons the grace and gentleness and charity and loving kindness of our religion, but they represent the American spirit. . . .

It is not bloodthirstiness in missionaries to desire to see further shedding of [Chinese] blood, but an understanding of Chinese character and conditions, and a realization that the policy of general forgiveness means the loss of many valuable native [Christian] and foreign lives.

—The Reverend D. Z. Sheffield on the Boxer aftermath, in a letter to Judson Smith, March 26, 1901



Foreign soldiers clash with Boxers at the "Great Battle of Yang Village"—as denoted by the title of this woodcut. In the background, Boxers, who carried out their fighting in units of 25 to 100, fire a cannon at a foreign ship.

Our Reverend Ament is justifiably jealous of those enterprising Catholics, who not only get big money for each lost convert, but get the "head for head" besides. But he should soothe himself with the reflection that the entirety of their exactions are for their own pockets, whereas he, less selfishly, devotes only 300 taels per head to that service, and gives the whole vast thirteen repetitions of the property-indemnity to the service of propagating the Gospel. His magnanimity has won him the approval of his nation, and will get him a monument. Let him be content with these rewards. We all hold him dear for manfully defending his fellow missionaries from exaggerated charges which were beginning to distress us, but which his testimony has so considerably modified that we can now contemplate them without noticeable pain. For now we know that, even before the siege, the missionaries were not "generally" out looting, and that, "since the siege," they have acted quite handsomely, except when "circumstances" crowded them. I am arranging for the monument. Subscriptions for it can be sent to the American Board [of Missions]; designs for it can be sent to me. Designs must allegorically set forth the Thirteen reduplications of the Indemnity, and the Object for which they were exacted; as Ornaments, the designs must exhibit 680 heads, so disposed as to give a pleasing and pretty

effect; for the Catholics have done nicely, and are entitled to notice in the monument. . . .

We have Mr. Ament's impassioned assurance that the missionaries are not "vindictive." Let us hope and pray that they will never become so, but will remain in the almost morbidly fair and just and gentle temper which is affording so much satisfaction to their brother and champion today.

On September 7, 1901, the eight nations whose soldiers lifted the Boxer siege forced China to sign the Boxer Protocol. Though each of its articles was galling, humiliating, or destructive, by far the most devastating for its long-term effect was the indemnity provided for in Article 6. Article 2B cut at the heart of the Chinese political system, which was based upon official examinations. Articles 1 and 3, here omitted, were apologies for the killings of a German and Japanese diplomat.

Article 2A

... the principal authors of the outrages and crimes committed against the foreign Governments and their nationals, are to be condemned to death by execution [or] death by committing suicide. . . .

This judgment was made by an unidentified soldier in the Boxer campaign, recorded in a book published a year after the Western forces entered China.

It is safe to say that where one real Boxer has been killed since the capture of [Beijing], fifty harmless coolies or laborers on the farms, including not a few women and children, have been slain.

A Japanese soldier wipes blood from his sword after decapitating suspected Boxers. Because foreign troops often had no way to differentiate Boxers from non-Boxers, violence and bloodshed was common among non-Boxer populations.



Article 2B

... the suspension of official examinations for five years in all cities where foreigners were massacred or submitted to cruel treatment.

Article 4

The Chinese Government has agreed to erect an expiatory monument in each of the foreign or international cemeteries which were desecrated and in which the tombs were destroyed.

It has been agreed with the Representatives of the Powers that the legations interested shall settle the details for the erection of these monuments, China bearing all the expenses thereof, estimated at ten thousand taels for the cemeteries at Peking and within its neighborhood, and five thousand taels for the cemeteries in the provinces. . . .

Article 5

China has agreed to prohibit the importation into its territory of arms and ammunition, as well as of materials exclusively used for the manufacture of arms and ammunition. . . .

Article 6

By an Imperial Edict dated the 29th of May, 1901, His Majesty the Emperor of China agreed to pay the Powers an indemnity of four hundred and fifty millions of Haikwan Taels. This sum represents the total amount of the indemnities for States, companies, or societies, [and] private individuals. . . .

Article 7

The Chinese Government has agreed that the quarter occupied by the legations shall be considered as one specially reserved for their use and placed under their exclusive control, in which Chinese shall not have the right to reside and which may be made defensible. . . .

Article 8

The Chinese Government has consented to raze the forts of [Dagu] and those which might impede free communication between Peking [Beijing] and the sea; steps have been taken for carrying this out.

Article 9

The Chinese Government has conceded the right to the Powers in the protocol annexed to the letter of the 16th of January, 1901, to

Legations

Ambassadors and their staffs

His Majesty

"His Majesty" refers to the emperor whom the Empress Dowager had placed under house arrest after he became involved with radical reformers in 1898.



Groups of Boxers walk through the streets of Tianjin, a city near Beijing, in 1901. This is one of only a handful of known candid photographs of Boxers.

occupy certain points, to be determined by an agreement between them, for the maintenance of open communications between the capital and the sea. . . .

Article 10

The Chinese Government has agreed to post and to have published during two years in all district cities the following Imperial Edicts:

- a. Edict of the 1st of February, prohibiting forever, under pain of death, membership in any antforeign society.
- b. Edicts of the 13th and 21st February, 29th April, and 19th August, enumerating the punishments inflicted upon the guilty.
- c. Edict of the 19th of August, 1901, prohibiting examinations in all cities where foreigners were massacred or subjected to cruel treatment.
- d. Edict of February 1st, 1901, declaring all governors-general, governors, and provincial or local officials responsible for order in their respective districts, and that in case of new antforeign troubles or other infractions of treaties which shall not be immediately repressed and the authors of which shall not be punished, these officials

shall be immediately dismissed, without possibility of being given new functions or new honors.

The posting of these edicts is being carried on throughout the Empire.

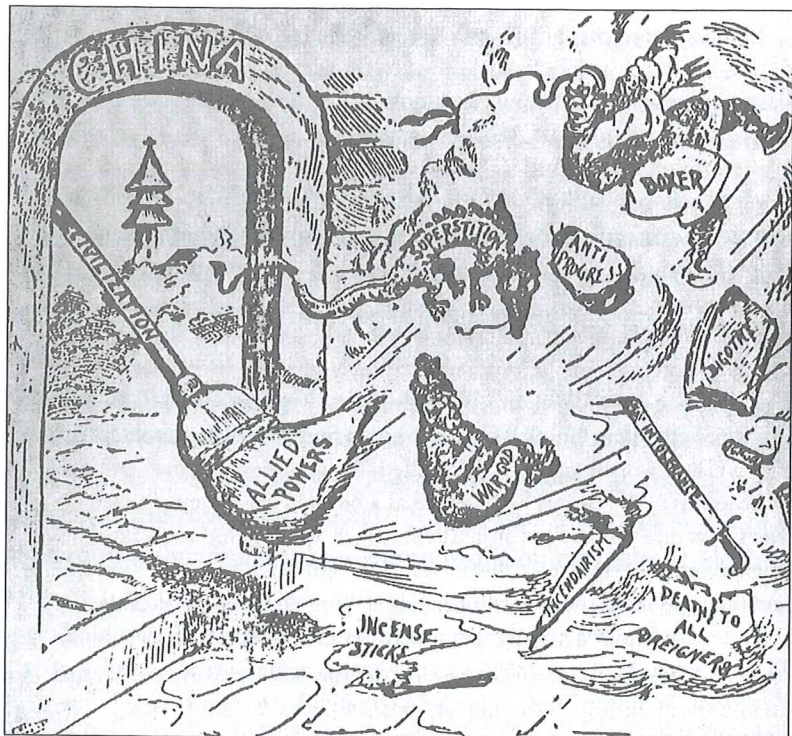
Article 11

The Chinese Government has agreed to renegotiate the amendments deemed necessary by the foreign Governments to the treaties of commerce and navigation and other subjects concerning commercial relations, with the object of facilitating them.

Article 12

An imperial edict of the 24th of July, 1901, reformed the Office of Foreign Affairs (Zongli Yamen), on the lines indicated by the Powers, that is to say, transformed it into a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which takes precedence over the six other Ministries of State. . . .

These two political cartoons view the Boxers from the perspective of the West and the Western actions at the time of the Boxers from the perspective of the Chinese. The first, published originally in the *Brooklyn Eagle* in July of 1900, is titled "The Open Door that China Needs." The Western powers (or as the broom puts it, "Civilization") are sweeping out the door those elements seen by the West as bad. It is ironic, given the general reactions of most Westerners to Chinese, that one of the swept-out items is "intolerance."



The gods of happiness and wealth issue these instructions for the information of the members of the Catholic and Protestant religions [that is, Chinese converts]: You have abandoned the gods and done away with your ancestors, causing the gods to be angry so that the rains do not fall from the sky. Before long heavenly soldiers and heavenly generals will descend to earth and wage a great battle with the adherents of your two religions. It is a matter of great urgency that you quickly join the Boxers and sincerely mend your ways, so that when the time comes [for the great battle], your entire families do not suffer harm.

—A placard posted in Taigu, Shanxi, summer 1899

Expansion of the Boxer Movement

The Society of Boxers United in Righteousness began in Shandong. Those who spread its boxing were all homeless vagrants. They claimed that by carrying charms and reciting chants they could call down gods to possess their bodies so that swords could not pierce them nor guns wound them. They traveled about misleading the simple villagers, taking teachers and transmitting to disciples, establishing [boxing] grounds and altars where they gathered to practice. The gods they worship are mostly taken from historical novels. They assemble in an unreasonable manner and [preach] heterodox nonsense.

—Yu-lu, governor general of Zhili Province, report, 1900

This cartoon, published in the *Anhui Common Speech Journal* in 1905, is titled "National Humiliation Picture." The Chinese carries a flag proclaiming his readiness to submit to foreign occupation, but the foreign soldier is nevertheless ready to slash the Chinese to death.

