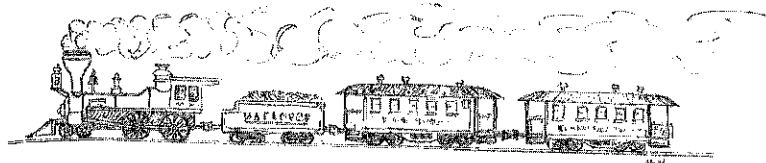




China at the End of the Qing Dynasty

Chapter Seventeen China's Troubles



The Boxer Rebellion

As Americans were moving west into Native American land, another kind of invasion was taking place in the great country of China.

For many years, European countries, along with the United States, had been trying to creep into China. After the Opium Wars, China had been forced to open its ports to American and British ships—and whatever those ships brought with them. While Russia was trying to take land away from the Ottoman Turks, it was also trying to push down into the northern Chinese province called Manchuria. In the year 1897, the Germans had moved into the southern province of Guizhou and occupied it, stationing German soldiers throughout the whole area. And in 1898, the British seized control of Weihai, an important port city on the Yellow Sea.

To fight the invasions of the West, a small group of Chinese rebels formed a secret society. Like the secret societies of the Young Turks, the Young Bulgarians, and the Young Italians, this society was called “secret” because it wasn’t officially recognized by the government. It was made up of men and women who were fiercely patriotic (loyal to their country), but who didn’t think that their government was doing a very good job protecting the Chinese people. This Chinese secret society called itself “Yihhe Quai,” or the “Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists.” But Westerners just called it “the Boxers,” because the members were so good at martial arts.

The Boxers weren’t just good at fighting. They also believed that they could become possessed by spirits who gave

them strength and skill. When they got ready to fight, they went into a trance and started foaming at the mouth. They believed that this ritual made them invincible, and that swords and bullets would simply bounce off them! And they also claimed that thousands of "spirit soldiers" would rise from the dead and join them in their fight against Western occupation. As they went into battle, the Boxers chanted their slogan: "Destroy the foreigners! Destroy the foreigners!"

The Boxers planned to begin their war against foreigners by attacking both missionaries from the West and Chinese Christians. They believed that these Chinese Christians were traitors to their country, because they had converted to a "Western" religion. According to the Boxers, Christian missionaries brought Western ways into China, and helped to destroy the traditions of the Chinese.

The first attacks were made against German missionaries. Germany had sent hundreds of missionaries into the center of China, near the Yellow River. And these missionaries had been very unwise. Instead of simply preaching Christianity, the missionaries had gotten involved in the local government. They had promised the Chinese near them that, if they became Christians, the Germans would help them sue non-Christians in court—and win. This made them very unpopular with Chinese who already resented Western involvement in China's business.

German missionaries were attacked and killed. Chinese Christians who were friends of the missionaries were also killed. And Germany's ambassador to China was murdered by Boxers right in the middle of the street in the city of Beijing. He had been on his way to complain to the Chinese government about the Boxer violence against Germans in China!

The government of China had done very little to stop the Boxers. The emperor of China himself refused to approve of the Boxer attacks. But many of his court officials did—and so did his aunt, Cixi.

Cixi was the real ruler of China. Her actual title was "Empress Dowager." Her nephew, Guangxu, had inherited the

throne and the title of "Emperor." But when Guangxu first became emperor, he made himself unpopular very quickly. In a hundred days, Guangxu made forty separate decrees, changing China's government, law, schools, money systems, army, and police so that China would be more modern. This was a lot of change, all at once—especially for a country that thought "more modern" meant "more like the Western countries that are trying to take us over."

When Cixi saw how nervous Guangxu's new decrees made the Chinese officials and the Chinese people, she rounded up the army, convinced them to fight for her, executed six of Guangxu's advisors, and put her nephew on an island in the middle of the palace lake. Now she held the real power in the capital city of Beijing. And she hated the foreigners who were pushing into China.

The Boxers roamed through the country, killing missionaries who could not get away from them, burning churches, and pulling up railway lines. Almost all of the railroads in China had been built by European merchants, with European money, in order to bring trains filled with European soldiers, European goods, and European customs into the center of China. Getting rid of the railroads was an important step in getting rid of European influence in China!

Governments from around the world sent messages to Cixi, ordering her to stop the rebels. Cixi agreed. She called up the army and put them on the alert—but she never actually told them to attack. She liked what the Boxers were doing. Although she might pretend to obey the Western countries telling her to stop them, she had no intention of actually doing so.

As the Boxer Rebellion grew larger, many foreigners in China fled to the city of Beijing. In Beijing, many different countries had offices called "embassies." These embassies were, by tradition, off-limits to Chinese officials. They were like little outposts of each country in China. And they were all located in a walled section of the city called the "legation compound."

The foreigners ran to their embassies and closed the gates of the legation compound. And not a moment too soon. The Boxers were already marching into Beijing, shouting, "Protect the country! Destroy the foreigners!"

Instead of stopping the Boxers with the imperial army, Cixi let them come in and surround the embassies. She declared that China was at war with the countries of the West.

Now the legation compound was under siege. There were almost five hundred foreign diplomats, journalists, and missionaries inside, along with about 450 soldiers from eight different countries. Three thousand Chinese Christians had also fled to the legation compound for safety. And the compound also had a stable inside it with 150 racehorses. When the besieged foreigners ran out of food, they ate the horses.

But news of the siege had reached the outside world. Soldiers from several different countries were preparing to march on Beijing to rescue the foreigners. The largest group of soldiers was from Russia (which was very happy for an excuse to send more armed Russians into China!). The second largest division of soldiers was from Japan. And the third largest was from the United States.

These soldiers were joined by British and French fighters. Nineteen thousand men landed on the shore of China and marched towards Beijing. Along the way, the army was attacked by Boxer raiders. But they pushed on towards Beijing. On August 14, 1900, two months after the siege of the legation compound had begun, the army of foreigners arrived in Beijing.

The Boxers, convinced that the special charms they wore and the words they recited would make them invincible, went out to meet them. But the Western soldiers shot the Boxers down. They broke down the gates of the Forbidden City, where the Chinese government had its headquarters, invaded the city, and burned the great Summer Palace—one of the greatest and most beautiful buildings in the world. Cixi barely escaped. She dressed herself as a peasant, grabbed her nephew from

the island in the middle of the palace lake, got into a cart, and rattled out of the city.

The government officials who were left in Beijing had to face the victorious Western army! They promised that if the soldiers would go back home instead of staying in Beijing, the Boxers would be properly punished. They insisted that Cixi's declaration of war hadn't been an official *Chinese* declaration. Finally, they signed an agreement with eleven foreign countries, spelling out how the Boxers would be punished. The Chinese agreed to punish officials who had supported the Boxers, to build stronger walls around the legation compound, to repair the railroads, and to pay 333 million dollars in fines to the rest of the world.

Once again, Western countries had managed to take control of Chinese affairs. As a matter of fact, Great Britain assumed that it could do as it pleased with China. One British official wrote that the British had three options, after the Boxer Rebellion. Britain could divide China up, replace the Qing dynasty with another dynasty, or just try to patch things up with the existing Qing ruler.

The third option seemed to be the best. So Cixi was allowed to return to Beijing as Empress Dowager. But she had to agree that schools would now teach Western ideas. She had to agree to outlaw several traditional Chinese practices, such as footbinding (wrapping girls' feet in tight bandages so that they would stay small). She also had to agree to send Chinese officials abroad to study and learn from the constitutions and governments of other countries.

The Qing dynasty had survived the Boxer Rebellion. Seven years later, when Cixi died of a stroke, the three-year-old prince Puyi inherited the throne of China.

But China had already been conquered by Western ideas. And Puyi would be the last Qing emperor of China.