

# US Policy in China Leading Up to the Boxer Rebellion

Written by Matt Finucane

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/04/14/us-policy-in-china-leading-up-to-the-boxer-rebellion/>

MATT FINUCANE, APR 14 2014

### Was US Policy in China Guided More by Ideology or Material Interests in the Period Leading to the Boxer Rebellion?

Since the very first days of American history, China has been a regular topic of mythology and storytelling. An “integral part of [the founding fathers’] concept of mercantile empire,” and later given “renewed vitality in the late nineteenth century [by] ‘old China hands’” (McCormick, 1967, p.54), its tales of commercial fortune and cultural splendor were enough to entice merchants and missionaries alike (Thomson, Stanley, and Perry, 1981, pp.9-10). Furthermore, there was the ideological desire to “finish the great circle [...] the ‘westward course of empire,’” justified in that American colonialism was unlike that of old, it was “benevolent, and self-limiting” (Thomson, Stanley, and Perry, 1981, p.16; Hunt and Levine, 2012, p.63). This aim—that civilisation, having traveled westward, would now return to China—accompanied another: that great wealth could be made in satisfying “growing demands of the overpopulated countries of Asia” (Thomson, Stanley, and Perry, 1981, p.18). With the “Great American Desert” now crossed, the first boatloads of missionaries and merchants departed for China on their new Pacific course, though their number was always limited (Thomson, Stanley, and Perry, 1981, p.17).

What inspired the real exodus was the depression of 1893 that “shook personal and national confidence in the infinite and inevitable linear progress of the United States” (Young, 1968, p.1). The depression closed banks and businesses alike at a time when industrial production was only expanding; thus, “[m]any Americans saw in China their national salvation. Only such a vast market could absorb the surplus products of an industrial machine” on which the “prosperity of the entire society depended” (Young, 1968, p.2).

The first point at which the state became significantly involved tied the old-world myths and the urgent need for exports together in the acquisition of the Philippines. The president at the time, William McKinley, wrote of their annexation that “without any desire or design on our part, the war has brought us new duties and responsibilities”—to democratise and civilise those islanders “not civilised enough to rule themselves” (Greenbie, 1920, p.79)—but also of the “commercial opportunity to which American statesmanship cannot be indifferent. *It is just to use every legitimate means for the enlargement of American trade* [italics added]” (McKinley, 1898).

In addition to financial interests, “McKinley knew that hanging onto the Philippines would appeal to naval strategists looking for bases to secure the Pacific” (Hunt and Levine, 2012, p.17). He knew this, because the expansionist ideology in America at this time was not new; it lurked beneath the surface of consensus and at periods such as this resurged. Following the Civil War, the “breadth and tempo” of American expansionism had increased, much under the direction of William Seward, which led to the annexation of Midway Island in 1867 (Hunt and Levine, 2012, p.13). Named as such for being the midpoint between San Francisco and China, when, as Walter Nugent writes, “commerce with Asia strongly suggested that it become American, [...] it did” (Nugent, 2009, p.253). With McKinley’s total complicity, and the trying times that drove it, a new era of state-sponsored expansion was ushered in. Naval Captain, Alfred Mahan, took up Seward’s mission and determined to fulfill America’s “two ocean destiny” (Young, 1968, p.6). A pioneering geostrategist, Mahan too had America’s economy at the forefront of his mind when he said, “[w]hether they will or no, Americans must begin to look outward. The growing production of the country demands it” (McCormick, 1967, p.21). American imperialism of this sort did not go unopposed; the Anti-Imperialist League—those who sought a closer reading of the constitution, specifically regarding self-rule—was founded in 1898

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to oppose the Philippine annexation, and indeed *nearly* defeated it in the Senate (Nugent, 2009, p.271). That it did not, and subsequently crumbled is testament to the power of ideology over U.S. foreign policy at the time. Instead, it would be abused by those who sought material interests (like McKinley's) to justify and "rationalise dominance both at home and in the field," while American 'anti-imperial imperialism' (neo-colonialism) strode on, unabashed (Hunt and Levine, 2012, p.4).

Characterized by avoiding *large* territorial acquisitions, these "stepping-stone" islands facilitated U.S. state presence in China (McCormick, 1967, p.18). Thus far, American trade had relied on shrewd diplomacy and economic might; 'most-favoured-nation' status was negotiated, meaning the U.S. would be granted any concessions made to other states (Chien-Nung, 1978, p.84), and representatives such as the lawyer, Caleb Cushing, (the embodiment of "spread-eagle Americanism in all of its arrogance" [Belohlavek, 2008, p.42]) did their utmost to compete against their better-endowed imperial adversaries (Clements, 1967, p.21n.). Nevertheless they feared for their position, since the trade of other states in Asia was guaranteed by force (and a propensity to use it) which might one day exclude American commerce. Following the Sino-Japanese War, this fear was elevated, for "the weakness of China [...] was shown to all," thus opening it "fully to the predatory policies of the West" (Tan, 1967, p.11; Young, 1968, p.14). The Open Door Policy which had tacitly existed since the First Opium War of 1839 was urgently re-stated by the United States as a means of protecting China (and thus U.S. trade) (McCormick, 1967, p.56); as ex-statesman Henry Kissinger wrote, it had "claim[ed] for the United States the benefits of other countries' individual imperialism" (Kissinger, 2012, p.88). While there is little doubt that the Open Door "may, through some moral effect, have slowed the slicing up of China," there "*were no sanctions to enforce such policy* [italics added]" (Tan, 1967, p.14; Spence, 2012, p.222). While an American naval build-up occurred—a lone cruiser supplemented by the rest of its squadron (McCormick, 1967, p.55)—McCormick writes that U.S. non-intervention helped, again, to preserve the "carefully cultivated image of the American Innocent, untainted by European imperialism and chicanery seeking only amity and trade" (McCormick, 1967, p.65). However, with the increasing likelihood of Chinese partition, how long such a policy could last was called into question.

There remained no imperial powers in the region that the U.S. could contest militarily. China found itself in a similar position, and as such both states sought equally to hold "like grim death to the Open Door" to preserve China's integrity (McCormick, 1967, p.173). However, while Open Door remained the official policy, significant is the fact that contingency plans had been made for if that gamble went awry. First was Secretary of State John Hay's: simply "to do nothing, and yet be around when the water-melon is cut" (McCormick, 1967, p.162). The latter plan, to be contemplated *only* after the election of 1900, held that if China would not grant the U.S. the kind of concessions that were granted other powers "at the sword's point," then "Congress should authorise the landing of an adequate force to compel proper action by China" (McCormick, 1967, p.171; Tan, 1967, pp.11-14; Clemens, 1967, p.21n.).

The Boxer Rebellion would see such a force land, but even then, while Chinese government was feasible (and incurred a lesser risk of U.S. exclusion), the military was limited to lifting the siege of their diplomats, and suppressing the uprising where Chinese authorities had not (Hunt and Levine, 2012, pp.15-16). America feared that the insurgency, if not handled quickly, would be used as an excuse for foreign powers to invade and then annex, a fear held by Chinese viceroys too, who urged suppression "to forestall the military intervention of the Powers" (McCormick, 1967, pp.163-164; Tan, 1967, p.77). The rebellion, however, was also an opportunity for McKinley to "make clear that the United States was a formidable Pacific Power," by deploying a force (5,000 troops and their largest naval presence yet) "necessary to properly represent our government" (Hunt and Levine, 2012, pp.15-16; McCormick, 1967, p.163). In the face of real threats to American enterprise China's position in this relationship was made clear, irrespective of their "anomalous attitude [and] traditional friendship;" finance came first (Clements, 1967, pp.113-114).

But what of missionaries? Their civilisation and educational activities were often commendable, and they did indeed receive some governmental support. However, during the Boxer Rebellion (an insurrection largely incited by the "haughtiness and unruliness of Christian missionaries" [Chien-Nung, 1978, p.166; Spence, 2012, pp.222-223]) when it was suggested that missionaries be evacuated, U.S. Ambassador Charles Denby refused, stating that "[m]issionaries are the pioneers of trade and commerce," and that "[g]iven the commercial stakes involved it is a risk not worth taking" (McCormick, 1967, p.66). They would not be evacuated, for fear that they could not return and thus

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might “abort efforts to expand trade into the un-tapped hinterland” (McCormick, 1967, p.66). Besides from this, government showed little interest besides conducting investigations into their non-religious affairs (hoping to exploit further opportunities for commerce), and encouraging their use of “treaty rights to establish residence in new and untried areas” (McCormick, 1967, p.86). When new settlement in the untried Hunan province was accomplished, Denby praised it, but “apparently saw no religious importance in the event” (McCormick, 1967, p.86). Here again, ideology and its adherents came second to the all-pervasive pursuit of commerce.

This willpower that drove America to look to China was brought about by harsh economic realities, and from that moment on ideological benevolence would take a back seat. Efforts that were made to civilise garnered no state sponsorship, and sometimes met with the “unofficial orthodoxy” of U.S. policy, to jealously oppose Chinese industrialization that might compete with American produce (McCormick, 1967, p.74). Their economic relationship clearly went one way, and as American power grew in the face of Chinese frailty, the use of force was increasingly considered. “The economic emphasis of American-East Asian relations was a result of America’s strategic and diplomatic weakness, not its virtuous principles,” and in some cases, such as McKinley’s message to Congress, ideology was perverted by the state to shroud and legitimise the bloody course of empire (Thomas, Stanley, and Perry, 1981, p.12). Of little concern to those who pioneered America’s China policy, it would consistently take second place to economic interests throughout the period.

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*Date written: October 2013*