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# “WESTERN CIVILIZATION” AGAINST “HORDES OF YELLOW SAVAGES” BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF THE BOXER REBELLION

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## *Abstract*

This article examines the discourses that occurred during the Boxer Rebellion in the reports of the *Daily Mail*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and *The Times* as well as in caricatures from *Punch*. Using official documents and contemporary sources to recontextualise the discourses, the article attempts to explain their social and political functions. The political orientation of the newspapers resulted in different perceptions of the Boxer Rebellion. For example, the *Manchester Guardian* criticised British imperialist action in China and blamed the Boxer Rebellion on Western economic ambitions and gunboat diplomacy. *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, degraded Chinese culture to justify British imperial policy in China and reinstall pride in the British Empire after the debacle of the Boer War. Nevertheless, there were also perceptions which all the newspapers had in common that resulted from the foreign correspondents and the diplomats in Beijing being unable to communicate with London because the telegraph lines had been cut by the Boxers. Consequently, rumours were printed as fact referring to the yellow peril, a major discourse at that time which was based on racial theories and fears related to labour and immigration policies. The newspapers also continued to depict China as the object of imperial rivalries, especially that between Russia and Britain as it was the perceived as the biggest threat to British interests in Asia.

## Introduction

In the summer of 1900 British troops were fighting in China in alliance with other imperial powers in the Boxer Rebellion, which was an anti-foreign movement directed against the imperial powers in China. The British public was eager to read about the progression of the rebellion in newspapers and magazines. On 18 July 1900 the British satirical magazine *Punch* printed the following caricature:



Fig. 1: “‘To Pekin!’ Japan: ‘En avant!’ Russia (aside): ‘I do hope his motives are as disinterested as mine!’” (*Punch*, 18 July 1900).

The caricature contains many of the dominant discourses<sup>1</sup> on the Boxer Rebellion. For example, Russia and the other Western countries are dressed like knights of the Middle Ages, referring to the crusades or Arthurian legends in which Western (Christian) civilization fought against hordes of (heathen) barbarians. In the illustration, an alliance of imperial powers fights against China, yet China is not pictured. The Chinese threat as a purely linguistic construct corresponds to the way the allied powers used China as an enemy image to legitimise the use of force. The illustration also reveals another aspect of the Boxer Rebellion: the aside of Russia is representative of the rivalry amongst the allied powers in China.

This article analyses British perceptions of the Boxer Rebellion in China. It examines the discourses that occurred throughout this time in British newspapers’ reports. Using official documents as well as contemporary sources to re-contextualise the discourses, the article also attempts to explain their social and

1 This article adheres to Ruth Wodak’s definition of discourse “as a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens”: WODAK, 2001:66.

political functions. The interest lies not only in voices hailing the actions of the British troops in China and thereby supporting British imperialism, but also in those discourses which criticised such actions, as they all had an effect upon how the British Empire was perceived within Britain. The article uses critical discourse analysis as a method because it examines the construction of knowledge in discourses and their effects on society.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper articles describe events according to socio-political and cultural factors, so they are never completely objective and always express certain values. Therefore, newspaper articles can be analysed for information about social identities and social as well as cultural values.<sup>3</sup> Critical discourse analysis is a multidisciplinary approach which has various methods that are dependent on the material and the social context.<sup>4</sup> This paper uses the discourse-historical approach, which aims to recontextualise discourses in order to analyse discrimination, prejudice as well as the construction of national identity in discourses.<sup>5</sup> Ruth Wodak, one of the founders of the discourse-historical approach, points out:

On the one hand, the situational, institutional and social settings shape and affect discourses, and on the other hand, discourses influence discursive as well as non-discursive social and political processes and actions. In other words, discourses as linguistic social practices can be seen as constituting non-discursive and discursive social practices and, at the same time, as being constituted by them.<sup>6</sup>

In the nineteenth century, nationalism significantly shaped collective identities. The “nation” was predominantly based on largely imagined traditions which were reinforced by rituals and myths that focused on the unity, equality and solidarity of citizens in order to present the nation as a homogenous space.<sup>7</sup> Since nations are systems of cultural representations, they are effectively imagined communities.<sup>8</sup> National identities, therefore, entail a set of moral values which are naturally exclusive and can be used to discriminate against “outsiders”.<sup>9</sup> In nineteenth-century Britain, newspapers actively participated in the tex-

2 JÄGER, 2001:81.

3 FAIRCLOUGH, 2002:55; FOWLER, 1991:4–5 and 11–17; VAN DIJK, 1989:203; CALDAS-COULTHARD, 2003:273.

4 VAN DIJK, 2001:96–99; WODAK/WEISS, 2003:11–14.

5 WODAK, 2001:69–71.

6 WODAK, 2001:66.

7 TANNER, 2001:44–46.

8 COLS, 2004:58; ANDERSON, 1991:25; HALL, 2003:273–325.

9 POOLE, 1999:70–73.

tual construction of the British Empire by creating and disseminating discourses on empire and race. Stories about war were very popular; colonial wars in particular were deemed as exotic and stirred patriotic enthusiasm within the society.<sup>10</sup> However, as this paper intends to show, there were also publications that were critical of British imperialism.

British newspaper reports about the Boxer Rebellion are interesting sources because they were written under special circumstances: As there were no means of direct communication with Beijing (the telegraph lines had been destroyed by Boxers and Chinese soldiers), newspapers and diplomats relied even more than usual on already existing images of China in order to construct what they thought were the events in China. The article uses official documents of the British governments,<sup>11</sup> Claude MacDonald's diary,<sup>12</sup> and newspaper articles on the Boxer Rebellion from *The Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Daily Mail* as well as illustrations from *Punch*. The only study of the Boxer Rebellion that includes British newspapers has been done by Jane E. Elliott who analyses a variety of English-speaking newspapers.<sup>13</sup> However, Elliott only analyses reports from June 1900 which is problematic because the tone of the newspaper articles changed radically in July and August. As a result, Elliott draws questionable conclusions, for example that the *Daily Mail* did not use derogatory language to describe the Boxers when in fact the *Daily Mail*'s articles on the Boxer Rebellion in July and August were linguistically amongst the most aggressive and derogatory. Another problematic aspect of Elliott's study is that although she uses a variety of international sources, she does not focus on national differences. As Haun Saussy points out, a China-West comparison can "lead to the exaggerated, unyielding conclusions of a polar logic".<sup>14</sup> Consequently, this article wants to show that the situation was much more complex and that even within Britain there existed several discourses on China. For example, certain British newspapers like the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* adhered to concepts like the "yellow peril" and "Western civilization" to justify British imperial policy in China and reinstall pride in the British Empire after the debacle of the Boer War. Others, like the *Manchester Guardian* and *Punch*, interpreted the events in China as a turning point in the relations between China and imperial countries because the anti-foreign stance of the Boxers forced the for-

10 DOMINKOWSKI, 1993:39.

11 PRO FO 405/92; PRO FO 405/93; PRO FO 405/94.

12 MACDONALD, 2000.

13 ELLIOTT, 2002.

14 SAUSSY, 2001:185.

eign powers to justify their occupation of Chinese territory and the privileges enjoyed by the foreigners in China.

## The Boxer Rebellion

Towards the end of the nineteenth century technological superiority led to a new form of imperialism in which technological innovations like the telegraph, railroad and steamship were utilised in the scramble for new markets and territories. In this epoch, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan and the USA joined the traditional imperial powers Britain, France, Russia and the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup> British imperialism in China was based on extraterritorial privileges which included tariff regimes, treaty ports and concessions. Britain could not turn China into a colony because of the presence of other Western powers. Since troops were needed for other conflicts (e.g. Crimean War, Indian Mutiny, Boer War), Britain relied on alliances with other powers. It also supported the Qing Dynasty because partitioning China among imperial powers would have limited British influence in China. Since British enterprise in China did not venture far beyond the treaty ports, informal rule was enough to protect the British commercial interests in China.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1890s the provinces Zhili and Shandong suffered several floods resulting in millions of people becoming homeless. Anxiety, hunger and unemployment increased the popularity of religious groups amongst poor peasants. These groups were not originally anti-Christian; they defended people and property against bandits and wanted to preserve traditional Confucian values like filial piety.<sup>17</sup> The Boxer movement began in 1898 in Shandong province.<sup>18</sup> The term “Boxers” referred to a version of martial arts that was practiced in Shandong. The Boxers believed that spirits entered their bodies and made them immune to weapons. Their slogan was “*fu qing mie yang*” (扶清灭洋, “support the Qing, destroy the foreigners”). The Boxer movement spread to the provinces Zhili, Shanxi and Henan in the winter of 1899–1900. The people who joined the

15 HEADRICK, 1991:50; HEADRICK, 1981:5–11; PORTER, 2004:81–90.

16 DARWIN, 1997:617–619 and 631–634; PORTER, 2004:153–157.

17 Groups included the Plum Flower Boxers (*meihuaquan* 梅花拳), Spirit Boxers (*shenquan* 神拳), and the Big Sword Society (*daqiehui* 大刀会): COHEN, 1997:23–35 and 69–79.

18 The Boxers were called *Yihetuan* (义和拳, “Boxers united in harmony”). Later the Boxers were also called *Yihetuan* (义和团, “militia united in harmony”): XIANG, 2003:116.

Boxer movement were mostly young peasants and unemployed or seasonal workers.<sup>19</sup> The two biggest cities in Zhili province were Beijing and Tianjin which each had large foreign settlements. This area also had more missionaries than most other regions in China as well as visible marks of foreign occupation by imperial powers like telegraph and railroad lines.<sup>20</sup>

For many Chinese the missionaries personified all negative aspects of Western powers.<sup>21</sup> The Boxer movement was originally anti-Christian, not anti-foreign, because many missionaries showed no respect for Chinese traditions and beliefs, and tended to interfere in local legal disputes to protect Chinese converts.<sup>22</sup> In Shandong province, German missionaries were infamous for taking advantage of their extraterritorial privileges and provoking disputes with the Chinese population in order to demand indemnities from the Chinese authorities. As a result, anti-Christian slogans and activities began to appear in Shandong in 1899.<sup>23</sup> By April 1900, the Boxer movement's anti-foreign stance increasingly worried the foreign ministers. This period also marked the beginning of the more supra-regional character of the movement and culminated in the occupation of Beijing by Boxers in the summer of 1900.<sup>24</sup>

While there were several battles between Chinese troops and Boxers in spring 1900, the Qing court did not take an official stance against the Boxers until an imperial decree concerning the suppression of the Boxers was issued on 29 May 1900 which advocated using force against the Boxers.<sup>25</sup> On 29 May 1900 the Fengtai station which was situated six miles outside of Beijing was destroyed by Boxers. Its destruction made train journeys to Tianjin impossible and isolated the foreigners in Beijing. The court immediately provided protection for the Legation Quarters and issued another imperial decree condemning the Boxers.<sup>26</sup> However, on 30 May 1900, disturbed by the anti-foreign violence, the British minister in Beijing, Sir Claude MacDonald, sent a telegram to the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, asking for reinforcements in Bei-

19 COHEN, 1997:16–19; COHEN, 2003:93–96; SPENCE, 1990:231–232.

20 COHEN, 1997:36.

21 SMITH, 1998:43. For the relationship between British missionaries and imperialism see SMITH, 1998:43–46 and PORTER, 2004:37–38.

22 CURZON, 2002:297–304; COHEN, 1997:19–31 and 146–172; KLEIN, 2002:283–301; COHEN, 2003:84–111.

23 COHEN, 1997:8 and 35; XIANG, 2003:55–74 and 110–113; ZARROW, 2005:3.

24 XIANG, 2003:171–241; COHEN, 1997:31 and 41–42.

25 XIANG, 2003:209.

26 XIANG, 2003:214–215.

jing.<sup>27</sup> On the same day, French and Belgian railway engineers were murdered by Boxers. On 1 June 1900 two British missionaries were killed in Yongqing. The Boxers also destroyed railway lines and telegraph cables.<sup>28</sup> As the situation worsened, the foreign ministers in Beijing decided that communication with the Zongli Yamen was pointless and that military force had to be used to fight the Boxers. This, however, had the consequence that the Qing Court considered the foreign threat worse than the domestic threat.<sup>29</sup>

On 10 June 1900, Seymour left for Beijing with 300 British soldiers, 100 Americans, sixty Austrians and forty Italians, who were later joined by additional British, German, Japanese, Russian and French troops.<sup>30</sup> The journey to Beijing was supposed to take less than a day, but as the railway tracks had been partly destroyed, Seymour’s force could only proceed slowly and after several clashes with Boxers and the Imperial Army it was eventually forced to return to Tianjin.<sup>31</sup> As a revenge for the humiliation suffered by the relief force, the foreign navy commanders in China decided that the allied navies should attack the Dagu Forts. The attack was preceded by an allied ultimatum which was presented to the Chinese General at nine p.m. on 16 June 1900, too late for the Chinese authorities to react before the allied forces started their attack at two a.m. on 17 June 1900.<sup>32</sup> A result of the attack was that the Qing Court openly sided with the Boxer movement.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, events in Beijing got worse. On 11 June 1900 Akira Sugiyama, the Chancellor of the Japanese Legation, was killed by Chinese soldiers.<sup>34</sup> On 20 June 1900 the eccentric German minister Baron Clemens von Ketteler was shot by Chinese rebels. Hours later, protestant missionaries and Chinese Christians

27 “Sir C. MacDonald to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 137.

28 See PRO FO 405/92. For the events in May and early June see also COHEN, 1997:46–48; HOARE, 1999:41; PRESTON, 2002:60–67.

29 XIANG, 2003:222–229.

30 “Consul Carles to the Marquess of Salisbury,” PRO FO 405/92, No. 214 and 215, “Consul Carles to the Marquess of Salisbury”, 10 June 1900, in COATES, 2000:27.

31 “Statement made in the House of Commons by Mr. Brodrick, June 18, 1900”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 282; PRESTON, 2002:92–107; COHEN, 1997:48–49; XIANG, 2003:256–265; ELLIOTT, 2002:511–517.

32 XIANG, 2003:281–290 and ELLIOTT, 2002:500–511.

33 The imperial decree from 28 June 1900 is quoted in “Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/93, No. 25.

34 XIANG, 2003:251–254.

from all over North China started pouring into the Legation Quarter,<sup>35</sup> and Chinese soldiers and Boxers began the siege of the Beijing Foreign Legations. Finally on 15 August 1900 international troops entered the Foreign Legations and ended the siege.<sup>36</sup> The Legations were defended by about 400 soldiers and 100 volunteers (including many missionaries from outside of Beijing). All in all, sixty-six foreigners were killed and over 150 wounded. Over 2,700 Chinese Christians were allowed sanctuary in the rest of the Legations. In September and October punitive expeditions by allied troops were carried out in Zhili and Shanxi.<sup>37</sup> The Boxer Protocol was signed on 7 September 1901. Its harsh terms and indemnities weakened the Qing Dynasty to such a degree that it never recovered and was overthrown in the Revolution of 1911.<sup>38</sup>

## British Newspapers

By the end of the nineteenth century newspapers had become part of daily life in Britain. Due to increasing literacy even the working classes had access to newspapers which tended to be read out aloud in communities. In the 1890s over 150 dailies were published in Britain.<sup>39</sup> This article examines three newspapers which targeted different audiences, namely *The Times* (readers with a high social background and education), the *Manchester Guardian* (middle and upper class readers) and the *Daily Mail* (lower middle-class and working-class readers). *The Times* was Britain's leading quality paper.<sup>40</sup> According to Jean-Pierre Lehmann it was "the most influential and prestigious newspaper of the Western world during [this] period".<sup>41</sup> It cost three pennies and had a circulation of about 380,000 in 1900. The *Manchester Guardian* had a circulation of 43,000 in 1897

35 COHEN, 1997:5 and 49–53; PRESTON, 2002:84–88; HOARE, 1999:41; XIANG, 2003:331–352. Zarrow argues that over 1,000 foreigners were killed until August but it is unclear what his sources are: ZARROW, 2005:2. Cohen and Preston use Claude MacDonald's diary (MACDONALD, 2000).

36 "Rear-Admiral Bruce to Admiralty", PRO FO 405/94, No. 239; "Consul Carles to the Marquess of Salisbury", PRO FO 405/94, No. 240.

37 PRESTON, 2002:297–309; COHEN, 1997:54–55; HOARE, 1999:41–44.

38 COHEN, 1997:55–56; HEVIA, 2003:241–259; ZARROW, 2005:4.

39 HAMPTON, 2004:19–28.

40 STARTT, 1988:283–284.

41 LEHMANN, 1978:18.

and cost one penny. It was Britain’s biggest radical morning daily newspaper.<sup>42</sup> The *Daily Mail* was Britain’s first mass newspaper.<sup>43</sup> In 1900, it printed 989,000 issues daily for a halfpenny which made it affordable for workers and employees. Its jingoism also made it very popular newspaper.<sup>44</sup>

News is an ideologically framed report of events which have been selected and transformed according to socio-political and cultural values.<sup>45</sup> Jean Seaton points out: “News is how we know ourselves and the world.”<sup>46</sup> Reports about the Boxer Rebellion were very biased because the editors in Britain had no knowledge about the actual events in Beijing and, consequently, often let frustration and fear over the well-being of their correspondents and the British diplomats in China dominate their articles. Newspapers in Britain provided a variety of perspectives on the Boxer Rebellion. For example, *The Times* was conservative and supported the government’s imperial policy whereas the *Manchester Guardian* remained much more critical and anti-jingoist.

War has been one of the central topics for news coverage ever since the production of newspapers began in the sixteenth century.<sup>47</sup> The Boxer Rebellion marks a special point in the history of media and war because all major powers of that time were involved in it (i.e. Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the USA, Japan, Italy and Austria-Hungary). Consequently, the worldwide presence of the Boxer Rebellion in the media surpassed that of previous conflicts,<sup>48</sup> despite the fact that it was not the most important conflict for each of the countries. British newspapers, for example, had at least as many articles on the Boer War as on the Boxer Rebellion from June to August 1900.<sup>49</sup> The Boer War in 1899 and 1900 was a disaster for British forces, and the awful state of the British army and its

42 HAMPTON, 2004:28; XEKALAKIS, 1999:19; AYERST, 1971:266.

43 COLLS, 2004:59.

44 CRANFIELD, 1978:200; BOLLINGER, 1996:100–103; STARTT, 1988:276–281; HAMPTON, 2004:40; MACKENZIE, 1984:6.

45 FAIRCLOUGH, 2002:103–104; CALDAS-COULTHARD, 2003:273–281; FOWLER, 1991:11–17.

46 SEATON, 2003:47.

47 IMHOF/SCHULZ, 1995:8.

48 MAINER/SIEBERG, 2001:13. This is denied by Knightley: “It was a little-covered campaign, because the eyes of Britain and America were on South Africa, where a ridiculously small force of Boers was tackling the might of the British army.” KNIGHTLEY, 1975:59. However, *The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *Daily Mail* usually printed several articles on the Boxer Rebellion every day in June and August 1900.

49 See issues of *The Times*, *Daily Mail* and *Manchester Guardian* in June, July and August 1900.

initial defeats came as a shock to the British people.<sup>50</sup> Thousands of British soldiers died from wounds or diseases. Furthermore, British taxpayers suffered because they had to finance a war from which only the capitalist elite profited. As a consequence, suddenly the moral values of imperialism were being questioned,<sup>51</sup> and this in turn had an effect on how British newspapers viewed the Boxer Rebellion. However, it was not only the Boer War which affected British perceptions of the Boxer Rebellion. Another important factor that determined the way British newspapers portrayed the Boxer Rebellion was that direct communication between Britain and Beijing was impossible because the Boxers had destroyed the telegraph lines. As a result, not only the public but also the government were uninformed about the events in China and relied on rumours. This inability to communicate led to stories about foreigners being massacred in China and, consequently, increased hostility towards China.

## Communication with Beijing

Conflicts like the Spanish-American War, the Fashoda Incident, or the Boer War had already shown that a government's control over telegraph lines was crucial for the outcome of the war because it gave the government access to and control over information.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the communication by telegraph was one of the major issues for the British minister MacDonald because it was the only means of direct communication from Beijing with the outer world. Already on 4 June 1900 MacDonald cabled Lord Salisbury: "I have to report that the situation in Peking is such that we may be besieged at any moment here, with the telegraph lines cut and the railway obstructed."<sup>53</sup> His fears of an imminent destruction of telegraph lines increased daily.<sup>54</sup>

On 10 June 1900 telegraphic communication between Tianjin and Beijing was interrupted.<sup>55</sup> On 11 June 1900 MacDonald cabled London via Siberia but

50 YOUNG, 1997:19–20; CHAMBERLAIN, 1988:159–161 and 166.

51 FERGUSON, 2003:181–186.

52 KIEVE, 1973:239–340; HEADRICK, 1991:82–89; HEADRICK, 1988:116.

53 "Sir C. MacDonald to the Marquess of Salisbury", PRO FO 405/92, No. 155.

54 See for example "Sir C. MacDonald to the Marquess of Salisbury", PRO FO 405/92, No. 161.

55 "Consul Carles to the Marquess of Salisbury", PRO FO 405/92, No. 214.

he still could not communicate with Consul Carles in Tianjin.<sup>56</sup> Since all the remaining lines north of Shanghai belonged to the China Administration (a Chinese company), Western diplomats had to rely on Western warships to deliver telegrams.<sup>57</sup> As a result of the Boxers’ actions, from mid-June telegraphic communication with Tianjin and Beijing became impossible. The Foreign Office in London also did not know what exactly happened in these cities because it had no means of direct communication with the diplomats stationed there.<sup>58</sup> For example, because the telegraph lines had been destroyed, neither MacDonald in Beijing nor the Foreign Office knew the exact position of Seymour’s relief force which was on its way to Beijing. Rear-Admiral Bruce only informed London on the 15 June 1900 that Seymour’s forces had come under attack from Boxers and Chinese soldiers, yet by this time he was expected to have already reached Beijing.<sup>59</sup> During the two weeks that Seymour was on his way to Beijing, British newspapers had to rely on rumours and reports from Chinese officials. This was frustrating, as the *Manchester Guardian* pointed out:

If we credited all that we were told we should have to believe at the same time that Admiral Seymour is dead, that he has reached Pekin, that he has returned to Tientsin, that he is precisely half-way between Pekin and Tientsin, that the Russians have entered Pekin, that the Legations are safe, that the German Minister has been murdered, that all the Legations have been taken, and so on in a list that might be prolonged indefinitely [...] The only authoritative news of yesterday’s making is that there is no news [...].<sup>60</sup>

The loss of telegraphic communication also affected the foreign ministers in Beijing, as they could not use the telegraph anymore. Consequently, MacDonald and other foreign ministers had to rely on messengers to communicate with Tianjin. However, as the Chinese troops and Boxers searched and/or killed most of the Chinese converts who were sent on these missions, the Legations

56 “Sir C. MacDonald to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 213.

57 AHVENAINEN, 1981:139–144.

58 See for example “Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 338; “Questions asked in the House of Commons”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 351. Since letters from China to London took over four weeks, it was not an alternative option for communication during an international crisis. For example, the Foreign Office received a letter from MacDonald in June that he had written April: “Sir C. MacDonald to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 207 was written on 16 April 1900 and received on 11 June 1900.

59 “Admiralty to Foreign Office”, PRO FO 405/02, No. 268.

60 *Manchester Guardian* 22 June 1900.

had to be very creative in hiding the messages.<sup>61</sup> The first messenger who made it to Tianjin was a Chinese boy who left the Foreign Legations on 4 July 1900. MacDonald recounts:

[H]e took a letter from me to the British Consul sewed up in a piece of oil-cloth; the package was flat, just an inch long and half-an-inch broad; instead of concealing it in the thick sole of his shoe or sewing it into his clothes, hiding places with which the enemy had become well acquainted, he concealed it in a bowl of rice which he carried with him, after the fashion of some Chinese mendicants.<sup>62</sup>

The journey to Tianjin took the boy fifteen days. Because most of the messengers were caught, MacDonald sent facsimiles of the same letter with various messengers, only updating the number of casualties.<sup>63</sup>

MacDonald was also ignorant of the whereabouts of allied rescue forces because he could not receive news from outside the Foreign Legations. In his diary he mentions several times how the inability to know the position of the relief forces left the Westerners in the Foreign Legations with a feeling of helplessness and frustration. For example, on 30 June 1900 flashlights outside of Beijing were reported from pickets in the Foreign Legations, causing great excitement among the Westerners because it was hoped that relief forces outside of Beijing were trying to communicate with them. However, this turned out to be untrue.<sup>64</sup> The first news from Tianjin reached the Foreign Legations in Beijing on 18 July stating that a relief force would leave Tianjin on 20 July. Many of the Westerners in Beijing were disappointed because they had expected the force to be already on its way.<sup>65</sup> The messenger who delivered MacDonald's letter to the British Consul returned on the 28 July 1900 with a letter that was sown in the collar of his coat. Frustration increased after it became known that the relief force had still not left Tianjin.<sup>66</sup> British diplomats in other Chinese cities also had no direct communication to Beijing: Acting Consul-General Warren even had to cable London from Shanghai to ask if the Legations in Beijing had been saved.<sup>67</sup>

61 See MACDONALD, 2000:197–198.

62 MACDONALD, 2000:198.

63 MACDONALD, 2000:199.

64 See entries 30 June, 1 July, and 2 July in MACDONALD, 2000.

65 MACDONALD, 2000:246–247.

66 MACDONALD, 2000:252–254.

67 “Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/94, No. 244.

The telegraph gave British diplomats in China a certain amount of agency. Originally, diplomats rejected the telegraph (as later also the typewriter and the telephone), arguing that it curtailed their autonomy. However, the decline in the power of the diplomat in the nineteenth century was actually caused by the professionalisation of the diplomatic service and uniformed procedures (i.e. bureaucracy).<sup>68</sup> The telegraph was seldom used by the British government to communicate with its representatives in China. Hence, as late as the Boxer Rebellion they were given some guidelines but could still mostly decide what policies they wanted to enforce.<sup>69</sup> For example, after Western troops took over Beijing on 14 August 1900 and freed the besieged Foreign Legations, the allied powers looted the capital and public executions took place in Beijing and surrounding areas. As plunder and seizing private property had been outlawed in the Hague Conventions of 1898 and 1899, the allied troops' behaviour in northern China was clearly a violation of these agreements,<sup>70</sup> yet, the foreign ministers approved of it and their governments simply could not entirely control their ministers' actions. For example, not only did MacDonald allow the looting in Beijing to occur, he even arranged an auction of the loot. Despite the fact that as a British minister plenipotentiary he had the power to make decisions without prior consultation with the British government, this was taking things too far and eventually MacDonald was transferred to Japan.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the telegraph lines did not tighten control over imperial officials because the government in London still had to rely on reports of men on the spot.<sup>72</sup> However, occasionally the telegraph was indeed used by the Foreign Office to restrict British diplomats. For example, Warren, who was stationed in Shanghai, became over-enthusiastic about punishing the Chinese. On 2 August 1900 he cabled Salisbury:

I would suggest informing the Manchu Government, through their Minister at London, that they will be held responsible for any outrage of the sort, and further, that their ancestral tombs at Mukden and Peking will be utterly destroyed. Ridiculous as this may appear, I am assured on good authority it is very likely to prove effective, as the Manchus have a great respect for their ancestors, and this threat will deter them.<sup>73</sup>

68 ANDERSON, 1993:118–119; JONES, 1983:116–126; NICKLES, 2003:102–134.

69 HOARE, 1999:9.

70 HEVIA, 2003:192–240.

71 Apparently Lord Salisbury also felt that MacDonald was generally unfit for duty in China: HEVIA, 2003:120; JONES, 1983:212.

72 HEADRICK, 1988:107; NICKLES, 2003:59–60 AND 80–81.

73 “Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/94, No. 17.

Salisbury cabled back: “The threat to destroy the tombs of the Manchu dynasty would be very repugnant to public opinion here in Europe, and we are also informed that it would create a bad impression in China generally.”<sup>74</sup>

The telegraph also influenced newspaper reports about the events in China. *The Times* was especially affected by the loss of telegraphic communication to Beijing because its correspondent, George Morrison, was in the Foreign Legations during the siege. As a result, *The Times*’ coverage of the Boxer Rebellion became more and more anti-Chinese when the editors assumed that Morrison (along with other foreigners) had been killed. In one of its editorials, *The Times* conveyed its frustration: “Of confidence there is, in fact, none here; of hope, little; of purely sensational news, an over-supply.”<sup>75</sup> It also printed obituaries of Morrison, MacDonald and Sir Robert Hart.<sup>76</sup> The coverage of the Boxer Rebellion varied between the newspapers; the *Daily Mail*, for example, printed quite aggressive articles. On 4 July 1900 it proclaimed: “white men and women are being done to death with every hideous circumstance by hordes of yellow savages”.<sup>77</sup> Two days later it wrote:

Crimes [...] have been committed at Pekin, at which, when the facts are known, the whole civilised world will stand aghast [...] a story of frightful atrocity which will shock Europe. In fact, it may be almost taken for granted that the whole of the foreigners in Pekin have been completely wiped out.<sup>78</sup>

This story later turned out to be untrue because the foreigners managed to defend the foreign legations until international troops arrived from Tianjin.<sup>79</sup> Elliott claims that “the Daily Mail produced responsible and accurate reporting of the Boxer crisis.” The newspaper articles analysed for this article, however, contradict this.<sup>80</sup> Elliott states that the *Daily Mail* was not sensationalist or inaccurate in June,<sup>81</sup> yet statements like: “The great struggle between Eastern exclusiveness

74 “The Marquess of Salisbury to acting Consul-General Warren”, PRO FO 405/94, No. 29.

75 *The Times* 14 July 1900.

76 *The Times* 17 July 1900.

77 *Daily Mail* 4 July 1900.

78 *Daily Mail* 6 July 1900.

79 The *Daily Mail* also had entire pages devoted to Chinese culture which were written by different people because they used no derogatory language at all. See for example *Daily Mail* 7 July 1900, 9 July 1900, 13 July 1900, 14 July 1900, 17 July 1900, 18 July 1900, 20 July 1900.

80 ELLIOTT, 2002:10.

81 ELLIOTT, 2002:67–69.

and Western civilizations is now being decided in China”<sup>82</sup> or “some hundreds of European men and women are in the direst danger from the most diabolically cruel mob in the world”<sup>83</sup> seem a rather sensationalist and inaccurate description of the events in China.

The *Manchester Guardian* was the only one of the three papers which remained highly critical of Western imperialism throughout the Boxer Rebellion. For example it stated: “If we had kept our hands off concessions and stood for fair play to China and true commerce for all the world, we may safely venture to say that the present trouble would never have occurred.”<sup>84</sup> One has to keep in mind that at that time Britain was still in shock from the disaster of the Boer War. A critique of British imperialism in 1900, therefore, also referred to those experiences. The *Manchester Guardian* was the only great morning daily newspaper in Britain that opposed the Boer War. This made it unpopular among British readers but its editor, P.C. Scott, was convinced that content was more important than circulation.<sup>85</sup> The *Manchester Guardian*, thus, had an anti-jingoist tradition. Yet, the situation in China was unique insofar as it united the Western powers against China. The *Manchester Guardian* realised that the action of one Western country in China would affect all the imperial powers in China and criticised the German Kaiser Wilhelm II’s *Hunnenrede* which declared that Germany would avenge the murder of foreigners in Beijing mercilessly even though their state was unclear:

The one thing to be kept in mind through all these vicissitudes of rumour is that we should do nothing, on the strength of a belief that the Europeans are dead, which would make their present danger greater if any of them are still alive. An example of this kind of wicked folly was the exhortation of the German Emperor to his troops to massacre the Chinese without quarter. Even if it were known for certain that the Europeans at Pekin had been exterminated, language of this kind would degrade to the level of the Boxers any European who used it.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, the Kaiser’s imperialist and racist fervour was not shared by all British newspapers. However, even the *Manchester Guardian* printed articles which

82 *Daily Mail* 18 June 1900.

83 *Daily Mail* 23 June 1900.

84 *Manchester Guardian* 7 July 1900.

85 AYERST, 1971:278–280; HAMPTON, 2004:57 AND 136; KOSS, 1981:391–400.

86 *Manchester Guardian* 31 July 1900. For the *Hunnenrede* which Wilhelm II held on 27 July 1900 see *The Times* 28 July 1900; *Daily Mail* 28 July 1900; *Manchester Guardian* 28 July 1900.

referred to one particular racist discourse about China, namely that of the yellow peril.

## The Yellow Peril

Statements like “white men and women are being done to death with every hideous circumstance by hordes of yellow savages” were typical for reports about the Boxer Rebellion in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*.<sup>87</sup> The metaphor of Chinese hordes was part of the discourse on the yellow peril. The actual term “yellow peril” came into use during the 1890s and referred to the – economic, military or social – threat from China and/or Japan to the West, or more often the white race.<sup>88</sup> According to Heinz Gollwitzer, the yellow peril was not perceived as a realistic threat in Britain.<sup>89</sup> This could have been due to the fact that, unlike the USA and Australia which had laws restricting Chinese immigration, hardly any Chinese emigrated to England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Even in 1901 there were only 387 Chinese immigrants in Britain.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the Chinese did not pose the same threat for (white) workers as they were seen to in other countries. However, while Chinese immigration to Britain remained insignificant, the British Empire was affected by Chinese immigration because Chinese labourers (so-called “coolies”) were used as cheap labour throughout the world (South Africa, USA, Cuba, Peru, Mexico, etc).<sup>91</sup> After the British ended their slave trade-actions in Africa in 1806, they sent 200 Chinese to Trinidad and began to export Chinese labourers to colonies overseas where they were bound by contract to work for five years.<sup>92</sup> Around the turn of the century, the British government planned to use Chinese indentured labourers in South African gold mines to improve the economy after the Boer War, and between 1904 and 1907 over 60,000 Chinese coolies worked in South Africa. The British public was divided on the issue of Chinese coolie labour and it was also

87 *Daily Mail* 4 July 1900

88 GOLLWITZER, 1962:13 and 20; LEHMANN, 1978:150.

89 GOLLWITZER, 1962:66–67.

90 See MAY, 1978:111–124.

91 MILLER, 1969:146–150; YOUNG, 1993:2; AARIM-HERIOT, 2003:60.

92 HU-DEHART, 1999:300.

debated in the British Parliament. In 1906 the Liberal Party even used the issue of Chinese labour in South Africa in the election.<sup>93</sup>

The concept of the yellow peril in Britain was influenced by Nathaniel Curzon and Charles Pearson. Charles H. Pearson (1830–1894) was professor of history at Oxford and influenced by Darwin and Spencer. His book *National Life and Character* was published in 1893 and reprinted in 1895. It sparked a heated discussion and was extremely popular in Australia.<sup>94</sup> Pearson’s view of China corresponded to one of the most popular versions of the yellow peril, namely the fear of millions of Chinese overrunning the West. Pearson warned that Chinese immigrants would arrive in endless numbers and thereby threaten to extinguish Western civilization because while the Chinese, Negroes and Hindus could survive just about anywhere, the white race could only survive in the temperate zone.<sup>95</sup> Pearson also argued that lower races increased faster than higher races.<sup>96</sup> As a result, the higher races would be forced to assimilate to the inferior moral and mental state of the lower races while the lower races improved their material level:<sup>97</sup>

The day will come, and perhaps is not far distant, when the European observer will look round to see the globe girdled with a continuous zone of the black and yellow races, no longer too weak for aggression or under tutelage, but independent, or practically so, in government, monopolising the trade of their own regions, and circumscribing the industry of the European [...] The citizens of these countries will then be taken up into the social relations of the white races, will throng the English turf, or the salons of Paris, and will be admitted to intermarriage.<sup>98</sup>

Among the newspapers that were examined for this article, the *Daily Mail* had the most in common with Pearson. For example, on 23 June 1900 it wrote: “The Chinaman can live and thrive where no one else can [...] Given free play, he could cover America from Alaska to Cape Horn, he could appropriate Australia. Courage and valour could not avail against numberless numbers.”<sup>99</sup> About two weeks later, the *Daily Mail* even mentioned Pearson:

93 See KYNOCHE, 2003:309; *The Times* 18 Feb 1904, 26 April 1904, 23 June 1904, 17 Jan 1906, 4 May 1906; BICKERS, 1999:52; CLARKE, 2004:17 and 33; LEE, 2003:29–33.

94 GOLLWITZER, 1962:49–53.

95 PEARSON, 1893:16, 29 and 40–63.

96 PEARSON, 1893:64 and 74–75.

97 PEARSON, 1893:95–96.

98 PEARSON, 1893:84–85.

99 *Daily Mail* 23 June 1900.

Are the four hundred millions of yellow savages about to fall in some demoniac outburst of fury upon the foreigners who have their position of strength? [...] are we at last face to face with that 'yellow peril' which years ago the prophetic gaze of Mr. Charles Pearson saw looming upon the horizon?<sup>100</sup>

*The Times* used the yellow peril to emphasise how crucial it was that the Westerners received help as soon as possible, stating: "every day that passes without the display of force adequate to deal with the hordes in northern China adds indefinitely to the danger of a universal uprising of the yellow race".<sup>101</sup> Both newspapers, therefore, referred to the yellow peril by stressing the sheer number of Chinese, as well as the fact that the Chinese were not quite human and planned the total destruction of the West.

Another book which influenced public opinion was *Problems of the Far East* by George Nathaniel Curzon (1859–1925). Curzon was a Member of Parliament from 1886 to 1898 for the Conservative Party. From 1887 to 1888 he visited Japan and China. In 1895 Lord Salisbury appointed Curzon as parliamentary under-secretary for foreign affairs. From 1899 to 1905 he was viceroy of India. Curzon published *Problems of the Far East* in 1894 and revised editions in 1895 and 1896. It influenced Britain's elite which tended to agree with him rather than Pearson.<sup>102</sup> Curzon argued that China's biggest problems were that it did not use its natural resources, had a reactionary and corrupt system, and rejected reforms and Western technology which were necessary to retain territorial integrity.<sup>103</sup> He disagreed with Pearson on China's threat as a military power stating that it was close to non-existent and that Chinese labourers emigrated because they could not survive in China. The fact that they were willing to marry foreign women proved that the Chinese immigrants wanted to assimilate, not colonise.<sup>104</sup> Curzon claimed that instead of threatening Europe, China's power had been in constant decline since the second half of the nineteenth century because of internal problems which prevented an externally aggressive China. Thus, while Curzon agreed with Pearson that the yellow race would expand, he was convinced that this would be via emigration, not conquest.<sup>105</sup> For example, he stated: "[the Chinese population] will increase, and swell, and con-

100 *Daily Mail* 13 July 1900.

101 *The Times* 17 July 1900.

102 NISH, 2002:viii and ix; GOLLWITZER, 1962:56.

103 CURZON, 2002:312–342.

104 CURZON, 2002:400–408.

105 CURZON, 2002:408–411; PEARSON, 1893:51.

tinue to overflow. But in this movement I detect no seed of empire, and I foresee no ultimate peril for the White Race.”<sup>106</sup>

The yellow peril was used by British newspapers in their articles about the Boxer Rebellion because they could not correspond with their men on the spot and, consequently, had to pen articles about the events in China with neither accurate nor first-hand information. Worry and frustration together with increasingly horrific rumours<sup>107</sup> also had the effect of generating more derogatory and emotive language in descriptions of the events in China. Especially *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* referred to the yellow peril in their articles.<sup>108</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* was more cautious in its choice of words and laid the blame for the Boxer Rebellion not on fanatical masses of Chinese but on Western imperialism. In terms of derogatory language, *The Times* was as racist as the *Daily Mail*; not only were the Boxers turned into a homogenous mass, they were also dehumanised and described as diabolical,<sup>109</sup> “demons in human form”,<sup>110</sup> and vermin. For example, all three newspapers used a report from Reuters which stated: “The whole country appears to be infected with ‘Boxers,’”<sup>111</sup> and *The Times* wrote: “‘Boxers’ are swarming from all directions”.<sup>112</sup> The image of Chinese hordes was also used to show how the white race triumphed over the yellow race, for instance in the *Daily Mail*:

By what miracle of skill and determination the foreigners succeeded in keeping at bay some tens of thousands of Chinamen armed with the best modern weapons, we are left to conjecture [...] a mere handful of white men have been able to set a vast horde of Asiatics at complete defiance.<sup>113</sup>

106 CURZON, 2002:411.

107 Even the British government had to rely on rumours, see “Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 338; FO 405/93 Nos. 157, 176, 244; FO 405/94, No. 338.

108 See for example *Daily Mail* 15 June 1900, 25 June 1900, 4 July 1900, 9 July 1900, 30 July 1900; *The Times* 15 June 1900, 18 June 1900, 25 June 1900, 27 June 1900, 17 July 1900, 31 July 1900; *Manchester Guardian* 26 June 1900.

109 *Daily Mail* 23 June 1900 and 5 July 1900.

110 *Daily Mail* 7 July 1900 and 13 July 1900.

111 *Daily Mail* 14 June 1900; *Manchester Guardian* 14 June 1900; *The Times* 14 June 1900.

112 *The Times* 29 June 1900.

113 *Daily Mail* 9 July 1900.

However, the image of a yellow peril not only shows how Britain viewed China, but also how it perceived itself, namely as part of Western civilization which was threatened by the yellow peril.

## Western Civilization

In the 1890s British imperial propaganda focused on the West as a concept.<sup>114</sup> This corresponds to Edward Said's notion that the Orient only exists as a discourse created by the colonizer that is produced and excluded to establish the West by symbolising everything that is considered non-Western. A "textual" Orient is, therefore, projected by the West to create a "real" Orient which it can govern and control.<sup>115</sup> Martin Lewis and Kären E. Wigen point out that the East/West dichotomy is a geographical construct while Orient and Occident are cultural constructs. Accordingly, the West is a spatially flexible concept based on the Western Roman Empire. The division of the Church into a Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) part was crucial in the formation of the concepts East and West because it led to idea of European Christendom from which a notion of the West evolved which also contained European settler colonies.<sup>116</sup> "Orient", on the other hand, originally described Southwest Asia because that was the limit of the known world. Only after the Arab conquests in the eighth and ninth centuries did "Orient" denote a culturally alien realm which stood in opposition to Europe, yet it still referred to the Eastern Mediterranean. With European imperialism the term "Orient" was expanded to include Southeast Asia but it was never a synonym for Asia because "Orient" remained a cultural concept and also included parts of Africa while other areas like Siberia were considered part of the Occident.<sup>117</sup> Lewis and Wigen conclude: "The Orient was, by general consensus, limited to lands of non-Western 'civilization.'"<sup>118</sup>

The concept of Western civilization was used as a legitimisation for imperialism (the so-called civilizing mission) by Western powers such as France,

114 GOGWILT, 1995:37–38.

115 SAID, 1979.

116 LEWIS/WIGEN, 1997:47–60. See also BONNETT, 2004:23–26.

117 LEWIS/WIGEN, 1997:53–54. Lewis and Wigen argue that "Orient" became a synonym for "Islam" but this is problematic because Islam is a religion while Orient is a geographical and cultural term.

118 LEWIS/WIGEN, 1997:54.

Britain, Italy, and Germany.<sup>119</sup> The term “civilization” was invented by the French in the eighteenth century and divided the world in civilized and barbaric peoples.<sup>120</sup> In the nineteenth century and also during the Boxer Rebellion, Social Darwinism was used as scientific legitimisation of the hierarchy between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism.<sup>121</sup> During the Boxer Rebellion, the *Daily Mail* wrote: “The great struggle between Eastern exclusiveness and Western civilizations is now being decided in China.”<sup>122</sup> “Struggle” clearly refers to “struggle for existence” originally used by Spencer and later associated with Social Darwinism.<sup>123</sup>

Social Darwinism also influenced concepts of race. At the time of the Boxer Rebellion many theorists used “race” and “nation” as synonyms. Races were usually put in a hierarchical order.<sup>124</sup> For example *The Times* was so frustrated by the rumours it received about the events in China that it described China as a country “where all men are liars”<sup>125</sup> and stated that the Chinese were inferior to Europeans: “the Oriental mind works differently from ours. Treachery and falsehood are resorted to in the East with a reckless disregard of ulterior consequences unintelligible to the European intellect, trained to look to the future.”<sup>126</sup> Such a hierarchy with European nations on top and China at the bottom was typical for the concept of civilization used during the Boxer Rebellion. Silvia Federici points out: “As a synonym for social progress, ‘civilization’ remained throughout the nineteenth century the prime signifier in the anthropological self-presentation of the European elites.”<sup>127</sup> In the reports about the Boxer Rebellion, Western countries were collectively described as “civilization” in order to portray them as developed and modern while simultaneously characterizing China as stagnant and backward. This is exemplified by a cartoon from *Punch* entitled “The Avenger”, showing a knight fighting in the name of civilization against the Chinese dragon. The knight is holding a shield with St.

119 HEVIA, 2003:12–13; MANN, 2004:4. See also CONKLIN, 1997:1–2 and 11; BARKER, 1968:59.

120 CONKLIN, 1997:14–15.

121 STEPAN, 1984:58; PATTERSON, 1997:45–49; HEVIA, 2003:175. For definitions of Social Darwinism see GREENE, 1981:128–134; HAWKINS, 1997:3, 13–17 and 30–38; ROGERS, 1972.

122 *Daily Mail* 18 June 1900.

123 See SPENCER, 1972.

124 HAWKINS, 1997:184.

125 *The Times* 6 July 1900.

126 *The Times* 23 July 1900.

127 FEDERICI, 1995:66.

George's cross on it, which is England's national flag, thus symbolising Britain's personification of Western Civilization:



THE AVENGER!

Fig. 2: *Punch*, 25 July 1900.

Western civilization as a historical and philosophical concept refers to a historical continuity which goes back to Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire.<sup>128</sup> In the late eighteenth century, the British elite became increasingly supportive of a civilizing mission that aimed at improving humankind (especially

128 BERNAL, 1995:5–9; FEDERICI, 1995:70.

the British colonies) morally and materially.<sup>129</sup> In Britain the civilizing mission was, therefore, used to describe imperialism as a moral duty because it helped to civilize inferior races.<sup>130</sup> However, it was not only the wish to civilize inferior races which led imperial powers to China but commercial interests as well. As a result, they used the concept of the open door to justify their presence; already both Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60) had been fought in the name of free trade.<sup>131</sup> Until the end of the nineteenth century the open door policy was used by Lord Salisbury to maintain British hegemony and legitimise Britain’s informal empire in China.<sup>132</sup> During the Boxer Rebellion the open door policy was again used to legitimise foreign presence in China, for example in an illustration from *Punch* where Europa attempts to break through the closed door of China with an axe (see fig. 3).

129 MANN, 2004:8 and 13.

130 LINDSAY, 1981:9–10; MANN, 2004:8; see also ADAS, 1989:200–221. Despite the civilizing mission’s ultimate goal to civilize colonised peoples until they had achieved the status of equals, such similarity was never admitted by the colonizers because it would needed as justification for colonial rule, see MANN, 2004:5 and 25.

131 WILGUS, 1987:14–15; HEADRICK, 1981:44–53; WONG, 1998.

132 WILGUS, 1987:3.



THE CLOSED DOOR.

Fig. 3: *Punch*, 11 July 1900.

The open door policy was a significant aspect of the Boxer Rebellion. For example, already in mid-June the imperial powers in China agreed upon international action because the anti-foreign movement in China threatened the open door policy.<sup>133</sup> The concept of (Western) civilization was used to justify the open door policy in China. *The Times* wrote euphorically of “the sentiment of solidarity which at the present moment animates all civilised peoples”<sup>134</sup> and viewed the relief force as the “great joint enterprise of civilization”.<sup>135</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* was more critical:

133 See PRO FO 405/92, Nos. 274, 275, 277, 277 and 279.

134 *The Times* 11 July 1900.

135 *The Times* 4 Aug 1900.

To the Chinese themselves this advance of a mixed European force for the purpose of restoring order must look remarkably like an invasion of their country. They can only see in it a further development of the process by which in the last three years China has been lopped, on one pretext or another, of a seaport here and a province there [...] Europe has worked up this movement by its aggressions upon China, and now that the movement has come to a head it finds Europe ill-prepared.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the *Manchester Guardian*'s reservations, the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* adhered to the concept of Western civilization throughout the portrayal of the events in China. The articles about the siege of the Foreign Legations in Beijing are exemplary of this discourse. The belief that Western civilization was on top of the racial and cultural hierarchy is evident in an article from *The Times* which imagined how the foreigners were murdered in Beijing (it later turned out that they survived). It is interesting which values were associated with Western civilization because *The Times*' portrayal of the event turns Westerners into martyrs who personified Western civilization:

The Europeans fought with calm courage to the end against overwhelming hordes of fanatical barbarians thirsting for their blood. While their ammunition lasted they defied the Chinese artillery and rifle fire and beat back wave after wave of their assailants. When the last cartridge was gone their hour had come. They met it like men. Standing to their battered defences they stayed the onrush of the Chinese, until, borne down by sheer weight of numbers, they perished at their posts. They have died as we would have them to die, fighting to the last for the helpless women and children who were to be butchered over their dead bodies [...] All that remains for us is to mourn and to avenge them.<sup>137</sup>

It is interesting that the article indirectly acknowledges its reconstruction (if not fabrication) of the massacre (“they have died as we would have them”). Since the massacre never occurred in reality, its description in *The Times* is a prime example of how the Chinese were constructed as the opposite of Western civilization: The Westerners are presented courageous and loyal men who do their best to protect the women and children while the Chinese are described as blood-thirsty, fanatical barbarian hordes that butcher helpless women and children. Such an image of heroes on the battlefield justified vengeance on the Chinese

136 *Manchester Guardian* 16 June 1900.

137 *The Times* 17 July 1900. The Chinese also viewed themselves as the Centre of the Earth (the Chinese name for China, *zhongguo* 中国, means Middle Kingdom) and other people as barbarians who were culturally backward: KIERNAN, 1995:156–157; ZARROW, 2005:55.

(i.e. the barbarians) and further imperial action. Only the *Manchester Guardian* kept questioning why such a situation could happen in the first place:

Our aggressions, particularly in China, have been justified upon Free Trade principles. In reality the Free Trade doctrine was that trade follows not the flag but the price list [...] The attempt to impose European civilisation on the Chinese – an attempt which however much veneered with talk of a beneficent mission, is in reality dictated by commercial considerations which we believe to be short-sighted as well as selfish – will bring us face to face with problems as grave as any that Europe has yet had to solve in dealing with a semi-civilised community.<sup>138</sup>

However, as the quote above shows, even the *Manchester Guardian* described the Chinese as less civilized, implying that Western civilization was generally accepted to be superior to any other kind of civilization or culture. The concept of Western civilization was also used by British newspapers to negate reports about international rivalry in China. In the 1890s China had been declared open territory for imperial powers which increased international rivalry. Yet, the Boxer Rebellion required that foreign powers acted as allies not rivals.

## Imperial Rivalry

After the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) imperial rivalries increased because the war ended the treaty-port era in China and marked the beginning of its partition among imperial powers who attempted to create spheres of interest in China.<sup>139</sup> The Sino-Japanese War made the Chinese government financially dependent on Western nations because it had to take out more loans in order to pay for the indemnity.<sup>140</sup> In return for the loans the Qing government gave the lending powers railway and mining concessions which gave the respective power control over Chinese territory.<sup>141</sup> The Sino-Japanese War changed the nature of demands that foreign powers made to China. Before the war, foreign powers asked for mostly commercial privileges but after 1895 they wanted territory.<sup>142</sup> The establishment of foreign spheres of influence in China was also justified by

138 *Manchester Guardian* 19 June 1900.

139 PAIN, 2003:8–9.

140 WILGUS, 1987:32–33.

141 MCLEAN, 1976:300.

142 PAIN, 2003:322.

claiming that the Chinese government could not manage its affairs because the whole system was corrupt.<sup>143</sup> Thus, in the 1890s a scramble for territories in China set in. Eventually, Russia controlled northern China, Britain Hong Kong, Kowloon, the Yangzi Valley and Weihaiwei, Germany Shandong, and France southern China.<sup>144</sup>

Lanxin Xiang points out that the rivalry increased after 1895 because many diplomats stationed in China were replaced with Africanists or men who had participated in the Scramble for Africa (MacDonald, Edmund von Heyking, Giacomo de Martino, etc.). Most of these new ministers had no knowledge about Chinese affairs and were not interested in Chinese politics, instead focusing on foreign competition in China. As a result, the Boxer movement was ignored by the foreign powers throughout 1899 due to a mutual suspicion that prevented them from deciding upon a common policy against the anti-foreign movement.<sup>145</sup>

Even during the Boxer Rebellion imperial rivalry did not completely disappear and mutual suspicion amongst the allied powers about each other's ulterior motives remained. For example, when it became clear that Japanese troops would be able to get to China quicker than European troops, *The Times* hailed Japan as “this young and vigorous recruit to the Concert of Civilization”.<sup>146</sup> However, only five days later *The Times* became worried about Japan's imperial interests in China and stated: “It is quite possible that we are all taking considerable risks in allowing Japan to land a large army in China, but, unfortunately, the risks are very great whatever line of conduct the Powers may pursue.”<sup>147</sup> It is very likely that this sudden change of attitude was linked to Britain's fears of a large number of Japanese troops because Japan's contingent in the international relief force was bigger than any other allied country's. Consequently, fears of Japanese expansion in China increased. Britain agreed to Japan's participation in the international relief force at least partly because there were not enough British troops available to send to China as they were already engaged in South Africa.<sup>148</sup>

The continuation of imperial rivalries in China was illustrated in a cartoon from *Punch*:

143 Paine, 2003:304.

144 Paine, 2003:304–309; Zarrow, 2005:7–8; Spence, 1990:230–231; Xiang, 2003:68–70.

145 Xiang, 2003:28–29, 42–45 and 120–127.

146 *The Times* 7 July 1900.

147 *The Times* 12 July 1900.

148 Giffard, 1994:19–20.



*Fig. 4: “The Same old bear. Russian Bear (to British Lion): ‘You’ve got so much to do elsewhere, I’ll tackle this obstreperous Party.’ British Lion: ‘Oh thanks! But I wouldn’t leave you alone with him for worlds!’” (Punch, 13 June 1900).*

Two things in particular are interesting in the above illustration: the depiction of China and the Anglo-Russian rivalry. China is represented by the Chinese dragon, symbolizing the yellow peril. The dragon is holding ancient weapons like a dagger and a torch. The imperial powers, however, are holding modern weapons like rifles. Therefore, the illustration adheres to the discourse about modernity and technology, which legitimized imperialism for technologically advanced nations as part of the civilizing mission.<sup>149</sup> The main focus of the caricature is the Anglo-Russian rivalry. Russia was considered the biggest rival for Britain in China. The Anglo-Russian rivalry was based on conflicting spheres of interests in Asia. Russia had been denied access to the Straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles in 1878, so as a result it was interested in Asia for ice-free harbours, but Britain considered this a threat to the Indian borders in Central Asia.<sup>150</sup> The Li-Lobanov Agreement of 1896 further increased Anglo-Russian

149 For this discourse see ADAS, 1989.

150 PORTER, 2004:153–154; WILGUS, 1987:3–4 and 26–27; BARTLETT, 1993:76–100.

rivalry in China because Russia gained Manchurian railway concessions.<sup>151</sup> During the Boxer Rebellion the British government feared that Russia could take advantage of the situation in Beijing and occupy further territory. Thus, already during preparations for international action in China the Admiralty warned Seymour:

There are many possible dangers; the most serious is that Russia should be moved to occupy the whole or part of Peking. It would be very difficult to move her out. We must, therefore, if possible, avoid making her wish to occupy Peking; but if she shows signs of intending to do so, we should occupy some important part simultaneously so far as our resources enable us to do so. Arrangements, of course, will be made with the other Powers, but they are less important.<sup>152</sup>

The international rivalry surfaced again during the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion when foreign troops looted Beijing and the surrounding areas. The following illustration from Punch depicts how the soldiers tried to loot whatever they could. Driven by imperial rivalry they thereby tried to outdo the booty of soldiers from other nations. As a consequence, China once more was reduced from yellow peril to the theatre of international rivalry.

151 XIANG, 2003:44–45.

152 “Admiralty to Vice-Admiral Sir E. Seymour from 7 June 1900”, PRO FO 405/92, No. 176.



*Fig. 5: "Daring Dogs! British sailor: 'We don't want to live in no bloomin' pagoda, do we?' German sailor: 'Nein! But subbosin' oder barties vants to ogguby him?' British sailor: 'Why, then, we bloomin' well reserves to ourselves the right to talk it over!'" (Punch, 31 October 1900).*

Competition among foreign powers to gain as much as possible from the Boxer Rebellion not only resulted in looting but also in the construction of additional telegraph lines in China. Therefore, the telegraph not only served to support imperialism but was actually used as a colonizing instrument. Western companies took full advantage of the weakness of the Chinese government to lay more telegraph cables without their permission.<sup>153</sup> Already during the Boxer Rebellion Acting Consul-General Warren suggested to Lord Salisbury that additional cables should be laid.<sup>154</sup> After the Boxer Rebellion a British cable was laid between Shanghai and the British base Weihaiwei so that telegrams did not need

153 HEADRICK, 1991:60–62.

154 "Acting Consul-General Warren to the Marquess of Salisbury", PRO FO 405/92, No. 340.

to be sent via the Chinese landline. This cable was used to inform the British government about the actions of the other imperial powers.<sup>155</sup> The international rivalry was increased by telegraph lines and led to such projects as the British government’s all-red route across the globe: The “all-red” referred to British territory which was marked red on contemporary maps. By 1902 Britain had cables to every colony.<sup>156</sup>

## Conclusion

The analysis of the articles on the Boxer Rebellion in three different British newspapers demonstrates that there existed differences in perceptions which can be explained with the political orientation of the newspapers. Thus, the *Manchester Guardian* criticised British imperialist action in China and blamed the Boxer Rebellion on Western economic ambitions and gunboat diplomacy. *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, depicted the Chinese as brutal savages who for no apparent reason murdered any foreigner that they could find, thereby justifying the foreign powers’ occupation of much parts of China. Nevertheless, there were also perceptions which all the newspapers had in common. This was at least in part due to the fact that the newspaper editors could not access first-hand information from their foreign correspondents in Beijing because the telegraph lines had been cut by the Boxers. Furthermore, once diplomatic communication from Beijing stopped, the only information available was based on rumours. Many of the rumours which were printed in newspapers referred to the yellow peril, a major discourse at that time which was based on racial theories and fears related to labour and immigration policies.

British newspapers also had to explain the nature of the Boxer movement because it was directed against foreigners in China. While only the *Manchester Guardian* questioned British imperialism in China, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* used the concept of Western civilization to exalt Western culture, degrade Chinese culture, and legitimise the British occupation of Chinese territory. The concept of Western civilization was based on scientific theories like Social Darwinism and was part of the discourse of empire and nationalism in Britain. Apart from justifying imperialism, it also implied a strong bond between the allied countries in China. The reality, however, was quite the opposite. Throughout the

155 KENNEDY, 1971:737; HEADRICK, 1988:107.

156 HEADRICK, 1981:162–163; 1988:108–116; 1991:52–54 and 83–85.

Boxer Rebellion, international rivalries remained and made actions like the international relief force difficult.

The concept “Western civilization against Eastern barbarism” is still used in the press and politics today. Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard points out: “in the discourses of the media, politicians refer to ‘we’ *the civilized world*, the ‘*free democracies*’, ‘*the West*’, ‘*the free world*’, in contrast with ‘the other’ Eastern countries, where the terrorists may come from.”<sup>157</sup> Esra Sandikcioglu examined coverage of the Gulf Crisis from 16 January to 28 February 1991 in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and concluded that the (American) media created an image of Islam which justified a war with Islamic countries in order to protect Western societies or civilization. Consequently, Iraqis personified the Orient while Americans stood for the West.<sup>158</sup> The analysis of British newspaper reports about the Boxer Rebellion shows how the dichotomy of Western civilization and barbaric other was used to justify imperialism and wars. It also demonstrates that the vocabulary used currently in the “war on terrorism” has a tradition of over a century.

During the Boxer Rebellion, media criticism of government decisions failed to make a significant impact upon the public opinion. For example, the *Manchester Guardian*, the only big newspaper which criticised Britain’s involvement in the Boxer Rebellion and questioned British imperialism, only had a limited influence on the public opinion and remained principally a paper for the educated elite; its anti-jingoism was too radical for most British readers. Instead, those newspapers which had sensational articles with derogatory language like the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* seemed to dominate public opinion with the *Daily Mail* targeting the working class and *The Times* the upper classes. As a result, the potential reappraisal of the Boxer Rebellion and of the ideological implications in partaking in such a conflict went largely unnoticed. However, this does not mean that media challenging governments are powerless: The US mid-term elections in 2006 have demonstrated that it is indeed possible for media to challenge a government’s policy and thereby influence public opinion to such a degree that a government’s ideology used to legitimize military actions is questioned.

157 CALDAS-COULTHARD, 2003:272.

158 SANDIKCIOGLU, 2000:299–301.

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