

NOVEMBER 2010

CHINA MEETS THE WEST

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO
IN HENAN PROVINCE -- CENTRAL CHINA**

**STORIES OF CONFLICT, LEARNING, MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND
ADAPTATION AS AMERICAN MISSIONARIES INTERACTED WITH THE
PRACTICES AND VALUES OF CHINA'S ANCIENT CIVILIZATION AND FACED
CHINESE HOSTILITY TO EARLIER EXPLOITATION BY WESTERN NATIONS**

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Introduction to China Service Venture Presentation

NOVEMBER 6 2010

This is the story of how young, idealistic Norwegian/Americans lived and learned as they carried out their missionary responsibilities in central China in the first years of the 20th century. As background, we should first gain a sense of the culture, values and society norms that prevailed throughout China at that time. These were an outgrowth of China's own history and, particularly, the history of China's interactions with the Western world

Rather than giving a chronology of dynasties, wars, treaties, revolutions etc., I will show a picture or cartoon covering some event or activity that may have significance to Chinese beliefs and values. We will identify what the picture is about and try to project the impact of the event on the experiences of the protagonists in our story, my parents. We must then, of course, explore the problems, adaptations, compromises necessary for effective Christian missionary programs in a what was for them a strange and exotic environment.

MARCO POLO -- circa 1275

It may be a stretch to assert that what happened in the late 1200's had anything to do with affairs in China in the early years of the 20th century. In Marco Polo's time Europe was a fragmented feudal society of perhaps 50 million with little culture aside from the Catholic church. China, on the other hand, was culturally and scientifically centuries ahead of Europe. China had a standing army of 1 million soldiers controlling a vast empire. Numerous armies associated with each European feudal kingdom pursued destructive wars with each other for land, resources and to settle religious differences. The average citizen of China was much better off than his European counterpart in most levels of society but the lot of the peasant and working classes in both societies was, of course, abysmal.

Marco Polo was able to ingratiate himself in the Chinese court, perhaps admitted because of personal charm and strange stories of Europe. The emperor assigned Marco Polo to "rule" a large southern city in China and he acquitted his responsibility very well.

Perhaps the only carry-over from Marco's China sojourn to the topic of China/foreign relations relevant to our main interest, the interrelation of China and the West in the early 20th century, was a carry-over of the condescension of China's elite towards foreign societies. China had far superior technical capabilities (compass, paper money, printing, silk etc.) and sought nothing from the West. When Marco Polo returned to Europe, however, the emperor sent along a letter addressed to the Pope in Rome requesting 100 Christian missionaries. It seems that Marco Polo's religion interested the emperor. There is, however, no record that the Pope responded to the emperor's request.



MARCO POLO --- CONTINUED

Marco Polo knelt before the Chinese (Manchu) emperor and offered "tribute". He pleased the emperor and was richly rewarded, both in treasure and in winning an important political appointment in China's government.

Some hundreds of years later emissaries to China from England refused to prostrate themselves before the Chinese emperor at the time. They further irritated the Court by attempting discussions on "trade" rather than "tribute". Trade was considered an issue below the emperor's concern as well as of his closest Confucian advisors. The English deputation was turned away and had little success in their mission.



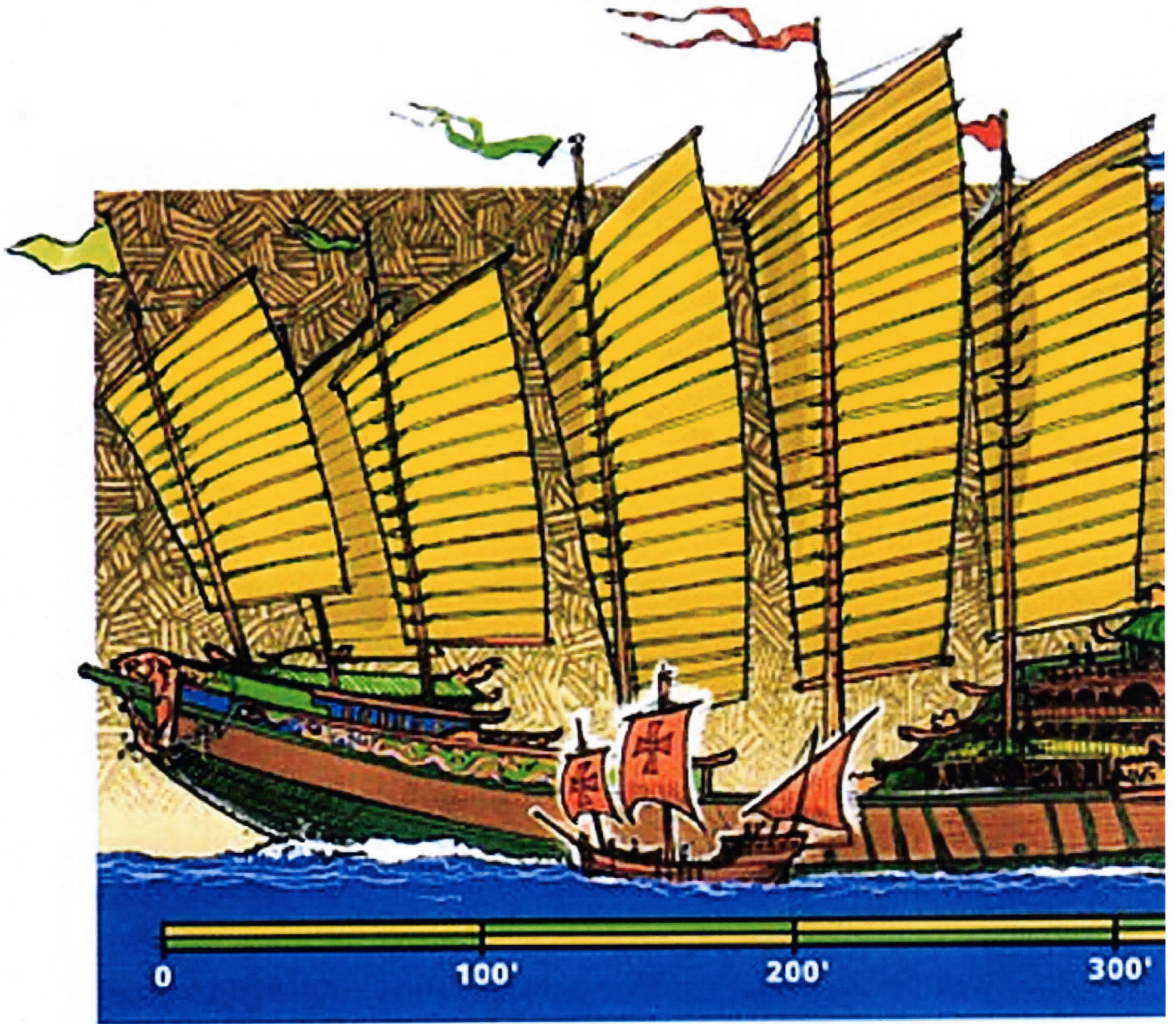
ZHENG HE AND CHINA'S GREAT ARMADA

A short century or so after Marco Polo a great Ming armada made history with seven epic voyages ranging throughout the entire South Pacific waters and as far West as the coast of Africa. The fleet was possible because in Marco Polo's time China had planted some 1 billion trees suitable for lumber -- reportedly 50 million trees in a single year -- --figures that make today's environmental effort seem puny by comparison. The admiral was a towering man from, a non-Chinese Muslim from China's remote interior Yunnan province. The fact that such a man, castrated for service in the Imperial court, could rise to this level says much about the meritocracy that apparently prevailed in China's leadership at the time.

The ships dwarfed anything in Europe at the time, not only in size (a single ship in the Chinese fleet could accommodate on one deck the combined fleets of Columbus and Vasco da Gama) but were superior in navigation and weaponry as well. Zheng He saw a new world leadership role for China and set out to initiate it.

In 1435 the Imperial court's Confucian scholars persuaded the Emperor that foreign contacts and the taste for foreign wares would lead to a decline of the dynasty. It may or may not be true historically, but it is certainly valid symbolically, that the emperor ordered Zheng He beheaded and the fleet burned.

China thus moved from a progressive outward-looking empire to a country that purposefully isolated itself from the rest of the world. The implications of this trajectory affects China through the centuries that follow going as far as the social and political environment at the first years of the 20th century.



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CARDINAL RICCI -- CIRCA 1600

Cardinal Ricci was accepted as a visitor and Christian advocate to the Imperial court in the declining years of the Ming Dynasty. His approach was that the Chinese people always believed in God and he was only presenting a more perfect manifestation of God. Of course, the Pope still had a preeminent role -- far from acceptable to the Emperor. His muted Christian message was also not acceptable to the Dominican and Franciscan Orders of the Catholic Church and they encouraged the Pope to outlaw his ministry.

Despite all, Ricci established a number of Catholic constituencies in China, not necessarily at the capitol. Interestingly, these continued as functioning Christian communities for more than 300 years, from his time until the 1920's. A number Chinese from these Christian congregations came into prominence as leaders of government and business activities in Western-Chinese relationships at that time. (Dr. Carol Hamrin of George Mason University provides specifics in her recent books - Salt and Light -- Vols. 1& 2))

The persistence of Christianity in China makes two important points about China over these Chinese centuries. The first is that Chinese society was, and recently still is, both tolerant and accepting, of religious practice divergent from the majority practices. Other examples are the persistence Nestorian Christians, Jewish enclaves and Moslem communities in areas where they are a small minority. A second point is that members of the few historic Christian communities rose to leadership roles in government and business far out of proportion to their statistical significance in the broader Chinese society.



BUDDHISM IN CHINA

Buddhism first entered China from India at about the time of Christ. Over the following twenty centuries, and in many forms and “schools”, Buddhism dominated religious life and belief in China. It adapted and absorbed many aspects of Chinese indigenous Taoism and Confucianism as well as some aspects of Animism.

The emperor as the “Son of Heaven”, and the mediator between the gods and man, gave a nationwide legitimacy to Buddhist beliefs and practices. It also exposed the emperor to being deposed by revolution when the harvest failed and the nation judged he had lost the “Mandate of Heaven”! Roman Catholic mission efforts were trivial in scale when compared to the thousands of monks and scholars out of India building shrines and temples throughout the country. The Catholics also suffered the disadvantage of having no “Son of Heaven” or equivalent role for the emperor and expecting the emperor to recognize the primacy of the Pope on religious belief and practice was an insurmountable handicap to acceptance in the Imperial court.

Buddhists were not overtly hostile to Protestant missionaries who first arrived in China beginning about in 1850. The people of China, similarly, felt at ease considering another new religion because they were at ease with their own overlapping beliefs and practices ranging from ancestor worship, multiple “special purpose” deities represented by idols in the local temple, “feng-shui” spirit concerns etc.

My father often accepted the hospitality of Buddhist temples both for overnight accommodations, and a place to assemble those in the to hear Christian invitations to attend local meetings, and perhaps enroll in “Christian Inquirers” classes presented in the community. Both Christians and Moslems had a religious concept at the time foreign to the Chinese approach to religion -- they expected exclusivity as expressed in second part of the first commandment -- “Thou shalt have no other Gods (before me).



THE OPIUM WARS

We now come to a series of events that poisoned the relationship of China with the rest of the world.

The first are the two so-called “Opium Wars“ in the mid 1800’s. There was an active trade between the West and China -- China had many products desired by the West (silk, porcelain, and even technology) while the West had little to offer in return. China demanded and received payment in silver with the result that the preponderance of silver in the world gravitated to China. There was, however, a vast illicit trade of opium (illegal in China but amounting to 18,000 “casks” in 1826 alone). A new Chinese governor decided to enforce Chinese law while his government in Peking reacted with “Confucian contempt” on such matters as trade.

The West, specifically England, did have one advantage, superior military capability. Under the banner of “free trade” China’s inadequate navy was defeated in two wars, 1839-1842 and 1859-1860.



TREATY OF NANKING - 1842

This was the first of a number of “unequal treaties” that focused the Chinese peoples’ resentment of “foreign privileges” which culminated in the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century. It provided “treaty ports” that facilitated the opium trade but, admittedly, other legitimate trade as well. Hong Kong was ceded to England and China paid an immense fine in silver to as an “indemnity”.

Foreigners had a special status, “extraterritoriality”, being subject to the laws of their home countries but immune from Chinese law. Chinese central government agencies throughout China were required to protect these foreign citizen rights. These included thousands of missionaries from throughout the Christian world who came, with much love, modern medicine, education and self-sacrifice, to bring the Christian message to China’s massive population.



THE TAIPING REBELLION -- 1850-1864

It is amazing that a religious war that cost more lives (20-30 million) than any war in the 19th century receives at most a footnote in history. The forces of a peoples revolution led by a heterodox Christian convert were finally defeated by the combined forces of the Quing emperor and support from Western armies led by the English and the French. The redoubtable "Chinese Gordon" was a significant participant working with the Imperial Chinese forces. To defeat the "Taipings".

Hong Xi studied the Bible with a Christian missionary. He failed the Imperial Exams for a government post and had a vision that he was the younger brother of Jesus. His message, which captured the allegiance of the peasant Chinese was, at the core, both Western and Christian. The Bible replaced Confucian teachings. It featured the adoption of the solar calendar, prohibition of foot binding of females and the equality of sexes. There were also prohibitions against polygamy, prostitution, slavery, tobacco and gambling. The revolution prevailed in much of central China and in 1858 captured Nanking. Private property was also forbidden by the revolutionaries and, in later years, the movement was much admired by Mao.

There was no leadership structure to sustain the revolution despite a number of military victories over Imperial armies. The Western Powers, led by the English and the French, felt threatened by the prospect of an "independent" Chinese entity and came to the aid of the Emperor. With military help from the English and French, the Quing Dynasty's armies ultimately defeated the "Taipings". In a few short years the "Taipings" were forgotten and the old order of Imperial rule, as well as the "unequal" Chinese-Western relationships growing out the Treaty of Nanking again prevailed.



SIR ROBERT HART -- IN CHINA 1853-1906

Sir Robert Hart may be the most appreciated foreigner in Chinese history. After the Opium War the Chinese Government needed import tariffs to support the federal establishment. The corruption and incompetence of Chinese customs agents and their employees motivated the Chinese govt. to appoint a British citizen commissioner of customs. He brought in young men from England and Scotland to act as customs officers and instituted financial controls so the revenue from customs revenue grew from 7 million to 26 million "taels" in a few short years. He, however, served the interests of China and not Britain or any foreign interests throughout almost 50 years in the employ of the Qing dynasty.

Some may be aware of the story that, among other proposals to increase China's military capability he offered to buy, equip and train a Chinese navy to limit the monopoly on military power represented by foreign gunboats at the treaty ports and on the rivers throughout China. The Chinese chose to do it on their own but the empress dowager was able to divert the funds provided to build her own "navy" --- the nautical summer palace on a lake near Beijing which now is a popular tourist attraction!

Memorials to his service to China still stand in Beijing and Shanghai unmolested by years of anti-foreign sentiment by the Chinese and even unmolested in the excesses of the Cultural Revolution of the late Communist era.



SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA IN PEKING

Sir Robert Hart -- director

Sir Robert Hart did not have an opportunity to “buy” a modern navy for the Chinese government. He did, however, buy and direct a full scale symphony orchestra for the city of Peking.

A letter to his factotum in London went something like this:

“I have decided to establish a symphony orchestra to improve the cultural and social life of Peking. Please purchase and ship to me all of the instruments needed for a symphony orchestra. Purchase the finest instruments available in London or on the continent. Also, please employ a qualified instructor in wind instruments and also one for percussion. I will train the string players myself and direct the orchestra.”

Hart's virtually daily letters to London are published in two very large volumes. They document seemingly every event in his daily life and service in intricate detail. There is an almost daily reckoning of his urinary problems, symptoms, attempted treatments etc. continuing through his time in China. Despite this, Hart was able to retire to England for about 10 years and live to the age of 76

The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 was a sore disappointment for Sir. Hart. It was both a rejection of the policies of the Qing government to protect foreign interests throughout China (although they compromised this position at the height of the Revolutionary successes) and of Western-China rapprochement in many areas of China. He, and most of the foreign community in Peking, survived the siege of Peking by the Boxers. The relief of Peking by an International military force consisting of English, Japanese, French, American and others is well documented in news and film.



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THE BOXER REBELLION

Te last historical movement that shaped the mood of the Chinese people at the time of my parents' entry to China was the grass roots rebellion against foreigners and the privileged status they enjoyed in China at the time. It was also a rebellion against Quing government's programs to abide by treaties with Western nations giving special protections and privileges to foreign interests in China.

The incident that sparked the boxer Rebellion was the decision of a local Chinese court to rule in favor of the expropriation of a Buddhist temple to be converted to a Roman Catholic church. The anti-foreign, anti government uprising soon spread throughout much of China. In essence, it reflected resentment at the humiliation imposed on the Chinese people by the treaties agreed to by the government giving privileged and prerogatives to foreigners. Before the government regained control 270 foreign missionaries in parts of china and as many as 18,000 Chinese who had become professing Christians were killed.

The peace agreement between the Quing government and foreign powers reinforced the resentment and humiliation of the Chinese people further by imposing an indemnity of 450 million "taels" of silver payable over several years to some 12 foreign governments whose interests in China were affected. This represented an amount some twice the total revenues of the federal government of China at the time! To its credit, The United States returned its full share of the indemnity to China and earned substantial goodwill as a result.

