China's Participation in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition

BY BRIAN B. ARENDT

The Chinese exhibits featured both modern works as well as more traditional ones, such as this inlaid table. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

Image left — When the Chinese participation in the St. Louis World's Fair was complete, most items were not returned to China but sold in the United States to pay for return passage. This desk is an example of an object in the Missouri History Museum's collection that reflects the influence of Western-style furniture on traditional Chinese design. This is also an example of the numerous objects left behind at the end of the exposition. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

As China approached the beginning of the twentieth century, sentiment was beginning to turn against those nations that were increasingly encroaching on its territory. It was the age of imperial expansion, and China was experiencing the effects. In 1897, Germany established a foothold in the port of Jiazhouwan in the Shantung peninsula. The intrusion into this part of China, where Confucius had been born, sparked vehement opposition. The result was the rise of anti-foreign protest. Leading the opposition in Shantung was a martial-arts organization known as the "Boxers." While the Boxers were marginal at first, the Qing government, which was increasingly under pressure to cede territory and developmental rights to foreign powers, saw this movement as an opportunity for action. Boxer contingents responded by blocking the exit of foreign nationals from Beijing and laying siege to foreign legations. As rumors spread in the world's capitals that the foreign inhabitants of Beijing had been slaughtered, an international military force landed in the port of Tianjin and reoccupied the capital. The Empress Dowager and the emperor fled.

Housed in the Palace of Manufactures on the Fair's grounds were a number of examples of Chinese traditional handicrafts. This aspect of the Chinese exhibit nearly did not take place. Upon entering the United States, a number of Chinese workers and merchants were detained by U.S. immigration officials and nearly deported. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

With the city of Beijing occupied, and with her armies in the south of China unwilling to support the central government, the emperor and the Empress Dowager agreed to sign a treaty, the Boxer Protocol. The Qing dynasty would be forced to pay a severe penalty in the form of a £67 million indemnity, essentially removing any hope of the further economic development of China. For the United States, the indemnity provided an opportunity to build a friendlier relationship with China as part of its "Open Door" policy. The United States agreed to set aside its portion of the Boxer Indemnity as scholarships for Chinese students wishing to study in American colleges and universities. Also as a consequence, the United States sought economic opportunities by agreeing to create a development bank to assist in railroad construction in Manchuria.

Returning in defeat to Beijing, the empress Dowager and the emperor would agree, at last, to serious reform efforts. A number of changes to China's institutions were proposed. China would create a Western-style foreign ministry to replace its traditional approach to diplomacy, the educational system would more closely resemble Western-style education systems, and the imperial government would examine the possibility of creating a constitutional government. This was the situation in China when the St. Louis World's Fair organizers sought it out as a participant.

Fair organizers succeeded in gaining China's participation. The Chinese exhibit at the 1904 World's Fair was perhaps the first time China showed evidence of its traditional culture to the world on such a large scale. To emphasize the exhibit's importance, the Qing government dispatched an imperial prince, Prince Pulun, to St. Louis and the United States as a special commissioner for the Chinese exhibit. While the huge effort China exerted in assembling a vast quantity of its wares greatly impressed fair attendants, poor treatment by immigration officials enforcing a ban on Chinese immigration marred the experience and provided the impetus for a boycott of American goods during 1905, one of the first examples

of protests against a foreign power using an economic boycott.

China Struggles to Reform

After Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, it became clear to scholars, officials, and the monarchy that previous efforts at the "self-strengthening" of the empire had failed. China's primary military and political leader at the time, Li Hongzhang, was overshadowed by Zhang Zhidong and Weng Tonghe, both of whom wanted China to implement limited reforms and adopt only some Western ideas. However, at this time, a group of patriotic young radical officials following the reformer, Kang Youwei, gathered together. Kang convinced the young emperor, Guangxu, that reforms were vital. This, however, alienated Cixi, the Empress Dowager, who was China's most powerful figure.[1]

In 1897, Germany's occupation of Jiaozhou Bay spurred Kang Youwei into action. He suggested that the emperor follow a policy of reform modeled after the Meiji Restoration in Japan, make institutional reforms, and encourage changes in the administration of the provinces. Kang Youwei began the "Hundred-Day Reforms" on the pretext that with the arrival of the Westerners and the Japanese in China, external policy had become more important. Governments had to look anew at foreign relations, industrialization, and administration. To institute these changes, Emperor Guangxu must seize power from the Empress Dowager. Their effort came to naught though, in part because China's most powerful military figure at that time, Yuan Shikai, did not aid the reformers.[2]

Meanwhile the presence of Germany in Jiaozhou Bay stirred outrage in the Shantung Peninsula. In December of 1899, the Empress Dowager gave approval to use the Boxer Movement, a society of anti-foreign martial arts practitioners opposed to foreigners living in China. Things grew more serious when, in May of 1900, China's regular army joined with the Boxers to form a single force. Reactionaries dominated the imperial court, giving foreign diplomats the impression that the Manchu leadership would authorize an assault on the diplomatic compound in Beijing. Apparently, reactionaries were happy with the Empress Dowager's decision to attack the foreign legations because it gave them a way to vent their anger.[3]

The Boxer Rebellion failed. Allied military forces occupied Beijing, and, coupled with the Russian encroachment into Manchuria, American officials believed that it was important that the powers maintain a status quo in China. This is the origin of the United States' policy of the "Open Door" in China. After the Boxer Rebellion and the humiliating "Boxer Protocol" the Allied occupying council imposed, China's sovereignty was virtually gone. The Chinese gained a reputation for barbarism, while the strong Allied responses made China seem weak. With the failure of reform, a number of scholar-officials in China looked toward revolution.[4]

In January of 1901, after the foreign troops had humiliated China, the Empress Dowager finally issued orders to her officials to suggest changes based on Western or Japanese political systems. What they suggested was a modern education system, changes in civil service examinations to include contemporary subjects, an end to outdated military training, and more study and travel abroad.[5] The Empress Dowager's desires for reforms after the Boxer Rebellion were not sincere, though, and she had no intentions of bringing foreign elements into her administration.[6] Not all in China wanted to import Western ideas, despite the humiliating defeat in the Boxer Rebellion and the occupation of Beijing.

Foreign military occupation of Beijing in 1900-1901 showed to what extent non-Chinese interests in China had increased. Railway and mining loans China secured from international investors greatly increased its debt. These blows to China's pride initiated the first movement to recover the nation's sovereignty that it had lost beginning with the First Opium War. Nationalism was behind the call for reforms. The nationalist movement that developed centered on three goals: an end to imperialism; establishment of a modern, centralized state; and an end to the Manchu dynasty.[7] The first, the end to imperialism, was a goal illustrated by China's role in the 1904 World's Fair.

The Open Door Policy and Chinese Diplomacy

Protest against the poor treatment of Chinese arriving for the fair can be traced to a feeling among several Chinese officials, beginning in the 1890s, that China could curry favor with the U.S. to modify harsh elements of the unequal treaties.[8] Wu Tingfang, minister to the United States until 1902 and again from 1907 to 1909, argued with the imperial viceroy Zhang Zhitong that the United States was the only power with sympathy for China. The court should try to enlist America's help against Russian, French, and Japanese encroachment on its frontiers.[9] At the time of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, it was clear that the American image of China was that of a country needing American goods, education, and democracy. This was particularly true after Theodore Roosevelt took office in 1901. Roosevelt's policy in China was to secure a large share of China's international trade for the United States and to use a strong military to block other powers from dominating it.[10]

While the United States sought an "Open Door" in China, a coterie of politicians had secured a "Closed Door" for immigrants from China. After 1898, these labor "exclusionists" and those politicians advocating limited access to United States citizenship gained control of the Bureau of Immigration. All states and local authorities attempted to root out Chinese emigrants. These policies had an impact on the Sino-American relationship as the start of the World's Fair loomed. New administrators in the Bureau of Immigration used intimidation, abuse, and arbitrary decisions to wheedle out Chinese travelers arriving on the West Coast. Agents used continuous, bullying interrogations to trap immigrants into conceding they were laborers and not merchants.[11] What seemed to

have concerned Qing dynasty officials, though, was not so much the exclusion of poor Chinese laborers in the U.S., but the gruff treatment merchants, students, and functionaries were receiving at the American gates.

In this atmosphere of trouble, Wu Tingfang, Minister to the United States, worked against exclusionist tactics by telling the Chinese people at home that their fellow nationals in the U.S. were being treated not as equals but as criminals.[12] Chinese immigrants in the U.S. were pleased with Wu's efforts on their behalf, but they believed nothing would come of negotiating with Washington as long as China was a weak and defeated power.[13] Those Americans supporting the Open Door policy agreed with Wu Tingfang's assertions and believed that better treatment of Chinese travelers to the U.S. would help gain access to the China market.[14]

During the same period, in 1903, the Roosevelt administration turned the Bureau of Immigration over to the Department of Commerce and Labor. A California official, Victor H. Metcalf, headed the Commerce department, and he was ill-disposed toward Chinese immigrants. Metcalf's desire was not only to prevent immigration but to drive out all Chinese living in the U.S. Minister Wu reacted by warning the administration in Washington that China might launch a boycott of American goods if the policy continued.[15]

Tension between Beijing and Washington ultimately led to China's demand to renegotiate the Gresham-Yang Treaty of 1894 with the United States which, negotiated during a period in which China was facing war with Japan, had conceded the right to restrict Chinese immigrants and deport those already residing in the United States. The Roosevelt administration refused to do so. Continued restrictions against the Chinese in the U.S. spurred some merchants in China to boycott American goods, which the Qing government initially supported.[16]

Just as the Chinese exhibit for the fair was being assembled, serious questions in Sino-American relations were emerging. Prince Qing, a high-placed noble and China's foreign minister, wrote the American representative in China that not only would China not continue the Sino-American treaty but would not renew it in its present form. Prince Qing did desire a treaty, though, for, he said, "in lieu of the friendly relations which have always existed between China and the United States, propositions looking to a satisfactory adjustment of the question by a new treaty will be entertained."[17]

The World's Fair and Sino-American Relations

Events such as the Qing dynasty's reform movement, the Open Door policy of the U.S., and the struggle over immigration had a definite impact on Chinese participation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The fair was an opportunity for China to gain international recognition through participation. The treatment of its delegates and merchants taking part in the exposition, though, dimmed the hopes of a number of prominent government officials that the United States would prove a friend in the international arena. There are some suggestions that the mistreatment during the fair (by American immigration agents and not fair attendants or fair representatives, it must be stated) ignited the boycott of American goods in 1905 in China. While the boycott ultimately failed, it was one of the first examples of a mass demonstration against foreigners in China without an accompanying armed uprising. Out of this boycott, we could say, came the precedent for the demonstrations of the May Fourth Movement of 1919.

Chinese merchants displaying items at the 1904 World's Fair were given severe restrictions, and though President Roosevelt assured them of better treatment, the Chinese at the fair were still badly handled despite their status as "guests."[18] The American administration was aware of the potential problems immigration agents could create. In a letter to Secretary of State John Hay, American Minister to China Edward Conger acknowledged that Prince Pulun would be the commissioner in chief for China to the 1904 World's Fair. Conger was clearly concerned for the Prince's treatment. He said that "since China is just now beginning to send her young princes abroad I apprehend that public or official courtesies extended to no one will be more gratefully appreciated than by Prince Pu Lun [*sic*] and his government."[19]

As it turned out, the prince did not experience rough handling. Histories of the World's Fair recorded that "Prince Pu Lun [*sic*], who upon his several visits to this country and to the Exposition, created a most favorable impression upon all who had the pleasure of seeing and meeting him." This continued when Pulun arrived in St. Louis. On May 6, 1904, the prince made a great impression on local St. Louis figures and their guests at an official reception.[20] Prior to Pulun's arrival, the Chinese imperial vice-commissioner Wang Gaiga had clearly stated a major motivation for China's participation. At the dedication ceremony, Wang said:

> From across the broad Pacific China beholds that civilization, of which she is the parent, assuming the perfect form, and shedding beneficial influence over a prosperous and a contented people. China, filled with wonder and admiration, is desirous of ascertaining the different stages her old civilization has passed through to attain the eminence it has reached today. Notwithstanding her great age, China is anxious to learn; and this Universal Exposition, being a universal educator, China will take her lessons from.[21]

Clearly China's plans for a new relationship with the United States, reflected in Commissioner Wang's speech, implied the need to acquire the benefits of industrialization and technological advances from the United States and the West in general. Though the Manchu government had long envied Western technology, Wang's speech suggested that China was now admitting that elements of Western society

and government could also be of benefit.

The presence of a Chinese delegation at the St. Louis World's Fair showed the willingness of the Chinese to alter their foreign policy.[22] Fair observers concurred regarding the significance of China's exposition at the fair. "China fully realized the importance of being adequately represented at the Exposition; not alone for the purpose of exhibiting her products and manufactures, but from a desire to show her harmonious commercial relations with all other nations," one chronicler of the fair noted.[23]

The fair was an opportunity for China to impress on Americans and the world the quality of its ancient culture. This is evident through the exhibits, which consisted of a variety of treasures collected from China's provinces. The dedication ceremony in May 1904 greatly impressed participants because of the presence of Prince Pulun and China's then-minister to the United States, Liang Cheng. The Chinese placed much hope on the strength of their exhibit, gaining them the support of Americans in their attempt to improve China's position in the world.[24]

In fact, Prince Pulun's trip to the U.S. was an opportunity to convey a message from the emperor, Guangxu, to President Roosevelt. The Emperor's letter described the importance of the 1904 World's Fair to Sino-American relations:

> From the commencement of China's friendly intercourse with the United States the relations between the two countries have been growing closer and closer every day. Now the holding at the city of St. Louis of an international exposition to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the purchase of Louisiana, the object of which is to bring

This photo depicts the Chinese imperial vice-commissioner, Wang Gaiga, standing with David R. Francis, president of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and with members of the Fair committee at the entrance to Brookings Hall on the campus of Washington University, not far from the location of the Chinese exhibit. Speaking at the ground breaking for the Chinese pavilion, he stressed China's need for industrial and technological progress. Prior to this, China's interest in Western nations was strictly to obtain technology, but the reform movements after the Boxer Rebellion were compelling the imperial government to look for broader benefits from Western contact. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

> together from every country on the surface of the globe its products and resources of every description for purposes of illustration and exhibition, gives us a fresh opportunity of manifesting our friendship.[25]

It was meant to exhibit the world's vast resources and diversity, but for China it was to signify the growing level of commerce that the United States had with that country, and, most appropriately, celebrated an event, the Louisiana Purchase, that thrust the United States toward the Pacific Ocean and Asia.

The negotiations for China's participation at the fair were the responsibility of John Barrett, previously the U.S. minister to Siam from 1893 to 1898. His trip in 1902 resulted in gaining much interest in Asia for participating in the World's Fair. While visiting China, he discussed the idea of China's participation with a number of prominent officials, including Zhang Zhitong and Yuan Shikai, who pressed the government to allow China to take part. This resulted in an audience for Barrett with the Emperor Guangxu and the Empress Dowager, who agreed to appoint a special commissioner to oversee preparations for China's participation.[26]

Once China agreed to participate in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the Imperial Vice-Commissioner Wang Gaiga arrived in St. Louis in July 1903, shortly after Chinese minister Liang Zheng had dedicated the exhibit. Commissioner Wang promised that China would provide some $500,000 to purchase Chinese silks, porcelains, and teas to display at the fair. Wang's appointment was instrumental to the exhibit's success, given his background as a former student at Yale University who was fluent in English. During his stay he participated in numerous social functions in St. Louis connected to the exposition, and he gave lectures on Chinese philosophy to the St. Louis Ethical Society.[27]

At the heart of China's participation in the World's Fair was the Chinese Pavilion, a building constructed as a replica of one of Prince Pulun's homes. The building

Postcards and other memorabilia of the St. Louis World's Fair depict the Chinese pavilion. At the entrance stands a traditional Chinese arch, built with upswept eaves typical of Chinese temples and pagodas. The pavilion behind the arch was constructed to resemble the palace of Prince Pulun containing a typical Chinese garden. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

China's participation in the St. Louis World's Fair was not restricted to the Chinese pavilion or the Palace of Manufactures. In fact, a small Chinese community grew around the Chinese exhibit that included workers and also actors, who participated in the Chinese theatre in the Pike area of the exposition. Many of these actors also experienced difficulty entering the U.S. to participate in the Fair, and required the intervention of China's minister to the United States to secure their safe entry. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

included a pagoda made of some six thousand crafted pieces of wood that included elements of ebony and ivory. Meanwhile, the items brought from China—some two thousand tons—were placed in fair buildings. These items included scrolls, jade, porcelain, coins, and costumes, as well as models of Chinese temples, houses, and an examination hall.[28]

One of the most remarked on items in the exhibit was a portrait of the Empress Dowager. Kate Carl, an American artist, had executed the painting while living in China. Donated by the wife of American Minister to China Edward Conger, the painting arrived in June of 1904 and was originally displayed in the Art Palace, today's St. Louis Art Museum. At the end of the fair it was officially donated to the United States and was placed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where it remains today.[29]

Another feature of the Chinese exhibit was the erection of a Chinese Village by a Chinese merchants' association from Philadelphia. The village consisted of a theater, a temple, a tea house, and a market selling silks, teas, and carvings. Some dozen Chinese children wandered the fair dressed in traditional costumes and urged fairgoers to visit the Chinese village. A group of Chinese acrobats also performed in the village, along with a number of musicians, who performed on traditional instruments. Chinese lanterns lighted the village at night.[30]

The treatment immigration officials dealt to Chinese participants at the fair marred their otherwise positive impression of the United States. John Barrett, special commissioner for Asia at the World's Fair, though he supported restrictive immigration policies, was shocked by the treatment of the Chinese officials and exhibitors and asserted that this almost caused the Chinese to withdraw from the fair. With this and an incident in which the family of Shanghai's mayor was detained in Boston, public

After the initial reception, Prince Pulun and Fair President Francis tour the Chinese contribution to the exposition, including the Chinese pavilion. The latter was constructed to resemble a palace belonging to Pulun in northern China. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

opinion in China called for a boycott of American goods.[31] Chroniclers of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition reported that China never objected to the 1880 Exclusion Act, but protested it in order to gain better treatment of those Chinese citizens who traveled to the U.S. with official permission.[32]

The Boycott of 1905

In May of 1905 the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce gathered to consider a request from overseas Chinese residents of San Francisco to begin a boycott of American goods. The Chamber of Commerce agreed to ask the central government in Beijing to express sympathy and to refuse further purchase of American goods if the discrimination against Chinese laborers in America continued. The imperial court sympathized with the treatment of its citizens in the United States, and the Empress Dowager expressed support on their behalf. She urged the cancellation of the Sino-American labor treaty. Working against the government's support for the boycott were acts of violence against American consulates and the imperial court's fear that antigovernment revolutionaries might take advantage of the situation to advance their cause.[33]

Although the government would formally end its support for a boycott in August of 1905, Prince Qing, president of the Chinese foreign ministry and guest at the World's Fair, sympathized with the position of the Chinese in the United States. American minister to China W. W. Rockhill considered the boycott a weapon China would use to force the United States to agree to a new labor treaty. On the other hand, Rockhill was instrumental in establishing the Open Door policy to China, and he promised that at the end of December the treatment of Chinese laborers would come before Congress. He issued a warning to the government in Beijing that the U.S. would not take kindly to threats to Americans and that Congress might insist China pay for damages to American trade. On his part, President Roosevelt was willing to advocate fairer treatment of Chinese residents in the U.S. He called upon Congress to enact laws leading to fair treatment of Chinese merchants and representatives, but not Chinese laborers. However, Congress was more concerned with the economic interests of Americans and did not take heed.[34]

To bring the matter to an end, the United States insisted that the Chinese government arrest those whom it believed were behind the boycott movement. One of those so identified was Wu Tingfang, former minister to the United States and the Chinese representative who had helped organize China's participation in the World's Fair. In fact, in 1900 Wu had advocated the use of boycotts to obtain better treatment for Chinese in the U.S. While serving as minister, Wu had sent letters to American newspapers advocating better treatment for Chinese residents. In 1902, Wu served as deputy minister in the Foreign Ministry and urged that if the United States continued to exclude and discriminate against Chinese people in America, China

would prohibit the presence of missionaries and merchants in China. American minister Edward H. Conger believed that Wu was a troublemaker. In fact, there are serious doubts that Wu was an agitator behind the scenes for the boycott, especially as he was accepted once again to serve as minister to the United States in 1907.[35]

The boycott had not ended due to American pressure, but as a result of other events concerning China's rights to exploit its own resources, which were of greater concern to the Qing government. Overall the damage to Sino-American trade was not significant, but American merchants were concerned for their position in China. Many would correspond with their representatives advocating more lenient treatment of Chinese laborers in order to help maintain their position in China. Whether the boycott succeeded or not, its importance was in the organization of a movement to assert China's national prestige and independence.[36]

The World's Fair of 1904 had a connection to the development of Sino-American relations in the early twentieth century. In the negotiations for China's participation in the fair, China saw a marvelous opportunity to build a positive image for the empire to a world whose most recent impression was that of hordes of "Boxers" besieging the American legation in Beijing. In fact, the Chinese exhibit at the fair appears to have accomplished this objective, for its section of the fair was popular and the presence of an imperial prince impressed an audience at a period in history when royalty was often not highly regarded. All was not well, however, for the grueling interrogations merchants and officials of the fair arriving from China experienced brought home to Beijing the impression that China was still not an equal in the world of diplomacy. Hence, when the suggestion of a boycott against American goods in 1905 reached the Qing government, it seemed an opportunity to peacefully protest the inequality remaining in Sino-American relations.

ENDNOTES

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[4] Ibid., 404-5.
[5] Ibid., 408-9.
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[7] *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913*, ed. Mary Clabaugh Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 3-4, 11.
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[18] Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 233.
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[27] Ibid., 62.
[28] Ibid., 63-64.
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[30] Ibid., 66.
[31] Israel, *Progressivism and the Open Door*, 24.
[32] Bennitt, *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, 289.
[33] Wong, Sin Kiong, *China's Anti-American Boycott Movement in 1905: A Study in Urban Protest* (Peter Leung, 2002), 39, and 145-46.
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[35] Ibid., 160-61.
[36] Ibid., 171-172.