

The Boxer Indemnity Scholarships: Education, Diplomacy, and the Making of Modern China

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Abstract: The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program emerged from the punitive reparations imposed on China after the Boxer Uprising of 1900, yet it evolved into one of the most consequential educational and diplomatic initiatives in modern Chinese history. This paper argues that the United States' decision to remit a portion of the Boxer Indemnity for Chinese education transformed a mechanism of imperial coercion into a vehicle for state-building, intellectual modernization, and transnational engagement. Through the establishment of Tsinghua University and the sponsorship of Chinese students in the United States, the program cultivated a Western-educated elite that reshaped China's political thought, scientific development, diplomatic strategy, and cultural life in the twentieth century.

Drawing on diplomatic correspondence, institutional records, and the careers of prominent scholarship recipients, this study traces the program's influence from the late Qing and Republican eras through the War of Resistance against Japan and the ideological realignments after 1949. It argues that Chinese reformers appropriated foreign funds, institutions, and expertise to strengthen national sovereignty and renegotiate China's position within the global order. Although the original scholarship initiative eventually ended, its institutional and intellectual legacy persisted in Chinese universities, wartime academic networks, and later state-sponsored study-abroad programs.

Author keywords: Boxer Indemnity; Sino-American relations; Tsinghua University; overseas education; educational diplomacy

Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty confronted a succession of military defeats, internal rebellions, and failed reform efforts that exposed the growing fragility of the imperial order. The Taiping and Northwestern Muslim Rebellions, the Second Opium War, and the First Sino-Japanese War weakened the dynasty politically, economically, and militarily, while the failures of the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred Days' Reform revealed the limits of incremental reform under mounting foreign pressure. These crises deepened social dislocation, economic instability, and cultural anxiety throughout the empire. Combined with recurring droughts, floods, and famines, they created fertile conditions for unrest among rural populations, particularly young, landless peasants who would later form the core of the Boxer movement. At the same time, successive military defeats and the expansion of unequal treaties demonstrated that piecemeal institutional adjustment could not halt China's relative decline within an international system increasingly dominated by industrialized imperial powers. Foreign gunboats, missionary expansion, and extraterritorial courts transformed questions of sovereignty, modernity, and national survival from

abstract concerns into immediate realities in treaty ports, provincial communities, and the imperial capital.

The Boxer Uprising (1899–1901) emerged from this atmosphere of instability, anti-foreign resentment, and dynastic weakness. Rural militants attacked missionaries, foreign residents, and Chinese Christian converts, viewing them as symbols of foreign encroachment and domestic disorder. Their uprising provoked a massive multinational military intervention that culminated in the defeat of the Boxers and the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901. The treaty imposed an enormous indemnity of 450 million taels of silver, payable over thirty-nine years with interest, further straining the Qing fiscal system while symbolizing China's subordination within the global imperial order. For many Chinese intellectuals and officials, the indemnity represented more than a financial burden; it embodied the broader crisis of national survival confronting late imperial China. In both elite discourse and popular memory, the Boxer defeat joined earlier military humiliations in shaping an emerging narrative of “national humiliation,” reinforcing the perception that China occupied a subordinate position in a world structured by Western and Japanese power.¹

Yet embedded within this moment of humiliation was an unexpected opportunity for national reconstruction. Beginning in 1908, the United States agreed to remit a substantial portion of its Boxer Indemnity share to support Chinese education. Out of the financial aftermath of imperial

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defeat emerged the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, which funded the establishment of Tsinghua University and enabled successive generations of Chinese students to study in the United States. Upon returning to China, many of these students became influential reformers, educators, scientists, diplomats, and intellectuals who helped shape the political and cultural transformations of the twentieth century. Their overseas experiences exposed them not only to new forms of scientific and technical knowledge but also to modern institutional structures, political theories, and professional networks that could be adapted to Chinese conditions.

This paper argues that the remittance of Boxer Indemnity funds created far more than an educational exchange program. It transformed a mechanism of imperial coercion into a vehicle for state-building, intellectual modernization, and transnational engagement. By appropriating foreign funds, institutions, and expertise, Chinese reformers used the scholarship program to strengthen national sovereignty and renegotiate China's position within the global order. Tracing the program from its origins in imperial crisis through its long afterlife across war, revolution, and reconstruction, this study demonstrates how educational exchange became a central strategy through which modern China confronted foreign domination and pursued national renewal. The history of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program therefore illuminates not only the relationship between education and diplomacy but also the broader process through which late Qing and Republican China sought to transform imposed foreign influence into an instrument of national regeneration.

Methodology

This study employs a historical methodology grounded in close analysis of diplomatic correspondence, institutional archives, and the published writings of key Boxer Indemnity Scholarship recipients. Primary sources, including U.S. congressional debates, Chinese Ministry of Education documents, and early Tsinghua School records, offer insight into the political motivations, administrative structures, and transnational negotiations that shaped the program's development. These materials are supplemented by memoirs, speeches, and essays produced by scholarship alumni, which illuminate how overseas education influenced their intellectual formation and their subsequent contributions to Chinese political, scientific, and cultural life.

The paper also draws on secondary scholarship in modern Chinese history, diplomatic history, and the history of education. Works by scholars such as Joseph W. Esherick, Paul A. Cohen, and Xu Guoqi provide interpretive frameworks for understanding the Boxer Uprising, national humiliation discourse, and China's evolving engagement with global modernity. By synthesizing these sources, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates intellectual history, institutional analysis, and transnational history.

This methodology enables a reconstruction of both the structural forces and individual experiences that shaped the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program. Rather than treating

the program solely as an American diplomatic initiative or a Chinese educational reform, this approach emphasizes its dual character as a site of negotiation, appropriation, and state-building. Through this lens, the paper argues that Chinese reformers transformed a punitive indemnity into a mechanism for national reconstruction and global engagement.

Description/Research Findings

The origins of the boxer rebellion, national humiliation, and foreign domination

The origins of the Boxer Rebellion lay in the profound social dislocation and foreign encroachment that reshaped northern China during the late nineteenth century. Already weakened by military defeats and internal uprisings, the Qing dynasty faced mounting pressure from Western imperial powers that demanded commercial privileges, missionary protections, and legal immunities through the unequal treaty system. In provinces such as Shandong and Zhili, regions closest to expanding foreign spheres of influence, this intrusion generated acute social and cultural tensions. For many rural communities, foreign domination was not an abstract geopolitical condition but an everyday reality that undermined local authority, disrupted traditional livelihoods, and intensified anxieties over the erosion of Chinese identity and autonomy.² The expansion of foreign influence thus destabilized not only the Qing state but also the social and moral structures that governed village life in northern China.

At the local level, environmental disasters, population displacement, and economic hardship created fertile conditions for militant mobilization. During the 1890s, North China experienced severe droughts, floods, and famines that forced large numbers of peasants into insecurity and unemployment.¹ These pressures were particularly acute in western Shandong, where growing landlessness and intensified competition for limited resources pushed many young men to seek alternative sources of stability, solidarity, and meaning. Joseph W. Esherick's influential study *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* argues that the movement emerged not from a coordinated anti-dynastic conspiracy, as earlier historians suggested, but from a distinctive local "social ecology," the interaction of environmental strain, economic dislocation, and cultural tensions that shaped rural life in northern China.² The Boxer movement thus reflected broader structural crises within late Qing society rather than a purely spontaneous outburst of anti-foreign violence.

Foreign missionaries and their Chinese Christian converts became central targets of popular resentment. Protected by extraterritorial privileges granted through unequal treaties, missionary institutions were widely perceived as disrupting village cohesion, shielding converts from traditional authority, and challenging long-established cultural norms.³ Disputes that would previously have been resolved through customary mediation increasingly fell under the jurisdiction of foreign consuls, reinforcing the belief that foreign religious

influence threatened not only cultural traditions but also the functioning of local justice and social order. Yet this hostility did not initially develop into opposition against the Qing dynasty itself. Instead, the Boxers adopted the slogan “Support the Qing, Destroy the Foreign” (扶清滅洋), presenting themselves as defenders of both the dynasty and Chinese civilization against external encroachment.² This fusion of anti-imperial nationalism with dynastic loyalty reveals the complex political character of late Qing popular resistance.

The cultural world from which the Boxers emerged was deeply rooted in folk religion, martial traditions, and ritual practices that promised spiritual empowerment. Spirit possession, martial arts training, and beliefs in invulnerability to foreign weapons were not marginal superstitions but integral elements of rural popular culture in northern China. As Esherick demonstrates, Boxer leaders drew heavily on these traditions, persuading recruits that ritual discipline and collective initiation could confer supernatural protection against modern weaponry.² This spiritual dimension proved essential to the movement’s rapid expansion, offering a compelling combination of cultural continuity, physical empowerment, and moral purpose at a moment of profound communal anxiety. In this sense, Boxer spirituality functioned not merely as irrational fanaticism, as many contemporary Western observers claimed, but as a culturally grounded response to the disorienting pressures of imperial intrusion.

The Qing government’s ambivalent response further complicated the movement’s trajectory. Local officials in Shandong initially attempted to suppress the Boxers, viewing them as disruptive and potentially dangerous. Yet as foreign encroachment intensified and court factions debated possible responses, elements within the Qing leadership, particularly the conservative faction surrounding Empress Dowager Cixi, began to tolerate and at times quietly encourage Boxer activity as a potential instrument of resistance against Western influence.² This inconsistency simultaneously emboldened Boxer militants and deepened political instability, contributing to the movement’s rapid and uneven expansion across northern China.

The Boxer movement was therefore the product of intersecting social, environmental, political, and cultural pressures rather than a centralized revolutionary agenda. Its spread across Shandong and into Zhili reflected the convergence of foreign intrusion, missionary conflict, ecological hardship, and popular religious traditions that shaped rural life in late Qing China.³ What emerged in 1899–1900 was not a revolutionary movement aimed at overthrowing the Qing state, but a violent popular uprising that sought to defend both dynasty and nation against what participants perceived as an existential threat to Chinese society and sovereignty. The Boxer Uprising thus embodied both national humiliation and grassroots resistance, illustrating how imperial domination could provoke forms of popular mobilization that were at once anti-foreign, culturally conservative, and deeply nationalist.

Reclaiming the Indemnity: The Birth of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program

The creation of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program marked one of the most consequential turning points in early twentieth-century Sino-American relations. Following the Boxer Protocol of (1901), China was required to pay an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver to the foreign powers involved in suppressing the Boxer Uprising. The United States eventually determined that its share, originally assessed at approximately \$24.4 million, exceeded the actual costs incurred during the intervention.^{4,5} Influenced by reform-minded diplomats, missionaries, and Chinese American advocates, President Theodore Roosevelt’s administration supported returning a portion of the surplus to China as a means of promoting educational exchange and expanding American influence through cultural diplomacy rather than direct coercion.⁵ In 1908, the U.S. Congress formally approved the remission of part of the indemnity on the condition that the funds be used to educate Chinese students in the United States.⁶ This decision transformed a punitive financial settlement into an instrument of transnational engagement and inaugurated a new phase in Sino-American intellectual and diplomatic relations.

Beginning in 1909, the Qing government established a nationwide competitive examination system to select scholarship recipients. The process was highly selective: approximately 630 candidates sat for the first examination, yet only forty-seven were admitted, reflecting the program’s elite academic standards.⁷ Between 1909 and 1937, roughly 1,300 Chinese students studied in the United States through the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, making it one of the earliest large-scale, state-sponsored overseas education initiatives in modern Chinese history.⁸ Although many recipients came from established gentry families, the merit-based examination system also created opportunities for talented students from diverse regional and socioeconomic backgrounds, expanding educational mobility beyond traditional elites.⁸ The program therefore functioned both as an instrument of elite formation and as a pathway through which new social groups could participate in China’s modernization efforts.

To prepare students for study abroad, remitted funds were used to establish Tsinghua School in Beijing, which formally opened in 1911.⁷ Conceived as both a preparatory academy and a symbol of national renewal, Tsinghua combined Chinese educational traditions with American curricular models and administrative practices. In 1929, the institution was reorganized as Tsinghua University and subsequently developed into one of China’s most prestigious centers of higher learning.⁹ The close relationship between indemnity remission and institution-building demonstrated how financial reparations could be redirected into instruments of state-building and educational modernization. More broadly, Tsinghua embodied the late Qing and Republican effort to selectively adopt foreign knowledge while preserving a distinct sense of Chinese national purpose.

The significance of the scholarship program extended well beyond individual academic achievement. Alumni such as Hu Shi, Liang Sicheng, and Zhou Peiyuan became influential figures in China's intellectual, scientific, educational, and political development.¹⁰ Many returned to occupy leadership positions in universities, government ministries, scientific institutions, and international organizations, helping integrate global knowledge into China's modernization process. The program also established enduring foundations for Sino-American academic exchange, creating networks of intellectual collaboration that persisted throughout the twentieth century.¹¹

The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program was distinctive when compared with the educational initiatives sponsored by other foreign powers. Britain, France, and Japan also provided opportunities for Chinese students to study abroad, but these programs were generally smaller in scale and less directly tied to the systematic reinvestment of indemnity funds into Chinese educational institutions. The American remission program uniquely combined overseas education with the creation of a permanent domestic institution, Tsinghua School, which served as a preparatory center and later evolved into a leading national university. As a result, the program produced both immediate educational opportunities and a lasting institutional legacy that extended far beyond the original indemnity settlement.

At a deeper level, the scholarship program demonstrated how Chinese reformers sought to transform the language of "civilization" used by imperial powers into a tool for national reconstruction. By sending students to American universities, Chinese officials and intellectuals aimed to acquire the scientific, legal, and administrative knowledge that underpinned Western power while strengthening China's capacity for modernization. Rather than accepting the indemnity solely as a symbol of subordination, they repurposed the remitted funds as intellectual and institutional capital for cultivating a new generation of reformers, professionals, and state-builders. Educational exchange thus became a mechanism through which unequal power relations were partially reconfigured into channels of knowledge transfer and diplomatic engagement.

Ultimately, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program transformed the meaning of the indemnity itself. What began as a symbol of national humiliation became a vehicle for educational advancement, institutional development, and international engagement. Through Tsinghua University (Fig. 1) and the achievements of its alumni, the program helped cultivate a generation of leaders who contributed significantly to China's political, scientific, and cultural transformation. Its enduring significance lies not simply in financing overseas study, but in demonstrating how a punitive imperial settlement could be redirected into a powerful instrument of national modernization.

Discussions and Recommendations for Future Work

The impact of the scholarship program

The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program was far more than an educational initiative. By transforming indemnity funds into opportunities for overseas study, Chinese reformers created a mechanism for cultivating new political leaders, scientists, diplomats, and intellectuals. The program became an important instrument of modernization, linking educational exchange to broader processes of state-building, institutional reform, and international engagement.

Transforming Chinese politics

The political influence of scholarship recipients was substantial. Exposure to constitutional government, legal reform, and modern political thought introduced many students to ideas that differed significantly from the institutions of late imperial China. Upon returning home, numerous scholars participated in debates surrounding political reform, national sovereignty, and modernization, particularly during and after the May Fourth Movement.^{12,13}

Several returnees later contributed to the development of Republican China's governmental and educational institutions. Figures such as Luo Longji advocated constitutionalism and democratic reform, while others participated in administrative modernization, legal codification, and public policy development. Overseas education therefore helped cultivate a generation of politically engaged elites who sought to redefine governance and citizenship in modern China.¹⁴

Scientific advancement and the rise of modern research

The scholarship program also played a major role in advancing Chinese science and technology. Students trained in American universities introduced laboratory methods, scientific research practices, and modern engineering education to Chinese institutions. The career of Zhou Peiyuan, who later became one of China's leading physicists and president of Peking University, illustrates the influence of internationally educated scholars on the development of modern research infrastructure.¹⁵

The long-term effects extended well beyond the Republican era. Overseas educational programs established a tradition of international scientific exchange that continued throughout the twentieth century. By the early twenty-first century, China's growing community of internationally trained researchers contributed significantly to the country's rise as a global center of scientific production and technological innovation.^{16,17}

Diplomatic modernization and global representation

The scholarship program also contributed to the professionalization of Chinese diplomacy. Among its most influential beneficiaries was Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun), whose American education and training in international law prepared him to become one of China's leading diplomats. At the



Figure 1. Tsinghua Xuetang (清華學堂), established through Boxer Indemnity remission funds and opened in 1911 as a preparatory school for scholarship students. The institution later evolved into Tsinghua University, one of China's leading universities. Source: Tsinghua University Archives

Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Koo emerged as a prominent defender of Chinese sovereignty and opposition to the transfer of Shandong to Japan.^{18,19}

Koo's career reflected a broader pattern. Many scholarship recipients entered diplomatic service, treaty negotiations, and international organizations. Their familiarity with foreign languages, international law, and diplomatic practices strengthened China's ability to participate in global affairs and reduced its dependence on foreign intermediaries. The program therefore helped modernize China's diplomatic institutions and improve its international representation.⁵

Intellectual reform and cultural transformation

The intellectual impact of the scholarship program was equally significant. Hu Shi, one of the program's most celebrated scholars, studied under John Dewey at Columbia University and became a leading figure in the New Culture Movement. His promotion of vernacular Chinese literature, scientific thinking, and intellectual pluralism influenced generations of Chinese students and reformers.²⁰

Other returnees, including Liang Sicheng, Chen Yinke, Mei Yiqi, and Chen Yingtai, contributed to the development of modern disciplines in architecture, history, education, and the humanities. Through teaching, research, and institution-building, they introduced new academic standards and expanded China's engagement with global intellectual currents. Educational exchange thus became a catalyst for cultural transformation as well as knowledge transfer.²¹

Long-term legacy and institutional continuity

The significance of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program extended beyond the individuals it supported. The

establishment of Tsinghua School in 1911, later Tsinghua University, created a lasting institutional legacy that continues to shape Chinese higher education. What began as a preparatory academy for overseas study evolved into one of China's premier universities and a symbol of educational modernization.⁷

The program also established a model for later state-sponsored educational exchange. Contemporary initiatives, including those administered through the China Scholarship Council, reflect a similar belief that international education can strengthen national development while enhancing global engagement. In this respect, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program transformed a symbol of foreign domination into a durable framework for educational diplomacy, institutional development, and international cooperation.^{22,23}

Enduring Legacy: From Educational Reform to National Renaissance

The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program left a lasting imprint on China's modernization, extending far beyond the education of individual students. By cultivating generations of internationally trained scholars, scientists, diplomats, and reformers, the program established a durable connection between educational exchange and national development. What began as a response to foreign-imposed indemnities evolved into one of the most influential educational initiatives in modern Chinese history.

Returnees and the architecture of modern China

The program's legacy is most evident in the achievements of its returnees. Many assumed leadership roles

in government, education, science, and culture, contributing to constitutional reform, administrative modernization, and institutional development. Others established university departments, laboratories, and research institutes that strengthened China's scientific and educational infrastructure. Their efforts helped transform overseas education into a powerful mechanism for national reconstruction and modernization.^{18,23}

Influence on sino-American educational cooperation

The scholarship program also laid the foundation for long-term educational cooperation between China and the United States. Although interrupted by war and political upheaval, the model of overseas study reemerged after diplomatic normalization in 1979. Educational and scientific exchange programs revived patterns first established under the Boxer Indemnity initiative, enabling thousands of Chinese students and researchers to pursue advanced study abroad. These exchanges strengthened academic collaboration and contributed to China's integration into global scientific and technological networks.^{24,25,16}

A model of soft power and educational diplomacy

The program represented an early example of educational diplomacy. By remitting part of the indemnity, the United States sought to expand its influence through cultural and intellectual engagement rather than coercion. Chinese reformers, however, adapted the initiative to serve national objectives, using overseas education to acquire knowledge, build institutions, and strengthen the state. The scholarship program therefore illustrates how educational exchange could simultaneously function as an instrument of foreign policy and a strategy of national empowerment.^{5,24,25}

Toward a national renaissance

The long-term significance of the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program lies in its transformation of national humiliation into educational opportunity. Its beneficiaries helped reshape Chinese politics, science, diplomacy, and intellectual life throughout the twentieth century. More broadly, the program demonstrated how international educational exchange could contribute to national renewal, providing China with human capital, institutional capacity, and global connections that continued to influence its development long after the original indemnity funds had been exhausted.^{11,12}

Recommendations for Future Work

Future research on the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program would benefit from deeper archival investigation into the lived experiences of lesser-known scholarship recipients, particularly those who did not become prominent political or intellectual figures. Their careers could illuminate how overseas education shaped professional mobility, social identity, and regional development beyond elite institutions. Comparative studies between the American indemnity program and parallel initiatives in Japan, Britain, or France could

also clarify how different models of educational diplomacy influenced China's modernization.

Further work is also needed to examine the program's long-term institutional legacy after 1949, especially the divergent paths taken by Tsinghua alumni in mainland China, Taiwan, and the broader Chinese diaspora. Such research could reveal how Cold War geopolitics reshaped the meaning of foreign education and the circulation of scientific and intellectual capital. Finally, integrating digital humanities tools, such as network analysis of alumni careers, could offer new insights into the transnational networks that emerged from the indemnity program and their enduring impact on China's global engagement.

Conclusion

The Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program demonstrates how Chinese reformers transformed a symbol of national humiliation into a powerful instrument of modernization. By redirecting indemnity funds toward overseas education and institution-building, they converted a punitive settlement into an opportunity for intellectual, scientific, diplomatic, and political development. The program helped create a generation of internationally educated leaders whose contributions shaped modern Chinese governance, higher education, scientific research, and foreign relations.

The program was also distinctive among foreign responses to the Boxer Indemnity. While Britain, France, and Japan largely used their indemnity shares for strategic or governmental purposes, the United States redirected a substantial portion toward educational exchange, creating a lasting institutional legacy through Tsinghua University and overseas scholarship programs. Chinese reformers, in turn, adapted this initiative to serve national goals, transforming foreign resources into tools of state-building and modernization.

Ultimately, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program illustrates how education became a means of national renewal in modern China. Its legacy extends beyond the students it funded, revealing how knowledge, international exchange, and institutional development enabled China to convert the consequences of foreign domination into foundations for long-term national transformation and global engagement.

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Conflict of Interest (COI) Statement

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Supplemental Materials

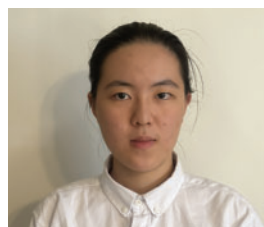
No supplemental materials.

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