THE BOXER REBELLION

A DEATH IN THE DARK CONTINENT SUPPLEMENT

Chris Peers tweaks his own rules and creates a *Death in the Dark Continent* supplement that covers the exciting possibilities found in China during the Boxer Rebellion.

My *Death in the Dark Continent (DitDC)* rules, published by North Star, have been featured in several past issues of *Wi*. A 32-page 'Lite' version of them was included as a freebie with *Wi*400 [*Wi*Prime Members can download those *DiTDC Lite* rules from the Vault - Ed].

DitDC was written specifically for games set in 19th Century Africa during the age of exploration, and I certainly never intended the rules to become a general 'Colonial' set… So, why tinker with them to play a campaign which took place in China when the rules were designed for a totally different continent? It's a fair question with a very simple answer - Crusader Miniatures (through North Star) are releasing some splendid new figures for the Boxer Rebellion. The folks at North Star already play my rules (and seem to like them), so we thought we would see if they worked with this new range of pewter.

DIFFERENT CONTINENTS, SIMILAR SKIRMISHES?

The incredible diversity of 19th Century African armies means that - with the addition of a handful of special rules - all the troop types and weapons that we need are already there. *DitDC* - can capably cope with the disparity between the traditionally armed and organised Boxers and the European regulars with their modern bolt action rifles. Many of the clashes in the Boxer Rebellion involved very small western forces fighting much larger but poorly organised Chinese armies which, like their African equivalents, attempted to compensate for their technical inferiority by using local knowledge, magic and ritual, and - if necessary - sheer desperate courage.

Because they are set in a relatively poorly documented period, games of *DitDC* are usually points based, with scenarios generated by the rules, rather than based around refights of historical actions. There is no set figure scale, but tabletop actions represent small scale encounters in which one or both sides lack formal command systems, and their officers lead mainly by example and shouting commands.

Movement rates are variable, firepower is decisive only at close range, and melee is short and bloody. Crucial factors are the interaction between troop types and terrain, and the player's ability to decide between different priorities and react quickly to fleeting opportunities. In this fast moving and unpredictable environment, the less well equipped but more numerous 'tribal' armies have every chance of defeating European regulars, just as the Imperial Chinese and Boxer armies did (or threatened to do) on several occasions.

RISE OF THE RIGHTEOUS HARMONIOUS FISTS

Most people with any interest in 19th Century warfare will be familiar with the broader events in the Boxer Rebellion, so I will set the scene as briefly as possible.

China was still ruled by the Ch'ing dynasty, established by the Manchu conquerors in the 1640s, and had fallen behind in terms of military technology. Thus, it was being pushed around by the European powers, who extracted numerous concessions even though they lacked the strength to colonise the country. Many native Chinese found this humiliating and decided to drive out the foreigners, especially the Christian missionaries who they felt were undermining their culture. In 1899 an armed uprising broke out, headed by a secret society called the I Ho Ch'uan, or 'Righteous Harmonious Fists', which had its roots in martial arts and traditional religion. Its fighters - known in the west as Boxers - besieged a group of foreigners and Chinese Christians in the Legation district of the capital, Peking, and drove off a relief expedition which was hastily sent up from the coast.

The Manchu government, headed by the Dowager Empress Tzu Hsi, at first tried to restore order, but switched to supporting the Boxers. The siege was eventually lifted by another expedition which included contingents from eight foreign powers - Britain (most of the 'British' force was actually Indian),

Russia, Japan, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, and the USA - and at the same time the Russians swept through Manchuria from the north.

With the defeat of the Boxer armies, the Empress changed sides again and agreed to yet more humiliating concessions to the foreign powers. Not surprisingly, this weakened the Manchu regime further still, and within a decade the Chinese Empire would be replaced by a republic.

GENERAL RULE AMENDMENTS

All armies have a choice between two new Home Terrain types; Cultivated and Urban.

Cultivated: There must be at least one village and three crops pieces on the table. Jungle, bush, tall grass and sand are not allowed.

Urban: Treat at least half the table area as a single large village, with the rest being as Cultivated. Within the built up area there may be up to two rectangular open squares, up to 6" long on each side, counting as open terrain.

If game scenarios are being diced for, treat a Raid as a Surprise Encounter.

Allies: Up to half the points of an Imperial Chinese army may consist of Boxer allies. Any foreign army maydraw up to half of its points strength from up to two allies from any other foreign army.

Any defending army may use trenches, bomas, town walls and tembes (the latter perhaps representing a temple, mission building or similar).

Any army except Imperial Chinese, Boxers and Garrisons may deploy a gunboat if the terrain is suitable.

ARMY LISTS

These are presented in the same format as the lists in the *DitDC* rulebook, and like them are fairly generic, being intended for points based games, whether using the scenario generation system in the rules or not. The assumption is that the lists will be used for forces of up to about 300 points, which means that 100 figures should be plenty for the Chinese armies, and between 30 and 40 for the foreigners.

1. IMPERIAL CHINESE

While Empress Tzu Hsi more or less openly supported the Boxers, the commanders of some of the provincial armies continued to campaign against them. In fact, the Chinese armed forces at this time consisted of several very different and effectively independent armies. The 'Bannermen' of the Eight Banners were hereditary soldiers mainly descended from the Manchu conquerors who had established the Ch'ing dynasty in the 17th Century, but their training and discipline had long ago deteriorated and at least some of them still fought with their traditional composite bows. They were backed up by the militia of the mainly Chinese Green Standard army. The 'Braves' were volunteers originally raised for defence against bandits, and were generally enthusiastic even if they lacked formal training. There were also several independent New Armies, whose men were often conscripted from among the Green Standards, but were better equipped and trained. This list allows the construction of a force representing any one of the above, but it can also represent the sort of mixed force which was often encountered in the chaotic circumstances of the war. New Army troops like those commanded by Yuan Shihk'ai in Shantung can realistically fight against Boxers as well as European forces.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND CHINESE TRANSCRIPTION

Nowadays it is often argued that the term 'Boxer Rebellion' is a misnomer, both because the movement was not a rebellion against the Chinese state, which in fact supported it, and because the name 'Boxer' is misleading. It is of course derived from the translation of 'I Ho Ch'uan', but it would be wrong to suppose that all its supporters practiced Chinese boxing, or that this was the movement's focus. Nevertheless 'Boxer Rebellion' is what it was called in English at the time and there still seems to be no widely accepted alternative, so I will stick with it here.

It is usual to employ the Pinyin system promoted by the People's Republic of China when writing Chinese names in the Latin alphabet, but here I have elected to stick with the older Wade-Giles system. There are two reasons for this, apart from the fact that I am hopelessly out of date. One is that an English speaker will often get closer to a recognisable pronunciation with Wade-Giles, but more importantly it was the system used by western writers at the time of the rebellion, so it is what you will find in the primary sources if you want to take your research that far. Many older secondary sources, like Bodin and Warner's Osprey *Men-at-Arms* book, also use it. All the same, you should be aware that you will come across different versions of Chinese words, not all of which will be immediately recognisable. This is just one of the unavoidable pitfalls of the subject!

Ag 1, Organised

Troop	Points
Bannermen or Green Standard troops: Untrained Raw Soldiers with muskets (5 points), breechloaders (6 points) or repeaters (10 points)	0–4
Traditionally armed Bannermen: Skirmishers with bows (4 points)	0–4
Tigermen: Elite Skirmishers with spears (8 points)	0–1
Manchu or Mongol cavalry: Light Horse with bows (7 points) or Untrained with breechloaders (11 points)	0–2
Braves: Untrained Soldiers with breechloaders (13 points) or repeaters (17 points)	0–6
New Army Regulars: Raw Soldiers with repeaters (17 points)	0–6
Jingals: Skirmishers with elephant guns (10 points)	0–2
Medium rifled field guns (48 points)	0–2
Rockets (20 points)	0–1

Notes

1. A Chief must be a Soldier.

2. The Tigermen unit can only be fielded if there are also at least 2 units of Bannermen.

3. Any field guns can be downgraded to smoothbore (20 points) to reflect the sometimes poor state of repair of Chinese artillery.

4. Stratagems: Scouting (only if at least 1 unit of cavalry is fielded).

Special Rule: Mounted Archers. Light Horse with bows are treated the same as those with spears. Theoretically, Chinese and Manchu composite bows should have a longer range than the African versions which are the focus of the DitDC rules, but by 1900, few if any of the troops who were still equipped with bows practised regularly enough to get the best out of their weapons.

Right: Crusader Miniatures Boxer painted by Kev Dallimore.

2. BOXERS

The driving force behind the uprising was a secret society called the I Ho Ch'uan, or Fists of Righteous Harmony, whose aim was to restore China's greatness by driving out all 'foreign devils', although the rebels were also joined by large numbers of disaffected peasants and bandits. I Ho Ch'uan members practised a form of kung fu, which gave rise to the name 'Boxers', and experts in this art were believed to be invulnerable to bullets. Inspired by this belief, they often fought with great courage, but their armies were poorly organised and relied mainly on traditional weapons like swords and polearms. A sympathetic Chinese government supplied some Boxers with firearms, but they lacked training in their use. Therefore, in their battles with the foreign forces they relied mainly on numbers, local knowledge, and sheer ferocity, but in the end these proved to be no match for modern firepower and discipline.

Ag 2, Tribal

Warriors (6 points)	4–9
Skirmishers, up to half with crossbows (6 points), rest untrained with muskets (5 points)	0–2
Jingals: Skirmishers with elephant guns (10 points)	0–2
Rockets (20 points)	0–1

Notes

1. A Chief must be a Warrior. A Chief representing Ts'ao Fu-t'ien may be outstanding (+25 points). Ts'ao was a Kung Fu master and anti-foreign campaigner who was executed in 1901 for his role in the Rebellion, and can stand for any of the charismatic figures who led the Boxer forces.

2. Up to half the Warrior figures fielded may be equipped with muskets (+2 points) or breechloaders (+4 points).

3. Up to 3 warrior units may be upgraded to Elite (+2 points), as members of secret societies with extensive training in martial arts. There were some all-female units, known as Lanterns, whose soldiers were said to have magical powers such as flying and walking on water. There seems no good reason to differentiate them from male Boxers, but romantically inclined gamers could use such figures to depict the Elites.

4. Up to 4 warrior, Elite Warrior, or Skirmisher units may be armed with fire lances in addition to their other weapons, at +1 point per figure. In order to count the advantage of these (see Special Rules below) all the figures in the unit must be equipped with them.

5. The crossbow category in the rules represents the light and fast shooting weapons used by the Fan people of Gabon, which were especially feared because of the difficulty of avoiding their very light, high velocity darts and the deadly poison with which they were often tipped. This category seems very suitable for the repeating crossbows which were still in use in China in this period, so the rules can be used without alteration.

6. Stratagems: Drums. As they have the support of most of the local peasants, Boxer armies can alternatively make use of either the Surprise or the Scouting stratagem.

Special Rules:

Fire Lances. These rather old fashioned weapons were still in use by some traditionalist Chinese, but being basically just a firework on a spear they were effective only at very close range. Traditional gunpowder grenades and 'stinkpots' can also be included under this heading. They are all used only in Close Combat, in which case any enemy unit facing them must take an extra morale test, in the same way as if shot at with rockets, etc.

Invulnerability. Boxer recruits were taught that their charms and rituals would make them invulnerable to enemy weapons. Therefore, they ignore both the morale tests for coming under fire for the first time, even if they are not Elite or equipped with firearms.

Baggage. Boxer armies often consisted of men drawn from local villages and lacked any kind of logistic training. Therefore, they never need to deploy baggage elements, and cannot be penalised for their loss.

3. BRITISH

British merchants and missionaries were very active in North China. Army and naval units were already stationed there when the Rebellion broke out, including a battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. These were quickly reinforced by an expeditionary force from India. Although the Russian and Japanese contingents were both larger, Britain continued to play a leading role in the alliance against the Boxers, with both Peking relief expeditions being led by British officers.

Ag 1, Disciplined

British or Indian Soldiers, Sailors, or Marines: Soldiers (24 points) or Elite Soldiers (30 points) with repeaters	2–4
Chinese Regiment: Raw Soldiers with breechloaders (13 points)	0–4
Indian Lancers: Elite Heavy Cavalry with repeaters (35 points)	0–1
Medium rifled field gun (48 points)	0–1
Nordenfelt machine gun (36 points)	0–1
Maxim gun (75 points)	0–1

An impressive collection of Crusader Miniatures Boxers painted by Kev Dallimore.

4. RUSSIAN

This list covers the Russian armies which operated in Manchuria as well as those in the Peking-Tientsin theatre. The former were heavily reliant on Cossacks, so it is possible to field a force which consists entirely of cavalry.

Ag 1, Organised

Regular Infantry: Soldiers with repeaters (24 points)	3*–6
Cossacks: Elite Light Horse with repeaters (29 points)	0–4
Maritime Dragoons: Heavy Cavalry with repeaters (28 points)	0–1
Medium rifled field gun (48 points)	0–1
Maxim gun (75 points)	0–1

Notes

1. * The minimum only applies if any infantry units are fielded.

2. Stratagems: Scouting (only if at least 1 unit of Cossacks is fielded).

5. JAPANESE

European observers thought that Japanese doctrine in this period prioritised rate of fire and the charge into close combat with the bayonet over accuracy, tactics which led to heavy casualties, even if they were often successful against less well trained opponents like the Chinese.

Ag 2, Organised

Soldiers with repeaters (24 points)	4–6
Cavalry: Raw Light Horse with repeaters (15 points)	0–2
Medium rifled field gun (48 points)	0–1
Maxim gun (75 points)	0–1

Notes

Special Rule: 'Banzai!': Japanese soldiers fight hand-to-hand as Elites but shoot as Raw. They are treated in all other respects as ordinary Soldiers.

6. FOREIGN GARRISONS

This list represents the small mixed forces of foreigners that were besieged in places like Peking and Tientsin, and is based mainly on the defenders of the Peking Legations. These consisted of small contingents drawn from any or all the nations involved, but here they are all treated the same. Players can, however, depict them as British, Indian, French, Japanese, Russian, Austrian, German, or American, or any combination of the above. The artillery represents the 'international gun' employed in the Legation Quarter, which was cobbled together from bits of old pieces and loaded with ill-fitting ammunition, and cannot have been very effective even though its barrel was actually rifled.

Ag 0, Disciplined

Sailors, Marines, or Soldiers: Elite Soldiers with repeaters (30 points)	4–8
Armed Civilians: Skirmishers with repeaters (18 points)	0–1
Smoothbore cannon (20 points)	0–1
Machine gun: Nordenfelt (36 points) or Maxim (75 points)	0–1
Rockets (20 points)	0–1

7. GENERIC EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

This list covers all the forces not listed separately above, and might represent contingents from Austria, France, Germany, Italy, or the USA, or any combination of these. This is not intended to minimise the contribution of these countries (though the Austrian contribution was fairly small and most of the Germans turned up too late to see action), but simply to reflect the difficulty of differentiating them in terms of the rules.

Ag 2, Disciplined

Soldiers (24 points) or Elite Soldiers (30 points) with repeaters	4–6
Cavalry: Elite Light Horse with repeaters (29 points)	0–2
Medium rifled field gun (48 points)	0–1
Maxim gun (75 points)	0–1

8. KOREAN

Korea did offer to send a contingent to join the other eight powers, but the Japanese would not agree to it. Nevertheless the Koreans could easily have intervened thanks to their geographical proximity, and they had recently been involved (on both sides) in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 - 95. This is also an unusual army which is ideally suited to a 'what if?' game.

Ag 1, Organised

Regular Infantry: Soldiers with breechloaders (20 points)	3–6
Smoothbore cannon (20 points)	0–1
Gatling machine gun (36 points)	0–1

Notes

Special Rule: Since 1895, the regular Korean army had been trained by the Japanese, but lacked ammunition for target practice, and seems to have retained its traditional preference for defending fortified positions. Therefore, the infantry shoot as Raw, but test morale and fight hand-to-hand as Elites when they are in trenches or tembes or behind town walls. They are otherwise treated as ordinary Soldiers.

FURTHER READING

A lot has been written on the Boxer Rebellion, including plenty of primary sources in English by those who were there, but, as usual, a good start is the two volumes from Osprey; a bit dated but still useful:

• Lynn Bodin and Chris Warner, *The Boxer Rebellion*, Osprey Men-at-Arms 95, 1979.

• Peter Harrington and Michael Perry, *Peking 1900: The Boxer Rebellion*, Osprey Campaign 85, 2001.

More up-to-date, comprehensive, and aimed specifically at the wargamer, is:

• Mike Blake and Chris Swan, *Righteous Harmonious Fists! A Wargamers' Guide to the Boxer Uprising*, Partizan Press, 2022. This has a short but very useful bibliography.

If you are seriously interested in the subject, you should look at the three-volume series *Forces of the Boxer Rebellion and the Eight Power War* by Mike Blake, recently published by Caliver Books.