

## OUR LADY IN PEKING

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*The following article by Dr. Borzo, Professor of History, Drake University, not only gives insight into the personality and openmindedness of Sarah J. Pike Conger, wife of the United States minister to China from 1898 to 1905, but also reveals much about the Chinese attitudes leading to and following the Boxer Uprising in China.*

*Edwin H. Conger, originally of Cherry Grove, Ill., and Sarah J. Pike, Galesburg, Ill., were married June 21, 1866. They moved to Iowa in 1868 and resided near Dexter. In 1877, Edwin Conger served as treasurer of Dallas County and later, in 1880, was elected state treasurer. At that time the Congers moved to Des Moines and both were active in civic and social work in the capital city; Mrs. Conger was one of the founders of the Home for the Aged and was an early member of the Des Moines Women's club. According to Brigham Johnson's History of Des Moines and Polk County, when the Des Moines Women's club acquired permanent quarters in 1890 and began to plan for an art collection, "The first gift received was from Mrs. E. H. Conger."*

*Edwin Conger served as a member of Congress from 1885 to 1890; as U. S. minister to Brazil from 1890 to 1893; and, as mentioned above, as U. S. minister to China from 1898 to 1905. In 1905, he was appointed ambassador to Mexico; however, he resigned that post the same year and the Congers retired in Pasadena, Calif. Edwin Conger died in Pasadena in 1907. Sarah Pike Conger, recognized for her familiarity with the people of China and for her books concerning that country, died in February, 1932; she was nearly 90 years of age.*

*To fully appreciate Mrs. Conger's attitudes concerning the Chinese people, one must understand the pressures within China during the late 1890s and early 1900s. According to a previously published article by Dr. Borzo, "Diary of an Iowan Under Fire in Peking," published in the Annals*

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of Iowa, Vol. 63, pp. 613-640, "China generally resented Western pressures and influences throughout the nineteenth century. The sale of opium in even larger quantities in China by the West had not lessened that resentment; nor had the influx of foreign missionaries in China always improved the latter's attitude to the West. Chinese traditionalism, which did not rate its own merchants too high, could hardly be expected to understand, much less to welcome, Westerners, equipped with guns, opium, merchandise and missionaries."

Political actions of the 1890s and increased foreign interest in protecting trade and investments in China only added to China's resentment against the West. "Reports of alleged abuses against missionaries and native converts, and reports of half-hearted official attempts to correct such abuses," Dr. Borzo continued, "seemed to take up most of the time of the American representatives in China (during the late 1890s). The conduct of the foreigners in China was, according to one student of the period, 'often deplorable and always open to misconstruction.' Here was the cause of much of the trouble. The inability of the Manchu dynasty to cope with the onslaught of Western civilization, only served to heighten her irritability. Perhaps because the dynastic power did not know how to act, it connived at cooperation with the secret society known as Boxers and supported the latter's rebellion against the foreigners."

The Boxer Uprising began in 1899 and reached its height in 1900. One can imagine the tenseness of a new United States minister to China beginning his service in a country so troubled with foreigners.

Sarah Pike Conger, wife of the American Minister to China (1898-1905), was no "ugly American," but more nearly an ideal American abroad — our lady in Peking. Even though in her late 50s and early 60s, she approached her role with all the goodwill, enthusiasm and curiosity that one would hope to find in a person half her age.

With respect to her knowledge about China, she admittedly started from scratch, referring to her ideas about the

Orient as "vague."<sup>1</sup> But, more significantly, she came with an open mind. She had learned a lesson from her previous tour of duty with her husband in Brazil; she said that she had such a small stock of good memories of Latin America because of her "attitude of superiority."<sup>2</sup> She was determined that this should not be the case in the new assignment. She was going "to seek, to see, to detect, to learn, and to bring into my life perhaps a little knowledge of the customs and home life of China and her people."<sup>3</sup> She ended up doing much more, making some keen judgments about China, the Chinese, and the East-West relationship. In view of the fact that many of her contemporaries thought in terms of the extinction of China, her recognition of China's potential and reserve of strength, may be regarded as prophetic. "China is not dead, nor will she die," said Mrs. Conger.<sup>4</sup>



sketch by Barbara Bower

Edwin H. Conger



sketch by Barbara Bower

Sarah J. Pike Conger

<sup>1</sup>Sarah Pike Conger, *Letters from China* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1910), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

It should be recalled that it was a time of agony for the Chinese dragon, stabbed and mutilated for over half a century by the onslaught of the West with all its contradictions—bringing to China missionaries and opium, textiles and weapons, democracy and “unequal treaties,” nationalism and “spheres of influence.” China’s traditional Confucian culture, with its age-old sense of superiority, was to be forcibly shown the superiority of technological might by the West. China tried to ignore it all as “barbarian,” but the waves of western civilization became higher and higher and threatened to engulf her. Some called it the “slicing of the melon,” as concession after concession was wrung from the reluctant dragon.

It was not long before Sarah Pike Conger began to understand this problem. Within the first year she had come to observe the quiet economical efficiency of her Chinese servants, the poor quality of the roads and highways, and that mob attacks were against foreigners in general. Arriving in July of 1898, she was already by October seeing some of the picture from China’s point of view: “It is a new sight and a sad one to see these foreign troops march into this capital city. Can we realize what such a condition means to a nation?”<sup>5</sup> But in spite of the disturbances, she thought that the Chinese were “not a warlike people,” though she was still very uncertain about much after five months in China. She wrote: “Oh, this strange, strange old country! Its hidden meaning I cannot find. I wish that I could know what the Chinese think.”<sup>6</sup>

Two months later (February, 1899) she was explaining the hatred of the foreigner in China: “the foreigner is frequently severe and exacting in this Empire which is not his own. He often treats the Chinese as though they were dogs . . . would that more of the Christ-spirit could be shown them by these people coming from Christian lands!”<sup>7</sup> She was already prophetic: “I feel that there is a deep reserve force in their character that will some day show itself in unknown

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

directions."<sup>8</sup>

Little as we now appreciate the known "directions," we must, before going further, realize that there was at the turn of the century nothing too suspect about an American making comments favorable to China — after all, we were superior, and there was no doubt about that. As Mrs. Conger observed: "Many times I feel ashamed that we do not appear more like civilized people. Our ignorance and extreme prejudice make us appear in a bad and untrue light."<sup>9</sup> Since we were convinced about our superiority in general, growing out of our unquestionable technological power there wasn't too much of a problem. Today, since the dragon has awakened and is snorting fire, one might suspect the loyalty of an American depicting a friendly dragon.

But Mrs. Conger's patriotism, in spite of her often favorable observations about China, can hardly be questioned; super-patriotism was in the air at the turn of the century, and she shared in it. On the 4th of July, 1899, the secretary of the Legation rose early and fired cannon and crackers and "we raised our American flag. . .our numbers were few but our heart beats were many and strong. . .we had the Constitution and we read it and commented upon its rich wisdom. We also read the Star Spangled Banner because our voices refused to show the honor due the song."<sup>10</sup> An apparently ardent Christian, as well as patriot, Mrs. Conger coupled the two in her mind as she noted that on Sundays the "Legations in unison hoist their flags early in the morning, and throughout the day these flags proclaim the acknowledged day of worship in all Christian lands."<sup>11</sup>

She obviously was not the patriot who, when abroad, sought out only things American, to be comfortable in exile; she wandered far away from the PX. She was the patriot who thought she served her country best by acquainting herself with the culture of the country to which her husband was the American representative. Her patriotism was the

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

"hard kind," of which the late Adlai Stevenson wrote so perceptively: "We shall not love our corner of the planet less for loving the planet too. . . I can, therefore, wish no more for the profound patriotism of Americans than that they add to it a new dedication . . . the world-wide brotherhood of which they are a part."<sup>12</sup>

That she had given much thought to China's dilemma must be recognized from her analysis, after being there not quite ten months: "The undeveloped power slumbering in the Chinese nature cannot now be truly estimated. . . China has received ruthless piercings from constant 'pecking' of the foreigner with his so-called progressive ideas. In the past year there have been telling strokes made by the foreigner, and at first glance it would appear that China is doomed. But, on closer examination, it almost seems that with the old, great nation, and her wonderful traits of character, this barbarous treatment by the foreigner may break the hardened crust of superstition and customs, and reveal a strength of character that will act well its part. . . True, the Chinese do not think or act as does the foreigner; but the foreigner had not made a perfect success of life through his trials, struggles, and 'superior thinking'."<sup>13</sup> She saw shortcomings in both East and West — it wasn't all the fault of the foreigners' methods, the Chinese too, had to learn—and she saw the possibility of good coming out of the evil wrought by the foreigner. There is little doubt that she was an optimist.<sup>14</sup>

In the spring of 1900 she again observed that "China does not like foreigners, and would like to be left to herself; but foreigners are determined not to let her alone, and they make inroads and demands in many ways."<sup>15</sup> The attacks of the Boxers on missionaries, foreigners in general, and Christianized Chinese, had been increasing. "The anti-foreign thought has been openly growing for many months,"

<sup>12</sup>Adlai E. Stevenson, "The Hard Kind of Patriotism," *Harper* (July, 1963), 227:31-4.

<sup>13</sup>Conger, *op cit.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>14</sup>Starting out on her first leave in October, 1899, her husband not being along, she wrote: "but while the distance is widening between us, every day shortens the time of our separation." *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

she wrote on June 4, "and for the past few months it has presented itself in organized and organizing bands called Boxers."<sup>16</sup> Concrete problems often are the spark that set off disturbances; the lack of rain and threat of famine did much to intensify hostile feelings. "They say there is a cause for gods of rain not answering their prayers," Mrs. Conger reported, and "They believe that the 'foreign devils' have bewitched their gods, poisoned their wells, brought sickness upon their children, and are striving to ruin them completely."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps she gave as good a thumbnail sketch of China at this time as possible: "A spirit of discontent pervades all of North China. The army is either afraid of the Boxers, or in sympathy with them some were and some were not."<sup>18</sup> The Chinese officials apparently fear their power and act accordingly. The Government seems to be tottering at the throne."<sup>19</sup> The failure of the Chinese government to afford protection to the foreign legations, caused the Ministers to insist on bringing in their own troops. By the end of May some 350 troops were brought in but by this time the situation had further deteriorated. Mrs. Conger reported: "No train from Tientsin. Two railroad bridges are destroyed on a branch road. The village of Fengtai is burned. Station cars, shops, Empress Dowager's private car, all burned! . . . all foreigners are anxious. The Boxers are cruel, frenzied!"<sup>20</sup>

There is no need here to recount the height of the frenzy—the besieging of the Legations, which has often been told.<sup>21</sup> Our concern is rather with Mrs. Conger, how she weathered the storm and what effect it had on her point of view. But a

<sup>16</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup>Two of the most important regional leaders and governors-general, Chang Chih-tung, and Lie K'un-i had "disobeyed the empress dowager's edicts which ordered them to support the Boxers," and thus later, earned her gratitude. See Franz H. Michael and George E. Taylor, *The Far East in the Modern World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), pp. 204-205.

<sup>19</sup>Conger, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>21</sup>Mrs. Bainbridge, wife of the Second Secretary of the Legation, left a day-by-day account. See: "Diary of an Iowan Under Fire in Peking," edited by Henry Borzo, *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. 36, pp. 613-640.

brief view of her reaction during the siege will not be amiss. Correctly, she surmised in June of 1900: "It seems that the Chinese officials are not united in their opinions. It also seems that the Government is afraid of the Boxers."<sup>22</sup> By June 10, she reported that the Postal Telegraph wires were cut and that there was "no communication with the outer world."<sup>23</sup> Deep regrets of the Empress Dowager and the Emperor were conveyed to the American Legation on June 18. On July 7, the German Minister Baron von Kettler was shot and the Austrian, Dutch and Belgian legation were burned as well as the Imperial Customs and all the missions. For a while at least Mrs. Conger had her doubts about Chinese virtues as she recounted that: "The foreigners who have known the Chinese longest and best say that they have never before seen anything like it. They make attacks in the dark and the rain, a thing they would not heretofore do in their warfare."<sup>24</sup> Further sample reactions: "The hour is most testing;"<sup>25</sup> "Terrific firing again about two o'clock this morning," on July 25.<sup>26</sup> On that same day, symbolic of the wavering of Government policy, "Gifts of flour, water-melons, vegetables and ice have come from their Majesties."<sup>27</sup> But, by Aug. 4, she reported, "We are now under fire all day and all night."<sup>28</sup> The difficulty of China's transition was characterized by the Chinese scholar in the legation compound who refused to fill sand bags because he said he was not a coolie—until after three days of no food, when he changed his mind.

By mid-August the siege was lifted by allied troops. Mrs. Conger reflected on the fact that the Chinese Government could have put an end to all of the legations: "The Chinese had built barricade after barricade. Why did they fear us? Their fears and superstitions evidently kept them from coming right in upon us. We saw the places where they planted

<sup>22</sup>Conger, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 150.



their big guns. They made great preparation, then failed to use the results of their labors."<sup>29</sup> That she had not changed her views very much was attested to by her comment a month after the terrible ordeal was over: "It is true, the cruelty of the Chinese toward foreigners has been extreme, but the Chinese wish to be let alone in their own land."<sup>30</sup> "Poor China!" she wrote a week later, "Why cannot foreigners let her alone with her own? China has been wronged, and in her desperation she has striven as best she could to stop the inroads, and to blot out those already made."<sup>31</sup>

Her optimism and patriotism were evident three months after the siege. She wrote: "The horrors of the siege have been allayed by the bright jobs of the past two months . . . there is no nation that should have the united respect of its people more than the United States of America," referring to the conduct of Americans during and after the siege.<sup>32</sup> But at the same time sober reflection caused her to write: "I have much sympathy for the Chinese, and yet I do not in any way uphold them nor excuse them in their fiendish cruelty. They have given the foreigner the most sorrowful, most degrading, and most revengeful treatment that their fiendish ideas can conceive. But the facts remain the same; China belongs to the Chinese, and she never wanted the foreigner upon her soil. The foreigner would come, force his life upon the Chinese, and here and there break a cog of the wheels that run their Government. . . even if we grant that China's condition has been improved by these invasions, what right has the foreigner to enter this domain unbidden . . . At length, in one last struggle, she rose in her mistaken might to wipe the foreigner and his influence from her land. . . Their methods, however, are most lamentable."<sup>33</sup>

After the siege, things were different. At least on the surface, China's attitude changed a bit. Mrs. Conger observed: "The foreigner has never lost sight of the fact that

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 182-185.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

the Chinese Officials wished to show them all the concealed disrespect that they dared; but, to what extent, they did not guess until now. Heretofore, the foreign ministers on their official visits to His Majesty, have been escorted through a side or back gate and received in a simple, inferior throne room, poorly furnished . . . Since the raising of the siege, the foreigner has been passing through the front gate."<sup>34</sup>

At the end of February, 1901, another leave was granted; they left Peking on March 11. The tone of the letters did not change; on March 29, Mrs. Conger wrote to a niece: "The foreigner has proved to be an obnoxious invader. In return, the Chinese are revengeful. . . Foreign nations seem determined to change the granite customs of China, and China struggles for their preservation."<sup>35</sup> Change in the West had also not been without its pain, we should have remembered.

Mrs. Conger had returned to China in time to witness the miles of funeral procession for China's great 19th Century diplomat, Li Hung Chang, and to tell of Empress Dowager's return to the capital. "For the first time in China's history," she wrote, "the foreign Ministers entered the Forbidden City and entered at the front gate."<sup>36</sup> A new day had dawned.

And new it was. On the first of February the Empress Dowager received the ladies of the diplomatic corps. Mrs. Conger's enthusiasm was unbounded: "A wonderful day it was! Can we not catch glimpses of a distant union as the round of the ladder takes us upward? Who could desire to cast a shadow across this path of progress?"<sup>37</sup> Her impressions of the Empress Dowager, who had had a bad press generally, were boosted on a second visit: "I was truly grateful that I could see the good spirit manifested in that woman whom the world had so bitterly condemned."<sup>38</sup> About an audience she had at the Summer Palace, she wrote: "How beautiful! . . . We saw the island, with its high

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 224.

rocks, glistening yellow tiled roofs, grottoes, marble terraces. . . One of the most remarkable pictures that I ever beheld."<sup>39</sup> That Mrs. Conger felt strongly about the virtues of the Empress Dowager, was again clear from a letter of June 21, 1903, when she wrote of another audience: "a happier, brighter day, her Majesty has never given us. Crowning the Imperial graces was the womanly tenderness that bade us draw near to her."<sup>40</sup> The Empress had consented to be painted by an American lady. Mrs. Conger rejoiced because "this portrait may present to the outside world even a little of the true expression and character of this misrepresented woman . . ."<sup>41</sup> The friendship blossomed further as "Her Majesty sends cakes and fruits."

In July of that year a new commercial treaty was signed between the United States and China. Mrs. Conger recounted the advantages to trade and missionary activity. She in no way intimated any regret over this. Yet, in February of 1904, she observed: "We deride, belittle, and woefully underate everything Chinese. We feel that with the banner of progress in our hands, with superior knowledge and wisdom in our minds, and determination in our hearts, a reformation must come. . . China is a nation that has stood self-supporting for over four thousand years . . . Is there not some recognition of the eternal truth of God that this great old nation has woven into her warp and woof, which made her stand? . . . If we can detect her thought, we can better comprehend the line of her actions. Let us be unbiased, charitable, and watch to see if we cannot find that which we would assign to the good."<sup>42</sup> The optimist shows clearly at least as far as American influence is concerned. Patriotism overcame every other feeling when, in April, 1904, the cornerstone was laid for a new home for American ministers to China. "Americans gathered on American soil and under American's Stars and Stripes," she wrote, "to rejoice in America's own way. This is an auspicious day in our country's forward march.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 290.

She has this day, with a step onward and upward, planted her banner with the sisterhood of great nations in the dignity of owning her home in foreign representation."<sup>43</sup> Were we merely trying to catch up with the fashion of nationalistic imperialism in the "sisterhood of nations?" At any rate, no mention of China's feelings here. Perhaps the strength of nationalism overcame all else, at least for a moment, even with Mrs. Conger.

In the last year of her stay she wrote to a friend: "You ask how I learned about the Chinese, about the missionaries and their work." Her answer gave the best advice about how to see another's point of view: "In reply I would say that I first studied my attitude. Our attitude determines our view and opportunity for information."<sup>44</sup> To those who thought of China as merely "a melon" to be "sliced," she had this to say: "China, with her centuries of history, is no child in her thought and action. Thousands of years she had stood independent of all other peoples, and she wished to continue thus; but the great sisterhood of nations would no longer permit this independence. Little by little these nations opened China's doors. They persuaded and forced her to join hands with them and even to divide her possessions with them. Strange demands!"<sup>45</sup> If Mrs. Conger was right, the present day offers not so much of a puzzle as the result of an effective reaction against a century of painful transition. And in that transition, Mrs. Conger welcomed the advent of Chinese patriotism; she saw this in a choir of 20 Chinese boys singing "God Save Our Emperor" to the tune of "America."

Upon leaving China, Mrs. Conger in a letter to a sister showed her awareness of the practical side of the Chinese, as well as her ability to appreciate it. "After the troubles of 1900 were settled," she wrote, "and the nations joined hands of friendship with China, China had no reason for loving the Christian nations more than before; but, true to the Chinese

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 295-296.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 317.

character, she accepted the situation, and in an outward spirit acted as though she wished to do so. Whether she were sincere or not was never questioned in my mind. I, too, accepted the situation, and improved even the slightest opportunity to mingle with these people."<sup>46</sup>

The homeward voyage inspired one last eulogy of China and the Chinese. In April of 1905, almost seven years after her first view of China, she wrote: "I found in the Chinese fundamental qualities not to be surpassed, upon which to build the Christian living. Their great love for parents, for the aged, for children, for music, for pets of all kinds, for flowers, and for trees; their reaching out to a power beyond themselves, their steadfastness, their great memories, their accuracy, their sober watchfulness, their quiet forbearance, their innate politeness, their unequalled obedience to law, their civility to guests, their trustworthy honesty, their devout respect for education, and their industrious habits, all combine to show the making of a strong character of a strong people that will in time stand with the sisterhood of the great nations. The Chinese are so thorough, patient, and steadfast in what they undertake to do, that when they start upon the new road they will show a power that we dream not of, and will surprise the nations. In an effective way China will resent the gross wrongs imposed upon her. This old giant is not weak in her people. The truly Christian world should lend her a hand."<sup>47</sup> Had we, we might not be getting so much of the back of her hand today.

Possibly there is too much praise here, but the prophecy is clear. Also clear is Mrs. Conger's feeling and insight. Regardless of how today some may disagree with her Christian aspirations for China (in which, incidentally, Mrs. Conger was but echoing aspirations of Western civilization that were centuries old), it was probably her sincerely religious view that enabled her to see more in China than a potential market for western products and investments.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 361-362.

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