

*Original Paper*

Benevolence or Pretext: An Exploration of U.S. Foreign Policy  
Toward China in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century from the Perspective of  
Social Darwinism

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Received: March 1, 2024

Accepted: March 8, 2024

Online Published: March 14, 2024

doi:10.22158/jar.v8n1p49

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jar.v8n1p49>

**Abstract**

*Applying Darwin's principles of natural selection and survival of the fittest to human society, social Darwinists in the late nineteenth century proposed the Manifest Destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. Based on the social Darwinism theory, this paper looks into the United States overseas expansion, especially its foreign policy toward China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It further argues that the alleged American "protection" for China in military, diplomatic and cultural domain was just an embodiment of racial superiority in U.S. foreign policy, which was a justification for the United States to invade and enslave other countries and establish world hegemony.*

**Keywords**

*Social Darwinism, U.S. foreign policy, China, racial superiority, imperialism*

In the late nineteenth century, the dramatic industrial developments in the United States propelled it to the top of the world's economic powers. The United States' resources and powers boomed to an unprecedented extent. In 1893, the United States became the world's second largest exporter, after Britain. Its railroad, steel, coal, banking, and food processing industries created an economic powerhouse second to none. Thus, the United States desperately needed market to sell its excessive products and to make capital investment. A wide range of influential Americans including capitalists, politicians, intellectuals encouraged the vigorous promotion of American interests. China, an ancient and mysterious country located in the Pacific naturally caught the attention of industrial America. Abundant in population and resources, China was an excellent market for commodities and the origin of raw materials. Contrast to the prosperity of American industrial and economic development, China, owing to its internal affairs and politics, declined and deteriorated. In the United States, the voices

came from different social positions supporting American overseas expansion, especially in China. Social Darwinism, at that time, served to provide the theoretical basis for the United States to justify its overseas expansion.

### **1. Advocates of Social Darwinism and Its Justification of Overseas Expansion**

The last three decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century saw an unusually quick and sympathetic reception of Darwinism in the United States. Darwinism was applied to the life of man in society, and a host of distinguished social Darwinism advocates was soon in the field. Among them were Herbert Spencer, John Fiske, Josiah Strong, John William Burgess, to name some of the most famous ones. Their views were fully adapted to the needs of the American imperialists' overseas expansion.

Herbert Spencer tried to explain human society with Darwin's theory of biological evolution. He believed that the relationships among different groups, nations and cultures within human society were "survival struggle", and the result was inevitably "survival of the fittest". Thus, Darwin's principles of natural selection and survival of the fittest in the biological world were applied to human society. In his view, the result of such a long struggle would be a "good and prosperous society" composed of the most physically and intellectually strong. In this society, all evil and immorality would be eliminated, and altruism would be the norm.

John Fiske, a famous American historian and philosopher, was a follower of Spencer and actively promoted social Darwinism. In some of his works, he used Darwin's biological evolution law to explain social phenomena, and absurdly attributed the relationship of oppression and exploitation among countries, nations and classes to natural selection and survival of the fittest. He went on to declare that "by natural selection, the United States has become a winning nation, showing that the fittest Americans naturally and logically should rule over the weak, i.e., the unfit" (Williams, 1962, p. 332). This was the Manifest Destiny of the race.

Josiah Strong, a prominent pastor and secretary of the Evangelical Society of the United States, was a social Darwinist in rank with John Fiske. He preached racial superiority under the cloak of religion. In 1885, he published a best-selling book, *Our Country*, in which he portrayed Americans as the ordained elect, Christians chosen by God to lead backward peoples. He wrote:

This race has an unsurmountable power, and behind it lies all the forces of wealth and untold riches. We should wish it to be the great depository of freedom, of pure Christianity, and of the highest civilization. This race exhibits some very progressive qualities, sufficient to spread its institutions to all mankind, and its dominion to the whole earth (Strong, 1885, p. 116).

And as to the unoccupied lands of the world, Strong declared: “Then will the world enter upon a new stage of its history... If I do not read amiss, this powerful race will move down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea, over upon Africa and beyond” (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 179).

Other social Darwinists also trumpeted the racist theory that only the Anglo-Saxon race was the “superior race” and that it had a duty to intervene in the affairs of other peoples in the interest of civilization. John W. Burgess also extended the doctrine of racial superiority to the study of American foreign policy, advocating “the use of any means necessary to compel the subjugation of backward peoples” (Williams, 1962, p. 333).

## **2. Justifying Military Invasion in the Pacific**

The Pacific, especially China occupied vital strategic importance for the United States. Many an influential figure in contemporary America realized the significance of this region. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt wrote that “The Pacific era, destined to be the greatest of all, and to bring the whole human race at last into one great comity of nations, is just at the dawn” (Chang, 2015, p. 102). The “fate” of the American people was to lead this new association of peoples of the West and East. “We cannot escape our destiny”, Roosevelt trumpeted. Alfred Thayer Mahan, the prominent military strategist who is best known for his work on the importance of naval power expressed a heightened appreciation for Pacific politics and the importance of Asia, especially China, for the United States. He concluded that America was, and should be, a great world power: its particular location in world geography, its size and economic heft, and its history determined its great responsibilities and its expansive interests. For Mahan, empire was a given destiny, not a choice. Senator Albert J. Beveridge likewise argued that America must be a Pacific power and have access to “China’s illimitable markets”. “China is our natural customer” (Ibid, p. 102), he declared. Therefore, after annexing Hawaii and grabbing the Philippines from Spain, the United States could not wait to bring China under its control.

Similarly, in conquering the countries in the Pacific region, the United States was obsessed with Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and contempt for other peoples. In taking the Philippines, President McKinley justified the American invasion by saying,

The United States will not allow the Philippines to become independent, for this would lead to anarchy and indiscipline worse than Spanish rule; the only thing that the United States can do is to take the entire Philippine Islands and educate the Filipino people with Christian ideas and Western civilization (Liu & Yang, 2001, p. 108).

In 1900, the anti-imperialist and patriotic Boxer Movement broke out in China. Mahan denounced the Boxer movement as a reactionary movement from the imperialist standpoint and advocated the use of force against the Boxer movement. President Roosevelt also insisted that sending troops to China was legal because the United States needed to “defend the interests of the open market for its own

merchants, farmers, and wage earners” (Ibid, p. 122). He also urged the Western powers to unite against the Boxer rebellion. In their view, the Chinese, like the Filipinos, had to be “liberated” from barbarism by western powers, so the use of foreign troops was necessary. In May 1900, the United States joined the eight-power allied forces to invade China and suppress the uprising in a bloody way. The United States thus prided itself on securing permanent security and peace for China. Similar to the Philippine Uprising of Aquinado, the uprising was brutally suppressed at the expense of tens of thousands of innocent lives, throwing the nation into huge calamity. However, the United States felt they were justified to do so. As far as they were concerned, they were “liberating” the Chinese and “leading” them out of their doomed destiny. This is the full embodiment of Roosevelt’s deep-rooted theory of white superiority.

### **3. Claiming Diplomatic Protection of China**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, President Roosevelt developed the Monroe Doctrine; the message conveyed was that the countries of Latin America were backward and uncivilized places that needed to be governed by civilized nations, and that the civilized nation with the responsibility for governance was none other than the United States of America. It was incumbent upon the United States to assume responsibility for the maintenance of stability and peace in Latin America as an international police force. The Open Door Policy ranked second only to the Monroe Doctrine in the history of American foreign affairs.

In face of the possibility that China would be dismembered by foreign powers, Secretary of State, John Hay first presented the Open Door Policy in 1899. In the summer of 1900, the Boxer Uprising erupted and the West declared that China was at war with civilization itself. The Great Powers, including the United States, formed a combined expeditionary force to invade the country to rescue the surrounded foreign community in Beijing from the upsurge against foreigners in north China. At that time, the United States was afraid of losing its interests in China because the balance of power among the Great Powers would be broken. Thus, John Hay sent notes to the Great Powers again on behalf of the American government, stressing:

A solution that will secure permanent security and peace for China, preserve China’s territorial and administrative integrity, preserve all the rights of friendly nations guaranteed by treaties and international law, and protect the principles of equal and fair trade throughout the world within the territory of imperial China (Ibid, pp. 117-18).

In it, the United States declared that it had a vital interest in seeing that China should be open to all. No one power or group of powers should dominate that vast country’s resources and markets. The United States claimed that it was the United States who rescued China from partition and dismemberment. It manifested that the United States acted as a unique friend and presumed protector of China. The Open Door Policy was thus seen not as a defense of American commercial or even strategic interests alone;

they were also perceived to be a noble expression of the American values of fair play and respect for others. Americans tried to distinguish themselves from the avaricious Europeans and Japanese. It declared “America stands alone as their constant friend and advisor, without territorial aspirations, without schemes of self-aggrandizement—the unpretending but firm advocate of peace and justice” (Chang, 2015, p. 106). As a matter of fact, what the United States really cared was the national interests; it never explicitly stated what Washington would do if other powers did not respect them. After the suppression of the Boxer Uprising, the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, Italy, and other foreign powers united to force the Chinese government to accept the humiliating Peace Treaty of 1901. It included such invasive terms as imposing staggering indemnities amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, and permanently installing foreign military personnel in Beijing to protect resident foreigners, etc. Even Mark Twain condemned American behavior in China and the Philippines as just as cynically imperialist as European colonialism.

#### **4. Spreading Cultural and Moral Superiority**

In terms of overseas expansion, not only business and politics, but also cultural and the moral superiority of the American people should spread outside the United States to the rest of the world. When Woodrow Wilson came to power, he proposed moral principles rather than economic interests or political power in dealing with foreign countries. Wilson believed in the invigorating power of democracy and anti-imperialism and spoke loudly about self-determination. At the end of World War I, many intellectuals in China had high hopes for President Wilson’s leadership. To those hopeful Chinese, Wilson was the most qualified politician who could take the lead in defending human rights in the world. Many Chinese saw Wilson as a world leader in “spiritual democracy” and their country’s best hope, among them included early Chinese communists.

While carrying out the Open Door Policy, President Wilson also paid great attention to the cultural infiltration of China in the ideological and cultural fields.

There were 400 million subhumans who, with appropriate protection and enterprise, could become 400 million customers and open endless vistas for American trade and industry. There were 400 million benighted souls which, with appropriate guidance and instruction, could be saved from damnation and add a vast realm to God’s kingdom on earth (Isaacs, 1973, p. 125).

With the active support of the US government, American missionaries actively carried out educational undertakings, established medical and health services, propagated Western culture and spread Christianity in China. An extraordinarily large number of Americans viewed themselves as the saviors, protectors, and benevolent guardians of China. In a word, besides assuming responsibility for China’s political independence and administrative integrity, the United States also assumed responsibility for the minds, bodies, and immortal souls of the Chinese.

However, Wilson asserted that the United States had “no hampering ambitions as a world power”, and “We do not want a foot of anybody’s territory” (Hart, 1918, p. 81). As to his country’s history, Wilson expressed:

If we have been obliged by circumstances, or have considered ourselves to be obliged by circumstances, in the past, to take territory which we otherwise would not have thought of taking, I believe I am right in saying that we have considered it our duty to administer that territory, not for ourselves, but for the people living in it, and to put this burden upon our consciences—not to think that this thing is ours for our use, but to regard ourselves as trustees of the great business for those to whom it does really belong, trustees ready to hand it over to the cestui que trust at any time, when the business seems to make that possible and feasible (Ibid, pp. 164-165).

Wilson disclaimed all territorial ambition and cast the apparent territorial grabs of the past as selfless acts of paternalist obligation, evidence of Americans’ willingness to shoulder the white man’s burden. In Wilson’s view, Americans, as trustees of a “great business” had been guided not by material interests but by obligation and the sound business principle of feasibility. If Americans had been “obliged by circumstances” to shoulder the burden of trusteeship, according to Wilson, Asians, especially Chinese had been similarly obliged to hand over their “great business” to those “in the main field of modern enterprise and action”, namely the Americans.

Therefore, it can be seen that Social Darwinists applied Darwin’s principles of natural selection and survival of the fittest to human society, and proposed the Manifest Destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race. In U.S. foreign policy toward China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States presented a “benevolent” image, claiming “protection” for China in many a domain. In military domain, the United States believed it had the destiny to lead. In conquering the countries in the Pacific region, the United States was obsessed with Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and contempt for other peoples. In this way, it justified its military invasion in the Pacific. Moreover, in diplomatic domain, owing to the Open Door Policy, the United States boasted itself as a unique friend and presumed protector of China. As a matter of fact, what the United States really concerned was China’s abundant resources and immense markets. Last but not least, in cultural and moral domains, the superiority of the United States was also embodied fully. In order to propagate Western culture and spread Christianity in China, the United States carried out educational undertakings and established medical and health services. The United States assumed responsibility for the minds, bodies, and immortal souls of the Chinese, positioning itself as a savior, protector and benevolent guardian of China. From what had been analyzed above, it can be concluded that the alleged “protection” was nothing more than a pretext. The United States’ foreign policy toward China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fully embodied its racial superiority. Shouldering the white man’s “responsibility”, the United States, actually found itself a justification to invade and enslave other countries and establish world hegemony.

### Fund Project

Scientific Research Project of Sichuan International Studies University for the year 2021 (sisu 202137) “A Study of John Dewey’s Thoughts on Sino-U.S. Community (1919-1929)”;

Post-Graduate Scientific Research Project of Sichuan International Studies University for the year 2021 (SISU2021XK004) “A Study of John Dewey’s Thoughts on Sino-U.S. Community After World War I”.

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