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* ‘Asia Pacific region’ as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.
The Role of German Missionaries in Post-Boxer North China
by Lydia Gerber, Ph.D.

Abstract

Through several case studies of anti-Christian violence in North China, this article examines various patterns of political interaction between German Protestant missionaries and Chinese local elite during the first decade of the twentieth century. In these cases, the Chinese officials used the Lutheran Berlin and Weimar missions to empower themselves, which in turn, allowed the German missionaries to play an active role in the competitive arena of local politics. This article argues that the anti-Christian sentiment was highly situational and varied in time and place. In those peripheral areas where there was little government control and Confucian influence, the Chinese elite did not hesitate to take advantage of missionary resources for political survival. It was these pragmatic concerns rather than ideological considerations that dictated the interaction between Chinese elite and Christian missionaries in the post-Boxer era.

This article examines various patterns of political interaction between German Protestant missionaries and Chinese local elites during the first decade of the twentieth century. Drawing on unpublished archival materials from the Berlin and Weimar missionary societies in Germany, it reconstructs four incidents of disputes involving German missionaries, Chinese district officials and rural communities around the German leased territory of Jiaozhou in Eastern Shandong. In these incidents, the Chinese officials used the Lutheran Berlin and Weimar missions to empower themselves, which in turn, allowed the German missionaries to play an active role in the competitive arena of local politics.

This analysis of the German Protestant missionary involvement in local politics departs from the existing literature on the subject. Previously, scholars like Paul A. Cohen and Lü Shiqiang have interpreted the outbreak of anti-missionary and anti-Christian violence as an ideological response to cultural imperialism from the West (Cohen, 1978, 543–90, 572f.; 1984, 52–55; Lü, 1966). Popular hostility towards Christian communities was often presented as a righteous action in defence of Confucian orthodoxy. John King Fairbank once described the tensions and conflicts between Christian missionaries and Chinese gentry as of such natural animosity as that between “cats and dogs” (Fairbank, 1986, 125). There were plenty of reasons for such animosity. Armed with the Bible and the gun, the Christian missionaries were perceived by the Chinese scholar-officials and gentry as a threat to their authority. Under the protection of treaty rights, the missionaries directly challenged the Confucian principle to “guard against heretical beliefs” and made the Chinese elite appear to be incompetent in front of the foreigners. This article argues that the anti-Christian sentiment was highly situational and varied in time and place. In those peripheral areas where there was little government control and Confucian influence, the Chinese elite did not hesitate to use missionary resources for political survival. It was these pragmatic concerns rather than ideological considerations that dictated the interaction between Chinese elite and Christian missionaries in Eastern Shandong during the post-Boxer era.

I. German Imperialism and Protestant Missions in Eastern Shandong

In November 1897, the German marines seized a small bay in Shandong under the pretext of ensuring that reparations were paid for the murder of two German Catholic missionaries in the province. In the early 1890s, the German government had been considering to occupy the bay for building its first marine base in East Asia in order to expand into the interior of Shandong. In the spring of 1898, the German government signed the Sino-German Treaty that allowed the Germans to lease an area of 540 square km for 99 years, to construct a railway to Jinan, the capital of Shandong province, and to exploit coalfields along the railroad. The leased territory itself consisted of small market towns, fishing villages, mountain dwellings, including the famous Daoist temples in the Laoshan Mountains that contained roughly 150,000 inhabitants in about 250 individual settlements. Upon their arrival, the Germans built the city of Qingdao and established a garrison. The treaty also established a 50 km-wide belt surrounding the leased territory as a demilitarised zone. The district cities of Jiaozhou, Gaomi, and Jimo were located in the zone, from which all Chinese troops had to be withdrawn. In an area deeply affected by the German invasion and the Boxer Uprising, the withdrawal of Chinese troops proved to be highly problematic. The German excursions into the demilitarised zone and beyond created diplomatic tensions between both countries. Although the German forces could protect the railway against the Boxers and local bandits around the zone, they did not protect hundreds of Chinese civilians who lost their lives in the intense warfare of 1900.

After the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1905), the German government was concerned with the Japanese military presence in Shandong and the rise of anti-foreign sentiment among the Chinese. To avoid confrontation with the Chinese, the German government dissolved the garrisons in the demilitarised zone in 1906 and gave up the plan to expand into the interior of Shandong. Instead, the Germans created the “model settlement” of Qingdao to promote German influence in northern China. The founding of the elementary school system in the German leased territory and of the Sino-German University in 1908 was an important part of this endeavour. The fact that after the 1911 Revolution, many of the Manchu government officials fled to Qingdao and stayed there points to the successful establishment of the German model-settlement. But the Japanese occupation of Qingdao in 1914 brought an end to this policy.

Founded in 1824, the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society initially began evangelistic work in Guangdong province in 1884 and came to Eastern Shandong after 1898. These German Lutheran missionaries were motivated “to offer the best the West has to offer to the Kaiser’s new subjects in China.”

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Their primary goals were to convert Chinese and to establish Lutheran congregations in Shandong. As time went by, the Lutheran mission founded several schools in the area and a small dispensary in Jimo. Financial constraints forced the home board in Berlin to confine their work within the leased territory and the demilitarised zone, but the superintendent of the Lutheran mission in Shandong, Voskamp, continuously expanded the missionary activities into the interior, and at the outbreak of the First World War, the Lutheran mission had about 1,000 converts.

Another mission active in Eastern Shandong was the Weimar Missionary Society, a joint Swiss-German missionary enterprise founded in 1884 by the liberal German Lutherans and members of the Swiss Reformed Church. The main goal of the Weimar Missionary Society was “to spread Christianity to the highly civilized nations of the East (i.e. China, Japan and India) in appreciation of the elements of truth already present in their culture.” Its German section, particularly its home board in Berlin, actively supported the German government to move into Qingdao after the Sino-German Treaty of 1898. But, under the leadership of Richard Wilhelm, the Weimar mission adopted a totally different mission strategy. It refrained from baptizing Chinese converts and founding native congregations. Neither did it hold any religious instruction sessions nor celebrate Christian holidays in the boys’ school. Instead, it actively supported a thorough Confucian training in the mission schools and promoted Confucianism in China and Germany.

Though divergent in their evangelistic approaches and openly critical of each other, the two German missions had a few things in common. The German missions did not have the financial support that the American and British missions had in Shandong. At a theological level, unlike their American and British counterparts, the German missionaries considered a purified Confucianism to be a viable basis for Christianity and therefore, favoured cross-cultural dialogues with Chinese scholars. Politically, the two German missions were dissatisfied with the German government’s policies towards China and socially, they did not fully integrate with the German community in Qingdao. It is against this background that the following incidents of disputes will be examined in detail. The first two cases took place in the demilitarised zone. The third case occurred in a village in the leased territory and the last one took place in a city outside the realm of German influence.

II. Jimo Incident (1901)

In July 1901, an anti-tax riot broke out in Jimo, a district city in the demilitarised zone surrounding the German leased territory. Yuan Shikai, the provincial governor of Shandong, increased taxes to raise funds for the Boxer indemnities. The district of Jimo had not paid taxes to the provincial government for centuries and all of a sudden, tax collectors asked for an amount of about 10 cents from each family. People refused to pay their dues and protested against the district government. Within days, more than 100,000 farmers surrounded the yamen and looted the houses of several tax collectors. They threatened to kill the district magistrate named Wang and then went to Qingdao to apply for German citizenship. After hearing about the anti-tax riot, the prefectural government in Laizhou sent forty soldiers to rescue Magistrate Wang. To ensure his safety, Magistrate Wang took four members of the gentry as hostages but this tactics immediately put him at odds with the local elite and tensions remained unresolved.

Magistrate Wang decided to create a religious case involving German missionaries and Chinese Christians (jiāo’ān). The German diplomats were known to be willing to defend the interests of their citizens and missionaries. As soon as Wilhelm Lutschewitz of the Berlin Missionary Society in Jimo declared himself in danger, Magistrate Wang believed that the German troops from Qingdao would arrive in a few days. In the next two days, Magistrate Wang visited Lutschewitz in person, hinting that Lutschewitz was in danger because of the riot and therefore, he should call for the German troops. Lutschewitz, however, remained neutral throughout the riot. Having failed to engage the German troops, Magistrate Wang released the hostages. He died of apoplexy shortly after the riot. The district of Jimo paid no taxes for another year and the prefectural officials were grateful that Lutschewitz had not made the Jimo incident a diplomatic crisis by calling in the German troops.

III. Missionaries as Educators in State Schools

Local unrest in the demilitarised zone during the Boxer Uprising led to the dispatch of the German troops into Eastern Shandong. The German troops were stationed in the district towns of Jiaozhou and Gaomi until 1906. Even though this was a clear violation of the Sino-German Treaty governing the German leased territory, the Qing government failed to get the German troops to withdraw after the Boxer Uprising. Without the support of the imperial government, the local Chinese could not secure any compensation for damages caused by the German troops.

In this volatile situation, the Chinese local government employed the “age-old tactic of “using the barbarians against the barbarians (yìyì zhìyì)”. All the German Catholic and Protestant missionary societies in the area were invited to teach at the newly established modern district schools. One of the Protestant missionaries was Richard Wilhelm of the Weimar Missionary Society, who had succeeded in persuading the German troops to end their retaliatory incursion into Gaomi in November 1900 and earned the respect of the people. In October 1902, Wilhelm took over the administration of the district school in Gaomi. The Berlin Missionary Society and the Society of the Divine Word (S.V.D.) each began teaching “Western subjects” and German language at district schools in Jimo and Jiaozhou at the end of 1903. This arrangement was in place until the summer of 1912. As teachers at these government schools, the missionaries became quasi employees of the Chinese state and members of the local gentry. They were invited to take part in public events and ceremonies commensurate with their status.

To a large extent, this policy of yìyì zhìyì was beneficial to the Chinese local government. The German missionaries were no longer seen as dangerous outsiders and potential trouble-
makers. Bounded by the Confucian rituals, the missionaries had to meet the gentry on a regular basis. Common courtesy required them to discuss any disputes between Christians and non-Christians with the district magistrate before making any public appeals. While this kind of informal meeting did not guarantee a peaceful settlement of such disputes, it sent a powerful message to those Christian adherents in search for protection.

The strong missionary presence helped control the German troops in the demilitarised zone. As potential witnesses with strong ties to the German diplomats and foreign media, the missionaries were the best watchdogs that the Chinese local government could find to police the German troops. Clearly, there was a political consideration behind the decision to employ the German missionaries to work at the government schools. This point is proved by the fact that the local officials never employed the American Presbyterian missionaries in the area and the Chinese graduates from Dengzhou College, a Presbyterian mission school, near Yantai because the American missionaries did not have access to the German troops or other security forces.

The Sino-German cooperation at the district level did not last for long. Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 had affected the balance of power between China and the West and the Chinese perception of Westerners. After 1905, local officials were more concerned with the threat of Japan than that of Germany. When the German military abandoned its barracks in Gaomi and Jiaozhou in 1906, the Chinese officials were no longer interested in cooperating with the German missions. In 1908, the district magistrates of Jimo and Gaomi did not employ the German missionaries to teach at the government schools. The change of political climate in northeast Asia indeed had an impact on the mission-state relations at the grassroots level.

**IV. Guye Case (1901)**

After the end of the Boxer Uprising, it was very clear to the Chinese in Eastern Shandong that the German troops were there to stay. Rural unrest in the hinterlands of Qingdao made it difficult for the German missionaries to travel to the countryside. In 1901, large numbers of villagers came to ask the missionaries in Qingdao to establish churches in their communities. The village elders bought stacks of the New Testament and catechisms and expressed interest in learning about the Christian message. These villagers sought to be affiliated with the Christian missions in order to show that they were not involved in the Boxer Uprising.

After purchasing the Christian pamphlets, most of the village elders never returned to the German mission compounds. The only exception was the village of Guye, where the Christian sympathisers eventually persuaded Adolf Kunze of the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society to establish a mission outpost there. They offered their ancestral hall for use as a school and chapel and promised to arrange living quarters for the Chinese preacher. Kunze was moved by their sincerity and sent a Chinese evangelist to Guye. One and half years later, the Chinese evangelist reported that the whole village was about to convert to Christianity. But only the village leader and one farmer were baptized in 1903. In the summer of 1905, the Christian village leader died and was buried according to the Christian rites. The whole village attended his funeral. At the funeral, the missionaries were very impressed by the hospitality of the villagers. When a member of the home board from Berlin visited Guye in 1905, all the village elders came to welcome the guest at the church and stayed throughout the lengthy service. Yet no one was baptized in 1905. When the Lutheran mission considered closing the chapel, several villagers came to the evangelist for religious instruction. But there was no baptism until the outbreak of the First World War. In 1909, Adolf Kunze visited Guye and met the new village leader. The village leader accompanied Kunze to nearby villages, all of which were under an inter-village alliance with Guye. The leader of Guye was the head of the inter-village alliance. On that occasion, all the other village leaders attended a church service in Guye and asked Kunze for special prayers to end the drought in the area. Kunze obliged, asking God for rain and for the conversion of the people in Guye. Nevertheless, even though it actually rained the next day, conversions did not follow.

Why did the people in Guye continue to keep the church in the village? Why were they so courteous to the German missionaries but refused to be baptised? There are three explanations for the non-conversion of villagers in Guye. The first explanation concerns the community’s intention to maintain a good relationship with the German administration in Licun. The German officials made religious neutrality one of their policies. Though a former missionary himself, Mootz, the senior German administrator in Licun, was not in favour of the German missionary expansion into the interior. Instead of looking after the German Protestant interests, he donated money for rebuilding local temples and holding traditional Chinese festivals. Because Licun was very close to Guye, the villagers heard about Mootz’s lack of support for the German missions. The fact that the German judge made a decision favourable to non-Christians in a lawsuit involving a Christian farmer in Guye in 1910 reinforced the popular perception of Mootz. To keep the Chinese evangelist in Guye was a gesture of maintaining some sort of relationship with the German establishment in the area. But, with the decline of German power in Eastern Shandong after 1905, there no longer was any interest in affiliating with the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society.

The second explanation concerns the community’s desire to have an elementary school in the village without financing a teacher. The villagers were far more interested in helping their children to acquire literary skills at the church school rather than receiving proper instruction in the Christian doctrine. The third explanation has to do with the community’s desire to invite the Christian God of those powerful Germans to be the spiritual guardian of Guye, a manner comparable to worshipping deities at village shrines and temples. This popular perception of Christianity probably arose from the close association between the Bible and the gun in the German missionary movement.

The final explanation concerns the power relations between Guye and neighbouring villagers. The German
missionaries noted that in many parts of the German leased territory, the local Christians liked to be accompanied by a missionary when they marched through the neighbouring villages. Each chapel often displayed a German flag and pictures of the German Imperial family. By displaying a close connection with the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society, the village leader in Guye could enhance his authority within the inter-village alliance.23 While asking the German mission to stay at Guye, the villagers tended to have a political agenda that was different from the religious concerns of the missionaries. This political feature of the German missionary movement in Eastern Shandong, similar to that in late nineteenth-century South China analysed by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, reveals that Christianity became a new potent element in Chinese local politics (Lee, 2003).

V. Jingzhi Case (1902)

As with the Guye case, a wealthy resident named Yang invited the Berlin Missionary Society to come to the city of Jingzhi in 1902. Jingzhi was located neither in the German leased territory nor in the demilitarised zone. Although Yang did not profess any interest in Christianity, he offered a sizable piece of land as a gift to the Berlin Missionary Society for building a chapel and a school.

Carl Voskamp, the superintendent of the Berlin Mission, interpreted Yang’s generosity as a personal vow. While such bequests were traditionally made to the Buddhist and Daoist temples, Voskamp claimed that the Chinese elite would now give donations to the Christian churches.24 The home board in Berlin was very pleased with the offer and requested that the property deed be filed with the district magistrate and a copy be sent to Berlin. However, long after the chapel and school were built, the property deeds had not been filed with the magistrate. Yang died shortly after the church construction and the Berlin Mission never made much progress in Jingzhi.

Several years later, the reasons for Yang’s generosity came to light. Lutschewitz, the acting superintendent of the Berlin Mission, learnt that Yang had participated in a sectarian organization known as jindanjiao (The Sect of Golden Elixir) in Jingzhi. As with other sectarian organizations in late imperial China, this sect had no political agenda and was primarily concerned with the cultivation of individual spirituality. Nonetheless, the sect was labelled as a “heterodox sect” by the Chinese government.25 After the end of the Boxer Uprising, the local government in Jingzhi decided to target this sect and strip its members of all their wealth. Yang then asked his family and friends for help. A distant cousin who had joined the church suggested Yang to donate a piece of land to the German missionaries. With a close connection with the Germans, the local magistrate would not arrest him. Yang followed his cousin’s advice. But even though the magistrate would not confiscate his land, Yang did not want to keep his promise to the Berlin Mission. It was only after repeated exhortations by the local evangelist that Yang finally handed over the landed property to the Mission. When being asked to draft a new property deed to document the transfer of ownership, Yang named the German Kaiser rather than the Berlin Mission as the new owner. In so doing, it was impossible for the Germans to file the document with the district magistrate. The Yang family tried to reclaim the land from the missionaries after Yang’s death and it took several years for both sides to resolve the problem.26 At the end, the Berlin Mission never gained a permanent foothold in Jingzhi.

VI. Conclusion

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the German missionaries in China were more than proponents of an alien creed. Under the Sino-German Treaty, they could move freely in the interior and were not subject to Chinese laws. In the remote areas where there was little government control, some local powerbrokers did not hesitate to exploit missionary resources to enhance their positions. Because of the dual identities of the Christian missionaries as spiritual teachers and political agents, it is clear that conversion offered material advantages for the poor and empowered the politically marginalized communities.

As shown in these case studies, the end of the Boxer Uprising witnessed a change of attitude among the Chinese elite towards Christianity. When the Chinese elite came to terms with German imperialism in Eastern Shandong, they had to learn how to survive in the new political environment. This pragmatic concern dictated their interaction with the German Protestant missions in the region. The Chinese officials who took advantage of the German missionary resources in the competitive arena of local politics were as pragmatic as the Chinese Christians who employed conversion as a strategy of survival. For the German missionaries, cooperation with the Chinese elite brought in large amounts of resources but did not lead to large numbers of conversions. The change of political climate after the Russo-Japanese War (1905) led to a decline of interest in the German missions. Wilhelm Lutschewitz of the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society finally realized that the Chinese gentry had virtually no interest in Christianity. This realization came as a shock to Richard Wilhelm who believed that his relationship with the gentry had been based on a deep personal and emotional bond.27

ENDNOTES


2. The rule that no Chinese were allowed to live within parts of Qingdao reserved for Westerners was abolished to accommodate these wealthy Chinese officials.


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8. These events were reiterated in several of the Berlin Missionary Society’s publications. See, for example “Anfangsarbeit eines Missionars – aus einem Privatgebetbuch von Lutschewitz,” *Das Evangelium in China* (1902), pp. 70–89, especially pp. 86–87. The archives of the Berlin Missionary Society have the German translation of a letter by Daotai Cui Zhongshan, expressing his own gratitude as well as that of Governor Yuan Shikai to Lutschewitz. The translation is undated and included in Lutschewitz’ annual report for 1901, which arrived in Berlin on January 9, 1902. *Stationakte Tsino*, Bd. 1, unnumbered sheet. The Berlin Missionary Society Archives (hereafter BMSA), Berlin Germany.


10. The arrangement described here is probably based on a memorial by the future governor of Shandong, Yuan Shikai, dated July 1899. In this document, Yuan suggested the local officials in Shandong to take a more active role in preventing anti-missionary violence. The solution found by the district magistrates in the demilitarized zone was highly effective. For a description of the ideas presented in Yuan’s memorial, see *Imperialism and Chinese Nationalism*, Schrecker, pp. 112–14.


12. Wilhelm himself did not move to Gaomi but had other missionaries from the Weimar Mission stationed there to teach German and “Western subjects”. However, he repeatedly visited Gaomi and was received as an honored member of the local gentry.


14. Richard Wilhelm’s report to the Qingdao Gouverneur Jaeschke regarding German violence against Chinese villagers during a military expedition directed against the Boxers in November 1901 had indeed made an impact. It motivated Jaeschke to end the military expedition and provide Wilhelm with funds to relieve the suffering of Chinese villagers. Wilhelms passionate account of the events was only published by the home board in excerpts, and all the details concerning the extreme cruelty of the German troops were removed. Richard Wilhelm to Kind, 26 November 1901, DOAM Akte 236, Bl. 159 f. printed (in parts) in ZMR 1901, pp. 59–61.

15. The Berlin Missionary Society prevented a termination of their involvement in the district school by asking the German consul in Jinan to intervene on their behalf. The local mandarin, who had originally sent two teachers and a member of the local gentry to persuade the missionaries to leave the schools, called on the missionaries on his way back from Jinan. He told the missionaries that he had gone to great pains to convince the reluctant provincial supervisor of schools (zuetai) that the future support of the missionaries was urgently needed. Lutschewitz, “Erster Halbjahresbericht 1908,” *Stationakte Tsino*, Bd. 2, BMSA. Wilhelm, on the other hand, had expected that his friendship with the Gaomi elite would lead to his continued and increasing involvement in the school reforms in the district. It came as a severe shock to him, that in spite of personal friendships, the anti-foreign sentiment in Shandong was directed against him. He eventually terminated his involvement in Gaomi after the 1911 Revolution.


21. Lutschewitz, “Unsere Mission in Schantung”, in *Jahresbericht der Berliner Mission 1907*, pp. 192–224, especially p.196. Mootz used to be a missionary for the Basel Missionary Society in Guangdong province. His interest in the modern liberal theology and his lack of engagement in missionary work had led to an investigation into the nature of his beliefs. Mootz left the mission to work as a translator and then an official for the German colonial government in Kiautschou.


27. Because Richard Wilhelm had refrained from proselytizing, he was willing to attend the Confucian rituals. In 1906, he was awarded a Chinese rank in recognition of his peace-keeping mission in November 1900. He was convinced that his missionary approach was well received by the Chinese gentry.

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