

Chinese in Germany at the end of the Qing-Dynasty

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As travel reports from Marco Polo and Leibnitz's „Novissima Sinia“ spread through Europe and a China fever was triggered at the upper-class level, the Middle Kingdom was still excluded from the West to a large extent and ships were only allowed to anchor in South Chinese City, Canton. When in the middle of the 18th century the new founded „Royal Prussian-Asian Trade Company of Emden“ delegated their merchant ships only to Canton, the Chinese showed little interest in German products. The „one-eagle-state“ did not become very well known until the Middle of the 19th century. Shipping of the Prussian privileged society had already ceased in 1757 and other Prussian traders had gone nearly exclusively by order of the Dutch.

1. THE DISGUISED “AUSTRIANS” ?

In March of 1823 the first two Chinese, 27-year old Feng Assing and businessman Feng Haho 22, were displayed for six Groschen in Berlin. Some Germans were skeptical as to their authenticity, thinking they were disguised „Austrians“, because at that time existed great political conflicts between Germany and Austrian. However the four paintings of the sculptor and the former director of the Prussian Royal Academy of Arts, Johann Gottfried Schadow, prove the existence of them.¹ Feng Assing, the son of an astrologer, had previously worked as a secretary for his uncle in Canton and had been to England twice previously. He wanted to see the alien world and together with Feng Haho undertook a quest to find happiness. They left China on an English ship on the 3rd of August in 1816. On the island of St. Helena they received an invitation from Napoleon who was living in exile. After arriving in London three months later, they realized that Chinese were not such a curiosity anymore and decided to accept an offer from a Dutch waffle baker to travel around Germany with him.



Feng Assing

Feng Haho

In Berlin they aroused people's curiosity by displaying themselves at 65 Behrenstrasse wearing Chinese clothes and playing Chinese violins. Even though it was only for five minutes, they became known at the Prussian court and received a scholarship of the Prussian King in order to support Wilhelm Schott, one of three German then-sinologues, for the „Research of the esprit of the Chinese language“. Before their appointing as Tee butters to the royal court in Potsdam, they assisted German philologist for three years at Halle University. Meanwhile Feng Assing converted to Christianity and renamed himself Friedrich Wilhelm Asseng. He married an 18-year old German woman in April 1826 after having a son to her. In Potsdam he translated six verses of the Bible into Chinese. He returned to China in 1829 to visit his ill mother and subsequently stayed there, whereas Feng Haho spent the rest of his life in Germany. As a reward for his merit in spreading Chinese culture in Germany the Prussian King got his architect build a villa for Feng Haho in Potsdam.²

2. CHINESE DIPLOMATS IN BERLIN

After the opium wars and several unfair treaties with Western powers, among them Germany in 1861, China deteriorated into a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country. In order to save the country, a number of Chinese politicians and intellectuals were looking for a new road to take. They decided to use „Chinese teachings as an ideological basis and Western knowledge for practical use“. „Learning from the West“ became an initiative under the framework of the self-strengthening movement of 1861.

„To see once is better than to hear a hundred times“. In order to collect up to date knowledge on Western countries and to foster mutual understanding, the Qing-government sent its first education envoys to Germany in 1866. Three years later, the Chinese diplomatic mission took place in Germany. The lively exchange with German politicians, together with

¹ Gottfried Schadow: Kunst-Werke und Kunst-Ansichten, Berlin 1949, S.204.

² Rainer Schwarz: „Heinrich Heines chinesische Prinzessin und seine beiden chinesische Gelernten sowie deren Bedeutung für die Anfänge der deutschen Sinologie“, in: Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens/Hamburg, Nr. 144, 1988, S.75-94.

friendly dealings led to a good atmosphere and to a successful visit. This immediately influenced the Qing government's opinion on Germany in a very positive way, attributing characteristics such as virtue („Tugend“) and will („Willen“) to the country.

Eight years passed before the Chinese embassy was erected in the Berlin embassy quarter in the Tiergarten. On 22 October 1877, Liu Xihong, the first ambassador to Germany, handed over his credentials to the German Emperor. Ten days later, the Empress Augusta Victoria received him.³ At that time, few people of Berlin adapted to guests from the Middle Kingdom. Quite often, children gathered at the site of the embassy and tried to climb its walls in order to catch a glance of the new residents from the Far East. In the streets and in department stores Chinese were often surrounded by curious Germans.

In 1887 the new Chinese ambassador Hong Jun came to Berlin. Soon his young wife Sai Jinhua with her „exotic beauty and her maid“ drew the attention of Berlin high society. Together with Hong Jun she performed official duties in the German capital. One and a half years later, a new „citizen of the world“ was born in the Chinese embassy as the Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung reported on 31 May 1889. The extended ambassador family stayed until spring 1891 in Berlin, before being called back to China.

3. STUDENTS FROM THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

After Germany won the war against France in 1870/71, news of the military success immediately spread to Qing officials. First and foremost Li Hongzhang saw Germany as an example and partly also as an ally, as ten years previous France together with England had conquered and burnt the summer palace of the emperor. Under the framework of the selfstrengthening movement and on Li's initiative, a group of seven sergeants were sent to Germany. In Berlin, the young Chinese received about three years of training at the Prussian Military Academy in Spandau under the supervision of the German colonel Lehmeier, who had been working for three years with the Krupp envoy in Tianjin.



The inevitable opening of China to the world led to increased private travel of Chinese to Germany from the middle of the 19th century onwards. According to recent archive studies the first Chinese student was enrolled in a German university as early as 1873. Rankin H., from the port city Ningbo, enrolled in Easter of 1873 for one semester at the faculty of philosophy in the Leipzig University.⁴

It was only in the winter term of 1898/99 that another Chinese from Beijing called Hsü h Shen started to study Law at the University of Berlin. Prior to that he had been teaching Chinese at the faculty for oriental languages since 1891. One year later two other graduates of the Chinese public academy for foreign languages „Tongwenguan“ started to study in Germany.⁵

4. NEW COMPETITORS?

It was not so easy for ordinary citizens of the Far East to gain ground in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. Many German citizens felt threatened by their presence and afraid that the foreigners would take away their jobs. Therefore a group of Chinese that originally wanted to open a laundry service in Berlin respectively to start some other businesses left Berlin in the middle of the 1880's just after a short stay there. In 1890 a German named Gurt Abel even published a brochure with the title „Chinese in Germany?“ in which he pleaded against the employment of Chinese workers in German companies. Even during the Gold Rush in California stories not only about the „bad characteristics“ but also about the idleness of the Chinese who worked, without complaining from dawn till dusk like machines spread across Europe.

5. THE GERMANY VISIT OF LI HONGZHANG AND PRINCE CHUN

³ Liu, Xihong: Aufzeichnungen über den Aufenthalt in England (刘锡鸿：《英轺私记》). Changsha 1981, S.200.

⁴ University archives of the Leipzig University, Enrolment book Easter 1873.

⁵ Meng, Hong: Das Auslandsstudium von Chinesen in Deutschland (1861-2001) - Ein Beispiel internationaler Studentenmobilität im Rahmen der chinesischen Modernisierung. Frankfurt am Main 2003.

The visit of the Chinese viceroy Li Hongzhang at the end of the nineteenth century was a special event for the citizens of Berlin. Li Hongzhang was famous for his „Construction plan for China“ and his negotiation skills with regard to foreign affairs. At the Court of Prussia he was even called the „Bismarck of the East“ . On 13th June 1896 Li arrived in Berlin, coming by train from Russia. The reception that awaited him was extraordinary. Reichs-Chancellor Hohenlohe-Schillingsfűrst went through the suburbs on special order of Emperor William II in order to escort Li in a pompous decorated four-wheeled coach, pulled by six horses, into the Capital of the German Reich. In Berlin Li enjoyed the special attention of three German China Experts. On the second day of his visit Li was invited by Emperor William II to his palace where he was awarded the decoration of the „ Groß kreuz des Roten Adlerordens“ . In Berlin Li met several other politicians, he visited factories for military equipment as well as some shipyards in Potsdam, before going to Friedrichsruhe to meet Bismarck, who was eminently respectable in China.



Li Hongzhang and Bismarck

Two years later however German troops, for Li the archetype for the Chinese troops, occupied the Chinese Bay of Jiaozhou, and Qingdao became a German Colony. When Prince Chun visited Berlin in 1901 the atmosphere in the German Court had changed to against the Middle Kingdom. Due to the assassination of the German envoy in Beijing, von Ketteler during the boxer-uprising, the younger brother of the Chinese emperor not only had to pay a huge reparation, he also had to apologize on behalf of the Qing Government.

The „exotic young prince“ however was able to gain the respect of the Germans because of his excellent literature and negotiation skills; his politeness was also highly appreciated. Not only he did bring precious gifts for the German emperor but he also distributed presents among the attendees of invitations and receptions or awarded decorations. He visited German companies and cities where he was warmly welcomed with „Hurra“ . In Danzig Emperor William II awarded him later with military decorations. The excitement of the German population for the Chinese prince made it possible for Chinese living in Germany to wear their traditional Chinese costumes again. After Chun's visit to Germany, the German government changed its colonial policy towards China. Instead of military measures,



Germany placed emphasis on cultural policy. China introduced broad reforms within the so-called „ New Policy“ . Between the two countries a productive approach took place, not only in the economic sector but also in political and cultural aspects.

6. NEW GENERATION OF THE CHINESE INTELLECTUALS

After the Boxer-revolt in 1901, the Qing-government began a deep and comprehensive reform of China. This reform encompassed not only in the field of education, but also of civil and government-administrations. In 1905 the traditional exam for civil servants was abolished. At the same time, the education systems of Germany and Japan were catching the attention of Chinese intellectuals. The Chinese soon learned that Japan's exemplary justice, medical and education systems had been copied from the Germans. Therefore, the Central Government of China, as well as some provincial governments, began to expand their study programs in Germany. So arose new groups of Chinese students at German universities by the beginning of the 20th century. These students majored in government, law, economy, natural sciences and, by 1909, medicine.

The positive evaluation of the Chinese study-abroad program and the political and economic development in Germany at the time made this country also attractive for older Chinese intellectuals. In 1907, as the result of the failure of the Qing government to organize a research delegation from the Hanlin Academy to Europe, 41 years old Cai



Li Fuji

Yuanpei financed his own way to Berlin. Once there, Cai improved his knowledge of the German language, gave lectures for the children of the members of the Chinese embassy and worked as commissar for the Chinese Public-House „Shangwu“. One year later he left Berlin for Leipzig. For the following three years he concentrated mainly on the study of philosophy, education, art history and psychology at the University of Leipzig.⁶

Whereas most Chinese left German universities with a departure-certificate, some strove for an academic degree and finished their study with a dissertation. In 1907, Li Fuji from Shanghai became the first Chinese student to receive a Ph.D. in physics at the University of Bonn. Half a year later another Chinese student, Ma Derun, finished his dissertation on Law at the University of Berlin⁷. By the end of 1911 there were altogether six Chinese students who had received Ph.Ds. in Germany.

7. SUN YATSEN AND THE XINHAI-REVOLUTION

In 1902 the Organization of Chinese Students in Germany - „Club chinesischer Studenten in Deutschland“ - was founded. After the onset of the Xinhai Revolution, about the half of 110 Chinese students in German universities returned to China. Some of them did this at the request of their own provincial governments due to the unclear power situation in China. Other did so at the appeal of Sun Yatsen to take part in the construction of the new Chinese government. Most of them studied at the University of Berlin or the Technical College, but a small number graduated from German highschools. Many became familiar with Sun during his 1905 visit to Berlin. When he arrived, more than a dozen students held an intensive discussion with him about his ideas of nationalism, democracy, socialism and his plan to draft a democratic constitution for China. They established The Correspondent Office of Tongmenghui (同盟会) in Berlin. Zhu Hezhong, head of the office, arranged a meeting with Sun to



Cai Yuanpei (3. Left) and Wang Chonghui (2. right)
with Sun Yatsen

bring his attention to the idea of using the Prussian constitution as a model for the China's, and also the need for Chinese intellectuals, especially the modern thinking students abroad, to be involved in order to realize Sun's plan in China.

So it was no surprise, that some of the exemplary Chinese students, once returning to China, ended up in important cabinet positions in the newly formed Republic of China government. Especially notable are Cai Yuanpei, the first Minister of Education, and Wang Chonghui, who after receiving his Ph.D. in the United States and studying law for three terms at the University of Berlin became the Chinese Foreign Minister. Thanks to the shining examples set by these „German-Experts“, Germany continues to have a strong influence over the modernization of Chinese politics, economics and education, and has remained highly favored beyond other European countries for the last century.

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⁶ Cai, Jianguo: Cai Yuanpei und das moderne China, Berlin (Dissertation.) 1990

⁷ Vgl. Acta der Königlich Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, Promotion, Nr. 282