

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

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Germany Military Presence in Nineteenth Century China

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The Germans came to China much later than the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British because, before the nineteenth century, Germany was a collection of tiny states founded on self-sufficient feudal economies which lacked the maritime traditions and the political and economic strength that would have been needed if they were to expand abroad. On the other side, Jesuits working at the Ming and Qing courts and Prussian traders visiting Canton occasionally had few opportunities to acquaint the Chinese people in the eighteenth century with the German states which were of little economic and geopolitical interests to the Middle Kingdom. The forgotten Sino-German trade resumed after the revolutionary era and further developed after the First Opium War (1838-1842) which forced China to open five seaports to foreign trade and residence. Despite the growing Sino-German commercial ties in the mid-nineteenth century, Prussia and Berlin, German railway and Krupp guns, Moltke and the Prussian General Staff were remote from the Chinese mind. It was during the Self-strengthening Movement in the 1860s that the reform-minded Chinese official-scholars came to realize the growing strength of Prussia, which eventually completed the German unification. Ironically the unified Germany turned in the following decades from a reform model to a threat to China.

From 1867 to 1870 Wang Tao (1828-1897), a Chinese thinker with exposure to Western learning, travelled around Europe where he personally experienced the forces changing the modern world. After returning to China, he won considerable fame and influence by his writings, including accounts of his travels abroad and *The Chronicle of the Franco-Prussian War* in which he vividly depicted the growing industrial and military prowess of Germany. This book caught the attention of the reform leader Li Hongzhang (1823-1901), who showed a penchant for the German military culture and system. Li's early naval construction plans, for instance, were shaped by the ideas of the Prussian officer Viktor Ernst Karl Rudolf von Scheliha (1826-1899), whose *A Treatise on Coast-Defence: Based on the Experience Gained by Officers of the Corps of Engineers of the Army of the Confederate States* was translated into Chinese by the Jiangnan Arsenal in Shanghai in 1868. Thanks to the support of the military instructor C. Lehmeyer, who had been instrumental in several business deals between China and Krupp A.G., Li sent in 1876 a group of seven officers to Berlin to receive military training. Although these young people ended their sojourn in 1881 without fulfilling Li's expectations, Sino-German military cooperation continued in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, particularly in arms trade. For instance, through the German merchant F. Peil in Hong Kong, who originally specialized in the import and export of wines and spirits, Krupp succeeded in selling to the Chinese government a large number of Krupp cannons, which were later installed in Tianjin, Jinan, Guangzhou and Shanghai. To avoid overreliance on British-made vessels, Li also instructed Li Fengbao, the Chinese Ambassador to Germany to buy in the 1880s from the Vulcan shipyard at Stettin one cruiser (Jiyuan) and two battleships (Tingyuan and Zhenyuan), which formed the bulk of the Beiyang Navy.

Apart from hardware, Germany also provided experts that helped transfer modern military skills and science to China. The last quarter of the nineteenth century in China witnessed therefore the inflow of a large number of German soldiers, engineers, advisors, etc., who soon occupied important positions in a new arsenals, shipyards and military schools. Foremost among them was Constantin von Hanneken (1854-1925), a soldier-turned-engineer who was in charge of the construction of the naval base at Port Arthur from 1879 to 1883. In the 1890s German naval experts serving in the Beiyang Navy included A. Heckmann, J. Albrecht and Gustaff Hermann Hoffman. German military instructors also played an important role in the modern Chinese Army. As early as in 1895, Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909) began to train his Self-Strengthening Army in Hupei by a team of thirty-five German officers. Duan Qirui (1865-1936), who had spent two years in Germany studying military science, created in 1897 a 14,000-strong German-trained and –equipped New Army. Transmitted from these German officers to China, as recent researches emphasize, were not only military skills, knowledge and institutions, but also values and behaviors that gradually transformed the Chinese society.

In the recession period between 1876 and 1878, the quest for overseas expansion overwhelmed the free trade doctrine advocated by the German liberals. Responding to German financiers and industrialists' demand, Germany put aside its traditional diplomatic strategy to pursue a *Weltpolitik* which inclined toward colonial expansion. China became one of Germany's targets. Germany soon joined other imperial power to look for a sphere of influence and a naval *Stützpunkt* (base) in China. The German occupation of Qingdao in 1897 opened another page of Sino-German relations.