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Arming the Beiyang Navy. Sino-German Naval Cooperation 1879-1895

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1. Introduction

When it came to military armament in the second half of the 19th century for the non-European world, the parts were assigned clearly: For development of the naval forces one turned to England, for the land forces to Germany – at least after the Prusso-German victory over France 1870/71. With few exceptions, this pattern was true for every independent state outside Europe, including Chile or Argentina, the Ottoman Empire or Japan.¹ China also had initially followed this rule. During the first wave of military modernization in the 1860s and 1870s, China had slowly developed her navy from a mere coastal police force to the organization of flotillas for Northern and Southern China. The new warships came almost exclusively from England, from the Norman-Osbourne flotilla to the gunboats for the Beiyang fleet in the late 1870s.

This policy changed considerably from 1879 on. China ordered the new ironclads for the Beiyang fleet at the German “Vulcan” in Stettin and for the years to come, Germany received the lion’s share of China’s purchases. Only under heavy English pressure and

¹ Jonathan A. Grant: *Rulers, Guns, and Money. The Global Arms Trade in the Age of Imperialism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2007, pp. 80ff. and 116ff.

agitation by the “Vulcan’s” rival Armstrong, orders for new cruisers in 1885 were split equally between England and Germany. Remarkably, China also started to employ German instructors, who played a major role in planning and building navy yards, harbours, training facilities and coastal defenses in Northern China. Although the attempt to exchange Captain William M. Lang, the English commander of the Beiyang fleet, with the German Sebelin in 1884/85 failed, Germany managed to gain the upper hand in torpedoes, torpedo boats and the instructors necessary to teach their use.

The German role in China’s naval development has not received adequate attention. While German historians have overlooked imperial Germany’s international naval entanglements altogether, historiography about the development of the Chinese Imperial Navy generally gives the German part not much attention.² Recent Chinese works have given the Sino-German naval relations more room.³ But still Lee Kuochi has been the only scholar to include German archival material in his studies on the topic⁴ and most of the German sources have hitherto remained untapped. In the course of my research I have looked through most of the files of the German navy and the Foreign Office concerning the Chinese navy and through our cooperation with the First Historical Archive also was able to gain access to some unpublished documents from the Chinese side. In this paper I can only give rough overview on a topic I am currently concerned with in the course of my research on the Sino-German Military relations prior to World War I.

² See the otherwise essential standard works by John L. Rawlinson: *China’s Struggle for Naval Development, 1839-1895*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1967.

³ E.g. Jiang Ming姜鸣: *Longqi Piaoyang de Jiandui 龙旗飘扬的舰队*, Beijing: Xinhua Shudian 2003.

⁴ Lee Kuochi: *Die chinesische Politik zum Einspruch von Shimoseki und gegen die Erwerbung der Kiautschou-Bucht. Studien zu den chinesisch-deutschen Beziehungen von 1895-1898*, Münster 1966.

2. Germany builds Ironclads for the Beiyang Fleet

Germany was amongst the great Western powers about the most unlikely partner for naval cooperation. The Prusso-German navy was young and its successes in battle were few. The Prussian navy had played only a negligible part in the wars leading to the German unification, during the war against France the two Prussian corvettes stationed in Eastern Asia had to hide in neutral waters to protect themselves from the superior French naval forces. In shipbuilding, Germany also couldn't have made much impression on China. Although the German shipbuilding industry had developed considerably, German shipping in China was represented mainly by smaller sailing vessels, leaving the impression of a harmless trading nation without noteworthy martial capabilities. In addition, the modern tradition of German wharves building warships was even younger than the navy. Up to the 1860s, the Prussian navy had purchased most of their material in England and only in the 1870s, the German started to develop a fleet building program. The Chinese motivation for the naval cooperation with Germany was complex.⁵ The general background was obviously the generally very favorable picture of Germany as military power. The victory over France had been registered with great interest. Not only had Prussia and her German allies beaten China's enemy from the Second Opium War, but at the same time from China's point of view, Germany was comparatively harmless and seemed to have no aggressive ambitions in the Far East. As the Inspector General of the Chinese Customs, Robert Hart, put it when speaking about Li Hongzhang, Governor-General of the province Zhili and head of the Beiyang Fleet: "Li believes in Germany

⁵ See also Jing Chunxiao: *Mit Barbaren gegen Barbaren. Die chinesische Selbstärkungsbewegung und das deutsche Rüstungsgeschäft im späten 19. Jahrhundert*, Münster et.al.: LIT Verlag 2002, pp. 91ff.

because France got trashed – and in Krupp guns consequently”.⁶ China was well aware that England was the supreme naval power, Germany was only a newcomer. But the German offers were cheaper and the government as the German Imperial Navy promised every support for the building process. It seems that China in the end was willing to accept also slightly minor quality, considering that their new German ironclads would still be the mightiest units in East Asian waters.⁷ From the Chinese side, not only Li Hongzhang and the Central Government in Beijing were involved in the decision process, but also the ministers in Berlin and London and last but not least the Inspector General Robert Hart.

Hart also saw clearly how much the German side was willing to do to get the orders for the Vulcan’s dockyard: “I fear Germany will be so very obliging over that Stettin order as to make it hard for China to go elsewhere.”⁸ Indeed, the German side was willing to offer China every kind of support if their orders were placed with the “Vulcan” in Stettin. It seemed like a unique opportunity, as the deal with China was the first major order of warships from a foreign power. In the records of the German Foreign Office the files about the orders for warships from abroad start with the naval cooperation with China and it took several years until other countries were to follow.

How far the German Imperial Navy was willing to go in the assistance of German dockyards becomes quite clear in the close cooperation with the Chinese Minister in Berlin, Li Fengbao. Not only was the Admiralty willing to provide the blueprints for the “Sachsen”-class – modern German ironclads for costal defense, the first model had been

⁶ The I.G. in Peking, Vol. One, p. 381.

⁷ Jiang Ming姜鸣: Longqi Piaoyang de Jiandui 龙旗飘扬的舰队, Beijing: Xinhua Shudian 2003, pp. 125-127.

⁸ The I.G. in Peking, Vol. One, p. 386.

put into service in 1877 – but it closely followed the whole building process from testing the armour plates to the initial cruises of the ships on the Baltic Sea. When the second ship, the “Chen Yuan”, was launched in 1882, the head of the German admiralty, Albrecht von Stosch, was present and praised the strength of the ship and her weapons, “so that the [Chinese] emperor will rule in his oceans.”⁹

The Chinese representatives were quite content with the cooperation and in 1884 the Chinese minister in Berlin, Li Fengbao, reported that the ships had been built according to plan and expressed his satisfaction with the Vulcan’s products.¹⁰ Accordingly Germany’s role for China’s naval defense was further expanded, China had already ordered another Cruiser and seven Torpedo Boats.

First difficulties only arose in 1884, when the two ironclads “Ding Yuan” and “Chen Yuan” were ready to be sent out for China. Everything had been prepared, the test cruises had been made and German crews had been hired. But just before departure, the German government decided to hold the ironclads back, because by now war between China and France was imminent. As Germany intended to remain neutral, delivering war material to China was out of the question. The ships had to remain in Kiel and their voyage to China was delayed until spring 1885.

3. England's Reaction and the Anglo-German Rivalry

Of course China’s close naval cooperation with Germany soon had met with English attempts to reenter the competition and to regain her supreme position. With the incoming orders for German warships and torpedo boats, British representatives up to the

⁹ Hamburgischer Correspondent, 30 November 1882.

¹⁰ 出使德国大臣许景澄 奏为遵旨勘验在德国订购铁甲船工料事折, 中国第一历史档案馆军机处录副 -938902.

nominally neutral Robert Hart were increasingly worried about the growing German ambitions. In October 1883, Hart alarmingly reported: “Li & Co. are going in for German productions on every side”.¹¹ Hart observed correctly, as in addition to warships, Chinese viceroys by this time ordered large quantities of rifles and guns. Even more alarming were news of German military instructors. Mostly the increasing number of Germans in the Chinese naval service worried English representatives. Not only had Li Hongzhang with Constantin von Hannecken a German officer to oversee the development of Northern China’s coastal defences, but in 1883 came a naval officer, Captain Felix Hasenclever, to assist the Beiyang Fleet in the building of new bases and mainly a new torpedo station.

The ironclads were also accompanied by German experts and Hart complained as early as 1883 about German competition “on the ‘cheap labour’ principle.”¹² While Captain Lang as head of the Beiyang fleet demanded 600 Taels per month, German officers were willing to accept payment as low as 100 Taels. In addition, while Lang left Chinese service during the war with France, at the same time Li Fengbao had hired a whole group of German instructors who arrived in China in 1884. While Li’s main intention was to suggest to France an official support from Germany, the German presence in the Chinese navy was further enhanced. But the German government was not enthusiastic about these “military missionaries” and most were badly chosen – the German Captain Sebelin, who had been in the position to take Lang’s position, quickly made enemies by trying to change the whole naval structure to German style. He finally failed and even German diplomats were relieved to see him leave.

¹¹ The I.G. in Peking, Vol. One, p. 493.

¹² The I.G. in Peking, Vol. One, p. 455.

British diplomats, Hart and representatives of Armstrong, one of England's most important dockyards, had constantly pressured Li Hongzhang to place future orders in England. After the Sino-French War, Li gave way to this pressure in a truly solomonic style: Of the next four warships for the Beiyang Fleet, two would be built by Armstrong, the other two by the Vulcan. German authorities were alarmed. The German minister in Peking, Max von Brandt, urged the admiralty to instruct the directors of the Vulcan to do their very best as their achievements now would be directly compared to the British. If the German dockyards performed well, this would secure Germany's position, while failure would lead to a loss of the Chinese market.

In the end both sides managed to deliver the ordered ships in time. Captain Lang, who had regained his position as commander of the Beiyang Fleet after the Sino-French War, personally came to Europe for an inspection of his new units. The inspection was satisfactory and the four new ships were transported to China. Controversy arose almost as soon as the ships had left Europe. Britain and Germany, Armstrong and Vulcan, battled via the newspapers who actually had built the better ships. Through their agents in China, Armstrong launched a series of articles which clearly favoured the British products. On the other hand, the German legation and the General Consulate were busy trying to counter Armstrong's campaign.

While the British side accused the German ships of being too slow and sturdy, the Germans defended themselves by pointing at the differences between the types ordered - Armstrong had built two cruisers while Vulcan delivered ironclads for coastal defense. While British dockyards were back in the game, they hadn't managed to drive their German rivals out. The question which power would be in the supreme position to deliver

warships for the Chinese fleets remained open. In 1888, competition for influence on the Chinese Navy was close enough that Robert Hart expressed his fear, that “if Lang goes, probably France or Germany will get the navy.”¹³

4. Conclusion: The Sino-Japanese War and the Sino-German Naval Cooperation

The 1880s saw the ascendancy of German dockyards in the international competition. While the German Imperial Navy had relied on British imports in the 1860s and was still experiencing drawbacks in the 1870s, Germany now started to enter the race for the international weapons market. It is remarkable, that China played the role as a pioneer in introducing German warships when Germany was still mainly famous for her Krupp guns or Mauser rifles.

From the Chinese side, the placing of orders in different countries surely also was a means to achieve greater independence. Li Hongzhang's strategy can be interpreted as an application of the much older principle of "Yiyi zhiyi", "Using Barbarians against Barbarians". By bringing Germany into the game, Great Britain was forced to react and offer more favorable conditions, and the possibility to tend to France or the USA remained present in the background.

We can see the competition as an international entanglement, which in this case focused on China. But we have to consider that the field was much wider. For Germany, the ships built for China were just a start and after a few years, Vulcan or Schichau competed for orders from East Asia, South America and other European countries as well. Ships for one nation were an advertisement for others, e.g. after the battle of the Yalu the German minister in Tokio was quite enthusiastic when he heard of favorable reports about the

¹³ The I.G. in Peking, Vol. One, p. 718.

Chinese ironclads from the Japanese navy. Although only one of a series of six armoured cruisers built for Japan after 1896 was built by Vulcan (the "Yakumo"), Germany played a major role in other fields, from twenty-two first class torpedo boats under construction in 1902, eleven were built by Schichau.

From the example of "Arming the Beiyang Fleet" we can also see how the available forces were mobilized for a share of the market. We have not only the competing dockyards placing their offers, but a whole network of company agents, diplomats and even foreign officials in Chinese service. The direct presence of the companies was seen as vital, when German consuls urged the Vulcan several times to send an agent after reporting the presence of British representatives. The example of Robert Hart shows, that although even the German minister in Peking, Max von Brandt, had a favourable opinion of his impartiality, he remained not neutral towards British interests. The same was expected of the German servants of the customs. Military and Naval instructors played a similar role. Although not always enthusiastic about their conduct, it was always hoped that they would further national interests by placing orders in their home countries. In many cases the system worked: When the German specialist Ernst Kretzschmar took over the torpedo school in Whampoa in 1884, he immediately started to order the new torpedos in Germany and thus Schwartzkopff replaced Whitehead.

The battle of the dockyards ended without result. From the end of the 1880s on, the Chinese fleets lacked the funds for new ships. Until the Sino-Japanese War only a few more minor units were acquired, and the Beiyang Fleet entered the battle on the Yalu with the material purchased during the 1880s. The defeat of the Chinese fleet had nothing to do with the quality of the ships, more with the command structures and the

organization of the Chinese navy. In addition, the Beiyang Fleet had had not enough ammunition for its large Krupp guns - ironically the German naval inspectors had pointed this out already in their concluding reports in 1884.



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