"What has been accomplished at least is that we are no longer justified before God in considering ourselves above the Chinese. All inhumanity and cruelty have been repaid with interest in the name of culture."

(Richard Wilhelm, Jan. 1901)

INTRODUCTION

In the summer and fall of 1900, two young Protestant German missionaries, Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) and Wilhelm Schüler (1869–1935), witnessed the cruelty of the German response to the Boxer Uprising from the vantage point of the new German lease Kiao-chau (1898) in the province of Shandong. At a time when the world watched in horror as the Boxers laid siege to foreign enclaves in Tianjin and Beijing, these two men saw the Chinese population foremost as victims of German Imperialism.

Both men recognized that an open critique of German brutality and barbarism might be risky, yet they shared their concerns with the liberal Protestant Weimar Mission home board in Berlin. This project presents evidence to this effect from Wilhelm and Schüler’s private letters and published reports, including a sermon that Schüler delivered in Qingdao in commemoration of fallen German soldiers. It argues that through a careful process of editing and piecemeal publication of some of this material in the home board’s signature journal, Zeitschrift für Missionskunde und Religionswissenschaft (ZMR), the missionary society was able to deflect the potential impact that the Boxer catastrophe might otherwise have had on its missionary enterprise, which emphasized cross-cultural communication and elite academic exchange over conversion. Instead of continuing to rationalize the violence of the multinational foreign force response under German leadership as a means of chastising the Chinese in preparation for the gospel as most missionary societies did, the Weimar Mission gradually shifted its position to reflect Wilhelm’s and Schüler’s messages. It now positioned itself as a source for peace and cross-cultural understanding within a context dominated by violence and racism. In particular, Richard Wilhelm’s significant role as a cross-cultural communicator between China and Germany began with his mission as peacemaker in the midst of the Boxer unrest, which shifted the dynamics of Weimar Mission work toward joint German-Chinese collaboration in meeting educational and medical needs for the local community.

STRATEGY I

Echoing the General German Christian Public in the ZMR (June – Oct. 1900)

“China’s government has no right to ruin a beautiful country such as China through mismanagement and to enslave such a talented people. If this selfish despotic regime continues to block cultural progress, then it is true for the civilized world powers who have been appointed by God to lead throughout modern history: The authorities (the supervising agency of mankind) do not carry their sword in vain.”

(Krane, “Der Krieg in China und die Mission,” ZMR (Aug.) 1900, 241-46)

STRATEGY II

Delaying Publication of Challenges to German Public Opinion (Sept. 1900 – Jan. 1901)

In a sermon delivered in Qingdao on July 1, 1900, commemorating the fallen German soldiers, Wilhelm Schüler makes the following provocative claims:

- The decision of individual Chinese to rise up against foreigners is quite understandable, especially in the current context of Chinese past and current occupation and ongoing exploitation from the Chinese perspective.
- A lasting peace cannot be achieved through bloodshed, but only through “instruments of peace” inspired by the spirit of Jesus, who does not recognize imagined barriers such as nationhood or race.

(Rote des Pfarrers Lic. Schüler in Tientsin bei der Gedächtnisfeier am 1. Juli 1900 für die bei Taku und Tsingtau Gefallenen,” ZMR (Feb. 1901), 61-63. The sermon arrived in Berlin in time for the September edition of the ZMR, but was not published until February 1901.)

STRATEGY III

Careful Editing of Texts Sent by the Missionaries (Feb. – April 1901)

“Our troops in Gaomi, who are there to restore order, have been engaged in excesses that I refuse to mention, have been able to look deep into an unbelievable abyss. Less friendly [in comparison to the welcome I received from the district official] was the reception in the German garrison, since until then there had been looting in an unspeakable manner and the presence of a European was therefore viewed as embarrassing. Gaomi was quickly presented when I arrived, and it succeeded eventually, however, in convincing the [German] officers that I had no political goals and only came in order to help. They would not believe that the Chinese dogs would be willing to see me. But I was gradually able to soften the anti-Chinese attitudes in the camp…”

(Letter, Wilhelm to home board, dated November 26, 1900, original in the Weimar Mission Archives, DOAK 276, 159-60; the published version ZMR 1901, 59-61. The underlined passages appeared in the original, but were not published.)

STRATEGY IV

Emphasizing the Positive (Feb. – April 1901)

“The Chinese themselves welcomed me with open arms. Huan Shikai personally sent Colonel Ma to me to express his gratitude. The Gaomi populace gradually returned to town. Upon my return [to Qingdao] I found our governor [Jaeckle] to be very eager to hear my account. He told me to use the sum collected as fines to ease the suffering of the innocent, and begged me to go back to [Gaomi].”

(Ibid. – see Strategy III)

SOURCE

Archiv der Deutschen Ostasiennmission im Zentralarchiv der Evangelischen Kirche der Pfarz, Speyer, Germany.

“Working with Disaster: Weimar Mission Responses to the Boxer Catastrophe (1900–1901)” has been published in Joanna Chi (ed.), Transnational Encounters between Germany and East Asia since 1900. New York: Routledge, 2018, 45-61.