

# **Western Advisers and Late Qing Chinese Military Modernization: A Case Study of Constantin von Hanneken (1854-1925)**

Ricardo K. S. Mak  
Hong Kong Baptist University

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## **Western Advisers and Late Qing Chinese Military Modernization: A Case Study of Constantin von Hanneken (1854-1925)**

Major works on Western advisors in modern China pay much attention to these sojourners' cultural arrogance, moral rightness, and desire to change China. In fact, they were people with different skills and world views who came to China for different reasons. Their careers in China were in many ways determined by the success they achieved and the problems they encountered. Their experiences in China are thus simply too diverse for one to make meaningful generalizations. This paper attempts to expose untold stories of Constantin von Hanneken, who played a leading role in the construction of China's coastal defense between 1879 and 1886. Drawing principally on his personal correspondence, which remains underutilized since its publication in 1998, this paper aims not only to assess this German officer's actual contributions to China's military modernization, but also to present his life drama in China, which was interwoven with hope, greed, ambition and bitterness.

**Keywords:** Constantin von Hanneken, the Chinese navy, military modernization, Port Arthur, the Battle of the Yellow Sea

# Western Advisers and Late Qing Chinese Military Modernization: A Case Study of Constantin von Hanneken (1854-1925)

Ricardo K. S. Mak  
Hong Kong Baptist University

## I. Introduction

Historians must deal with myth. The late Arthur Marwick stated in one of his very illuminating lectures the relationship among the past, myths, and sources. For him, the past is gone for good, but it has left behind sources and given rise to myths. Through investigating sources, historians challenge myths and create more credible understandings of the past.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, myths include all stories that reveal aspects of historical events and figures as well as faiths, beliefs, and perceptions of particular groups of people.<sup>2</sup> Myths, which are in fact mixtures of facts and falsities, knowledge and hearsay, and reality and wishes, reveal how their believers conceive themselves, their life experience and things and

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Presented on March 6, 2013, at the Annual Conference of the Chinese Military History Society in New Orleans, this paper draws heavily on the constructive comments of Elisabeth Gaske and Ines Eben.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Writing History* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Open University, 1976), Video recording.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

people they encounter. We may go so far as to say that myths endure because individuals as well as communities make sense of their existence through creating and believing in myths.<sup>3</sup>

The “challenge-and-response” thesis which dominated East Asian Studies in the United States and was later transmitted throughout the Western world in the 1960s has produced at least two myths. First, it is believed that despite their ever-increasing contact with Europeans since the sixteenth century, pre-modern Chinese political leaders who were secure in the superiority of the Chinese culture displayed or pretended to display little interest in the wider world. Second, many still hold that China managed to escape from premodernity only after it came under the influence of the advanced Western nations in the mid-nineteenth century. These two myths have joined to create a Western-centric view that on the one hand overlooks China’s own endogenous momentum for change, and on the other hand overrates Western impact on modern China. The recent reprinting of Paul Cohen’s *Discovering History in China*, which reflects on three paradigms of American Sinology, namely “challenge-and-response,” “tradition and modernity,” and “imperialism,” shows that their influence persists today.<sup>4</sup> The advancement of Chinese and Western historical scholarship over the last few decades has helped revise many misconceptions, but many more are yet to be demythicized.

The Western advisors’ contribution to the modernization of China, which this case study strives to address, is a major theme to be revisited. Obviously, China’s military and industry were two key areas where Chinese reformers in the 1860s, despite their political and cultural differences, accepted the need for innovation along Western

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<sup>3</sup> Martin S. Day, *The Many Meanings of Myth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). A new edition was reprinted in 2010.

lines.<sup>5</sup> However, China lacked many conditions necessary for military and industrial reorganization at that time, including capital, technology, infrastructure and a new elite more adaptive to change and understandably more open who understood to advanced Western scientific knowledge. Recruiting Western experts and advisors met the short-term as well as long-term goals of China. Besides transferring Western knowledge and technology directly to China, they could help nurture a new generation of educated Chinese locals upon whom China could rely. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, China therefore witnessed the inflow of a large number of Western soldiers, engineers, bureaucrats, and others who soon occupied important positions in the Customs Service, a number of arsenals, shipyards, and military schools as well as banks and railway consortiums. Although their abilities and attitudes varied, and some of them took on tasks they were not familiar with, it is generally believed that they were instrumental to the earliest modernization program of China.

Edmund S. K. Fung positively assesses Western military instructors in different types of military schools in the late Qing.<sup>6</sup> David Pong highly regards the professionalism of the French engineers and technicians in the Foochow Navy Yard.<sup>7</sup> Catherine Ladds discusses in great detail the work and lifestyle of the middle- and low-ranking Western officers in China's Customs Service.<sup>8</sup> In the eyes of Jonathan Spence, Frederick Townshend Ward, who repeatedly suffered miserable defeats in his early encounter with the Taipings, eventually became "a brave and effective

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund S. K. Fung, *The Military Dimension of the Chinese Revolution: The New Army and Its Role in the Revolution of 1911* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1981), 68.

<sup>7</sup> David Pong, *Shen Pao-chen and China's Modernization in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 325.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Ladds, *Empire Careers: Working for the Chinese Customs Service, 1854-1949* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2013).

leader of men within the limits of his opportunities.”<sup>9</sup> Quoting Spence, “[Ward] had, as well, managed for the first time to train Chinese troops to fight in the most effective manner; had provided a model for Li Hung-chang’s Huai Army...and had built up the foundations of a force that was to be more effectively used by his successor, Gordon” in eliminating the Taipings.<sup>10</sup> Using a range of sources to expose the human weaknesses of some of these Westerners, Spence has, to a certain extent, demythicized them. On the whole, however, he is more impressed by their moral qualities, which originated from a sense of superiority:

The superiority sprang from two elements: the possession of advanced technical skills and a sense of moral rightness. Convinced that their goals were good and that their advice was solely needed, the Westerners adopted a proprietary air toward China; Chinese refusal to accept the validity of their goals, and Chinese rejection of their advice, were met with Western bewilderment or anger.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing principally on Constantin von Hanneken’s *Briefe aus China, 1879-1886* (Letters from China, 1879-1886), this paper attempts an in-depth account of the German Army officer’s early life experience in China, a life which has been quite often overlooked and at times mythicized. Notably, William Kirby’s pioneer work on Sino-German relations hardly mentions him.<sup>12</sup> Over the last two decades, Hanneken has only caught the attention of historians interested in the Chinese navy and experts on the First Sino-Japanese War. However, relying primarily on Chinese sources, their understanding of Hanneken appears less than

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>12</sup> William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

complete. Wang Jiajian, for instance, praises the contribution of this “German expert in battery building” to the development of China’s modern coastal defense, despite Hanneken having received only one and a half years’ training in engineering before going to China.<sup>13</sup> Wang agrees that Hanneken caused Li Hongzhang great financial strain, but he maintains that Hanneken stood out among his Western colleagues for the efforts he put into designing and completing the forts at Port Arthur (Lushunkuo). In another work, Wang Jiajian shows high regard for this German engineer’s diligence and proactiveness.<sup>14</sup> The works of other scholars such as Xie Junmei, Hu Qiyang and Gao Linyou are too brief to give Hanneken a fair treatment.<sup>15</sup> Liu Yue and Liu Jinqiu, whose biography of Hanneken extensively utilizes *Briefe aus China*, focus their attention on his contribution to China’s maritime defense.<sup>16</sup> Recently, Hanneken’s business undertakings in China and his lavish life in Tianjin during the early twentieth century have come to be more precisely

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<sup>13</sup> Wang Jiajian, *Li Hongzhang yu Beiyang jianhui: Jin dai Zhongguo zhuang jian hai jun de shi bai yu jiao xun* [Li Hongzhang and the Beiyang Navy] (Taipei: National Institute for Compilation, 2000), 299.

<sup>14</sup> Wang Jiajian, *Yangyuan you bei yang hai fang jian she* [Westerners and the Building of North China’s Coastal Defense] (Beijing: Beijing guzi chubanshe, 2004), 126.

<sup>15</sup> Xie Junmei, “Hannagen yu jiawu zhongri zhanzheng” [Hanneken and the Sino-Japanese War] in *Jiawu zhanzheng yu jindai zhongguo he shijie* [The Sino-Japanese War and Modern China and the World], ed. Qi Qizhang and Wang Rukui (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), 581-594; Wu Qyang, “Shixi huaer, Hannagen yu wanqing lujun xiandaihua” [A Preliminary Study of Ward and Hanneken and the Modernization of the Army in Late Qing], *Xin xueshu* 2 (2008): 184-86 and Gao Linyou, “Zhongguo xinjun cehuaren hannagen” [Hanneken, the Founder of the Modern Chinese Army], *Zhengfu fazhi* 5 (2010), 55. In addition, many works on the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 include less than substantial accounts of Hanneken’s contributions to the Beiyang Navy.

<sup>16</sup> Liu Jinqiu and Liu Yue, *Li Hongzhang de junshi guwen: Hannagen zhuan* [The Military Advisor of Li Hongzhang: A Biography of Hanneken] (Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing Limited, 2010). While paying attention to Hanneken’s leading role in the construction project at Port Arthur, the peaceful side of his life in China, and his relationship with his father back in Germany, this book provides rather minor details about his inner struggle, conflicts with Chinese official-scholars, criticisms of Chinese political culture and emotional ups and downs during his stay at Port Arthur.

presented in Chinese popular literature. Nevertheless, his conventional image as a professional German officer who not only devoted his early life in China to modernizing late Qing military infrastructure, but who also volunteered to defend China from French and Japanese aggressions remained largely unchallenged.<sup>17</sup>

*Constantin von Hanneken: Briefe aus China 1879-1886* contains 172 letters, 112 of which Hanneken received from his father, Bernhard (Carl August Herman) von Hanneken, while another 60 were from Constantin von Hanneken to his parents, brother, sister, and nephew. These letters, which discussed a wide range of issues, such as Hanneken's reasons for going to China, his experiences and frustrations during his eight-year stay, and his impressions of the Chinese officials and the other Western advisers, sufficiently reveals the inner world of a realist who saw his work in China merely as a necessary step to continue his military career. Though speaking Chinese and working closely with many Chinese people, Hanneken found himself a stranger in a foreign land from which he often tried to escape.

## II. The Reluctant Chinese Sojourner

Born to a family with a strong Prussian military heritage, Hanneken entered the Prussian Academy for Cadet Corps (*Preußisches Kadettenkorps*) in his early years. After graduation in 1873, he joined the Eighth Regiment of the East Prussian Army in Metz as *Portepeefähnrich* (similar but not entirely equivalent to ensign), which was another step toward higher levels of command.<sup>18</sup> He withstood the tough

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<sup>17</sup> These include Li Xingjian, "Daqing yangshuai Hannagen de Zhongguo qingjie" [The Chinoiserie of Hanneken, the Late Qing Foreign Military Advisor], *Renwu chungiu* (March, 2013): 19-22 and many other short Chinese articles and audio-visual programs on the internet.

<sup>18</sup> For a brief discussion of the education system of the *Preußisches Kadettenkorps*, see Robert B. Kane, *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army, 1918-1945* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2002), 201.

examinations and became Second Lieutenant. In 1877, he was reassigned to the Field Artillery Regiment in Mainz. Though his life seemed to be proceeding smoothly, Hanneken left the army and began receiving theoretical and practical training in engineering. One year later, Hanneken accepted the post of military advisor to Li Hongzhang, thanks to the patronage of Gustav Detring, who was a close friend of his father.<sup>19</sup>

The reasons behind Hanneken's early exit from the German Army and the motives that pushed him to set sail toward an unfamiliar world are questions that deserve further investigation. As Elisabeth Gaske points out in her thorough study, the lucrative package that the Chinese government offered only proved attractive to lower-ranking German officers who had little career prospects or those who were forced to leave the army for disciplinary reasons.<sup>20</sup> In the introduction of *Briefe aus China*, the editor Falkenberg attributed Hanneken's sudden departure to a dispute with civilians. Liu Yue and Liu Jinqiu were told by members of Hanneken's family that his brawl with several leftist Social Democrats after an overheated political discussion led to his dismissal.<sup>21</sup> In one of his letters to Max von Brandt, the German Envoy in China, dated October 22, 1882, Hanneken mentioned that his departure from the Prussian Army was a penalty (*Bestrafung*). According to Gaske, a court of honor (*Ehrengericht*) that dealt with disciplinary cases of non-criminal nature decided that Hanneken, though allowed to retain his rank, was

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<sup>19</sup> Vera Schmidt's *Aufgabe und Einfluß der Europäischen Berater in China: Gustav Detring (1842-1913)* in *Dienste Li Hung-changs* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984) provides a detailed study of Detring's life and work in China; Po Chung Yam's "Westerners in Li Hongzhang's Mufu: With References to Gustav Detring and Hosea Ballou Morse" (M.Phil. Thesis, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2009) compares the works of Detring and Morse, both of whom were important Western advisors to Li Hongzhang.

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Gaske, *Das Bismarcks Missionäre: Deutsche Militärinstitute in China 1884-1890* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 47-50.

<sup>21</sup> Liu and Liu, *Li Hongzhang de junshi guwen: Hannagen zhuan*, 6.

stripped of his position.<sup>22</sup> Hanneken probably hoped that after accumulating a wealth of military experience in China, he would be able to “at least request an official discharge” (*wenigstens den wirklichen Abschied zu verschaffen*).<sup>23</sup> Taken together, it seems clear that going to China had never been a priority for Hanneken in considering his career path.

Unprepared for his new mission in China, Hanneken was cynical towards his first encounters in China. Many a German stereotypical perceptions of China filled his first few letters to his father: noisy Chinese men with shaved heads, poor people and naked children, poorly built and ill-defended barracks, dirty streets and filthy houses that resembled the ugliest side of the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and so on.<sup>24</sup> What particularly caught his eye during his first visit to the magnificent city of Beijing were the Jesuits’ unused and broken astronomical instruments that had been left lying near the city wall.<sup>25</sup> The longer he stayed and the more people he met in China, Hanneken reaffirmed that nothing could save China from decline. Driven by self-interest, all the Chinese officials Hanneken met and worked with, regardless of rank, strove solely to make themselves or their family rich and powerful. Their egoism, Hanneken sadly remarked, would eventually bring down this “colossal thousand-year empire.”<sup>26</sup> Hanneken’s visit to the Taku Fort in December 1880 reaffirmed his impression that China was in a state of eternal standstill: “The Chinese people are still at the level that they reached one thousand years ago. They still use bows and arrows, without knowing that there are much better weapons today. They

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<sup>22</sup> Gaske, *Das Bismarcks Missionäre*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Constantin von Hanneken, *Briefe aus China, 1879-1886*, ed. Rainer Falkenberg (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1998), 337.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21, 32, 55.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

are left untouched by the recent cultural developments.”<sup>27</sup> Western ideas, practices, and institutions transmitted into China through the treaty ports after the Opium War, unfortunately, injected little new energy into the Chinese society. The Chinese Customs Service created by Robert Hart (1835-1911), for example, had had to coexist with the traditional customs officials. While the former served to administer business transactions of Westerners, the latter continued to “repress and exploit” Chinese merchants.<sup>28</sup>

Though seemingly without a strong sense of mission to change China, Hanneken, who went to China a disillusioned man, once dreamt of a better career there. Excited by his first conversation with Li Hongzhang in November 1879, he told his father, “I have found here a position. I am no longer an aimless and useless loser and I feel that I have partly rebuilt my personality.”<sup>29</sup> Without doubt, Hanneken was cheered by the handsome reward, Li Hongzhang’s repeated compliments, Detring’s encouragement, and above all Robert Hart’s appreciation, which, according to Detring, a German in China could hardly think of. Furthermore, he concluded after several military drills that he possessed an expertise few Chinese military officials and Western advisors in China could challenge.<sup>30</sup> In his eyes, even the foreign educated Chinese naval officers were not qualified to be “commanders of washbasins” in Germany.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it was with such confidence that Hanneken took on whatever tasks were assigned to him using merely what he had learnt from the Academy for Cadet Corps.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 116; Ernst Schulin’s *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958) is the pioneer work that fully explores the German conception of China in the nineteenth century.

<sup>28</sup> Hanneken, *Briefe aus China*, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 31-35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 119.

Back in Germany, Berhard von Hanneken, knowing that Li Hongzhang and Robert Hart were the persons who could decide Hanneken's future, repeatedly reminded his son to stay close to them. However, a soldier rather than a politician, Hanneken was overly cautious, so it took him a while to get into the complex political life in China. In a single downturn, Hanneken was caught in an incident a few months later that nearly cost him the patronage of Detring, to whom Hanneken reiterated his awe and gratitude in his early months in China. Simultaneously, this escalated Hanneken's hatred of some Chinese political practices, an intolerance that would become a major obstacle to his development in China.

China's growing demand for Western arms tempted Hanneken to explore opportunities in the Sino-German arms trade as early as in late 1879. Hanneken also perceived the arms trade as a way to help his retired and impoverished father, who was left with only a small pension and some connections with the Prussian Army and the German military industries. In February 1880, he inquired of his brother Hermann, who was serving in the German Army, of the quantity of four-pounders, Chasspots, and German needle guns that could be sold to China.<sup>32</sup> Like his father, he believed that the German needle guns, given their simple structure and user-friendliness, fit the still ill-trained Chinese soldiers most. For Hanneken, a successful arms deal with China would win him the appreciation of Li Hongzhang, earn Hanneken Senior a commission, and provide Chinese reformers with improved weapons, liberating them from the grasps of shameless English and German arms agents.<sup>33</sup> The Hannekens eventually came up with an offer in May 1880 of 30,000 needle guns and 50 guns at a price of 1,767,700 German Marks.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

negotiation entered its final phase in late June as details of shipping and insurance came to be finalized.<sup>35</sup> Before setting off in June for a survey trip to Port Arthur, where the first Chinese naval base in North China would be built, Hanneken wrote in great confidence to his father, advising him to prepare for a trip to Berlin when he would draw up an agreement with the Chinese officials. The deal, however, was aborted at the last minute. Upon returning to Tianjin in mid-August, Hanneken was informed that the Chinese delegation in Berlin had decided to cancel the deal due to the disappointing performance of the German needle guns. What struck him most was that Detring, who was well aware of the delegation's decision beforehand, did not make any attempt to inform him about the abrupt change, let alone do anything to save the plan. Subsequently, Hanneken spelled out in great frustration his suspicions about Detring.<sup>36</sup> Although Hanneken soon resumed cooperation with Detring, and married his eldest daughter in 1895, he was also unmoved by his father's repeated urging to look to Robert Hart for further support.

### III. As Soldier-turned-engineer Trapped in Northeast China

Disheartened, at least for a while, by the “unfaithful” actions of Detring, Hanneken chose to distance himself from political matters. His contempt for the political tricks of power-hungry Westerners in the Qing court was well reflected in a letter to his brother one year later: “Everybody here tries to be a great diplomat, and to have diplomatic influence. It is such great amusement when you stand between them and listen to what they say.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps finding light from Max von Brandt's earlier advice to “do

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115.

only what they ask you to do, try your best to save money; go home when you have saved enough money, [and] do not try to attain unachievable goals,” Hanneken accepted in 1880 without hesitation the new mission of supervising the creation of a naval base at Port Arthur.<sup>38</sup> Prompted by his bad experience in the needle gun trade, he stated, “I do not want to have anything to do with the army and I shall throw myself entirely into the task of constructing the fortification.”<sup>39</sup> Soon enough, Hanneken came up with his first construction blueprint.<sup>40</sup> Though admitting it was his first big construction project as an engineer, Hanneken was quite self-assured because he had realized early on that nobody around him could question his expertise.<sup>41</sup>

Hanneken was delighted by the immensity of his first task to construct a new fort, which would watch over the entrance to Port Arthur, especially considering he could be away from Tianjin and Detring. While Hanneken was exceedingly confident of both his construction plans and his competence, Hanneken Senior never stopped furnishing his son with useful technical details about fort building and his own observations of the fort of Toulouse, which was in a geographical environment very much similar to that of Port Arthur. Nevertheless, Hanneken was still certain that “if I am not the only, I should be the most knowledgeable person of these skills here.”<sup>42</sup> His fears regarding both the shortage of equipment and skilled workers were soon proved to be unfounded. To his surprise, the Chinese farmers, fishermen, and carpenters in that area swept aside their own business to join his workforce for merely a few pennies. Working at a level of tenacity, diligence, and self-discipline far beyond Hanneken’s comprehension, these untrained, ill-equipped

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 92.

Chinese helped erect the first fort mostly with their bare hands.<sup>43</sup>

Hanneken enjoyed the power vested in him so much that, for a while, he saw himself as “a little emperor,”<sup>44</sup> with great financial and administrative autonomy. Delighted by the proposal of Ma Jianzhong, who visited Port Arthur on Li Hongzhang’s behalf in April 1881, to further expand the Port Arthur fortification,<sup>45</sup> Hanneken mentioned in September 1881 about an expansion plan that included three other forts.<sup>46</sup> Apart from directing the construction work, he began to pay attention to the reform of the Chinese army and proposed a new army academy in Port Arthur. Though Hanneken’s work proved eminently effective, his growing ambition irritated Li Hongzhang. The amount of financial resources invested in Port Arthur was far less than sufficient for Hanneken and his father, but much beyond his means for Li Hongzhang. In spite of the construction work’s remarkable progress and Hanneken’s outstanding performance, Li Hongzhang refused to provide additional funding after the first inspection, forcing Hanneken to shelve his expansion plans in February 1882.<sup>47</sup> This marked a watershed in relations between Hanneken and Li Hongzhang and in the following years, Hanneken occasionally criticized Li Hongzhang for his indecisiveness and poor leadership.

The resources at Hanneken’s disposal were too little to modernize the coastal defense of Port Arthur, but sufficient to provoke jealousy from other Chinese officials. Consequently, Hanneken was confronted with intentional attacks upon general observations that he had lost the favor of Li Hongzhang. In mid-1882, things took a turn for the worse

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>45</sup> Jiang Ming, *Longqi piaoyang de jiandui* [The Fleet with the Dragon Flag] (Beijing: San lian chubanshe, 2002), 281.

<sup>46</sup> Hanneken, *Briefe aus China*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 160.

with the arrival of the new director Yuan Baoling (1841-1889). While many Chinese sources credit Yuan Baoling's enthusiastic succession of directorship, who took over the directorship enthusiastically, for restoring the financial viability of the Port Arthur construction project,<sup>48</sup> Hanneken saw Yuan Baoling as an ignorant mandarin whose unwise moves not only destroyed all his groundwork for the naval base, but also vastly increased building costs.<sup>49</sup> Still entrusted with the task of supervising a series of dredging and pumping works, Hanneken admitted he was no longer the "little emperor" he used to be.<sup>50</sup> Fearful of being swept aside, Hanneken withdrew his proposal for the second fort and spent the winter of 1882-1883 in Tianjin reading and writing, so as to acquire advanced knowledge in engineering and to prepare another construction plan for Li Hongzhang.<sup>51</sup>

Hanneken's frustrating misfortune intensified his desire to return to the German Army. In October 1882, he asked for Max von Brandt's support in either re-entering the German Army as a reserve officer or at the very least to be formally discharged from it.<sup>52</sup> While awaiting for the the German Army's final decision, Hanneken resumed his work in Port Arthur in the early summer of 1883 and actively prepared for the second fort on the west side of Port Arthur.<sup>53</sup> To boost his declining influence, he helped prepare for a possible Sino-French military confrontation in North China and went so far as to tell his father in a letter to lead the Chinese army against the French. However, nothing gladdened him so much as a

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, see Zhou Yuxing and Huang Zhuanhui, *Longqi: Qingmo beiyang haijun jishi* [The Dragon Flag: An Account of the Beiyang Navy in Late Qing] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2007), 243 and Liu Guicui, "Yuan Baoling yu Lüshun gongcheng ju" [Yuan Baoling and the Construction Bureau at Port Arthur] *Dalian jindaishi yanjiu* 9 (2012): 480-83.

<sup>49</sup> Hanneken, *Briefe aus China*, 169.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

*Kabinettsorder* (cabinet order) he received along with a letter from his father in mid-July 1883. The contents of the *Kabinettsorder* were not revealed in any of Hanneken's letters, but Falkenberg states in the introduction of *Briefe aus China* that Hanneken received the honorable discharge he had long been seeking in 1883. Probably containing a message about his honorable discharge, the *Kabinettsorder* drove Hanneken to spell out with great joy that he could finally escape from a six-year-long nightmare and was now in a position to plan for a better tomorrow.<sup>54</sup>

Unfortunately, Hanneken remained at Port Arthur for the next three years and experienced tremendous ups and downs. While the long stay at the remote Port Arthur enabled him to escape from different kinds of political struggles in Beijing and Tianjin, it prevented him from creating political allies and networks that would have been vital to his career development. Unlike Detring, who gradually extended his influence to postal services and many other political and diplomatic undertakings, Hanneken had no way to explore other career opportunities while focusing solely on construction work in Port Arthur. Much to Hanneken's delight, he was asked in October 1883 to complete the second fort and, if possible, a third one by the autumn of 1885.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the war-like atmosphere and the imminence of a possible French attack in North China eventually led the Chinese political leaders to conclude that the naval base at Port Arthur required further strengthening, albeit at minimal cost. Despite the twist of events, he was shuffled from one task to another and many of his suggestions fell on deaf ears. Concomitant with his growing duties was a reduction in funding. In the next eighteen months, he was forced to rewrite the budget four times.<sup>56</sup> Construction of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 205-206.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 260.

the third fort, which was a very important component of his plan, was postponed.

Although Hanneken now seemed to be content with the role of a mere *Baumeister* (architect), he felt that his work environment remained less than positive.<sup>57</sup> With the arrival of many younger German military instructors since 1883, he was no longer irreplaceable at Port Arthur. His duties as military instructor were soon handed over to another German colleague.<sup>58</sup> He sadly saw that the incoming German instructors, most of whom were of poor moral and professional qualities, were so obsessed with the power game in China that they did not behave as German officers should.<sup>59</sup> In August 1885, he wrote in despair that his future would be uncertain after the completion of the project in the following autumn.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV. Hanneken's Rage

After receiving the Royal delegation in May 1886, Hanneken was reassigned to the new naval base at Weihaiwei, where he spent just a few months. On November 17, 1887, he returned to Germany for eight months on sick leave. Two days after his departure, a long article published in the *Chinese Times* praised him not only for his contribution to army reform and construction work at Port Arthur, but also for his brave deeds during the Sino-French conflict. Its long conclusion, however, highlighted his grievances over the years:

Captain von Hanneken and the other German Officers named then  
threw in their lot with China at all costs, and not even for their native

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 316.

country could they have acted with more devotion. Von Hanneken's noble, warlike spirit was at this time appreciated, and he for a while had his way, but as soon as peace was sure his services were forgotten; he was again subjected to mean and jealous spites, irritating stupidities, and dishonourable intrigues. His arduous labours, his superb citadel, his sunken and masked docks, his fine extemporized defenses, his creation of order out of unconditioned chaos, his loyalty, were turned to his hurt, and his position became painful to a high-minded soldier and gentleman.<sup>61</sup>

The author of this anonymous work, as its tone and content suggest, was probably either Hanneken himself or one of his very close friends.

In 1892, Hanneken returned to China. Although it was said that he was again appointed military advisor to Li Hongzhang, little about him was recorded before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. It was not until July 1894 that Hanneken's star shone again. His heroism in accompanying 1,300 reinforcement troops to Korea by sea and his dramatic escape from the *Kwoshing*, which was sunk during a Japanese assault, placed Hanneken back in the spotlight. Together with several Western advisors and technicians, he directed the *Dingyuan*, the flagship of the Beiyang Navy, after Admiral Ding Yuchang was badly injured in the first phase of the Battle of the Yellow Sea. In October 1894, Hanneken was further summoned to the capital to propose a new military reform with the following major points:

1. To create a 100,000-strong new army, divided into two divisions and under the leadership of European officers. They would be stationed at Shanhaiguan after a five-month training period, to fend off a Japanese offensive

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 335.

2. To strengthen the Beiyang Navy by buying battleships from Chile and Argentina and by integrating some battleships of the Guangdong Navy into it
3. To set up a defense line stretching from Yingkou to Mudken

As his plan abruptly reached another dead-end, Hanneken returned to Germany for a time. At the turn of the twentieth century, he reappeared in China, but as a businessman staying away from military affairs.

Two unreleased reports entitled “The Conditions of the North China Navy and Its Performance in the First Phase of the Sino-Japanese War” (*Bericht über die Zustände in der nordchinesischen Flotte and über ihre Tätigkeit während der ersten Hälfte des japanisch-chinesischen Krieges*) and “A Report on the Unsuccessful Attempt to Create a Royal Chinese Army during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95” (*Bericht über das Scheitern des Organisationsplans für Bildung einer Kaiserlich-chinesischen Armee während des chinesisch-japanischen Krieges 1894/95*),<sup>62</sup> collected in *Briefe aus China*, provide far too many sources about the Battle of the Yellow Sea to be discussed here. In fact, they in many ways help revise our understanding of China’s miserable defeat in this decisive battle. More importantly, in his critical reexamination of the weaknesses of the Beiyang Navy, Hanneken revealed in these two reports his no-holds-barred hatred of the Chinese government and culture. According to him, instead of being humbled by the forces of the new Asian modernity that Japan represented, China was brought down by its own outworn system. After decades of reform, China remained reliant on incompetent and shortsighted leaders produced by the traditional

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<sup>62</sup> The content of these two reports contrast vividly to that of two other reports which Hanneken submitted to Li Hongzhang earlier. The earlier reports, which are now available in Japanese only, gave an account about the Battle of the Yellow Sea, without going deep into the causes of the Beiyang Navy’s failure. Here, I would like to thank Mr. Chen Yue, an expert in the history of the modern Chinese navy, for sending me a copy of the two earlier reports.

examination system, an authoritarian style of governance that gave rise to nepotism and factionalism, and Western advisors who did whatever they could to please their Chinese patrons. Before the war with Japan, he saw in China “a conceited but lackluster government, an arrogant but incompetent army, a navy without self-confidence, a chaotic command structure, empty arsenals, empty pockets and empty brains.”<sup>63</sup>

Phil N. McGiffin, who was on board the Chinese ironclad battleship *Zhenyuan* during the Battle of the Yellow Sea, dictated for *The Century* magazine another account of the battle which only partly confirmed Hanneken’s observations. While admitting that the Japanese fleet had better ships, more supplies and better commanders, unlike Hanneken, he admired the extraordinary will and courage of the Chinese crews that enabled the ill-equipped Beiyang Navy to stand until the last minute.<sup>64</sup> Hanneken’s two reports, compared with McGiffin’s, showed in many ways his vengeful rage and accumulated grievances.

## V. Conclusion

It is said that “no man is a hero to his valet.” Equally true is the fact that a man is a hero only to people watching him from afar. Constantin von Hanneken, long known for many general rumors surrounding him yet unconfirmed due to missing pieces that are yet to be completely uncovered, is slowly identified as a man struggling between differing cultures and inner desires. Through deciphering *Briefe aus China*, light is thrown on Hanneken’s previously obscure life in China. The productive, contributive yet conflicting German adviser was never too aware that central authority and power were at the tip of his fingers. From the letters sent back to Germany, we come to comprehend Hanneken’s failure in

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<sup>63</sup> Hanneken, *Briefe aus China*, 363.

<sup>64</sup> Phil N. McGiffin, “Battle of the Yalu,” *The Century* 50, 4 (1895), 593.

consolidating his position in Chinese affairs. Too wound up in his hatred and frustration towards the betrayal and complexities of politics, Hanneken oversaw the realism of affiliation and its importance. On a more positive note, Hanneken's attempts at bettering the Chinese navy and its heroic endeavor during the Sino-Japanese War have been further reaffirmed in *Briefe aus China*. Though seemingly always in confrontation with obstacle after obstacle, the German adviser nonetheless once came under the favor of crucial figures such as Li Hongzhang and Gustav Dietring. From this, we witness that Hanneken, after all, was not apolitical as commonly perceived. Personal emotions, tough luck and miscalculated choices were what left the man in the middle of a bitter misfortune.

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