



The Boxer and Its Media. Erfurt: Thoralf Klein, Lehrstuhl für Ostasiatische Geschichte, Universität Erfurt; Plattform Weltregionen und Interaktionen - Area Studies Transregional, 17.07.2009-19.07.2009.

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The Boxer and Its Media

Historical events do not simply exist by themselves, they are made — this methodological chestnut was one guiding principle of “The Boxer and Its Media,” a conference that took place from July 17-19, 2009 in Erfurt. The media played a crucial role during the Boxer War. As soon as historical actors experienced the events in China, their representations were communicated almost around the globe. The different media that were used to transport images and representations of the Boxer War transmitted different structures of meaning, depending on the specific materiality of these media and the cultural contexts in which they were received. For example, the horizon of meaning that opened up for a German boy who was reenacting the battles with his braided Chinese and moustached German tin soldiers might have been different from that of a moviegoer who watched Ava Gardner on the silver screen in her role as Russian baroness Natalie Ivanoff in Nicholas Ray’s monumental 1963 film, “55 Days at Peking.” As the participants of the conference were once more reminded by the opening remarks of Thoralf Klein, who also organized this workshop, it was exactly this relationship between event and medial agency in an emerging transnational space that would occupy the center of attention during the 3 days at Erfurt’s “Kleine Synagoge.”

The conference papers, comments, and debates aptly demonstrated that the Boxer war indeed possesses impressive potential for the history of media and transnational relations in the 20th century. However, it was almost more fascinating to witness some of the practical

possibilities and difficulties of transnational historiography in practice — especially in the conference’s last section (“Research”). This was obviously the organizer’s intention, as the conference’s structure proceeded from the initial processes of interpretation and their medial communication to today’s attempts at decoding them. The conference started with a session on how the actors on the ground made sense of what was happening in China (“Participation”). Then, in a second panel, it focused on the medial representation of these interpretations (“Representation”). Consequently, this was followed by papers on the retroactive integration of these representations into shared narratives (“Memory”). And, as already mentioned, the conference ended with a look on how contemporary historians reconstruct, reinterpret, and sometimes consciously rewrite history (“Research”).

The papers of the first panel demonstrated how, during the war in China, the media influenced not only the actors’ perceptions, but also the transmission of these representations to a broader audience. As was stated in the discussion, nearly all of the analyzed actors tried to relate their actions to a bigger entity and thus to render them meaningful. To put it bluntly, for them it was about finding one’s place in history. SUN LIXIN (Beijing) showed in his paper how the Boxers, in order to mobilize the populace, drew on a broad spectrum of forms and means of communication, such as verbal, physical, and textual ones. But, to some extent, their efforts were not entirely honest. In order to convince their audience of the effectiveness of their martial arts that allegedly should

render their followers's bodies invulnerable to bullets, the Boxer made use of specially prepared cotton bullets, which they fired on volunteers during public displays. According to Lixin, these and other actions (or 'propaganda' to use his term) indeed did influence the Chinese populace's response. An isolated, obscure sect became what Lixin called a 'mass movement.' The panel's two remaining papers - by INES EBEN VON RACKNITZ and DIETLIND WÄNSCHE - dealt with a medium that historians still seem to favor: written texts. Eben von Racknitz demonstrated how several works of literature that dealt with the Great Mutiny of 1857 and the Relief of Lucknow in particular became, at least for the British residents of the besieged Legation Quarter in Beijing, 'scripts.' Relating to those 'scripts,' the staff of the embassies could make sense of the dire situation; these scripts enabled them to integrate their misery into a greater whole. One would like to know, however, what is gained with this insight. It remained unclear whether the reading of literary texts alone could change the behavior of human beings in a siege situation - as the term 'script' as used by Eben von Racknitz suggests. WÄnsche was able to state an interesting (and, for historians, a favorable) phenomenon. Amongst the members of the German contingent in China, a veritable 'urge to comment' broke out. The Boxer War produced scores of ego-documents which, according to WÄnsche, must be interpreted as a response to negative comments on the war by the German press. Apparently, German soldiers were avid readers of the news. WÄnsche demonstrated this primarily with one case: Lieutenant Colonel Carl von Wallenich, the diligent author of what WÄnsche called a 'diary in letters.' It is remarkable how von Wallenich tried to justify his behavior in a rather flamboyant manner. According to WÄnsche, this has to be interpreted in the context of this soldier's 'inner conflict.' Like many of his comrades, he knew from his daily readings that their actions were heavily criticized at home. This was the reason why he and other soldiers turned to texts that were written in order to be circulated amongst relatives and friends at home. In other words, in response to media reports, German soldiers started their own private press campaign.

The next section's papers dealt with processes of interpretation that were more distant from the events in China, both geographically and chronologically. In REINHARD ZÄLLNER's paper on the visualization of the conflict in Japanese print media, CHRISTOPH KAMISSEK's analysis of representations of war in transnational networks of military writers, and DANIEL

MOLLENHAUER's comparison of debates in the French and German parliaments, the advantages of a rather narrow understanding of the concept of representations became obvious. All three papers succeeded because they related the represented meaning to different constellations of actors and their specific intentions. ZÄllner's paper, for example, reconstructed the image that Japanese elites wanted to project to their populace through the use of widely circulated wood prints. The Japanese wanted to present their army as an efficient and well-organized fighting force that matches Western armies in terms of organization, appearance, and efficiency. Surprisingly for many, these depictions neither ridiculed, nor demeaned the regular Chinese army and the Boxers. Instead, they could draw on a specific narrative about Japan's Chinese neighbors that has been well established since the Chinese-Japanese war of 1894/95. Kamissek investigated in his paper a topic widely neglected by global history: the 'transnational' networks of military experts. As Kamissek argued, from the mid-19th century onwards the increasing occurrence of colonial wars that have been fought in an asymmetrical manner has led to the emergence of networks of military experts that superseded and transcended national boundaries. Military journals have served as the centers of these networks, in which military experts zealously exchanged information about the wars of the future. And debates about asymmetrical warfare, which was widely perceived as non-European, dominated these 'printed chat rooms,' as Kamissek wittily dubbed these journals. However, the lessons learned from these debates were widely neglected. High-ranking German military leaders, for example, as late as 1914 still believed in a shared military culture of the West that would (at least outside of Europe) foster solidarity amongst the Western powers. Mollenhauer's comparison of parliamentary debates in France and the German Reich showed how, in the German case, the Boxer war served as a catalyst for domestic political debates. Here, the main topic was the Kaiser's role in politics - and the German reading public thus vividly followed these debates. Yet in France scant attention was paid to the Boxer War. Here, the topic of the day was the Dreyfus affair. Unlike the Germans, the French had already had their debate about colonialism during the Fashoda incident in 1898. The subsequent debate showed once more the importance of not only the interrelation between representations and the representing individual, but of its medial aspects as well. It is the media that enables the emergence of collective representation out of individual ones. The attention and perceptions of historical actors are shaped and channeled

through highly iconic symbols and images. As has been demonstrated by Mollenhauer's German example, units of meaning have to pass a threshold of attention in order to become political issues. They must be present not only in the contemporaries's, but also in subsequent observers's notions and memoirs (and historiographical writings). Conversely, as shown in the case of the Assemblée Nationale, this presence enables historians to explain why images and perceptions have not been shared and thus not been hardened into shared representations. So the Boxer War, too, as Thoralf Klein stressed in the discussion, was rendered transnational only by the attention it gained in different cultural contexts. Very often, however, these realms of reception did not overlap with national borders.

The above-mentioned process of the hardening of individual representations into collective ones formed the center of the conference's third paper. The papers of JEFF BOWERSOX, THORALF KLEIN, and LÄ YIXU exemplarily demonstrated the usefulness of approaches that focus on a variety of sources. Yixu's paper analyzed literary works of fiction. Working with movies and children's toys, Klein and Bowersox used sources that are almost unmatched in their ability to shape consciousness. Using toys such as the above-mentioned tin soldiers and also board games, Bowersox showed how miscellaneous and seemingly contradictory stereotypes of the Chinese were reinforced and blended into a "sensationalist bricolage" of the Boxer. Behind it stood local conditions, nominally the needs of an emerging consumer culture, of new approaches to education in the wake of the German Reformist movement and of the escapism of the German youth in their search for entertainment and adventure. So, while playing seemingly harmless games, German children and adolescents developed colonial hierarchies and visions of order and projected them onto a seemingly chaotic and shapeless society. Additionally, the production of these toys and games was complemented by the distribution of teaching materials for schools and kindergartens. Yet, in the imaginations of most Germans, China was not simply a "blank slate of chaos and uncertainty." Therefore, different colonial contexts were more useful for German utopias of order. And shortly after the war in China, German kids simply did not want to play Boxer and Germans anymore. Other conflicts became more attractive to them.

It was not only children but their parents as well who harbored certain preformed perceptions of the outside world. The "siege story," as Thoralf Klein argues in his paper, is one of them. Since the sieges of Cawnpore and

Lucknow during the Great Mutiny of 1857, this myth represented not only colonial fantasies and fears, but also deeply rooted understandings of colonial order and hierarchies. At least in the colonizers's representation, the rampart of the colonial fortress under siege separated civilization and savagery, fearless individuals from an amorphous, faceless mass. Klein analyzed the development of the "siege story" in two seemingly very different movies. But the plots of both "Alarm in Peking," a 1937 German production by Herbert Selpin, and the above-mentioned Hollywood classic, "55 days at Peking" (1963), were centered around the siege story. However, as Klein argued, this story was blended with transnationalism. But if "55 Days," shown at the climax of the Cold War, was skeptical about the possibility of transnational cooperation, the German movie from 1937 ended on a more idealistic note. LÄ¼ Yixu, too, looked closely at two contemporary depictions of the uprising. The novels "Der gelbe Wind oder der Aufstand der Boxer" ("The Yellow Wind or the Uprising of the Boxer") by Gerhard Seyfried (2008) and Mo Yan's 2001 "Tanxiang xing" ("The Sandalwood Torture") both relay their version of the war by heavily relying on what Yixu called "asymmetrical myopia," meaning that the respective Other is excluded from both narratives. Obviously, the depiction of this Other was, for various reasons, considered too problematic.

A particularly fruitful feature of the conference in Erfurt was to place open questions and problems of research in the center of the concluding section. The author of this report cannot hide his sympathy for an approach that actually tries to combine theoretical and practical topics and to bridge gaps that still might exist between different historiographical traditions. It was quite an experience to see WANG DONG demonstrating the strength and weaknesses of a "3-level textual analysis" by using her own work on the "unequal treaties" as an example. In Erfurt, Dong showed how the reception of the Boxer Protocols in China led to the emergence of the academic field of international law in China, and how the young discipline was instrumentalized in different political and historical contexts. The reception of these treaties, Don argued, helped to shape China's perspective of the Western world. WU HUEY-FANG provided the Western conferees with a fascinating glimpse into Chinese academic debates. Her paper was on the tradition of oral history on the Boxer war. Field research and the collection of interviews started as early as 1905, but had its heyday in the Party's commission after 1949 (almost 50 years after the war!). Huey-fang's paper directed the participants's attention to universal problems: the condi-

tions under which sources are collected, recorded, categorized, and archived in general, and the methodology of oral history in particular. According to Huey-fang, in Chinese-speaking historiography on the Boxer War, one can observe a recent trend moving away from a pure history of events to what she calls a methodological history of events. Apparently, debates on the Boxers have led to a sensible and conscious use of methodology and theory. And, after having attended the conference, one is tempted to conclude that this trend can be partially explained by a generational gap, too.

To put it simply, the overall impression that the conference produced was a positive one. Informative, thought-provoking papers in an inspiring setting that left enough space for discussion certainly made for an excellent workshop. For the sake of future research, however, certain sets of questions that were raised in Erfurt seem to merit further attention. First, the author has to confess that the historiographical surplus of transnationalism has, in this case, not become entirely obvious to him. Can a coalition of different armies (of which some were multiethnic and not national) truly be called transnational (and not international)? And furthermore: What is gained by categorizing an event as transnational? Secondly, as was mentioned in the final discussion, tensions between national and transnational phenomena should be further investigated. Here, an approach that focuses on the historical actors and the observers' consciousness might be a promising path.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: Participation

Chair: Thoralf Klein, Erfurt

Sun Lixin, Beijing

Texts and Rituals: Media of Propaganda during the Boxer Movement

Ines Eben v. Racknitz, Konstanz

Plays and Recitations. The "Great Mutiny" of 1857 as a Script During the Siege of Peking, Summer 1900

Dietlind Wänsche, Heidelberg
The Letters of Lieutenant Colonel Karl von Wallmenich, East Asian Expeditionary Corps

Panel 2: Representation

Chair: Christoph Gumb, Berlin

Reinhard Zöllner, Bonn

Visualizing the Boxer War in Japanese Print Media

Christoph Kamissek, Florence

Theorizing about War in a Global World. The Representation of the Boxer War in Transnational Networks of Military Writers

Daniel Mollenhauer, Munich

Parliamentary Debates as/and Media. The Boxer War in the German Reichstag and in the French Chambre des Députés

Panel 3: Memory

Chair: Lars Schladitz, Erfurt

Jeff Bowersox, Hattiesburg, MS

Playing Out the Boxer War Through Toys and Print Media

Thoralf Klein, Erfurt

Siege Stories: The Boxer War as a Transnational Experience in "Western" Movies

Lǎ Yixu, Sydney

Narrating the (Common?) Past. The Boxer Uprising in Contemporary Fiction: Mo Yan's Tanxiang xing and Gerhard Seyfried's Gelber Wind oder der Aufstand der Boxer

Panel 4: Research

Wang Dong, Wenham, MA

The Boxer Protocol and the Emergence of International Law Studies in China

Wu Huey-fang, Keelung

Oral Materials and the Study of the Boxers

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