



# Myth-Making for the Empire

GERMANY'S COLONY IN CHINA  
1897–1914

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**My topic is the** role of China in the German popular imagination in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. The focus will be on Qingdao (Tsingtau), Germany's 'model colony', as it was widely celebrated in political discourses and popular literature at the time. It existed from 1897 till 1914, was lavishly supported by the German Naval Office, and sustained an emotional charge that was out of proportion to its very modest size and economic performance. I shall illustrate in what way the discourses on Qingdao can be seen as part of a myth-making process for the German Empire under Emperor Wilhelm II (fig. 1).

On 14 November 1897 marines of the East Asian cruiser squadron under the command of Rear Admiral Otto von Diederichs occupied Kiautschou Bay on the northern coast of China. On 14 November 1914, the seventeenth anniversary of the occupation, Alfred Meyer-Waldeck, Governor of the German protectorate, left the city of Qingdao with his staff as Japanese prisoners of war. In these 17 years, Qingdao had embodied lofty symbolic values in German public discourse, and these became more intense through the colony's downfall.

The foundation of Qingdao was the fulfilment of a long-cherished wish on the part of German explorers and bureaucrats. The dream of an industrialised China, one created by the German spirit, had been current since the 1860s. Earlier in the century, China had been perceived within

Germany as a senile state, sunk in decadence. A shift in this perspective was largely brought about by the efforts of the pioneering geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, whose writings stressed the enormous economic potential to be unlocked in China by Western intervention. Von Richthofen saw China as a pre-industrial nation, needing only to profit from Western know-how to make the transition to modernity.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, there was acute rivalry among Western powers to acquire a colonial outpost in China. The German Naval Office had been on the lookout for a base in East Asia since the middle of the 1890s, and Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the relevant secretary of state, had personally intervened to have the choice fall on the site of Qingdao.

Thus, Qingdao was from the outset a focal point of various ambitions. Although the colony was never to achieve the exalted goals its founders cherished, the city remained an icon of German culture in the midst of Asia. In the following, I shall analyse the image of Qingdao in German popular discourses during the seventeen years of its existence and — above all — in the drama of its downfall. I shall show how the unique status of Qingdao derived from the fact that it was a convenient instrument for the staging of Kaiser Wilhelm's 'Weltpolitik'. For this made possible the transfiguration of the city after its inevitable capitulation in November 1914.

(above)

Detail, fig. 4,  
p. 65, Map of  
Qingdao circa 1906.

The unique status of Qingdao had its origin in a coincidence of images of Germany as a 'world power', committed to realising 'world politics', and of the demands for the creation of a German battle fleet. The murder of two German missionaries in Shandong on 1 November 1897 provided the longed-for pretext for action. On 14 November, the Kaiser ordered German troops to occupy Kiautschou Bay. From the outset, the creation of Qingdao had its theatrical aspects. A letter from Wilhelm to the Foreign Secretary von Bülow on 7 November testifies to the Kaiser's hectic frame of mind at the occupation of Chinese territory:

Hundreds of German merchants will rejoice in their awareness that at long last the German Empire has gained a firm foothold in Asia. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese will tremble when they feel the iron fist of the German Empire upon their necks, and the entire German people will be happy that its government has done a virile deed.<sup>2</sup>

The vision of the Chinese masses trembling beneath the iron fist of Germany is indicative of Wilhelm's propensity for mythical thought and bombastic utterances, and I shall address this issue shortly. The Kaiser issued a personal decree that 'atonement' for the murder of the missionaries should be demanded in the form of the ceding of Chinese territory: 'Go with all speed to Kiautschou with the whole squadron, occupy suitable positions and localities and compel the Chinese in whatever way you will to make atonement'.<sup>3</sup>

But in the *Reichstag* there was no longer any talk of atonement when von Bülow informed the members of the occupation of Kiautschou. Rather, it was seen as the triumphant entry of Germany as a colonial power onto the world stage:

Germany now stands at the inception of its development into an international world power. Taking possession of Kiautschou Bay represents the first initiative in securing a firm basis for our trade and industry to exploit China, and I hope this will bring us rich rewards from those lands where our goods are sold. [...]



(left)

Fig. 1. Head and shoulders portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm II by Court Photographer T. H. Voigt of Frankfurt, 1902.

IMAGE: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, IWM NON-COMMERCIAL LICENSE  
[HTTPS://WWW.IWM.ORG.UK/COLLECTIONS/ITEM/ OBJECT/205124138](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205124138)

Those times are past when Germans left to one neighbour the earth, another the sea and kept the heavens, where pure doctrine reigns, for themselves. [...] In short, we wish to put no other nation in the shade, but we also demand our place in the sun.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of this cliché — 'our place in the sun' — Qingdao henceforth becomes the symbol of Wilhelmenian 'world politics'. Ironically, it was not to survive the events of 1914.

The founding of the first and only German colony in China did, in fact, represent something new, namely the only tangible result of Wilhelm II's 'Weltpolitik' — a most ambitious if very diffuse set of doctrines.<sup>5</sup> One of Wilhelm's senior officers, Alfred Graf von Waldersee — later to command the Western allied troops in China in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising — was sceptical of the worth of the Chinese colony, and, indeed, of what 'world politics' might mean, confiding in his diary of 13 July 1900: 'We are supposed to be engaging in "world politics". If I only knew what they were meant to be.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, they meant a good deal more than protecting German trade with China, as becomes clear if we look at other speeches of the Kaiser regarding the occupation of Qingdao, for example:

Let it be clear to any European out there, that the good German has planted his shield — with its emblem of the Imperial eagle — firmly on the ground so as to protect anyone who seeks his protection. [...] But should anyone make so bold as to infringe upon our rights or seek to diminish them, then we shall defend them with a mailed fist!<sup>7</sup>

The warlike tone that Wilhelm here adopts reveals a somewhat paranoid attitude towards other colonial powers, especially England. For these powers were busy trying to carve up China to their own advantage. Thus, the celebrated 'model colony' of Qingdao was from the outset embedded in a power play in the service of the ambitions of the German Empire. It bore a heavy symbolic burden which did not cease to exist when Japanese and British troops conquered the colony in November 1914. Qingdao always had a function in a discourse of power, whether real or imaginary.

of strategic ports, so that the outbreak of the First World War saw it hopelessly isolated. In the year 1907 there was even a public debate in Germany on the question of whether it would not be better — given what the colony was costing — to return it to China. So what was Qingdao good for? It was good for morale — in other words: it could *represent*.

This brings us to the issue of just what constitutes political myth. I cannot begin to sift the enormous literature on the topic, so offer here a minimalist approach. In the words of the anthropologist Pierre Maranda, myths — at their most fundamental — 'display the structured, predominantly culture-specific, and shared, semantic systems which enable the members of a culture area to understand each other [...] More strictly, myths are stylistically definable discourses that express the strong components of semantic systems.'<sup>8</sup> It is important here to note that the emphasis is on 'semantic systems', rather than the more conventional one on

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The official rhetoric surrounding the foundation of the colony proclaimed that this was the inception of a grandiose expansion of the Empire. Qingdao was seen as the beginning of a fresh push towards imperial equality with France and Britain. The acquisition of Qingdao was thus part of a wider discourse in which Germany sought to catch up with the other European powers by becoming a major colonial nation and world power in its own right. However, the enormous rhetorical and financial expenditure attending the foundation of Qingdao simply dwarfed its concrete achievements. It never realised the expectations that it would become a flourishing trade centre. It was designated a 'free port', but the Chinese customs still collected tax on all goods leaving the protectorate. This dampened trade considerably and forced the colonial administration to integrate it into the Chinese imperial custom system a couple of years later. It was developed as a naval harbour, but no attempt was made to integrate it into a network

'narratives'. The semantic system in question here is that of German nationalism in the wake of the foundation of the *Reich* in 1870. Such semantic systems produce 'discourses' which often take the form of past-tense narratives, but this is not essential. The same semantic system can produce discourses that are in conflict with one another. The consistency required of a single coherent narrative need not be present in a nexus of mythical elements. A contrasting myth to that of the 'model colony' was to emerge in 1900. For the great assertion of German military power in China came with the suppression of the Boxer Uprising and the appointment of Alfred Graf von Waldersee as supreme commander of the allied troops. The following quotation from a prestigious German paper, the *Kölnische Zeitung*, anticipating Waldersee's appointment, throws some 'strong components' of the semantic system of German nationalism into stark relief:

So if the decision has in fact been made in favour of General Field-Marshal Count Waldersee, this would alone guarantee [...]



final victory since the powers representing the civilisation of the West must triumph in this campaign against the culture of the East which has sunk into barbarism [...] If a German leader is considered worthy of leading the forces of civilisation to this inevitable victory, so is this an honour that the German nation will be sure to value.<sup>9</sup>

Some very strong components of the semantics of German nationalism are here on display, but the discourse has not taken on the form of a conventional mythical narrative. I have argued elsewhere that there is a strong tendency in the German press at the time of the Boxer Uprising to make the German mission in China into a replay of the German military successes of 1870 against France, thus grafting the hoped-for triumphs in China onto the foundation-myth of the *Reich*.<sup>10</sup> The *Kölnische Zeitung* then supplies, a few days later, a more conventional piece of mythical narrative: 'The armed White Man has marched into China and has forced the Yellow Man to his knees'.<sup>11</sup> The stark simplifications here leave out of account that the vast majority of the population of China was quite unaware of the presence of Western troops on a small segment of one province. Moreover, the victory celebrated here was more in the nature of a skirmish than a decisive, pitched battle in European terms. But to set the seal on this largely imaginary triumph, the paper takes over from Waldersee's telegram of 5 November this happy formula: 'The German flag is flying on the Great Wall of China'<sup>12</sup> — a mythical emblem of a sweeping and decisive victory that — in mundane reality — had simply failed to occur.

In the examples I have given here, we may discern a triangle of communication. The myth-making process circulates between the German leadership, the print media and the popular imagination. In 1895, the Kaiser drafted a graphic which was transformed into a lithograph by the artist Hermann Knackfuß (fig. 2) and presented as a gift to a number of royal families in Europe including the Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The threat embodied by the Buddha in this picture was aroused by the triumph of Japanese military in the Sino-Japanese war. Chinese forces had been equipped with German armaments, notably Krupp gunboats, and there was some



(left)

Fig. 2. Hermann Knackfuß, *Völker Europas, wahrt eure heiligsten Güter* ("Peoples of Europe, guard your dearest goods") 1895.

IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN  
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS,  
CC PUBLIC DOMAIN  
MARK 1.0.

consternation in Germany when they made such a poor showing against the Japanese. But the elements of mythical systems need not be invariable in their semantics. By 1900, following the murder of the German envoy, von Ketteler, in Beijing by a Manchu soldier, the 'Yellow Peril' assumes a Chinese guise. Thus, Wilhelm exhorts troops embarking for China on 27 July 1900 with a speech that was to become justly notorious. It reads in one version:

Across the seas, great tasks await the newly arisen German Empire [...] Tasks to which the old [Holy] Roman Empire of the German Nation was not equal can now be successfully completed by the new German Empire. [...] You well know that you will be fighting a cunning, courageous, well-armed, cruel foe. When you encounter him, so be aware: Quarter is not to be given. No prisoners are to be taken. [...] Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under King Attila made a name for themselves which resonates mightily even today in history and legend, so may the name of Germans in China by your deeds gain such fame that never again shall a Chinese dare to look sideways at a German.<sup>13</sup>

There is more than one version of the speech, but all versions conclude with the slogan: 'Clear the way for Culture — once and for all!'<sup>14</sup> The 'Yellow Peril' may have changed its guise, but the German civilising mission — here in its most bloodthirsty terms — is a constant in the nationalist discourse. Notice also the tendency for one myth to overlay another. Just as Waldersee's suppression of the Boxer remnants could be seen as a re-enactment of the German triumphs of 1870, so here the imminent

destruction of the Chinese is to recapitulate the conquests of the Huns, who are transformed by Wilhelm's overwrought rhetoric into honorary proto-Germans. Such imaginative distortions of history are the common currency of political myth. That the Huns had, in fact, devastated large tracts of German lands had apparently slipped the Kaiser's mind.

At this point it is as well to remind ourselves of the triangle of communication I spoke of earlier. To quote from Christopher G. Flood, a prominent writer on political myth:

Mythmaking is a communication process which involves reception as well as (re) production. To state that a narrative is mythopoeic is merely to judge the properties of the discourse itself without reference to how that discourse is received by an audience. But to be the expression of a *myth* the telling of a given narrative [...] needs to be perceived as being faithful to [...] the correct interpretation of a story which a social group already accepts or subsequently comes to accept as true. [...] Conversely, the narrative will be described as myth [...] in the pejorative sense by those who consider the account to be factually untrue or significantly distorted in its selection and/or interpretation of relevant true facts.<sup>15</sup>

Wilhelm's mythicising tirades did not stand alone, as they do today on the pages of history textbooks. Rather, they resonated with most of the German print media, the landed aristocracy and the populace at large. There were, of course, some dissenting voices. In the historical context we are addressing, the disbelievers were the Social Democrats. They annoyed the government in the Parliament to the extent that Wilhelm dreamed of dissolving it and ruling autocratically. In an aggressive attempt to subvert the nationalist myth-making that was instigated by the leadership, reinforced by the patriotic press and accepted uncritically by the popular imagination, the Social Democrats used their paper *Vorwärts* to print the '*Hunnenbriefe*' — 'letters from the Huns'. These were letters home from common soldiers setting forth German atrocities against the Chinese in the course of the mopping-up campaign. Thus,

the political myth of German heroism in the face of a demonised enemy produced its own factual refutation. But this did little to dampen popular fervour which demanded signal victories against ferocious odds. Wilhelm may have appalled his inner circle and foreign observers with his bombastic rants and unpredictability, but by and large he was on a popular wavelength. Germany wanted its 'place in the sun' and in this lay the Kaiser's main strength.

(far right)

Fig. 3. Main gate of former Chinese munitions depot, taken over by the Imperial German Navy, Kiautschou Bay, Shandong peninsula, 1898.

IMAGE: ATTRIBUTION SHAREALIKE 3.0 GERMANY, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE



The German forces in Qingdao played a very minor role in the suppression of the Boxer Uprising. These hostilities mainly took place in the Imperial province of Chili, whereas the province of Shandong, surrounding the German colony, saw some armed combat around the construction of the Shandong railway. Moreover, Qingdao's representative role was a long way from the blood and thunder of the Boxer skirmishes. For the mythical function of Qingdao was to transform a piece of China into 'German mother earth'. This it did with great success. Although Qingdao had become the most expensive project of German colonialism and was, indeed, a financial disaster, within the symbolic world of German writing the city remained a shining example of German progressiveness and efficiency. Critical remarks to the effect that, with the 110 million marks in subsidies that had been expended up till 1908 on Qingdao even the Mark Brandenburg could have been turned into the most beautiful garden on earth, did nothing to weaken the myth of the exemplary colony. This is shown by the following obituary for Qingdao after it had fallen in November 1914:

Tsingtau was the defiant and impressive exemplary achievement of the genuine German spirit, particularly imposing in the





(left)

Fig. 4. Map of Qingdao circa 1906

IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN  
VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS,  
CC PUBLIC DOMAIN  
MARK 1.0

(below)

Fig. 5. Present day Qingdao

IMAGE: PIXABAY, CCO  
CREATIVE COMMONS



drab environs of Chinese backwardness and causing especial offence to foreign powers. [...] Tsingtau became an exemplary exhibition of 'Germanness' [*Deutschtum*] in the Far East, a place of pilgrimage for admiring Chinese, Japanese, English and Americans. A spotlessly clean city with that German order [...], Tsingtau remains a crowning achievement of the German naval administration [...] and it

was the entry port for the German spirit, for German education, for *the German idea* in the world.<sup>16</sup>

From today's perspective, we may term the consciously crafted and widely disseminated image of Qingdao as the triumph of the domestic over the exotic. Under the political and financial protection of the Imperial Naval Office there arose a miniature Germany on the coast of

Shandong. The favourable climatic conditions and the opportunity of creating both the city and the landscape anew favoured the creation of a 'paradise' that was made to reflect 'genuine Germanness' [*echtes Deutschtum*]. This was taken so far that the Chinese surroundings were largely lost to sight. Here German 'mother earth' was cultivated. The capacity of the Chinese workforce to adapt to German orderliness guaranteed that there were scarcely any concessions required to the Asian context. The following text may be seen as emblematic of the theatrical production of Qingdao in the service of German nationalist expansion:

In this milieu, supported by the prestige of concentrated military power on land and sea, the German entrepreneur in East Asia finds native German soil [*deutsche Muttererde*]. Here he can soak up new national strength and by this means preserve his Germanness [*Deutschtum*] and become bound more closely to it.<sup>17</sup>

In Germany's interactions with China in these years we may see the contrasting faces of colonialism. The aftermath of the Boxer Uprising saw many innocent civilians die in the course of Count Waldersee's campaign of vengeance. In Qingdao, a more benevolent aspect of colonialism could be seen. In a submission from the Naval Office to the Parliament in 1907 we read: 'The new city boasts a network of broad roads, has drainage for storm water and sewage, fresh running water and electric lighting, churches, hospitals and schools for Europeans and Chinese'.<sup>18</sup> The Naval Office also discovered a gentler German cultural mission than Wilhelm had preached at the height of the Boxer crisis.

The idea of a peaceful 'cultural mission' was floated first in 1907 in the course of a debate in the Parliament on the prospect of handing Qingdao back to China. The 'remainers' argued that German language and culture will pave the way for German products and 'economic penetration' of China. Whilst schools and hospitals for the Chinese were left to the missionaries, the colonial administration did establish in 1908, in cooperation with the Chinese government, an educational institute to prepare graduates for entry into Peking University. On a more mundane level, a

rickshaw-depot was established offering clean lodgings, laundries, baths and even a canteen for the rickshaw pullers to provide them with garlic-free meals so as not to offend the noses of their European passengers. For Qingdao, still a naval base, had also become a health resort for tourists and Europeans stationed in China.

A lecture delivered in January 1915 by Otto Franke, who was first a diplomat in China and then a professor of sinology at the Colonial Institute in Hamburg, is typical of many retrospective evocations of Qingdao that portray it as a monument to benevolent colonialism:

Thus, Kiautschou became what it was always meant to be: a base for German trade, an entry-portal for German culture, not destined for conquest and subjugation but for an amicable approach to the Chinese people. [...] this honest German cultural labour, with Tsingtau as its centre, serving the interests of both lands — Tsingtau had a rosy future ahead of it.<sup>19</sup>

The wealthy Chinese, mainly Mandarins, who had taken up residence there as a refuge from turbulent times in the new Republic of China since 1911, would have had no grounds for disputing this. That the German cultural and educational mission was competing with those of other European nations was typical of changing Western attitudes to China.

The immediate cause of the downfall of Qingdao so early in World War I was a treaty between Britain and Japan that was chiefly directed against Russian expansion in the Far East. German relations with the British navy in Chinese waters had been cordial, but, once war broke out, Japan chose to honour the treaty as a means of getting at the rich coal reserves in the province of Shandong and thus the story of Qingdao devolved into tragedy. The persistence of Qingdao in German war propaganda and in other patriotic writings in the years that followed its fall allows us to see how the discourse of cultural and economic progress was interwoven with a discourse of sacrifice. In what follows I shall concentrate on the mythicising of the fall of the colony.

Although it was obvious to the German government that the alliance between Britain and Japan made the situation of the colony

untenable once hostilities commenced, there was no question of a peaceful surrender. The East Asian squadron under the command of the Graf von Spee was in the South Pacific when war broke out and was obliged to flee to South America — only to be defeated there by a British fleet. In spite of Qingdao's hopeless plight, Berlin rejected Japan's ultimatum requiring Germany to vacate the colony. On 22 August, one day before the expiry of the Japanese ultimatum, the governor of Qingdao Alfred Meyer-Waldeck received the following telegram from the Kaiser: 'May God protect you in the fierce struggle that awaits you. My thoughts are with you. Wilhelm.' The governor answered: 'I pledge we shall fulfil our duty to the last man.'<sup>20</sup>

We do not know how Berlin understood Meyer-Waldeck's promise. Reason would have urged a rapid surrender so that none of the around 4000 Germans in Qingdao was obliged to die a hero's death. But heroism was the watchword of the time, and so the besieged troops were obliged to pursue a scorched earth tactic. On 27 October, two months after Japan had blockaded Qingdao, cutting it off from the world, the Germans confined there received the last telegram from the Emperor: 'With me, the whole German fatherland gazes proudly on the heroes of Qingdao, who are fulfilling their duty in accord with the promise of their governor.'<sup>21</sup> In view of the fact that Berlin could send nothing in the way of reinforcements to relieve the situation in Qingdao, the question arises as to the sense of Wilhelm's telegram: What did the Kaiser expect of his soldiers there? One thing is clear: the Kaiser's choice of words is once more tinged with theatricality: the fall of Qingdao was to be placed in the service of mobilising emotions on the home front. The colony was to die a hero's death. This was to be its final representation, its last contribution to German imperial myth-making.

One of the first obituaries for the lost colony appeared in December 1914. It was the printed version of a lecture delivered in the Concordia Club in Shanghai by a man who claimed to have fought there. In this text, the complete surrender of the colony is played down and the theatrical effect of the first telegram from the Kaiser is magnified:

At this moment came a greeting from our Emperor: 'May God protect you in your fierce struggle. My thoughts are with you. Wilhelm.' These words in such a dark hour called forth a profound joy in all our hearts: Although at home battles were raging on three fronts, we were still present in their thoughts.<sup>22</sup>

In the fictionalised report *From Qingdao to the Falkland Islands* that appeared in 1917 the author sets out to reproduce the thoughts and feelings of the Germans in Qingdao at the beginning of the war:

When the World War broke out, a depressive mood took hold in Tsingtau [...] We were condemned to inactivity! And when in future years stories would be told of what those on the home front had fought for and how they had suffered, then we would have to sit silently and listen, and we could only confess: I was not part of the great conflict of nations. My heart's blood may have glowed for the holy cause, but I was forbidden to sacrifice it. But then rumours began to circulate that something was not quite right with Japan. [...] In the middle of the month there came the confirmation: Japan had delivered an ultimatum to the German Empire [...] In an instant all our cares were banished! No one could now doubt that there would be a fight to the death. But our hearts were uplifted in the knowledge that the conflict would also rage about Tsingtau — the struggle of the German spirit against a world of envious, vile foes who had taken up the sword purely for the sake of their purse.<sup>23</sup>

There is no mention of the fact that Qingdao was completely isolated and in an untenable position. The skilful portrayal of the Japanese ultimatum as an unavoidable natural phenomenon serves the purpose of enabling the discourse of sacrifice, which is the point of this piece of propaganda. It has the obvious function of installing the German capitulation as its complete opposite in the pantheon of German heroism. It reaches its culmination in a lament on the scorched earth policy:



With the expense of their last energy, the heroic garrison fought for the fame and honour of German arms. That the position of Tsingtau was not tenable had been clear since the day on which Japan had begun its siege with the expenditure of vast means. [...] But worse was to come! The Germans were compelled to destroy their own creation. The watchword was: let nothing usable fall into the hands of the aggressor! With a cruel sense of satisfaction, the besieged garrison set about supporting and completing the work of the Japanese artillery.<sup>24</sup>

The author of this book was far from being the inventor of such discourses of sacrifice. Emotional expressions of heroic sacrifice can already be found in the telegram that Wilhelm II sent to the *Reichstag* on 14 November 1914:

The heroic defence of this model creation of German culture, the result of several years of devoted exertions, gives us a new and honourable proof of that faithfulness unto death that the German people has demonstrated so many times already in this titanic struggle against a world of hatred, envy and pillage. May God grant that your struggle has not been in vain! Wilhelm Imperator Rex.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, ‘faithfulness unto death’ was not demanded of most of the defenders of Qingdao. The governor, Meyer-Waldeck, had opted

for a strategy of defence that did not involve the garrison in a fight from house to house, from street to street. Nor did he implement the ‘scorched earth’ policy rigorously. Bridges, batteries and railway installations were indeed destroyed, but important structures, such as the Governor’s Residence and the Imperial Courthouse, remained intact, so did the villas and shops, as witnessed by the first British correspondent to be allowed to enter Qingdao after the surrender: ‘The city appeared as if a typhoon had passed through it. Its wide asphalt streets, fronted by beautiful four and five-storey buildings of German architecture, were vacant.’<sup>26</sup> So the Germans had destroyed everything that could be used for the purposes of war, but they had stopped short of destroying the architecture that was the ‘model colony’s’ real pride.

But enough blood had been spilt to justify the discourse of sacrifice in the obituaries for Qingdao. The echo in the German press left nothing to be desired. While the liberal-conservative *Kölnische Zeitung* lamented the destruction of a ‘green island’ in the perilous waves of violence and revolution,<sup>27</sup> the centrist *Frankfurter Zeitung* mourned the loss of the ‘beautiful, flourishing, expanding centre of trade that German industriousness had conjured forth from the yellow sand’ and of the ‘model exhibition of the adventurous spirit of our Imperial Navy.’<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the fallen Qingdao is now being praised as the ‘real’ Qingdao — the perfect symbol of the German national spirit: ‘The colony that had been shot to pieces and hunted to death became a torch that glowed more brightly, was more an incarnation of the German spirit than Qingdao at peace could ever have been.’<sup>29</sup>

Since Qingdao had held out for 73 days of siege against an enemy that was vastly superior in numbers and equipment, expectations on the home front had been more than satisfied. The sacrifice demanded for purposes of war propaganda had been delivered. That the vast majority of the German garrison had survived the defeat unscathed simply does not figure in this and other accounts. With the end of the war and the loss of all German colonies forever, all such sacrifices were seen to be in vain. The discourse of sacrifice lost its grip —

(right)  
Fig. 6. Men of the German Garrison at Tsing-tau, from *The Illustrated War News*, No. 15, Nov. 18, 1914—II

IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA PROJECT GUTENBERG <[HTTPS://WWW.GUTENBERG.ORG/FILES/18333/18333-H/18333-H.HTM](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18333/18333-H/18333-H.HTM)>



Qingdao fades out of history until its rediscovery by the scholars.

In conclusion, we may say that the various discourses that focus on Qingdao are exemplary for the theatricality of German politics in the epoch of Wilhelm II and their dependence on political myth. They are clearly influenced by the bombastic style of government that the Kaiser affected. In a sense, everything about Qingdao had, from the outset, been theatre. It was the standard bearer of a nebulous kind of 'world politics' that left the world outside Germany quite unmoved and, in Germany's internal politics, was chiefly responsible for a better financing of the war fleet. In addition, Qingdao provided an emotional point of intersection for the Kaiser and the German nation. In this way, Qingdao became a looking glass for 'genuine Germanness' in East Asia.<sup>30</sup> As Qingdao, from the outset, was chiefly there to *represent*, it is understandable that this aspect was only enhanced by its fall for the duration of the war. While the outcome of the siege was inevitable, it nonetheless lasted for more than two months. This was a positive factor in creating the legend of the martyrdom of the colony. The famous 'place in the sun' was a shining example to the German people, even as it was overcome by superior forces.

Empires need myths — as do democracies and dictatorships. Myths reinforce the selfhood of communities, and national myths thrive on creating, and then rejecting as inferior, versions of the alien 'other'. Germany's interaction with China over these few decades brought forth, under the pressure of political forces that far exceeded these two countries, contrasting colonialist discourses. Let us consider some of the guises in which these created the Chinese 'other'. In the early years of the colony, there were the Chinese workers, an alien underclass paid starvation wages, having no rights and forbidden to mix with Europeans. The Boxer Uprising then called forth the demonised Chinese: fanatical, savage, a threat to all Western order and stability. These, in turn, produced the innocent victims of Waldersee's campaign, commemorated by the Social Democrats. Later came the eager recipients of German culture, learning Western attitudes and know-how in Qingdao's preparatory college. Then there were

the wealthy Mandarins — tolerated as 'honorary Europeans', but still alien and despised. All of these 'others' were generated within the overarching myth that Qingdao was but the first fruit of a massive expansion of the German Empire. It was not — and so it transformed into one of the first sacrifices to German militarism in the mighty conflicts of World War I. Myths of empire were by no means confined to Germany's brief colonisation of a very small part of China. But I suggest that Qingdao offers us a microcosm of Western colonial attitudes. It is tempting to ask how many of them still persist today, when *colonialism* has become such a pejorative word. ¶



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1. Cf. Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Forschungsreise und Kolonialprogramm. Ferdinand von Richthofen und die Erschließung Chinas im 19. Jahrhundert', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 69 (1987), 150–95 (p. 183).
2. Quoted by Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *War der Kaiser an allem schuld? Wilhelm II. und die preußisch-deutschen Machteliten* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2005), p. 95.
3. Cf. Volker Schult, 'Auf dem Weg zur Weltmacht? Des Kaisers Admiral: Otto von Diederichs zwischen Pazifik und Atlantik', *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 36 (2005), 125–58 (p. 126).

4. *Kaiserreich und Erster Weltkrieg 1871/1918*, ed. by Rüdiger vom Bruch and Björn Hofmeister (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), p. 268.
5. Cf. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 151.
6. *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*. Vol 2: 1888–1900, ed. by Heinrich Otto Meisner (Stuttgart and Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1922), p. 449.
7. Cf. *Reden des Kaisers: Ansprachen, Predigten und Trinksprüche Wilhelms II*, ed. by Ernst Johann (Munich: dtv, 1966) pp. 74–5.
8. *Mythology. Selected Readings*, ed. by Pierre Maranda (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 12–13.
9. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 9 August 1900.
10. Yixu Lu, 'German Colonial Fiction on China: The Boxer Uprising of 1900', *German Life and Letters*, 59 (2006), 98–99.
11. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 3 November 1900.
12. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 5 November 1900.
13. Quoted by Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *War der Kaiser an allem schuld? Wilhelm II. und die preußisch-deutschen Machteliten* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2005), p. 95.
14. The Kaiser's speech exists in more than one version. The official version is much less inflammatory than those noted down by reporters on the occasion. Cf. *Reden des Kaisers*, pp. 90–91 and *War der Kaiser an allem schuld?*, p. 104.
15. Christopher G. Flood, *Political Myth. A Theoretical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 43–4.
16. Fritz Wertheimer, *Deutschland und Ostasien* (Stuttgart und Berlin, 1914), pp. 22–23.
17. K. Romberg, 'Die politische und kulturelle Bedeutung des deutschen Kiautschougebietes: Ein erlebtes Kapitel politischer Theorie', *Koloniale Monatsblätter* 2 (February 1914), p. 59.
18. Klaus Mühlhahn, *Herrschaft und Widerstand in der Musterkolonie' Kiautschou. Interaktionen zwischen China und Deutschland 1897-1914* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2000), p. 229.
19. Otto Franke, 'Deutschland und China vor, in und nach dem Kriege' (Lecture delivered on 29 January 1915 in Bonn am Rhein) (Hamburg: L. Friederichsen & Co., 1915), pp. 16–17.
20. Kurt Schultze-Jena, *Der Kampf um Tsingtau. Vortrag gehalten im Club Concordia zu Schanghai am 28. Dezember 1914*, (Shanghai: Verlag von Max Nössler und Co., 1915), p. 12.
21. Schultze-Jena, p. 12.
22. Schultze-Jena, pp. 4–5.
23. Hugo Waldeyer, *Von Tsingtau zu den Falklandinseln. Eine Erzählung von den Heldenkämpfen um Tsingtau und der ruhmreichen Fahrt des deutschen Kreuzergeschwaders im Weltkriege 1914* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1917), pp. 47–48.
24. Waldeyer, p. 129.
25. Quoted from *Kriegstagebuch der Belagerung von Tsingtau vom 23. Juli bis 29. November*, published anonymously (Tientsin: Tageblatt für Nord-China A.G., 1915), pp. 36–37.
26. Edwin Hoyt, *The Fall of Tsingtao* (London: Arthur Baker Limited, 1975), p. 141.
27. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 8 November 1914.
28. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 17 November 1914.
29. Wertheimer, pp. 24–25.
30. Wertheimer, pp. 24–25.