

Mission:Reflexion – 200 Jahre Berliner Mission

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Chapter 4: Beginnings of missionary activity

Where to Begin? The Berlin Mission in China

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How do we begin to narrate the history of the Berlin Missions in China? Do we start in 1824, with the founding of the society? Or do we mark its origins in 1869, when the Berlin Missions first sent missionaries to China, more than thirty years after it started sending people to Africa? Do we begin in 1882, when Berlin missionaries took over an abandoned mission station in Guangdong from the Rheinische Mission, thereby establishing their first missionary station in China? Or do we begin in 1898, when the German navy asked the BMS missionaries to work in north China, in the newly established Jiaozhou Bay leasehold?

I ask these questions because origin stories matter, as they help to determine the subsequent narrative arc. Beginning in 1824 draws our attention to the importance of Pietism and the Prussian nobility in the nineteenth century. The Berlin Mission was a child of the Pietist revival that swept through the German lands in the early nineteenth century. Galvanized by the massive transformations that the French and Napoleonic revolutions brought to the European political landscape, “awakened” Protestants in England and the German lands saw the revolutionary upheaval as a sign of the apocalypse. Inspired by this awakening, a wave of Protestant missionary societies were founded on Pietist principles in the 1820s, including the Berlin Missions.

Dating the origins to 1869 points us to the massive influx of Western missionaries into China in the wake of the Opium Wars. As part of the unequal treaties imposed on China as a result of its humiliating defeat in the Opium Wars, Catholic and Protestant

missionaries were allowed to preach freely throughout the Chinese empire. Chinese Christians were also guaranteed the right to practice Christianity without being punished. Thus the decades after 1860 were a period of unprecedented growth for the missionary movement to China. Between 1864 and 1874, the number of Protestant missionaries almost quadrupled, from 189 to 436. By 1905, that number leapt to 3,445, an almost nine-fold increase.

Starting in 1898, on the other hand, draws our attention towards the entanglements between missionary work and the new imperialism of the late nineteenth century. In March 1898, Germany established a leasehold (Schutzgebiet) in Jiaozhou Bay, making it the first European colony on China's mainland. The German navy sent troops to the village of Qingdao, situated around Jiaozhou Bay in Shandong, with the goal of transforming it into a European metropolis; the Germans built sewers, piers, wide streets, churches, and colonial palaces. The German navy invited BMS missionaries to work in Jiaozhou Bay. The German action sparked an era of "New Imperialism" in China. Soon the Russians, the British, and the French all followed suit, hoping to expand their spheres of influence beyond the coasts and farther inland.

But I choose to begin in 1927, more than a hundred years after the founding of the Berlin mission society and more than forty years after its first missionaries entered China. That year, the leadership of the Berlin Missionary Society appointed the first Chinese pastor to independently lead a congregation in China. The missionaries declared that the Chinese Pastor had the "same rights and responsibilities as a European missionary," marking the first time that a Chinese pastor was elevated to the same level within the institution as his earlier supervisors. The pastor's name was Ling Deyuan, and his congregation was located in Shixing, in southern China.

Shixing lies at the foot of a continuous mountain range known as the Nanling (南嶺), which marks the boundary between Central China and Southern China. Historically the county as a choking point: inland travelers or merchants sojourning from Central China to the south encountered Shixing one of the first stations after crossing the mountains. But proximity to the mountains put any commercial activity in constant danger: bandits ransacked the salt merchants and agricultural producers, and made a quick retreat to the mountains. Due to its position as a node for immigration and emigration, Shixing became

a hodgepodge of different cultures and dialects. The area contains four major dialect groups — Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkienese (a dialect that stems from Fujian), and a local Shixing form of speech. This was the wide-ranging structural issue that the Berlin missionaries faced when they established a missionary station there in 1899.

Born in 1883, Ling Deyuan came from Shixing, from a poor farming family. He had received education from Chinese private learning institutes (私塾) when he was young, but dropped out because of poverty. Learning of the BMS's free elementary school, he enrolled. The Berlin Missionary Society's schools were often the first encounter that local Chinese had with Europeans. The missionary school was also more egalitarian: the schools took both boys and girls. Class sizes varied — according to the BMS's yearly report in 1908, the largest elementary school, in Lukeng (鹿坑), served close to 200 students; the smallest elementary school, in Nan'an (南安), enrolled ten. Students entered at the ages of five or six, and graduated when they were twelve or thirteen years old.



For the majority of Chinese students, education ended with elementary school, but the missionaries selected a small number of Chinese Christian boys whom they found talented and devout to continue their education at the middle school (*Mittelschule*) located in Lukeng (鹿坑). Gifted students were encouraged to enter the seminary for evangelists and catechists (*Predigerseminar*). To graduate from seminary, the Chinese Christians had to pass a series of oral and written examinations, administered at the BMS's annual synod in Guangzhou. Noticeably, seminary candidates were tested only in theology, not in secular subjects: their exams included sections on dogmatics, liturgy, church history, catechism, and homiletics. Ling Deyuan (see the photo with his family), for example, took the test on April 21st, 1906, when he was twenty-three. In the section on theology, he received questions such as "How did sin come into the world?" Candidates were also asked about missionary method, such as "how should one prepare for a

sermon?” The exam culminated in a section on homiletics. Students preached a sermon, on a bible passage chosen by their examiners, in front of the German missionaries gathered at the Synod. When the seminarians finished, the missionaries graded, transcribed, translated, and delivered the exam results back to Germany, where the missionary home board verified the results. Upon approval, the Chinese Christian received his ordination papers, earning him the title of vicar, or assistant pastor (*Vikar*, or 副牧師). Ordination signaled the final stop on a long and rigorous process. Ling was ordained *Vikar* in 1914, a process that had taken sixteen years and multiple exams, comparable to what a pastor in Germany had to withstand.

Ling's importance within the missionary society continued to rise. In 1922, he accompanied Siegfried Knak and Carl Johannes Voskamp to the Shanghai National Christian Conference in Shanghai in 1922. At the conference, Ling displayed his linguistic talents: Ling was one of the few Chinese pastors who could understand both Mandarin and the southern dialects spoken in Guangdong. He was thus called upon to serve as a translator between the northern and southern congregations. In 1927, the Society entrusted Ling with a congregation of his own.

Little did they know, the next two decades were a time of almost constant warfare, devastation and destruction. After 1927, descriptions of “Communist robbers” disrupting the mission society’s work pervaded the reports to the home board. In some reports, the Chinese leaders described their congregations as having come under increasing attack from Communists, who almost daily harassed the missionaries by shouting slogans such as “destroy imperialism, down with Christianity.” In 1931, the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists intensified in southern China. And then, of course, came the second Sino-Japanese War. Throughout these tumultuous decades, the Berlin missionaries—faced with their own increasingly disastrous and devastating war in Germany—continued to support the mission in China to the best of their abilities.

Ling professed as much devotion to the mission society as the society did to him. In 1947, after having suffered more than two decades of war, poverty, and distress, Ling wrote a letter to the German missionary home board, beseeching them to send more resources and support to China. In the letter, Ling pleaded:

We desperately need more Western missionaries. Currently there are only two Western missionaries and five missionary sisters in the field, our society's territories cover all of the north-eastern and central area of the Pearl River. Many mission stations and chapels have no Western missionaries, and much of our church property has been vandalized or occupied; many of our congregants no longer have spiritual guidance as a result. Please send five more missionaries to come and support the work.

Three years later, however, Ling publicly retracted his support for his Western missionary friends: Ling was among a group of Christians who signed the "Protestant Manifesto," a document that denounced the foreign missionary enterprise as a "weapon of imperialism" and called for the expulsion of the Western missionary presence from China. The Protestant Manifesto led to the establishment of the state-sponsored Three Self Patriotic Church. Due to his signature, Communist hagiographers claimed him as one of their own after 1949. They referred to him as a patriot, who had, even during his time as a evangelist and pastor for the church, "always supported the work of the Chinese Communist revolution."

How can we make sense of Ling, and others like him, who joined the Three-Self Patriotic Church? Much of the literature on the establishment of the Three-Self Patriotic Church has been surrounded in invective and polemic. To religious conservatives in the West, characters such as Ling were branded as traitors to the global Christian community. They collaborated with the Communists for politically expedient reasons, not spiritual ones: Christians like Ling Deyuan were pressured by the Communists into submission, and therefore betrayed their previous faith for the sake of survival. In this narrative, the true heroes—the authentic Christians—in China were figures such as Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee: they refused to join the Three-Self Patriotic Church and were persecuted and jailed as a result. Much of the literature on indigenous Christianity in China has focused on figures such as these, as these figures are seen as the precursors to the underground church movement that has seen a revival in recent years

Defenders of the Three-Self Patriotic Church see its theology as a sincere religious attempt to grapple with the complexities and difficulties posed by the Sinicization of

Christianity in China. These studies focus primarily on national-level religious leaders, such as Y. T. Wu, K. H. Ting, and T. C. Chao. By examining the roots of the liberal and progressive theology of national leaders in the Patriotic Church, these studies focus on continuity within the ideas of the liberal Chinese Christians. Rather than seeing cooperation with the Communists as a betrayal of authentic Christian belief, these works argue that collaboration was a sincere attempt by Christian theologians to work out the thorny theological question of how to be simultaneously Christian, Chinese, and Communist.

Ling Deyuan fits into neither of these narratives. He did not join the underground church. Nor did he study abroad and immerse himself in the progressive Social Gospel milieu of the divinity schools in the United States and Britain. If we placed the liberal collaborators on one end of the spectrum of conformity to the state and conservative resisters, Ling belonged to the majority of Chinese Christians living between these poles. He was, after all, a mid-level operative, a pastor who had local and regional influence. But Ling's story directs us to the stories of other individuals who were responsible for the things that the missionaries left behind when they were expelled from China: he had to deal with problems from church buildings to the care-taking of individual souls in the congregation. What dominated Ling's thinking was not the question of orthodoxy and correct Christian practice, but how to maintain and sustain a church congregation in the face of troubling economic and political circumstances.

Focusing on a character like Ling Deyuan also points us to the manifold complexities of the history of Christianity in China. Ling's story points us to the revolutionary role that Christianity played in modern China. Without the Berlin missionary society's schools and other institutions, Ling would have never been able to continue with his education. Funding from the Berlin missions helped Ling keep afloat during the devastating decades of the first half of the twentieth century. But association with Christianity placed him in an increasingly precarious position as the forces of nationalism and communism became increasingly antagonistic towards Christianity. Focusing on Christianity's survival draws our attention to the incredible courage, flexibility, and resourcefulness that Chinese Christians like Ling Deyuan possessed.

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