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“Strong Friends in Far East”

The Return of Spoils of War by the GDR to China in 1955

In December 1955 Otto Grotewohl, Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) handed over ten banners of the Boxer movement (Yihéquán) and three volumes of the Yung Lo Encyclopaedia to the Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-lai. The objects had been acquired during the so called “Boxer Uprising”. The flags were spoils of war that had been captured from groups of the Boxer movement, the volumes of the Yung Lo Encyclopaedia originate from the plundering of the Hanlin library in Peking.¹ Grotewohl presented the objects as diplomatic gift on occasion of the first state visit of a GDR delegation to China. In his speech Grotewohl emphasised the long-term relations between China and Germany and focused as well on the history of Western imperialism in China and the Chinese liberation process. Grotewohl dedicated a lengthy passage of his speech to the Chinese resistance against colonialism as represented by the Boxer movement. By pointing out that “German militarists, [...], stole these banners [and] German Socialists, [...] faithful friends and comrades-in-arms of the Chinese people are bringing them back”, Grotewohl dissociated the GDR from the imperialist German past and focused on the uniting elements of international socialist friendship. The Chinese prime minister Chou En-lai received the gifts with gratitude and pointed out in his speech that the Chinese people would try to regain all objects that had been acquired by the colonial powers at the beginning of the 20th century.

The following passages are extracts of the speeches by Otto Grotewohl and Chou En-lai that had been published by the Chinese news agency Hsinhua in 1955. The handover ceremony became part of the documentary “Starke Freunde im Fernen Osten” (Strong Friends in the Far East) directed by Bruno Kleberg in 1956. The film will be screened and discussed at the conference on Wednesday evening, November 17.

¹ Davis, Donald G./ Huanwen, Chen: Destruction of Chinese Books in the Siege of Peking 1900, in: IFLA Journal 23 (1997), 112-116.

Source: Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv, Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, M1-A 12.254, Protokollabteilung. Aufenthalt einer Regierungsdelegation der DDR unter Leitung des Ministerpräsidenten Otto Grotewohl in der Volksrepublik China.

Transcript:

Hsinhua News Agency Release, No. 2230, 11. December 1955

121132 Grotewohl's Speech At Peking Rally: Peking, Dec. 11-The speech by Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl of the German Democratic Republic at the Peking rally in honour of the Government Delegation of the German Democratic Republic follows in full:

Dear Comrade Premier, Dear Comrade Mayor and dear friends and comrades: It is with joy and gratitude that the Government Delegation of the German Democratic Republic accepted the invitation of Your Government and has come to your beautiful and mighty country to return the visit of Comrade Chou En-lai, Premier of the People's Republic of China, to Berlin in 1954. [...] Long-standing traditional relations have existed between our two countries from very early days. These relations have not always been good in the past, German imperialism too, took part in foreign capitalist encroachment on China. However, the revolutionary forces of our two peoples found the way to uninterrupted cooperation for several decades in the international organisations of the militant working class. This is the real root of our friendly relations today which have been established on entirely new foundations as a result of the German people from Hitlerite facism by the glorious Soviet armies and because of the victorious struggle of the Chinese people for liberation from internal and foreign oppression. [...] The Soviet Union which from the outset of its existence has pursued a policy of peace and the reduction of world tensions, is the great example to all nations. Its aim to maintain peace, frustrate war and free people from its terrors and so ensure that nations can work tranquilly and live in peace. The Soviet Union stands in the forefront of the great camp of peace, democracy and socialism which today embraces 900,000,000 people and has become a tremendous world-wide force. Today side by side with the Soviet Union in this great camp are China and the German Democratic Republic. Please allow me in conclusion a few further remarks. In the reign of the Emperor Cheng Tsu of the Ming Dynasty, in the year 1407, China completed one of the greatest encyclopaedias that the world has seen. The remaining copy of this great Chinese encyclopaedia was destroyed in the fire at Han Lin Yuan (College of Literatures) in Peking in 1900. Only one part was saved and it was scattered in all directions. In this way three volumes ended up in the library of the Leipzig University. The Soviet Union has already returned the parts it had in its possession and now please allow us to give you back the three volumes which we had. We highly respect the great militant traditions of the Chinese people in their historic struggle to free themselves from the yoke of the foreign imperialist robbers at the beginning of this century. When towards the end of the 19th century, the imperialists plunged into the fight to divide up the world, they also stretched out their dirty hands to the rich land of the Chinese people. Our great teacher Lenin said of these intrigues of the imperialists that one after another the European governments were so eager to plunder Chinese territory, to get concessions as the called it, that it was not without reason that rumours spread about dividing up China; but they went about this dividing up not openly but in secret, like thieves; they went about the plundering of China like grave robbers. But with burning hatred in their hearts for the imperialist robbers and pillagers filled with boundless love for their country, the patriots of China arose under the slogan "the fist for peace and righteousness" which became known in the whole world as the Boxer Uprising, and launched armed resistance to the imprudent plunder of their country. The imperialists throughout the world sent troops to China to drown the rightful

demands of the people in blood. In this attack, German militarists stole numerous freedom banners of the Chinese insurrectionists and carried them off to Germany as trophies of victory. Among the ten banners that came into our hands after German facism was annihilated by the Soviet army, are the famous banners of the Tau King-huan fortress of the Kuang Chiang Kuen Militiamen, the banner of the "Volunteers of the Tien Hsien Kung Patriotic Association at Shi Mon Chen," and other battle flags of the Chinese fighters for freedom. These honourable tokens of the Chinese people's historic struggle are the property of the Chinese people. These ten banners stolen by German militarists we are therefore handing back to the Chinese people, full of respect for the will to freedom of the Chinese people and in commemoration of the Chinese people's heroes who fell in the Boxer Uprising, accompanied by the fraternal militant greetings of the German Democratic Republic. At the same time we are handing over documented historical notes concerning these banners. German militarists, blood-and-profit sucking enemies of the Chinese people, stole these banners. German Socialists, the grandchildren of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, faithful friends and comrades-in-arms of the Chinese people are bringing them back to you and are placing them in your hands. May the handing back of these banners by the first worker-peasant state in German history strengthen and deepen the friendship between our countries. May it serve to unite us still more closely and firmly in our militant alliance against imperialist incitement of hatred among nations and threats of war. Long live the courageous and glorious Chinese people! Long live the unbreakable friendship between the peoples of Germany and China! Long live Comrade Mao Tse-tung! Long live the government of the People's Republic of China! Long live Comrade Chou En-lai! Yu Hao (Friendship!) end item"

121120 Chou En-lai Thanks Grotewohl: Peking, Dec. 11-Following is the full text of Premier Chou En-lai's speech at the meeting this afternoon welcoming the Government Delegation of the German Democratic Republic.

Respected Comrade Prime Minister, all other comrades of the Delegation, comrades and friends: Prime Minister Grotewohl in the name of the German Socialists, faithful friends and comrades-in-arms of the Chinese people, has just given back to the Chinese people three volumes of the Yung Lo Encyclopaedia and the banners of the Boxers. On behalf of the socialist Chinese people and Government, I express profound thanks to you, respected Comrade Prime Minister, to the Government of the German Democratic Republic and the German people. [...] For more than a hundred years in the past the Chinese people were suffering from severe imperialist aggression, oppression, pillage and slaughter. During this period, the Chinese people, in order to achieve their national freedom and independence, were continuously and heroically fighting against imperialist aggression and feudal oppression. The Boxers' movement in 1900 was a manifestation of the Chinese people's tenacious resistance to imperialist aggression. Their gallant struggle was the foundation stone for the great victory achieved by the Chinese people 50 years later. The Chinese people treasure highly the history and relics of the glorious struggle of their forefathers. That's why we accept this noble gift of great friendship with our hearts full of tributes. The Chinese people have many historical legacies now still exhibited as "trophies" in the museums of many a western country [sic]. Moreover, the Chinese people can never forget that up till today imperialist countries are still occupying part of China's territory. Chinese historical relics were stolen from China by imperialist gangsters are still being kept at the museums of western countries. China's territory Taiwan is still being occupied imperialism. The Chinese people firmly believe that there must be a day when these so-called "trophies" will be eventually returned to their own fatherland. [...]"

Further reading:

Rede des Ministerpräsidenten Otto Grotewohl auf der Massenkundgebung in Peking, 11.12.1955, publiziert in: Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990. Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung, hg. v. Werner Meißner u. Anja Feege, Berlin 1995, p. 78f.

Holger Stöcker: "... schweigend umgehen". Zum Umgang der DDR mit Forderungen nach Rückgabe von Museumsobjekten kolonialer Provenienz, in: Cladders, Lukas; Kratz-Kessemeier, Kristina; Bernau, Nikolaus (Hg.): Museen in der DDR. Akteure - Orte - Politik, Böhlau 2021 (in print)