

# **THE WILDERS OF NORTH CHINA: THE FIRST 20 YEARS**

**Historical Background and Summaries of  
the Wilder Letters, from 1894 to 1914**

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The following pages were originally written as brief introductions to the Wilder Letters, grouped in approximately five-year intervals. Together, they provide an overview of both the historical background and the contents of the Wilders' own descriptions of their first two decades in China, their adopted homeland.

Donald Wilder Menzi, 2004



## 1. 1894 to 1900

### Historical Background

War between China and Japan breaks out just days before George Wilder departs from the U.S. for a lifetime of work and adventure half-way around the world. Within a few months China's humiliating defeat demonstrates the country's military weakness and during the next five years the foreign powers seize more Chinese territory and extract more concessions than during the preceding five decades.

- Japan annexes the island of Formosa (Taiwan) and gains control of Korea and eastern Manchuria, in addition to obtaining \$280 million (in 1895 dollars) in indemnity payments;
- Russia acquires a long-sought ice-free seaport at Port Arthur/Dalian, and the right to build a rail line connecting it to the Trans-Siberian Railway;
- Great Britain expands its Hong Kong colony onto the mainland under a 99-year lease, obtains a fortified naval base at Weihaiwei, and is assured that the Chief of China's Customs Bureau will always be a British subject;
- France extends its influence from Indochina (Viet Nam) into China's southern provinces, with rights to build railroads and construct a naval base on Chinese soil;
- Germany uses the pretext of the murder of two German Catholic missionaries to land troops and establish a naval base in Kiao-chow Bay (today's Qingdao) along with the right to build railroads in Shantung province;
- Eleven new "open ports" are added to the 34 already in existence, the foreign-controlled "concession" districts in Shanghai, Tientsin and Hankow are enlarged, and foreign gunboats are granted the right to patrol China's inland waterways;
- Foreign railway concessions include control of hiring, a share in the revenues, and the right to develop mines and mineral quarries along either side of the railroads' right of way;
- The loans made by foreign banks to pay post-war indemnities and to build railroads are guaranteed by foreign control of customs revenues and foreign administration of the imperial tax on salt (the "salt gabelle").

As the other powers extract more and more concessions from the almost defenseless Chinese, the Americans – preoccupied by their conquest of Spain’s colonies and suppression of Philippine resistance to U.S. occupation – persuade them to honor an “open door” policy in which all of the foreign powers (including the U.S.) are given a fair share in whatever concessions are wrung from China by any one them.

Chinese reaction to the upsurge in foreign encroachments takes several different forms. A movement aimed at modernizing many aspects of China’s political, economic, and educational systems culminates in 1898 in a series of edicts by the young Emperor Kiang-hsu, nephew of the officially-retired Empress Dowager Tzu-hsi. This top-down experiment, later known as the “Hundred Days of 1898,” ends in a coup in which the Empress Dowager takes back power, locks up the Emperor, repeals most of his edicts and has the leading reformers beheaded.

A more immediately practical movement aimed at restructuring and modernizing key units of the army is led by an ambitious young commander named Yuan Shih-kai (1859 – 1916). Meanwhile, the charismatic revolutionary Sun Yat-sen arouses support among overseas Chinese for the forcible overthrow of the Empire and the establishment of a republic.

Within China, popular anger and antagonism to foreigners is widespread due to a number of factors:

- Increased Imports of cotton are ruining the market for home-spun cloth;
- Steam boats and railroads are destroying the livelihood of boatmen, porters, and inn-keepers along the old internal trade routes;
- Prices for exported tea are falling due to increased competition from new plantations in India, Ceylon and Java;
- increased taxes on peasants and small land-owners are required to pay both for the war and for post-war indemnities;
- marauding armies have caused widespread devastation in the countryside;
- A series of floods and droughts have brought famine and economic hardship to many areas.

Anti-foreign resentment is especially intense after the German seizure of territory for naval bases and railroads in Shantung province, which proves to be

fertile ground for a movement led by a secret society known as the Righteous and Harmonious Fists (called “Boxers” by foreigners). The Boxer movement, which aims at killing or expelling all foreigners, beginning with the missionaries and their converts, is suppressed in Shantung province after the powers persuade the Empress Dowager to appoint Yuan Shih-kai as governor. Boxer bands, defeated in Shantung, move north into the next-door province of Chihli, surrounding Peking. When the Empress Dowager’s advisors persuade her that the foreign troops that have captured the Chinese forts south of Tientsin intend to depose her and restore her nephew to power, she shifts her support to the Boxers and declares war on the invading foreigners.

The Boxer siege of the foreign legations in Peking is relieved by the joint efforts of six foreign armies – Japanese, German, French, Russian, American and British. Their brutality, including massacres of civilians, rape, looting and “punitive expeditions” in which whole villages are burned to the ground, is criticized by the foreign press as even worse than the Boxers’.

### **The Wilder Letters**

George Wilder’s first letter after arriving as a Congregational missionary in China tells of his “falling in love with the Chinese people,” a mutual love affair that lasted his whole lifetime.

George Wilder’s mother, Frances Wilder, who accompanied him to China, provides a detailed account of her son’s wedding to another life-long love, Gertrude Stanley, daughter of veteran missionary to Tientsin, Charles Stanley.

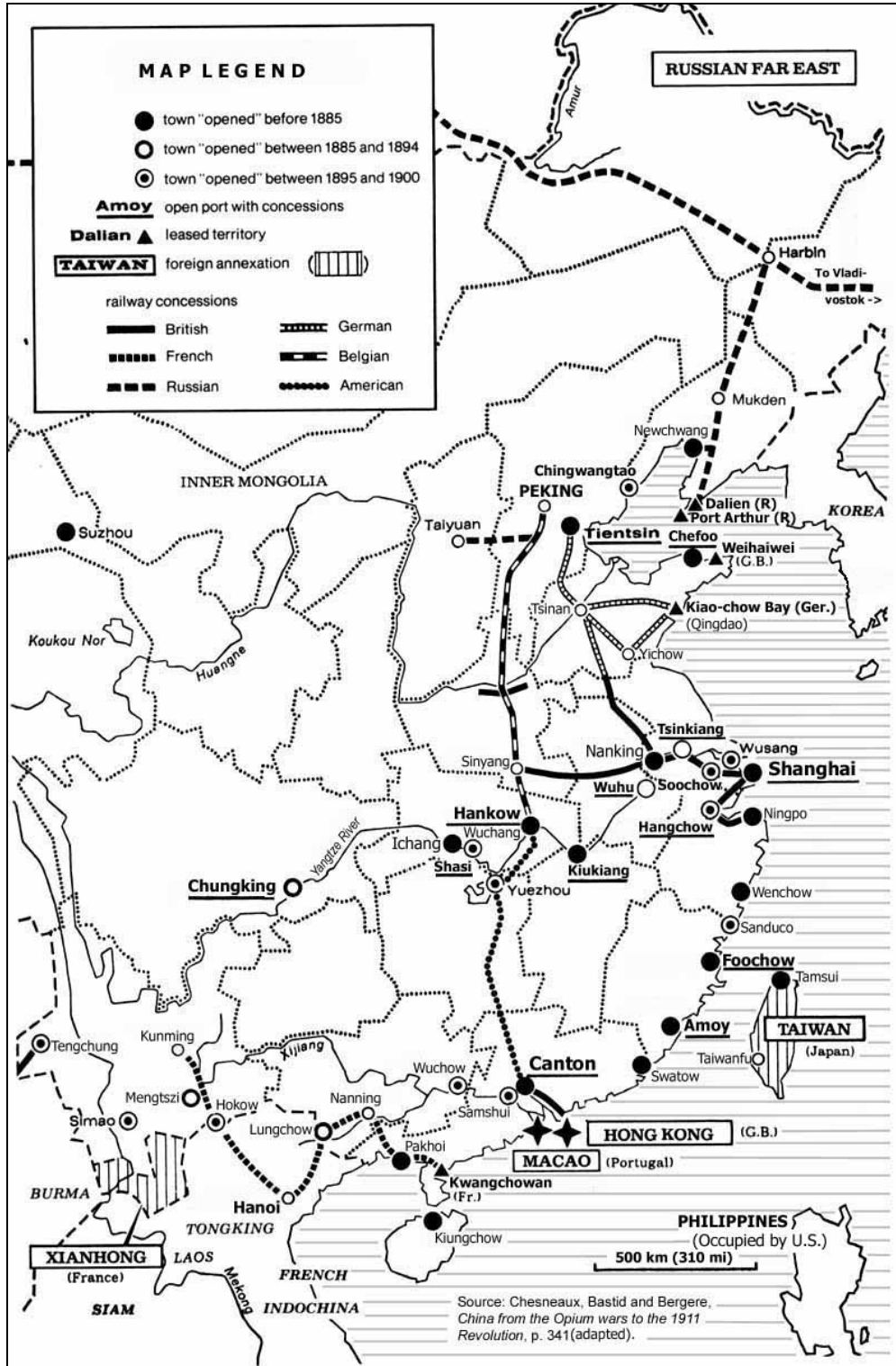
The attempted murder of another old-timer, D. Z. Sheffield, would later become the source of the Wilder-family legend of Dr. Sheffield’s forgiveness and his attacker’s repentance and conversion, a too-good-to-be-true story proved by contemporary newspaper sources to be the opposite of the truth.

Descriptions of an attack of typhoid fever and a tour of the rural village congregations under his care give us a glimpse both of the perils and pleasures of George Wilder’s work in his new homeland.

Three weeks of old-fashioned revival meetings among Chinese Christians will later be interpreted as having provided them with spiritual strengthening in preparation for the disaster that will soon overwhelm them when the Boxer movement engulfs the Peking-Tientsin-Paoting triangle. Both the Boxers’ siege of the Peking legations and the lawlessness of the foreign troops in its aftermath are described in George Wilder’s letters. A decade later he would recall that thousands of Peking women had committed suicide in order to escape the victorious Allied soldiers. In the villages he visits he reports that “the people have a hunted look and the fear of us foreigners is upon them. It is a pleasure to see

the look of relief that passes over them when one speaks in their own tongue and they see they have nothing to fear.”

### FOREIGN PENETRATION INTO CHINA BY 1900



## A BOXER POSTER



The original of this poster, found in a Manchu palace in Peking, gives a Chinese view of foreigners and their relation to China.

Arthur H. Smith, *China in Convulsion* , (1901), frontispiece.

## 2. 1901 to 1904

### Historical Background

The Boxers remain active in the North China countryside despite “punitive expeditions” by the allied armies, who are criticized in editorials for their barbaric “outrages in the name of civilization.” Although a few Chinese military units support the Boxers’ re-emergence, Yuan Shih-kai’s promotion to governor of Chihli Province is a sign that the government will not give them official support.

Reform edicts issued by the reinstated Empress Dowager appear to move the country in the direction advocated by the reformers whom she had executed in 1898, but are partially offset by the arrest and beating to death of a Shanghai newspaper editor in a crackdown on current dissidents.

Floods and famine again cause great distress, spawning sporadic revolts, while Sun Yat-sen continues to advocate from afar the overthrow of the Empire and creation of a republic as the solution to China's troubles.

The trickery of the Belgians, who had acted as a front to disguise French and Russian interests in building the Peking-Hankow railway, is exposed.

### **The Wilder Letters**

George Wilder describes the semi-anarchic state of the bandit-infested countryside, as he and other missionaries struggle to re-open their village congregations, many of which were practically exterminated by the Boxers. Among the new houses built in the American Board's Tungchou compound is the Wilder's own, which will later be known as "Wisteria Lodge" for the wisteria vines surrounding the entrance.

An inter-denominational "union" movement is begun, as the four main Protestant denominations in the Peking-Tungchou field – Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, and London Missionary Society – form plans to merge their educational institutions into a single Peking University.

George Wilder's own work shifts from country village evangelism to instructing Chinese students in the practical aspects of the ministry at the American Board's Tungchou seminary and teaching the Chinese language to newly-arrived foreigners at The Language School, later to be re-named The College for Chinese Studies. (Howard Galt, who will become a life-long colleague, friend and tennis partner, arrives at The Language School in 1901.) His friendship with General Ma, the commander of the Chinese troops stationed around Tungchou, signals his life-long ease among all classes of people, Chinese and foreign.

The first decade of the Wilders' life in China concludes with him acting as the official translator for the International Monetary Commission investigating economic conditions in the interior provinces. His fascinating series of articles as a correspondent for *The North China Herald* describes the Commission's expedition down the Peking-Hankow Railroad, still under construction in 1904.

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### 3. 1904 to 1909

#### Historical Background

The years from 1904 to 1909 seem relatively calm in China, but only on the surface and in comparison to the previous period (the Boxer Rebellion) and what would soon follow (the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty).

To the north, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) produces the first military defeat of a western power by Asians, enabling Japan to tighten its grip on Korea and expand further into eastern Manchuria, another step in what would eventually become an attempt to conquer all of East Asia.

The Chinese government continues to institute a number of modernizing reforms, especially in the fields of military training and public education. New elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools, capped by provincial universities and the national university in Peking, introduce “western” subjects into the official curriculum. Many students are also sent to school in Europe, America and especially Japan. Provincial military academies begin producing a new, young officer corps who are, however, loyal to their provincial commanders, rather than to the central government. Yuan Shih-kai, who had been particularly effective in establishing a modern army in Chihli province, is appointed Commander-in-Chief of the New Army, making him one of the most powerful officials in the empire.

The death in 1908 of both the titular Emperor and the Empress Dowager Tzu-hsi, and the enthronement of her grand-nephew Pu-yi, brings an end to the push for reforms when the child-emperor’s father, as Prince Regent, surrounds himself with conservative Manchu nobles intent on preserving their privileged status under the old order. In their attempt to assure Manchu control of all the important government ministries they dismiss Yuan Shih-kai, claiming it is due to his poor health.

Responding to an increasing number of anti-Manchu riots and other signs of growing rebellion – secretly abetted by Japanese-supplied arms – the Court agrees to create a constitutional commission and to establish elected provincial consultative assemblies as first steps in a reform process that is supposed to lead gradually over a 10-year period to a constitutional monarchy modeled after those of Japan and Germany.

## **The Wilder Letters**

The American Board granted its missionaries a year-long “furlough” in the U.S. about once every seven to ten years. The Wilders leave China in August, 1904 for their temporary home in Oberlin, Ohio, returning to China the following September. While in Ohio, George’s mother, Frances, is invited to give the keynote address to the annual reunion of the alumni of Geauga Seminary, a small institution that she had once headed. Her address provides us with a sympathetic foreigner’s views on “China and the Chinese” in the last years of the Empire.

After Judson Smith retires as Foreign Secretary of the American Board in 1906, George Wilder writes less frequently to “the Rooms” in Boston. In his few letters to the new Secretary, he notes a decline in the evangelistic spirit within the Chinese church compared to what he had found when he arrived over a decade previously, and cites suspicions among some of the Chinese Christians – later proved to be unfounded – that the foreign missionaries were misusing funds intended for widows and children orphaned by the Boxers. Partly for this reason, a religious revival in 1908 – led by the aptly-named Reverend Goforth – lacks the fervor and depth of the revival of 1899.

Many years later, two of the four Wilder children – Ursula and Durand – wrote about what it was like as children growing up in the American Board’s Tungchou mission compound during these years. Part 3 of “The Wilders of North China” begins with their accounts.

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### **4. 1910 to 1914**

#### **Historical Background**

The new decade begins with an acceleration of anti-government and anti-foreign riots in China’s southern provinces, highlighted by protests against price-gouging by corrupt officials trying to corner the rice market during a time of acute famine in that region.

Meanwhile, the provincial assemblies created by the central government as purely advisory bodies begin to demand a real national parliament, and some leading men publicly cut off their queues – the braided “pig-tails” imposed by the

Manchus as a mark of Chinese subservience – as a symbolic act of rebellion against the ruling dynasty.

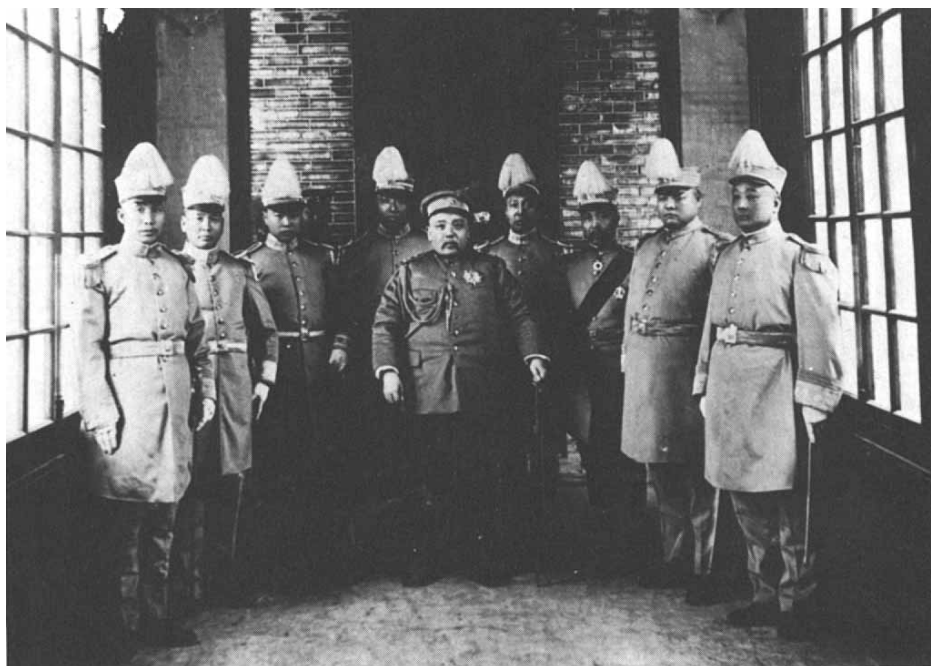
In October, 1911, the arrest and execution of a group of anti-Manchu conspirators triggers a mutiny among New Army troops in the Wuchang garrison. A series of victories over imperial troops leads to the declaration of a Republic by the rebels and the convening of a National Convention in Shanghai. Massacres of defenseless Manchus by the rebels are matched by the slaughter of unarmed civilians by imperial troops.

Military defeats persuade the Court to recall Yuan Shih-kai, who is now made the Premier of the Empire and asked to negotiate a compromise with the nascent republican leadership.

When the perennial rebel Sun Yat-sen arrives in Shanghai to address the new Republican parliament, it chooses him as the first President of the Chinese Republic, which now encompasses the provinces south of the Yangtze River. Lacking any real military base, Sun voluntarily resigns the presidency in favor of Yuan Shih-kai who, supported by the military commanders of the northern provinces, is made President of a unified Republic of China with its provisional capital in Nanking. As part of the agreement negotiated by Yuan, the safety and property of the Imperial household, including the child-emperor Pu-yi, are guaranteed. Yuan Shih-kai does not, however, wish to leave his northern base for Nanking, and his own troops in Peking mutiny, thereby demonstrating the need for him to remain in Peking to maintain order.

The continuing conflict between Yuan and Parliament is ultimately resolved in Yuan's favor when his leading political opponent is assassinated, dissident generals are executed and over 300 members of the opposition Kuomintang party are expelled from Parliament. Yuan re-appoints cabinet ministers who had previously served under the Manchus, dissolves Parliament, dismisses the provincial assemblies and has the national constitution re-written to give him absolute power, moves made possible by the continuing personal loyalty to him of the provincial military commanders.

The new Republic of China under the dictatorship of Yuan Shih-kai is nothing like the vision of freedom, democracy and socialism preached for years from exile by Sun Yat-sen. Yuan's critics are silenced in a wave of repression but opposition continues in the southernmost provinces, especially in Canton, where it is never fully subdued.



### **Yuan Shih-kai with his Bodyguards**

(Source: United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, in Johnathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, following p. 228.)

### **The Wilder Letters**

We have no letters from 1910, but the departure in 1911 of both Wilder boys – Theodore and Durand – for boarding school at Chefoo on the coast of Shantung Province marks the beginning of a period of almost weekly correspondence, not only from their father, but also from their mother and grandmother. As a result, we have a rich trove of letters describing for the boys the political events of the day as seen from Peking, as well as many notes of personal interest to them. Through their elders' eyes we witness the progress of the anti-Manchu rebellion, preparations for neighborhood defense and the creation of places of refuge for women and children, culminating in the actual looting and burning of the city by Yuan Shih-kai's soldiers. On the personal side, it is undoubtedly due to the boys' interest in athletics that we hear of their father's own love of tennis and baseball.

In George Wilder's less and less frequent letters to the American Board, he analyzes the reasons for the continuing decline in interest in the Christian ministry among Chinese college students. We also learn in passing that his professional responsibilities have increased. He is now a member of the Board of Directors both of the Peking Union Medical College (P.U.M.C.) and of the foreign mission-sponsored Peking University. He is put in charge of The Language School for a year and is asked to assume the position of Evangelistic

Secretary for the whole of China by an international association of Protestant churches. He declines this position in order to remain in Peking and continue his work with prospective Chinese pastors at the seminary and university.

A grateful letter-writer reveals George Wilder's role in bringing modern bee-keeping methods and equipment to North China.

The 1910 - 14 period closes with "Party Passports," an entertaining description of a 14-day, 1,500 mile journey on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, as narrated by a different member of the traveling party each day.

By the time the Wilder family arrives in the U.S. in August, 1914, war has erupted in Europe, a global tragedy that will forever change the world, both for the Wilders and for the whole of mankind.

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