

China

By [Klaus Mühlhahn](#)

Summary

This article discusses China's role in the First World War with a focus on the country's contribution to the war and the role of the war in shaping Chinese development and its place in the world. Contrary to common knowledge, China was not only involved in various aspects of the war, but the war also had a significant impact on China. The war period, therefore, marks a turning point for the country: the crises challenged China to define where it stood in the world and how to embark on a political and cultural revival.

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Introduction

The First World War was a global war, but its greatest impact concerned the internal politics and the social order of the participating states. To work out the significance of the Great War for China, a broader [historiographical](#) approach is needed that above all takes into account the domestic political, social, and cultural contexts, in addition to the diplomatic and military developments. Although China was hardly involved in the conflict militarily and diplomatically, the First World War nonetheless represents a major turning point for the country. The direct and indirect consequences of the war fundamentally changed both China's position in international politics as well as its domestic political and social conditions.

Chinese Foreign Policy and the Great War

The Chinese response to the First World War has a history that goes back to the so-called long 19th century. China's involvement in the First World War is essentially a long-term consequence of the expansionist policy of European [imperialism](#). Beginning in 1840, the increased rivalry between the great powers in the struggle over spheres of influence and strongholds in Asia brought China onto the stage of European power politics. The forced opening of China through the Opium Wars (1840 and 1860), the establishment of foreign spheres of influence in prosperous Chinese provinces, the surrendering of colonial bases (Hong Kong, Qingdao, Port Arthur) and extraterritorial foreign settlements and concessions (Shanghai, Hankou, Tianjin) were violently pushed through despite Chinese resistance. The war China lost against [Japan](#) (1895) compelled it to pay high reparations and to cede large territories such as [Taiwan](#). Following the suppression of the Boxer Rebellions in 1900/1901, China was not only forced to pay additional high reparations, but had to accept the capital's brief occupation and the presence of foreign troops. The political and economic expansion of the great powers revealed the fundamental weakness of the Qing Empire (1644-1911). Among Chinese intellectuals and the political leadership a consciousness of crisis predominated. By themselves, the overthrow of the monarchy in 1911 and [Sun Yatsen's](#) proclamation of the republic were unable to solve any of China's pressing internal and external problems.

Foreign Imperialism on the China Coast

China, furthermore, became involved in the world war as a country that was still informally dominated from abroad. On the eve of the First World War, several foreign powers pursued their interests in China. There was the ongoing [alliance](#) (ratified in 1902) between Japan and [England](#), whose terms further involved [France](#) and [Russia](#). Next, there was [Germany](#), whose social order was held aloft as a model for China in the final years of the Qing dynasty. Finally, there was the [USA](#), which pursued an open-door policy. It sought to cooperate with China, while distancing itself from the major imperialist powers.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance made it possible for Japan to conduct an expansionist policy vis-à-vis China, which chiefly focused on the natural resources in Manchuria.

Qingdao under German Rule and the Origins of the Shandong Question

Germany's ambitious plan to establish a model German colony in China was also part of the struggle of industrial countries to establish economic spheres of influence in areas of the globe outside of Europe. The military occupation of the Bay of Jiaozhou (Kiautschou)¹ in 1897

laid its foundation.² In 1898, [Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany \(1859-1941\)](#) declared the port city of Qingdao a German colony. It was then rebuilt according to German standards. A complete German system of administration was established. Public institutions such as banks, consulates, and schools were also built. The new upper class from Germany naturally required that German-style villas ought to be constructed as well. Qingdao's architectural design attests to the efforts that were made to develop a specific German colonial style. The intention of the colonial authorities was to realize and implement from the drawing board an exemplary city layout that was clear, clean, and hygienic. Stress was placed on ostentation. The "model colony" (*Musterkolonie*) needed to flaunt technological progress and liberality.

The dominant ideology of racism significantly influenced the day-to-day relations between the German and Chinese populations in two ways. First, the conviction predominated among the colonial masters that a geographic coexistence of different races should be rejected for eugenic reasons. Second, it was considered necessary to achieve the unequivocal subordination of the Chinese population. The colonial system in Kiautschou, therefore, differentiated between the Chinese and European populations in a fundamental, but also spatial, way.

Chinese were initially prohibited from living within the European part of Qingdao. In 1905, however, the separation of the different populations was gradually eased and, by the end of the colony's existence, individual Chinese requesting permission were allowed to settle in the European part.³ In Qingdao's business district of Dabaodao, Europeans and Chinese lived side-by-side from the start, and the restrictive "*Chinesenordnung*" of 1900, which forbade Chinese to live in the German districts, was attenuated over time. Indeed, recent research shows that even within the relatively short time span of the German colonial presence in Qingdao a transition took place from exclusionist to inclusive policies, which George Steinmetz dates to 1897-1904 and 1905-1914, respectively.

There was also a different legal system for the Chinese population, which mainly rested on traditional Chinese law with regard to enacting forms of punishment.

After the completion of the railway line between Qingdao and Jinan, the capital of Shandong Province, and the construction of Qingdao's port in the winter of 1904/1905, the colony's economy began to thrive. By 1914, Qingdao was the most important trading port in northern China. The colony attracted many Chinese workers and businessmen. Around this time, about 200,000 people inhabited the concession, of which approximately 53,000 Chinese and 2,000 Europeans lived directly in Qingdao.⁴

The Outbreak of the War in East Asia

The declarations of war in Europe at the end of July 1914 brought military conflicts at once to Chinese territory. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the [Chinese government](#) made a statement on 6 August 1914, proclaiming China's [neutrality](#) and prohibiting the warring states from undertaking military operations on Chinese soil. Initially, the perception prevailed that the First World War was essentially a conflict between imperialists over colonies and world supremacy. China was therefore expected to remain neutral as a partially colonized country.

Japan took advantage of the circumstances resulting from the developments in Europe to exercise its plans for another violent advance into China. On 15 August 1914, Japan issued an ultimatum to the German Reich that its colony in Kiautschou had to be unconditionally vacated by 15 September. Japan declared war on the German Reich on 23 August. A few days later, Japanese and English ships started a naval blockade against Kiautschou. The first Japanese units landed near Longkou in September and then went from there to Kiautschou. Two weeks later, on 17 September, fighting erupted along the border of the protected area. On 7 November 1914, fort commander [Alfred Meyer-Waldeck \(1864-1928\)](#) surrendered. On the German side, there were 224 dead and 400 injured. According to German sources, Japanese casualties totaled 12,000 men. The surviving occupational troops were taken into Japanese captivity. Some were not released until after the [Treaty of Versailles](#) in 1919.

China initially protested against the [Japanese warfare](#) on Chinese soil in the fighting around Qingdao. However, given that the Japanese attack that was essentially already under way, President [Yuan Shikai](#), who was in office from 1912 to 1916, had little choice but to permit Japan's military actions against Qingdao. The fighting surrounding the [seizure of Kiautschou](#) would constitute the only acts of war on Chinese territory during the First World War.⁵

The major European powers were completely preoccupied with the war in Europe. This gave Japan the opportunity to make good on its aim to turn Manchuria and North China into a de facto Japanese protectorate. On 8 January 1915, the [Japanese government](#) issued to China the so-called "[Twenty-One Demands](#)," which imposed political demands and considerable economic privileges for Japan, especially in Manchuria and Mongolia, as well as the lower reaches of Yangtze River and in the province of Fujian. In addition, the central government was to be put under Japanese control. Japan presented a shortened list on 8 May. Following a Japanese ultimatum, Yuan Shikai reluctantly gave into their demands on 25 May 1915. In his negotiations with the Japanese, he was able to achieve only minor concessions.⁶ The resulting public protests against this abdication of Chinese sovereignty weakened Yuan Shikai's government. 9 May was later declared a "day of national humiliation" that was then

commemorated annually.⁷ In the eyes of Chinese nationalists, this particular day marked a historic low. For the first time, a significant part Chinese mainland had been put under foreign rule.

China's Entry into the War

China's announcement of its neutrality in the First World War in February 1917 was due in no small measure to pressure from foreign powers. After the German declaration of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) on 1 February 1917,⁸ the United States demanded that other neutral powers, including China, follow their lead by likewise rupturing ties with the German Reich. Although Japan had previously rejected such a move, it changed its position on this issue, partly because of English pressure, and partly because of assurances from several Allied powers that it would be able to retain its privileges in northern China after the war. Further figuring into China's decision to sever relations with Germany and enter into the war was Japan's promise to extend much needed loans (the so-called [Nishihara loans](#)) to the government of [Duan Qirui](#), which had been in power since 1916. All the same, apart from Duan Qirui, there was generally no stomach for taking a stand in the war against Germany.⁹

A momentous event, however, led to a change in China's position: The sinking of a ship with [Chinese workers](#), en route to France, by a German U-boat became known at end of February 1917. The ship was the "Athos I," a steamship of the French shipping company Messageries Maritimes that had been put into service in 1915 and served as a troop carrier during the war. On 28 November 1915, it was put to sea for the first time on a voyage to China. The vessel was then torpedoed at 12:27 p.m. on 17 February 1917, 180 nautical miles south-east of Malta, from a distance of 1,000 to 1,200 meters, by the German submarine U 65. On board, there was a total of 1,950 people, including 900 Chinese workers, a large contingent of [Senegalese soldiers](#), along with civilian passengers. The ship sank at a near vertical angle within fourteen minutes. The captain, 112 crew members and 642 soldiers and workers and passengers (including 543 Chinese) were killed, a total of 754 people. The "Athos I" was the biggest ship ever to have been sunk by U 65. Germany's breach of [international law](#) through its unrestricted submarine warfare damaged the positive image of the country that had otherwise existed in China. At the same time, the attack was an unjustified act of aggression. In March 1917, China broke off its diplomatic ties with Germany. Germans, however, still continued to largely enjoy free movement in China.

Over the pending question of China's entry into the war, an intense debate was ignited that involved almost every influential personality.¹⁰ It constituted an unprecedented episode in Chinese history, for never before had China taken an active role in a global event being

played out far away from its own national borders. By participating in the war, the government hoped to regain its sovereign rights to Shandong in the event of a German defeat. Similar pragmatic political arguments were also put forth by prominent conservative representatives of the National Assembly like [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#). Liang criticized the German [militarism](#) and considered a German victory to be impossible. In order to improve its international standing, he argued that China should aspire to align itself with the presumptive victors of the war. In contrast, Sun Yatsen and President [Li Yuanhong \(1864-1928\)](#) spoke out against China's entry into the First World War on the side of the Allied powers. Sun Yatsen assigned the question of entering the war enormous significance, estimating it to be an "existential issue for China" (this was in fact the title of a brochure he published in 1917). He further saw Germany as a potential future ally, especially with regard to England and Russia. Germany, he observed, had actually inflicted the least harm on China in the past. English and Russian imperialism, on the other hand, was the country's greatest threat. Sun Yatsen also argued on moral grounds, remarking that while participating on the side of the imperialists might promise "material gain," it would not compensate for the "spiritual loss." China thus needed to keep its neutrality. Due to the ongoing domestic political resistance, Duan Qirui did not succeed in pushing through the declaration of war against Germany in the National Assembly until August 1917. In total, Japan awarded his government loans amounting to 72.5 million US dollars. Members in the National Assembly, who belonged to the Nationalist Party and opposed the declaration of war against Germany, subsequently gathered in August 1917 in Canton and chose Sun Yatsen to be generalissimo of a military government. The gap between Duan Qirui in the north and the military government in the south only deepened further when Duan Qirui signed a top-secret agreement with Japan in May 1918 that allowed for close military cooperation between the two countries in northern China against Russian Bolshevism. In the settlement of the peace accord between Russia and the Central powers ([Brest Litovsk](#), 3 March 1918), Japan witnessed the foundation of a Russo-German alliance. The Duan government, for its part, feared that the [Russian Revolution](#) would spill over into northern China. In fact, Sun Yatsen in Canton for a time hoped that Russian-German troop contingents would be deployed against Duan Qirui in the north.^{[11](#)}

Repercussions for Chinese Society

The issue of China's entry into the war now figured into the domestic debate as a way of eliciting foreign support for one's own position of power. Domestic and foreign policy therefore can hardly be separated. Other, far-reaching social developments in China were affected by the world war as well. Indeed, the results of the conflict seemed to have a catalytic effect on the formation of a proletariat, a national bourgeoisie, and a political intelligentsia.

Chinese Workers in Europe

China's contribution to the war in Europe consisted in its deployment of workers to Western Europe and Russia. This, too, was an event without parallel in Chinese history, as the Qing dynasty had long attempted to keep the Chinese from going abroad. It was not until the mid-19th century that the government began to change its policy and allow emigration.

Beginning already in the summer of 1916, negotiations were carried out with France and England regarding the deployment of Chinese workers. Chinese officials hoped that the workers in Western Europe would learn valuable technical skills. Above all, the progressive social and intellectual elite of China, e.g. [Li Shizeng \(1881-1973\)](#), [Cai Yuanpei \(1868-1940\)](#), [Yan Yangchu \(1890-1990\)](#), also known as James Yen, [Wang Jingwei \(1883-1944\)](#), [Wu Zhihui \(1865-1953\)](#) was involved in planning the migration of Chinese workers to Europe. They harbored the hope that the workers would not only enhance their knowledge and skills by living in the West, but also widen their horizons and consciousness. As a consequence, they would be able to contribute to the reform of Chinese society and thus to the formation of a new national identity. In short, "working was the means and learning was the end."¹²

With the consent of the authorities, recruitment centers were set up in Tianjin, Pukou, Qingdao, Weihaiwei (Brit.), as well as in the French settlement in Shanghai. Overall, the UK recruited about 100,000 workers, France 35,000 workers, and Russia 50,000 workers. The workers from northern China (mainly Shandong) were not meant to serve as combatants in any campaign, but to provide the Western troops with necessary additional personnel. In turn, this would allow the Allies to continue fighting ("laborers in the place of soldiers").¹³ They were active behind the front, but quite close nonetheless to the combat. The workers' tasks consisted in unloading military goods in ports and stations, digging trenches, constructing barracks and field hospitals, burying victims of war, and working in [armament factories](#). They worked seven days a week, ten hours a day. Their activity was also not free of danger. Although the Chinese were assured they would not have to work while under fire, they were actually deployed in or near military combat zones. In France alone, approximately 2,000 workers were killed. China would eventually mourn around 3,000 victims in total.

There was a high number of Chinese workers on the front. They were employed behind the trenches in the west in France and [Belgium](#), as well as in [paramilitary](#) units in the east, especially in Russia.¹⁴

Frequently, however, the Chinese workers and soldiers were not treated with the same respect nor did they receive the same recognition for their achievements and sacrifices as

the Europeans. In general, the workers who were sent to France were better off than those who were sent to England or Russia. They received higher wages and had more freedom and rights than the Chinese in England, who were shut up in a camp after work.

Members of the Chinese [YMCA](#) under the leadership of James Yen and overseas Chinese students supervised the workers. General education and writing skills were taught in evening courses and entertainment programs were presented. From 1918, a magazine was published for the workers. Approximately 50,000 letters were sent each month from France to China, where they were read out loud in the villages. Eventually, the working class developed a political and national consciousness, a new patriotic attitude, and a new outlook on the world order. Repatriation took place from 1920 to 1922. With their worldliness, knowledge and skills, political awareness and savings, the workers back in China became the backbone of an emerging, if numerically small, Chinese proletariat and contributed to raising awareness among their compatriots. To sum up, by deploying workers China not only made a contribution to the Allies, but it also helped bring about domestic reform.¹⁵

Economic and Social Development

The First World War even had an impact on China in economic terms. The return of the great powers to Europe and the war-related decline in European imports (tied to more expensive freight rates) opened up important opportunities to Chinese merchants and entrepreneurs, which they exploited to establish of their own industries and businesses. The rise in silver prices also increased the profitability of Chinese enterprises. The rising demand for [raw materials](#) and foodstuffs triggered by the war further contributed to the rapidly growing share of Chinese products in international trade. The world war thus led to a reduction of the economic effects of imperialism and ushered in new prospects for the Chinese [economy](#). The lack of European capital flows was offset by US financial institutions. The United States was consequently able to greatly increase its share of Chinese trade, which was around 20 percent at war's end. The economic recovery (13.8 percent p.a.) – which began with the war and did not deteriorate significantly, even despite the global economic crisis in the 1920s – had social ramifications. Within a few years, a Chinese bourgeoisie that was active in the modern sectors of the economy took root in the [urban centers](#) on the coast.¹⁶ The members of this class sought autonomy from foreign powers, while self-assuredly demanding a greater say in political decision-making domestically.

The War and the May Fourth Movement

The radical changes that emerged out of these social processes in politics and culture were unmistakable in 1918/1919. When Germany declared its surrender on 11 November 1918,

expectations were high in China. In Peking, there were celebratory parades and the triumphal arch, which commemorated the murder of the German envoy [Clemens von Ketteler \(1853-1900\)](#) during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, was destroyed. A Chinese delegation, led by five prestigious diplomats, was sent to the [peace conference](#) in Versailles, which China participated in as a victorious power. At the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of April 1919, delegations from England, [Italy](#), and France ratified the terms of their previous understanding with Japan. The [Japanese were awarded Shandong](#), which had been occupied by the Japanese during the war and was formerly part of the German sphere of influence, and the German concession Kiautschou (Qingdao). The country's prerogatives in China were also affirmed. The Chinese public became enraged when this development was announced. The delegation was overwhelmed by numerous petitions and appeals. On 1 May 1919, it further came to light that the Chinese delegates had no hope for resolving the situation and had given up opposing the resolution. In France, Chinese workers and students prevented the delegation from leaving its hotel.

On the morning of 4 May, representatives from various universities and high schools assembled in Peking and jointly adopted a resolution. An appeal was made for a nationwide protest against the Shandong decision made at the Versailles Peace Conference.¹⁷ A demonstration was held that same afternoon, despite a police ban. Even later, there continued to be nationwide demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts. Today, the general wave of protest is referred to as the [May Fourth Movement](#).

Students and young intellectuals publicly discussed the question of national identity, science and democracy, social issues and the political situation, individualism and enlightenment, the importance of their own cultural traditions, and China's standing in the international world order. During this period of intellectual discovery and reorientation, the writings of [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#) and [Zhang Junmai \(1886-1969\)](#) on the destruction and devastation that the war had caused in Europe were highly prized. They combined with their reporting a fundamental critique of the cultural values of Western European societies. The implied departure from the European model coincided with an awareness of the Russian Revolution. The latter suggested an alternative path of development that transcended imperialism and militarism. Already in December 1918, [Li Dazhao \(1888-1927\)](#) described the Russian Revolution as a "revolution of the type of the twentieth century" which eliminates everything "that is the legacy of history – all the emperors, warlords, aristocrats, bureaucrats, militarists, and capitalists."¹⁸ Compared to the discredited Western European system, which had been viewed with increasing pessimism, the Soviet Union was a model of dissident modernization.

The May Fourth Movement marked an important turning point in Chinese history in three

respects: First, in contrast to the Republican Revolution of 1911, which was only supported by a few segments of the population, a broader political alliance formed in 1919 for the first time. Soon, students joined the workers, artisans, businessmen, merchants, and civil servants.

This was the beginning of an era of public mobilization as a modern form of politics. Second, in 1919, [nationalism](#) transformed from a mental attitude into a political force. Anti-imperialist nationalism was the ideological linchpin for the broad political alliance to “save the country.” Third, a new perspective opened on the international world order. Chinese policy started to distinguish between three blocs: European-Japanese imperialism, the Soviet Union, and the disadvantaged, underdeveloped former and remaining colonies. The alliance of the revolutionary forces in China now joined in a close alliance with the socialist Soviet Union. In the summer of 1919, the Soviet government furthermore tried to gradually annul all unequal treaties of the tsarist government with China (Karakhan Manifesto). This would only be partly realized later on, however.¹⁹

Conclusion

As in Europe, the effects of the First World War also contributed to a radical change in the existing external and internal political situation in China. While the major European powers gradually retreated in the course of the war to focus on the theater of war in Europe, the new powers, Japan and the USA, rapidly asserted their influence in China. Japan was able to extend its position as a result of the world war and to establish itself as a dominant imperial state. As for the United States, its increasingly important trade with China and influential activities in the area of education contributed to a growing political and cultural presence in China. At the same time, China’s experience at Versailles convinced it that it was necessary to look for new partners who were not part of the imperialist world. For the radical and revolutionary forces, the Soviet Union was a source of inspiration, whereas the more liberal and pragmatic group led by [Hu Shi \(1891-1962\)](#) looked to the United States. At the same time, China’s entry into the First World War also signaled an important turning point in Chinese relations with foreign countries, as China made its first appearance as an active member of the international community. China, furthermore, was also involved in the founding of the [League of Nations](#). Domestically, the consequences of world war were no less grave. The First World War and Versailles would eventually ignite a serious political and cultural crisis. Large parts of the intelligentsia were convinced that the very existence of China was under threat and that China could only be saved through cultural enlightenment and a completely new beginning. Calls for a new culture, a new social order, and, ultimately, for a “new man” paved the way for the socialist revolution, which soon appeared to be the only possible solution for the crisis that was set into motion by the First World War.

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Notes

1. The colony's official name was "Gouvernement Kiautschou." Qingdao is the name of the largest city and the seat of the colonial administration. ↑
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