

Historiography 1918-Today (China)

By [Xin Fan](#)

Summary

The First World War has been a neglected topic in Chinese historiography from 1918 to today. Although it was a point of attention among contemporaries, both nationalists and communists did not want to remember the war. This article uncovers three major shifts in First World War historiography in China: historization, politicization, and de-politicization. During the Republican period, nationalist historians struggled to develop a historical narrative for the war. Later, communist historians adopted a simplistic and negative view of the war. Abandoning the Marxist paradigm, Chinese historians today, however, have failed to offer an overall evaluation of China's participation in the war.

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Introduction

[China's](#) involvement in the First World War (WWI) has been a neglected topic in Chinese historiography. Historians, including [nationalists](#) and their communist counterparts, were reluctant to remember this war. For most of them, the war that took place in Europe had little to do with the historical contingency in China. Taking one example, Chinese scholars often referred to the war as *Ou zhan* 欧战, the European War, during the Republican period and in Taiwan today. However, recent scholarship's shift toward depicting China as an active player in the war is both timely and significant for the evaluation of major shifts in WWI historiography in China from the Republican period to today.

In this article, the author surveys the published articles and monographs in Chinese-language sources from both mainland China and Taiwan. The author pays special attention to the conceptual changes with regard to the war in the scholarship from the early Republican

period to today. Accordingly, the author has divided the development of the historical writing about WWI in China into three stages, detailed below.

The first stage is the Republican period from 1918 to 1949, which was a time of historicization (historization) in WWI historiography in China. During this period, Chinese scholars made an effort to adopt a historical perspective when writing about WWI. However, constrained by the Eurocentric view of history, they neglected China's contribution to the war and were unable to develop a satisfactory interpretation of the war. It was also difficult to make sense of the war because Nationalist leaders, such as [Sun Yat-sen](#), opposed it in the first place.

The second stage is the Maoist Period from 1949 to 1978, which was a time of politicization in WWI historiography in China. During this period, Marxist historians in China adopted communist ideology and argued that, as a war of injustice, WWI exposed the profound problems in the capitalistic world order. The outbreak of the war was ineluctable and the consequences were disastrous. Therefore, for these historians, China's participation in the war only served the interests of imperial countries. Controlled by ideology, they were unable to present a more nuanced interpretation of China's role in the war.

The third stage is the post-Maoist period from 1978 to today, which was a time of de-politicization in WWI historiography. During this period, the Marxist paradigm began to lose its dominant place in Chinese historiography. Without maintaining a theoretical consensus, Chinese historians have increasingly worked on detail-oriented research and have failed to offer an overall evaluation of WWI in their studies. As a result, the war is still considered less relevant to China and remains a neglected topic in Chinese historiography today.

To be sure, the chronological division of the development of WWI historiography in China is somewhat arbitrary. For instance, as the author later demonstrates, some Chinese historians began to accept and introduce the Marxist interpretation of the war as early as the 1930s and 1940s, long before the founding of the communist regime in 1949. However, this periodization offers a bird's-eye view by which to examine the major shifts in the topic during the past century. This article, therefore, contains three sections discussing each major change in historiography. Within each section, the author introduces some representative works in WWI historiography in China and outlines the major trend in its development.

Historization: WWI Historiography during the Republican Period

Historization is the process by which a contemporary event is condensed into historical narratives. For Chinese scholars, WWI indeed started out as a contemporary event. The First

World War, also called the Great War, took place from 1914 to 1918. It began with regional conflicts in the [Balkan area](#) and gradually developed into a war that swept across the Eurasian continent. However, generally speaking, its major battles were conducted in Europe. For this reason, Chinese scholars referred to it as the “European War” for a long period of time.¹ To some extent, the term seems to suggest the war’s remoteness from China. However, it would be misleading to assert that China had nothing to do with the conflict. As recent scholarship indicates, China was heavily involved in this war through both military efforts and diplomatic negotiations. Not only did Chinese territory become the battleground between Japanese and German armies, but the [Chinese government](#) also sent hundreds of thousands of [Chinese workers](#) to Europe to assist the Allies’ efforts during the war.² As a result, scholars today celebrate the war as a “defining moment in modern Chinese and world history.”³

At the intangible level, the war as a contemporary event was heavily portrayed in Chinese media. WWI happened to take place just as a modern media system was established and began to flourish in China. Modern newspapers had existed in China since the late Qing era, and by late 1916, 289 newspapers existed across China.⁴ Those newspapers, journals, and pamphlets kept a close watch on the events in Europe. *The Eastern Miscellany* 东方杂志 (1904-1948) played a leading role in reporting the war in China.

As an influential magazine, *The Eastern Miscellany* closely watched the development of the war in Europe. It not only offered timely reports on the latest events, but also produced some analyses of its disastrous consequences. For instance, on 10 March 1916 the journal listed the number of deaths and injuries for all participant countries in Volume 13, Issue 3.

According to its statistics, 2,228,300 people had died in the conflict within one year.⁵ The cruelty of this war astonished Chinese intellectuals, who originally believed that Europe was a role model that China should look up to. This complicated the discussion of modernity in China.⁶ Yet, these media reports mostly portrayed the war as a contemporary event. They largely lacked the depth of the historical view.

The attempts to conceptualize WWI as a historical event took place in China almost immediately after the war. Between 1919 and 1920, the Committee on Asian Civilization published a two-volume history of the war, *The Complete History of the European War* 欧战全史, authored by Guo Jingzi and Lin Kai. In 1923, *The Eastern Miscellany* edited and published *The Origins of the European War*. In the same year, Wang Jingfu published *The European War and the New Tide*. Those books began to adopt a historical perspective for examining the war’s origins by placing the contemporary conflicts within a historical context. However, they

treated the war as a mainly European event, because most scholars at this time considered China to be a “small and weak” nation that had little influence in international politics.⁷ Feeling incapable of changing the world, none of these scholars actually tried to integrate a global perspective that transcended the Eurocentric view or include an extensive discussion of China’s participation in the war. This isolation of China from the war continued to dominate historiography even after the Nationalist Party came to power in the late 1920s. Because the Nationalist leaders had opposed China’s entry into the war from the very beginning, scholars affiliated with the National Party had difficulty appreciating China’s positive involvement in the war.⁸

The Eurocentric stance on WWI historiography carried on into the 1930s. Scholars continued to edit and publish historical accounts, such as Chen Maolie’s *A Short History of the European War* in 1936. At the same time, scholars began to develop a more diverse view of the events, as social scientists turned their attention to wartime economy and finance. For instance, Lin Menggong published *A History of Economy and Finance of the European War* in 1937. Another shift in WWI historiography in China during this period was that scholars began to adopt the term “the First World War” instead “the European War” to refer to the war. There has been little research about this transition in terminologies. However, as the term “First World War” makes sense only when the Second World War is in sight, the fear of another world war clearly played a factor. For example, He Ziheng’s article in 1934 constantly compared the contemporary situation to the period before the outbreak of the First World War; the author warned of the possibility of a coming second world war. Nevertheless, this change in terminology allowed Chinese intellectuals to conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of Asian countries’ role in the conflict. To some extent, it brought a more global perspective in WWI historiography in China.

In hindsight, the Republican period was a time when Chinese scholars started to write about WWI, producing the earliest works on this topic in Chinese. These works represent the first endeavors of Chinese scholars to treat WWI as a historical event, which means that they placed the contemporary war within a European historical context. These authors, many of whom were not professional world historians, tended to adopt an international relations perspective to explain the war’s outbreak. They blamed [Germany’s](#) attempt to challenge the existing international system to an extent that some even questioned the system’s legitimacy. Yet, without including China in the overall picture, the study of WWI remained underdeveloped during this period. The meaning of this war for, and its impact on, China was an undecided issue.

Politicization: WWI Historiography during the Mao Period

In contrast to the nationalist historians' struggle with historicizing the event, Chinese communists took a determined and politicized view of the First World War. Heavily influenced by Soviet historical perspectives, they believed that the war was an epoch-making event, as the conflict of the war eventually gave birth to the first Socialist republic in world history: the Soviet Union. Therefore, Chinese communist writers paid more attention to WWI as a whole than their nationalist counterparts. At the same time, as they adopted the deterministic view in Marxist historiography, they were less interested in historical nuances of the event. As a result, they came to the conclusion that the war was caused by the fundamental flaw in the pre-existing capitalistic world order and that it was therefore unjust by nature. Influenced by this view, they again largely neglected China's involvement in the war.

The establishment of the aforementioned orthodox view of the war was a process. Chinese communists started to discuss the war in the 1920s. In 1924, on the tenth anniversary of the war's outbreak, leftist scholars like Chen Duxiu and Shen Yanbing, a.k.a. Mao Dun, published a group of essays to remember the event. Chen criticized the injustice of the war and opposed the view that the world war had caused the collapse of the German and [Russian](#) empires. Instead, he suggested that all the workers in the world unite and oppose war.⁹ By contrast, other writers called for a violent revolution against the imperial powers.¹⁰ Writing prior to the consolidation of the Soviet regime, earlier leftist writers, like their nationalist counterparts, lacked a consensus in defining the nature of the war.

During the 1940s, communist historians developed a more consistent view of the war thanks to the introduction of [Joseph Stalin's \(1878-1953\) History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union \(Bolsheviks\). Short Course](#) into China during the Rectification campaigns. For these historians, capitalism had entered [imperialism](#), the highest and last stage of its development, by the late 19th century and early 20th century. The outbreak of the war demonstrated the self-destructive nature of the capitalist world order. Because of this Soviet influence, Chinese Marxist historians conducted some preliminary research on the topic. For instance, in an important and yet often neglected article, Hou Wailu, a major Marxist historian, discussed Sun Yat-sen's foreign policy during the WWI period. According to him, Sun Yat-sen opposed China's entry into the war because he had foreseen its destructive nature and believed that it was dominated by imperialistic interests. By the 1940s, both communists and nationalists considered the war to be unjust and criticized China's involvement.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the communist government systematically introduced the Soviet Union's works on world history under the policy of "Leaning to One Side." Marxist scholars started with translating and introducing Soviet textbooks on world history. For instance, the Xinhua publishing house published *A Concise History of the First World War* by Li Qi in 1949.¹¹ The text was based on a selective translation of a Soviet textbook on world history. As far as can be ascertained, the first monograph written by a Chinese scholar in the PRC era was Jiang Mengyin's *The First World War*. In this book, Jiang followed the Soviet simplistic view of the war and defined the nature of the war as "a rogue war among imperial countries with a purpose to exploit and to re-divide the world and claim hegemony." He followed the Soviet view and claimed that the root of the conflict was imperialism.¹² This simplistic view dominated Marxist historiography of WWI until the 1980s.

Nevertheless, thanks to the Soviet influence, the war as a historical event carried a great significance in Marxist historiography in China. Marxist scholars paid special attention to the war because they considered it an epoch-making event. During the Maoist period, world history in China was divided into four periods: ancient world history, medieval world history, modern world history, and contemporary world history. This periodization was based on the Stalinist teleological view of history, by which Soviet historians asserted that primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist (or communist) were the five common stages of human development. Marxist scholars both in China and in the Soviet Union usually considered that the [October Revolution of 1917](#) gave birth to the first socialist republic in the world, which signified a transition from the capitalist to the socialist stage of world historical development.¹³ Since the Russian revolution took place in the context of WWI, communist historians in China and in the Soviet Union alike usually regarded the war as a historic event.

Perhaps out of fear of conflicting with official ideology, communist historians in China rarely viewed the nature of WWI as given. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, they conducted some detailed case studies about the relationship between China and the war. These case studies usually adopted local and socioeconomic perspectives. For instance, the journal *Historical Pedagogy* published Ding Xun's essay on the development of China's national capitalism during the WWI period in 1959. In 1964, the *Historiography Monthly* published Ma Honglin, Ji Guozhong and Chen Honglin's article on the growth of the working class in Shanghai during the wartime period. During this period, some historians with a global historical interest started to study the histories of individual participant countries; American wartime policy attracted the most attention. In 1963, the *Historical Pedagogy* published Ding Zemin's article on the American policy on Cuba in the late WWI period. In 1965, Zhang Bofeng's article on the nature of America's entry into the war in 1917 appeared in the

Historiography Monthly. Because some communist leaders participated in the labor movements among Chinese workers in Europe, some preliminary research on this topic also appeared in the 1960s.¹⁴ These case studies helped Chinese scholars to establish a global perspective and became an important legacy for the later development of WWI historiography in China.

De-politicization: WWI Historiography during the Post-Mao Period

Despite the heavy ideological influence, the First World War was still a significant topic in historical studies in China during the Maoist era. For Chinese historians, it was a historic event that opened a new chapter in world history: the contemporary period. However, since the Marxist paradigm lost its dominant place in Chinese historiography, a phenomenon often described as a de-politicization process,¹⁵ Chinese historians have been unable to reach a historical consensus. In an age of de-politicization, they have focused on increasingly fragmented topics in historical studies. As a result, few scholars are interested in refining the nature of WWI and discussing China's role within it. The war has become a neglected topic in Chinese historiography.

The abandoning of Marxist historiography has been a subtle and gradual process. In the early 1980s, most scholars still conducted research within the framework of Marxist historiography and continued working on topics developed in the earlier period. The translation and introduction of primary sources on the war were an important milestone during this period. For example, in 1982 the Commercial Press in Beijing published a reference collection on WWI, collected and translated by Wang Tieya.¹⁶ In terms of research, the local perspective and the case study approach continued to dominate scholars' research interests. Ma Honglin's case study focused on the development of national industry during the WWI period. Lang Weicheng's article discussed the issue of Manchuria in the context of interactional relationships before and after the war.¹⁷ By the end of the 1980s, scholars had already developed a more positive view of China's participation in the war. In 1990, Yuan Jicheng and Wang Hailin cautiously reminded scholars that the consequences of China's involvement in the war and the subsequent [Paris Conference](#) were not entirely negative.¹⁸

By the 1990s, an increasing number of Chinese historians had abandoned the Marxist paradigm in historical research. However, due to the fact that communism was and still is the official ideology in China, in most cases Chinese historians simply chose to stop using Marxist terminologies and periodization without much explanation. For instance, in the most authoritative world history textbook in China, *World History*, the editors Wu Yujin and Qi

Shirong began the narrative on contemporary world history at the beginning of the 20th century instead of at the beginning of WWI. They silently decentralized the significance of the war and the following October Revolution in world history.

If this changed the war from a “historic” event to a “historical” event, the war further lost its significance in the following fragmentation of historical studies in the 1990s. Divided by the dichotomy between world history and Chinese history in the framework of historical studies in China, historians were unable to develop a comprehensive perspective on China’s involvement in the war. As a result, the war became “an unwritten chapter” in Chinese historiography.¹⁹

By contrast, the study of WWI began to slowly grow in Taiwan as the ideological control began to loosen in the context of democratization. In the 1980s, Chen San-ching published his work on Chinese laborers in Europe during the war.²⁰ In the first few years of the 21st century, scholars in Taiwan showed an increasing interest in the impact of the war on China. For example, Eugene Chiu discussed how the war complicated Chinese intellectuals’ conception of modernity. Based on an intense archival research, Li Chang uncovered the war observations from Chinese military officials who witnessed the war in Europe firsthand. Together with the introduction and translation of [Guoqi Xu’s](#) *China and the Great War* on the mainland, these works suggest a resurgence of research interest in China’s participation in WWI in Chinese-language historiography.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has traced the development of WWI historiography in China during the past century. Three major shifts were observed: First, nationalist historians attempted to develop a historical narrative about the war during the Republican era. Second, communist historians adopted Marxist ideology and attempted to politicize the event during the Maoist period. Third, historians today, in an age of de-politicization, have lost a comprehensive perspective on the war. Because of these conceptual changes, the study of WWI has never received comprehensive consideration or interpretation in Chinese historiography. However, along with the increasing exchange between China and the rest of the world, Chinese scholars have become more aware of China’s role in the war. The author confidently anticipates that the study of China and the Great War will soon resurge in Chinese-language historiography.

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Notes

1. Chiu, Eugene W.: War and Enlightenment. Revelation of the World War One to China, in: *The Journal of History* 23 (2005), p. 92. [↑](#)
2. As for the English-language works about this issue, see Xu, Guoqi: *Strangers on the Western Front. Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge 2011. [↑](#)
3. Xu, Guoqi: *China and the Great War. China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 9ff. [↑](#)
4. Chiu, Eugene W.: The World War I and China's Modernity, in: *Thought and Words: Journal of the Humanities and Social Science* 46/1 (2008), p. 83. [↑](#)
5. Anonymous: Ou zhan siwang renshu zhi tongji [The statistics of World War I casualties], in: *Dongfang zazhi* [Eastern Miscellaneous] 12/3 (1916). [↑](#)
6. By contrast, the New Youth, or La Jeunesse, was still enthusiastic about Western values in China. For them, a total Westernization seemed to be the only way out for China. This debate grounded keynotes for the subsequent New Cultural Movement. See Chow, Tse-tsung: *The May Fourth Movement. Intellectual Revolution in China*, Cambridge 1960, pp. 42-48. [↑](#)
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8. Xu, China 2005, pp. 208ff. [↑](#)
9. Chen, Duxiu: Ouzhan shinian jinian zhi ganxiang [The Thought at the Tenth Anniversary of the European War], in: *Xiandao* [The Guide Weekly] 78 (13 August 1924), p. 621. [↑](#)
10. Huanxing [pseudo]: Ouzhan shinian de huigu [Hindsight in Ten Years after the European War], in: *Guomin ribao* [Nation Daily] Juewu [Awakening] 9/11 (1924), p. 3. [↑](#)
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15. For a discussion on the de-politicization of contemporary Chinese politics, see Wang, Hui: Depoliticized politics, multiple components of hegemony, and the eclipse of the

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