1914 1918 ONLINE International Encyclopedia of the First World War

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (China)

By Lin-Chun Wu

China's attempt to participate in the European war was complicated by domestic turbulence. Japan's bid for supremacy in China compelled President Yuan Shikai to propose the Twenty-one Demands in 1915, and after Yuan's death, there were two governments in China, one in Beijing and one in Guangzhou. Moreover, the friction between President Li Yuanhong and Prime Minister Duan Qirui deepened the rivalry between government and Parliament. The different political parties who supported the policy to participate in the war, including the Kuomintang members of the parliament, sided with Li, while the Chun-pu Tang, or Progressive Party, sided with Duan. After Duan's return to power in July 1917, the country remained divided. Duan's government was too distracted by internal strife to garner support for China's participation in the European war. However, for most Chinese politicians, the best way to take advantage of the European war was to promote China internationally, a goal which garnered a common consensus across the political spectrum. Working towards a new China in the post-war period became a great dream for many.

Table of Contents

Governments

When the European war broke out in the summer of 1914, the Chinese President Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) proclaimed neutrality for China in order to avoid getting involved in the European crisis. As the European nations became entangled in World War I, Japan ignored China's proclamation of neutrality, and proceeded to attack the Germans in Qingdao. China tried to limit the spread of Japanese action by declaring a "war zone" in which war related activity could take place, but Japan disregarded this attempt. After the fall of Qingdao in November 1914, Japan took over the German leased territory in Shandong and revoked all the rights and interests the Germans had secured in that province.[1]

Once hostilities between the Japanese and the Germans had ceased with the collapse of German resistance, President Yuan Shikai informed the Japanese on 7 January 1915, that China's neutrality would once again extend over Shandong, with the exception of the leased territory. The Japanese protested that this was an unfriendly act and on 18 January 1915 they presented President Yuan with their own demands: the "Twenty-one Demands." These demands were presented directly to President Yuan, and he was admonished to keep them secret. Four months later, Japan presented an ultimatum on 7 May, a day which came to be memorialized as National Humiliation Day, saying that if matters were not settled by a certain date, force might be used. President Yuan then accepted all the demands but those of Section V. The demands contained within Section V were the most damaging and President Yuan requested that they should be further negotiated. In face of the widespread hostility that the demands had created, Japan agreed to the compromise.[2] The Sino-Japanese treaties were signed on 25 May 1915. The signing of these treaties provoked widespread violent response from the public to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the Twenty-one Demands. Anti-Japanese demonstrations, boycotts, and riots united the Chinese nation, and many Chinese came to support the idea that the right moment to reject the Twenty-one Demands would be at the post-war peace conference. Although China had earlier expressed its intention to join the war or to declare neutrality, it was only after the Twenty-one Demands that the Chinese government and public opinion came to think about what a great opportunity it would be for China to participate in the post-war conference, with the goal of working towards a new China. To discuss the implications of the European war regarding the future of Qingdao and the integrity of China, a rallying cry for "abolishing all the unequal treaties" emerged from the public. The goal of attending the post-war conference was becoming increasingly irresistible for China. [3]

Discussions regarding China's attendance at the peace conference reached a common consensus after Japan presented the Twenty-one Demands. On 18 January 1915, the Chinese Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang (1871-1949) sent a telegram to all Chinese ministers abroad explaining that attending the post-war conference was a top-priority for China.[4] However, the question of how China should take advantage of the European war still remained. Which side would China join? Joining the German side or the Allied side both gave rise to a number of policy issues. The Chinese minister to Berlin, Yan Huiqing (1877-1950), once reported that the German attitude toward China was "extremely peaceful and friendly." For many Chinese, Germany seemed a relatively more desirable imperial country when compared with some other European countries, for example Russia, France,

or Britain. But if the priority was for China to join the post-war conference and to gain a solid foothold in the international system, they had a far better chance by joining the Allied Powers. Influential politicians like Liang Shiyi (1869-1933) and Zhang Guogan (1876-1959), the Secretary General to the Senator Council, who both had access to inside decision makers on the Allied side, were convinced that the Allies would be victorious.

According to modern China's domestic political culture at this time, the United States undoubtedly enjoyed a better image than the other Great Powers, and many Chinese believed the United States would support China's territorial and political integrity. When the First World War broke out, most Chinese officials and intellectuals in the government of the Republic had pro-American leanings. After the U.S. declared war on Germany on 9 April 1917, Wellington Koo (1888-1985) strongly emphasized the importance of maintaining the connection with America to advance China's new diplomacy. He argued that the policy of actively joining the war on the side of United States was fundamentally different than declaring support for the Allied Powers, because Japan had taken advantage of the European war to expand its influence in China. If China joined the same side as Japan, this would provide an opportunity for Japan to tighten its control in China. If China did join the Allied camp, Japan would have the chance to further manipulate China's relations with the major powers and could make China a complete Japanese dependent. Koo suggested to Duan that the U.S. would come to have a great impact on China's future international status, and if China decided to join the war, it should follow the U.S. rather than the Allies.[5]

Unfortunately, Koo's policy suggestion was never followed. Washington's reluctance to support China's entry into the war and a sudden change in Japanese policy regarding China's participation attempt explain, to a certain extent, why China eventually went over to the Allied side. Yet the idea of a Chinese alliance with the United States clearly indicated the China genuinely wished to enter the war and that China took seriously the assurances of the U. S. minister in Peking, Paul S. Reinsch (1869-1923).[6]

In early June 1917, when China's internal affairs were in turmoil, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing (1864-1928) instructed Reinsch to communicate a message officially to the Waijiaobu (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and unofficially to the military leaders opposing Li, saying that China's unity was more important than her participation in the war. On the same day Lansing sent a circular telegram of the same proposal to the American ambassadors in Japan, France, and Great Britain to invite these powers to make identical representations to the Chinese government "expressing regret for the factional disorder that has arisen".[7]

However, Britain and Japan both rejected the American invitation, and France expressed that it was ready to associate with the United States, provided "that the other powers consulted by the Federal Government were of the same mind." For Britain, to retain Japan as an ally yet have her acquiesce in an Anglo-American alliance would entail the adoption of "Lord Grey's Policy". In the words of Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933) who was British Foreign Secretary from 1905-1916, this policy was

intended to give: “Japan a free hand over the whole of China or by giving her a free hand in a definite sphere in a portion of China, ie., Manchuria and Shantung”. Britain’s War Cabinet could not to make any move that might arouse Japanese suspicion. The Japanese press suspected that the note was Reinsh’s machination and violently criticized it for disregarding Japan’s special position in China.[8] In the summer of 1917, a mission headed by Ishii Kikujiro (1866-1945) was sent to the United States to determine Woodrow Wilson’s (1856-1924) purpose and to determine the extent to which Japan’s special position regarding China was being considered. The Ishii-Lansing Agreement signed on 2 November 1917 was evidence of American acquiescence and its compromise with Japanese imperialism in China during the European War. The agreement recognized Japan’s “special interests” and signaled acceptance of Japan’s “paramount interest” in China. It was disappointing for China that the U.S. missed what China saw as a great opportunity for the U.S. to play an active role in containing Japan’s ambitions in China.[9]

Parliaments

Japan’s refusal to allow China to join the Allies in 1915 was part of her strategy to eliminate President Yuan Shikai. After Yuan’s death in June 1916, the government of Beijing was locked in a succession of political strife. Yuan Shikai was succeeded by President Li Yuanhong (1864-1928) who had been vice-president under Yuan. President Li revived the 1912 constitution, recalled the members of the old National Assembly, and reconstituted the cabinet with Duan Qirui (1865-1936) as Prime Minister. The issue that brought matters to a head was how and if China would join the war against Germany. It was rumored that Prime Minister Duan was pushing the country into war, under Japanese influence, because he had received secret loans from the Japanese. President Li, backed by the parliament, dismissed Prime Minister Duan in May 1917. In response, Duan influenced Beiyang militarists to rally to his side. The generals of eight provinces, including the metropolitan province of Zhili, declared their independence and condemned the President and the National Assembly for Duan’s dismissal.

Duan and his supporters were chiefly concerned with securing financial aid and the Japanese government expressed their good will to lend. Duan spoke of Japan’s “sincere friendship” before the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Chinese Parliament and declared that China would sever diplomatic relations with Germany when the next German attack on neutral shipping occurred. But Duan had to overcome strong opposition within the country. Before associating with Japan, President Li wished to first be assured that in joining the Allies China would be treated with respect in the family of nations. Also, Li said the question of severing diplomatic relations with Germany had to be discussed and approved by parliament. Li might have been thinking about the post-war international order, but he also suspected that Duan had a secret deal with Japan. Thus, the bone of contention between Li and the members of the old National Assembly on the one hand, and the Premier Duan and his clique on the other.[10]

In desperation Li accepted the offer of General Zhang Xun (1854-1923) to intercede. But Zhang had

some plans of his own. After he got Li to suspend the meddlesome National Assembly on 12 June 1917, he led his troops into Beijing with the goal of restoring the Manchu dynasty. But the country, which had just denied Yuan the throne, was in no mood to accept the return of the Manchu emperor. The Beiyang generals prepared to attack Zhang Xun. On 14 July, Duan headed the anti-restoration army entering Beijing and forced Li Yuanhong to retire in favor of the vice-president, the Beiyang General Feng Guozhang (1859-1919).

In the summer of 1917, China suffered domestically having weathered the political crises brought on in the course of sorting out the institutional basis of the war policy. President Li was expelled, Parliament had been dissolved, and the country was divided. Duan declared himself as “the savior of the republic”, he refused to recover the old parliament that supported Li and tried to build a new parliament that submitted to him. In August 1918, a new parliament was founded, the so called “Anfu Parliament”, which was manipulated by Duan’s close friend Xu Shuzheng and the Anfu Club. Now the reunification of China rose to the top of Duan’ s agenda. To become a unifier of the nation, Duan would use the issue of participation in the war to strengthen his own legitimacy and power.

Parties

The Progressive Party was founded in 1913, they espoused the idea that China should pursue a constitutional system and saw themselves as the progressive political power in the country. The head of the Progressive Party, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) during his speech in Beijing’s YMCA, emphasized that the European war was a war between nation-states. Since China was deeply influence by world affairs, he urged the Chinese to learn to be citizens of a nation-state, and also citizens of the world. He expressed the hope that China would take advantage of the European war to change and reform its own society. On other occasions, Liang argued that the European war presented the Chinese with an opportunity to renew their country and get it on track to recover its national sovereignty. Until early 1915, Liang believed that Germany would win the war, but eventually he revised his pro-German stance. [11] He came to support Duan’s policy advocating that t China should participate in the war on the Allied side.

Interestingly, Sun Yat-sen (1886-1925), who in 1917 strongly opposed China’s entry into the war, was nonetheless enthusiastic when the Great War broke out. Sun Yat-sen started the Constitution Protection Movement to fight Duan and the northern warlords. Sun, joined by the Minister of Navy and some members of Beijing’s Parliament, sought to establish a rival military government in Guangzhou in August 1917. Sun took on the military rank of Generalissimo. Sun Yat-sen had changed his previous attitude; he no longer supported the Beiyang militarists and their policy to participate in the war.

Sun saw the European war as a favorable opportunity for China, but for different reasons: 1) because Europe would not have time to bother with the East and, 2) the constitutional traitor (Yuan Shikai) would no longer be able to benefit from foreign loans and military equipment. Sun saw this as his

chance to use his Revolutionary Party to restore the constitutional government.[12] In Sun's booklet entitled "The question of China's Survival" published in 1917, he vigorously challenged the wisdom of China's declaration of war, and also explored the motives of the Duan government for wanting to join the war. Sun argued that for the sake of China's survival it should maintain strict neutrality.[13] In addition to increasing opposition on Duan's policy, Sun tried to dissuade foreign countries from supporting China's participation in the war. After the U.S. declared War on Germany, Duan had a new policy with regards to China'ss alliance with the United States. Sun tried to discredit this new policy by arguing that the United States was not reliable, and he sent a telegram to American President Woodrow Wilson arguing for American intervention in Chinese politics, because "A band of traitors, under the pretext of declaring war for the benefit of China's interest, but whose real purpose is… actually for attaining their own selfish ends". [14]

China's War Aims and its Formal Entry into the War

Liang Shiyi, as a confidant of President Yuan, was involved in all the important policy-making discussions, especially in the area of foreign policy. For a time during the World War I period, he actually controlled both China's finance and foreign policy. When the war broke out in Europe, he argued that China should work with Britain to expel Germany out of Shandong Province and recover Qingdao before Japan could grab it. According to Liang Shiyi's view, joining the war would serve China's promising future and China had to be part of the winning side in order to present its interests in the post-war conference. But, if China could not join the war militarily, other alternatives had to be devised quickly. It is Liang's delicate strategy which led to the Yuan government sending Chinese Laborers to join the war effort.[15]

But China faced a difficult situation. Japan, which continued to try to intervene in China's foreign policy, was also a member of the Allies. In addition, France and Britain were suspicious of China's motives to enter the war on the Allied side, and they both rejected China's first attempt in 1914. The Chinese Foreign Minister declined to acknowledge openly that China intended to join the war, until the Japanese minister became aware of this information and questioned China's intentions. Under Japan's pressure, China finally admitted its intentions to Japanese officials and asked for Japan's response. To avoid losing favor with Japan at this critical moment in the war, the Allied Powers not only gave up on China's direct participation in the war, but they let the Japanese dictate Allied policy in China. On 26 November 1915, British officials denied openly that they had talked with China regarding its participation in the war. For Britain, France, Russia and the other Allied countries, Japanese assistance was more important than Chinese participation, and it was considered unwise to offend Japan in exchange for China's participation. Thus China's second push to join the war also failed.[16]

To establish a strong link with the Allied side, Chinese officials worked out a creative new strategy in 1915, which was taken up and launched by the Allies in 1916. This alternative strategy was called

“Using laborers as soldiers” and was designed by Liang Shiyi. This plan was highly secret and the laborers were recruited by a private company. According professor Guoqi Xu’s remarkable book *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War,* we now know the story of 140,000 lost Chinese laborers and their great contribution to the Great War. The labor plan was to play a pivotal role in China’s strategy to join the Allied cause and became a key mechanism for Chinese entry to the international system.[17]

On 14 August 1917 China declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. China had hoped that its declaration of war would be a first step towards an eventual complete recovery of sovereignty. The war enabled China to recover German and Austrian concessions; and it was hoped that it would also prove to be an opportunity to negotiate the cancellation, or at least a revision, of unequal treaties with the Allied Powers and the United States. There was enormous disagreement among the Allied countries about how to accommodate China’s aims. The gap was so large that the British Foreign office complained: “if China’s entry into the war is really the object of the Allied Powers, it is quite evident that the attitude adopted by many of their representative in Beijing are calculated to defeat their object.” Besides taking different positions on the Boxer Indemnity, the Allied countries had serious conflicts over China’s request for a revision of trade tariffs. Moreover, the major obstacle was Japan, which had his own plan. Japan wished to remit its share of the Boxer indemnity, but only under extremely severe conditions.[18] Not only would these conditions prevent China from taking back Shangdong at the post-war conference, it also made a joke of China’s war aims and undermined the fermentation of Chinese nationalism.[19]

Japan took advantage of the Great War to gain increased control over China. Once Japan received assurances from the Allied Powers that they would support her claims at the peace conference, she exerted pressure on China to enter the war. Japan benefited from China’s internal turmoil diplomatically and economically. A weaker and more chaotic China would need more loans from the outside to function. By providing loans to China, the Japanese were able to compel the Duan government to make further concessions. To continue receiving its financial support, the Duan government even agreed that Japan could keep its interests in Shandong in a secret agreement signed on 24 September 1918. This secret agreement aroused strong opposition among China’s foreign policy observers, especially college students, who held nation-wide demonstrations, which were forerunners of the May Fourth Movement.

The tragedy for China was that although it was finally welcomed by the Allied countries into the war effort, it had already lost the major objective of its war policy; recovery of its territory and sovereign rights in Shandong. The Chinese innocently believed a declaration of war would bring justice and international prestige to the country. The assurances of Allied countries gave the Chinese government and people a false expectation of fair treatment. When the European war ended with the Allies’ victorious, the Chinese people were excited and genuinely jubilant. China, however, hoped that the Allies, particularly the United States, would help China to get the Japanese to vacate Shandong and to promote China’s status in the international community. It was in this way that China would be

reborn.

Lin-chun Wu, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan

Section Editor: Guoqi Xu

Notes

1. ↑ Huang, Jiamo: Zhongguo dui Ouzhan de Chubu Fanying [China's Initial Response to the European War], in: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Jindai shi Yanjiusuo Jikan No. 1, Taipei 1969, pp. 3-19.
2. ↑ Vohra, Ranbir: China's Path to Modernization: A Historical Review from 1800 to the Present, Canada 1987, pp. 114-115.
3. ↑ Xu, Guoqi: China and the Great War, China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization, Cambridge and New York 2005, pp. 93-98.
4. ↑ Waijiaobu [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] to all China' legations, Jan. 18 1915: Archival Material on Sino-Japanese Negotiation: Manchuria Issue II, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, 1990, pp. 678-679.
5. ↑ Koo, Wellington: Wellington Koo Telegram, 12 April 1917, in : Jindai Shi Ziliao. No. 38, Beijing 1979, pp. 184-185.
6. ↑ Wu, Lin-Chun: Meiguo yu Zhongguo Zhengzhi [America and the Disintegrated China], 1917-1928, Taipei 1996, pp. 23-24.
7. ↑ Chi, Madeleine: China Diplomacy, 1914-1918, Cambridge 1970, pp. 124-127.
8. ↑ Chi, China Diplomacy 1970, p. 125.
9. ↑ Ishii-Lansing agreement spawned the controversy from the moment of its signature. Scholars have argued for a generation over whether or not the ambiguous words "special interest ", really committed the U.S. to recognition of Japan's "paramount" interests in China. Prescot, Francis G.: The Lansing--Ishii Agreement, Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1949, in: Iriye, Akira: Across the Pacific, New York 1967, pp. 133, 136.
10. ↑ Chi, China Diplomacy 1970, pp. 123.
11. ↑ Qichao, Liang: Yin bing shi he Ji [Collected Writings of Liang Qichao], Beijing 1989, pp. 11-26.
12. ↑ Xu, China and the Great War 2005, p. 85.
13. ↑ Sun, Yat-sen: The Question of China's Survival, in: Sunzhongshan Quanji [Complete Writing of Sunzhongshan], Vol. 4, Beijing 1982, pp. 39-99.
14. ↑ Wu, Lin-chun: Meiguo yu Zhongguo Zhengzhi [America and the Disintegrated China], 1917-1928, Taipei 1996, pp. 39-40.
15. ↑ Xu, China and the Great War 2005, pp. 102-103.
16. ↑ Chi, China Diplomacy 1970, pp. 85-93.
17. ↑ Xu, Guoqi: Strangers on the Western Front, Chinese Workers in the Great War, Cambridge, MA 2011.

18. ↑ Of the 80 million dollars still owed to Japan, according to Japan's plan, about 30 million was to be spent on education and the remaining 50 million on the development, under Japanese auspices, of China's resources in cotton, iron and wool. See Guoqi, China and the Great War 2005, pp. 176-177; Tong, Holling: "Japan's Conditions for Remitting Her Share of Boxer Indemnity," Millard's Review 6, no.8 (26 October 1918), pp. 303-306.
19. ↑ Xu, China and the Great War 2005, pp. 164-165.

Selected Bibliography

Chi, Madeleine: **China diplomacy, 1914-1918**, Cambridge 1970: Harvard University Press.

Huang, Jiamo: **Zhongguo dui Ouzhan de Chubu Fanying (China's initial response to the European War)**, in: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Jindai shi Yanjiusuo Jikan/1 , 1969, pp. 3-19.

Iriye, Akira: **Across the Pacific. An inner history of American-East Asian relations**, New York 1967: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Koo, Wellington: **Wellington Koo telegram, 12 April 1917**, in: Jindai Shi Ziliao/38 , 1979, pp. 184-185.

Liang, Qichao: **Yin bing shi he Ji (Collected writings of Liang Qichao)**, Beijing 1989.

Prescott, Francis C.: **The Lansing-Ishii agreement**, Yale University 1949.

Sun, Yat-sen: **The question of China's survival**: Sunzhongshan Quanji (Complete writing of Sunzhongshan), volume 4, Beijing 1982, pp. 39-99.

Tong, Holling: **Japan's Conditions for Remitting Her Share of Boxer Indemnity**, in: Millard's Review 6/8, Oct. 26, 1918, pp. 303-306.

Van Ypersele, Laurence: **Mourning and memory, 1919-1945**, in: Horne, John (ed.): A companion to World War I, Chichester; Malden 2010: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vohra, Ranbir: **China's path to modernization. A historical review from 1800 to the present**, Englewood Cliffs 1987: Prentice-Hall.

Wu, Lin-Chun: **Meiguo yu Zhongguo Zhengzhi (America and the disintegrated China, 1917-1928)**, Taipei 1996.

Xu, Guoqi: **Strangers on the Western Front. Chinese workers in the Great War**, Cambridge 2011: Harvard University Press.

Xu, Guoqi: **China and the Great War. China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization**, New York 2005: Cambridge University Press.

Citation

Wu, Lin-Chun: Governments, Parliaments and Parties (China) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10323.

License