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Making Sense of the War (China)

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Historically, scholars largely disregarded China's First World War involvement, since the country did not formally declare war until August 1917. I argue that we must re-examine the issue to understand both Chinese and world history. First, the Chinese seized the opportunity to attain higher status worldwide by sending labourers to assist the Allies; second, they sought to use the war to move China out of the colonial into the international system; third, they realized that achieving nation-state status was essential after the Peace Conference's unequal resolution. From internationalism through self-determinism to nationalism, China's position shifted with regard to World War I.

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Introduction

In the past, scholars have conducted copious research on the history of World War I. However, the focus was mostly on European countries, especially those that were directly participating in the war on the European continent.^[1] For those not directly involved, their war experience has not yet attracted much attention. For instance, [China](#), a weak nation that was located far away from the major battlefields in Europe, did not officially join the war until August 1917, when the conflict was close to its end. Probably for this reason, previous research rarely touched on the relationship between China and the war. Recently scholars have started not only to rediscover the neglected history of China's contributions to the war but also to appreciate the global dimensions to understanding how the study of China's involvement with the war can actually help an understanding of Chinese politics, economy and society.^[2] Beyond the confine of area studies, this trend also complicates the story of World War I at a global level and allows researchers to integrate China's perspectives into the global study of the history of World War I.

Methodologically, scholars have started to take international history as a research angle. Consequently, the link between China and World War I can be more clearly examined.^[3] International history is a new approach developed from the field of diplomatic history. Unlike traditional diplomatic history, which focuses on state relations between two or more countries, or high politics and elites, it pays more attention to the roles of culture, society and ordinary people in the dynamics of international relations. Most importantly, it attempts to "go beyond the national level of analysis, to treat the entire world as a framework of study."^[4] In particular, it offers an important tool by which to uncover neglected domestic political events and their relationships with international affairs.

China's pursuit for internationalization during the World War I

China's national humiliation

To examine China's motivation for joining the war, we first need to place this issue within the context of the national humiliations and diplomatic weakness that the country suffered from the late eighteenth to the early 20th century. Due to its defeat in the two Opium Wars (1839 and 1842) and several wars that followed, the Qing Dynasty government was forced to sign numerous unequal treaties with foreign powers including [Britain](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Japan](#) and [Russia](#). As a result, these powers increasingly controlled Chinese trade, resources, industry and infrastructure. Many people maintained that this foreign encroachment left China unable to maintain its complete sovereignty and independence, so that it became a so-called semi-colony. In 1912, the Qing government was overthrown and the Republic of China was established. However, the new [government](#) failed to quickly strengthen the country. During the first decade of the Chinese Republic, domestically, the country suffered political chaos caused by "warlordism" – local military rulers often controlled local economic and political affairs and undermined the power of the central government. Internationally, foreign powers continued to maintain their special rights and unequal treaties in China.

Therefore, the Chinese people longed for a stronger government that could build up a strong nation and overcome the humiliations of the past. To be sure, when the Great War took place in Europe, the Chinese government decided not to enter the conflict. However, it soon considered the war to be a good opportunity to increase China's international status and strengthen the government. While the Western powers were fighting one another, many Chinese intellectuals held out great hope that the war would be an opportunity to revive the Chinese nation. For instance, one of the most famous intellectuals [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#) stated that World War I presented the Chinese with a once-in-a-thousand-years' opportunity.^[5] This also reflects the rise of Chinese cultural conservatism, which aimed to reverse China's national humiliation. Nevertheless, things did not go the way the Chinese people wished. While most European powers were involved in the war and took little heed of their areas of interest in China, Japan was anxious to extend its sphere of influence. By 7 November 1914, the German colony of Qingdao had fallen into Japanese hands.^[6] On 18 January 1915, Japan forced the Chinese president [Yuan Shikai \(1859-1916\)](#) to approve the notorious Twenty-One Demands that people often believe aimed to eventually annex China. Yuan's government planned to accept most of the demands, which angered the Chinese public. Merchants and students in big cities immediately held rallies, vented their anger via the public media and circulated news throughout the country via telegrams. Eventually, the Chinese government rejected the most damaging demands. The Twenty-One Demands apparently exposed Japanese ambitions in China. This forced the Chinese government to declare war on Germany because it was the only way that China would be able to obtain an invitation to attend the [post-war Peace Conference](#), when the time came. The Chinese government expected to get back its lost sovereignty and territory in such a conference, and they especially aimed to evict Japan from Qingdao through diplomatic instead of military means. As a result, after failing in many other ways to restrain Japan, China stood on the side of the Allies and declared war on Germany in August 1917.^[7] In other words, China saw participation in the war as an opportunity to gain national independence.

China's contributions to the war

In the pursuit of national independence and a heightened position in the international arena, China actively participated in the war and enforced a vigorous international policy. During this period, internationalism was on the rise in China. Yet, unlike Europeans and Americans who were directly involved with military conflicts, China participated in the war indirectly by sending tens of thousands of labourers to help the Allies against the Axis.^[8]

As mentioned above, the Chinese government longed for a change to strengthen China's weak status in the world arena. After war broke out, the Beijing government first thought of alternative ways, rather than directly entering the war, to pursue its diplomatic goal. Then, early in 1915, [Liang Shiyi \(1869-1933\)](#) served as Yuan Shikai's finance minister, and significantly, his associate [Ye Gongchuo \(1880-1968\)](#) had worked on a labourers-as-soldiers' scheme that aimed to use [labourers](#) to pursue China's war policy. On 17 March, the French Ministry of War discussed using the scheme

for the construction of military roads.^[9] China was still **neutral** in the war at that point. Therefore, in order to avoid Germany's accusation that China favoured the Allies, the recruitment of Chinese labourers was effected through French private companies instead of the government. A retired French army lieutenant-colonel, **Georges Trupitel**, and a Chinese private organization, the Huimin Company, were initially in charge of recruitment. In this way, the first group of Chinese labourers arrived in France on 24 August 1916. Later on, other channels were also used, such as the Louis Grillet Mission in early 1917. Britain initially refused China's proposal to provide labouring assistance. However, by late April 1917, Britain had recruited about 35,000 Chinese workers in France, for the British military. The number even exceeded those working for France.^[10] **Guoqi Xu's** research indicates that the number of Chinese labourers was approximately 140,000. ^[11]

Although the Chinese labourers' link to the war has been largely neglected by scholars, in fact, they not only joined the Allies but also worked extremely hard: at least ten hours per day, seven days a week, with few days off. The French praised them as sober, strong, enduring and peaceful, and as first-class workers who could be made into excellent soldiers, capable of exemplary bearing under contemporaneous **artillery** fire. Although Chinese labourers were not directly involved in the battles, many of them lost their lives in Europe. The exact number is unknown, but the minimum would be 2,000, of whom at least 700 were killed by the Germans. Approximately 5,000 Chinese workers died either on their way to Europe or in France.^[12] At the same time, the European journey provided the Chinese labourers with a window to see the world. Most Chinese labourers in Europe were illiterate peasants, but members of Chinese elites who were accustomed to studying in Europe, also played an important role. For example, in 1917, **Li Shizeng (1882-1973)**, a member of the Chinese elite, who had been educated in pre-War France, founded *The Chinese Labour Journal (Huagong Zazhi)* in Paris, which provided Chinese labourers with knowledge and information about China and Europe. The **YMCA** (Young Men's Christian Association) also sent about 150 members to France. Those Chinese educators later became a new generation of Chinese political activists, and many of them played an important role in the Chinese communist revolution. This global link also contributed to the rise of internationalism in China.

While China's policy makers paid much attention to China's relationship with the war, including the decision to join the Allies, they were mostly indifferent to their people's welfare.^[13] This reflects the policy makers' desire for internationalism, but the failed attempt to revive the Chinese nation through international cooperation led to the rise of Chinese **nationalism** in the wake of the Paris Conference.

Self-determinism and nationalism in China

Not only did the war have an impact on the rise of Chinese internationalism, but its result also changed the course of Chinese history. The Paris Peace Conference in January 1919 was a pivotal point in modern Chinese history which directly gave rise to the **May Fourth Movement**, and the turn of an important intellectual tide from **Woodrow Wilson's (1856-1924)** to **Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924)**

self-determination: in other words, from the liberal democratic ideal to the leftist revolutionary radicalism.

Wilsonianism and China

After the war, the Paris Peace Conference, attended by diplomats from more than thirty-two countries and nationalities, was aimed at creating Peace Treaties for the post-war world. It was aimed at reshaping borders and countries and establishing a new international order. The Chinese people, like many other people in the colonial or semi-colonial world, tried to use the conference in a diplomatic way to change their country's weak status and recover their sovereignty and independence in the world arena. They had great faith in Wilsonianism, which was propagated by American President Woodrow Wilson in his famous [Fourteen Points](#) address. He argued the principle of justice: that all peoples and nationalities had the right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they were strong or weak. The address was delivered in 1917. Soon, everything relating to Wilson's important speeches and ideals was published in the Chinese media. The American Revolutionary ideals and political system, introduced by Chinese intellectuals, became desirable models for China. The Chinese thought that the [United States](#) under the leadership of President Wilson was willing to help China overcome decades of defeat and humiliation and achieve recognition in international society.^[14] Therefore, many leading Chinese intellectuals held out great hope for the Peace Conference.

Wilsonianism had an especially noticeable impact on liberalism in China. [Hu Shi \(1891-1962\)](#), the leading figure of Chinese liberals was the most faithful Wilsonian. He was mostly influenced by his Ph.D. advisor at Columbia University, the pragmatist philosopher [John Dewey \(1859-1952\)](#), a strong supporter of Wilson during the war. Hu's faith in Wilson was shared by many other Chinese intellectuals of the time, such as [Cai Yuanpei \(1868-1940\)](#), President of Beijing University and [Chen Duxiu \(1879-1942\)](#), Dean of Letters at the same institution. Besides liberals, [Kang Youwei \(1858-1927\)](#), a famous conservative intellectual, was also attracted by Wilson's ideals. In a way, Wilsonianism had a broad impact on Chinese society. But, not all intellectuals believed in Wilsonianism. For example, by late 1918, [Li Dazhao \(1889-1927\)](#) (the head librarian at Beijing University and a cofounder with Chen Duxiu of the Chinese communist party in the 1920s), was much more fascinated by Bolshevism in Russia and socialism in Europe than by Wilsonianism. However, he did not represent the popular stand.^[15]

Internationalism giving way to nationalism

The Chinese people had high hopes for the Peace Conference and counted on Wilson's support during it. However, the results caused them great dissatisfaction since, despite intense negotiation with the Western powers and Japan, a compromise was made whereby Qingdao, Germany's former colony in China, was handed over to Japan. The conference neglected China's request for adjustment of the unequal treaties that it had signed with foreign powers over the previous decades.

Even worse, the world powers passed China's right to one another without allowing the Chinese delegation to participate in the negotiation process. The decision shocked the Chinese people. For them, clearly, Wilson had betrayed his promise at the Paris Conference. The new international order based on the broken promises of justice and self-determination became a point of disillusionment for Chinese politicians and intellectuals. It resulted in a strong backlash, with a series of protest movements in China. The May Fourth Movement in 1919 was the first and most important one. On 3 May 1919, the day the news reached China, Chinese people, especially in Beijing, Shanghai and Shandong, organized large protest rallies. On 4 May, about 3,000 students in Beijing gathered in front of Tiananmen Gate carrying signs with phrases such as 'Give Us Back Qingdao!', 'Refuse to Sign the Peace Treaty!' and 'Oppose Power Politics!'. The students vented their anger at Wilson's betrayal and called him a liar. Chinese both in China and abroad dispatched numerous telegrams to the Chinese delegation in Paris. They demanded that delegates refuse to sign the peace treaty. ^[16] The May Fourth Movement marked a watershed in modern Chinese history and its significance has been emphasized widely in academia. Indeed, the growing sense of national unity and self-strengthening in China was one of the most far-reaching effects of World War I. For instance, a great number of Chinese people considered that the result of the war was a compromise among strong nations, which reminded them that the world was still dominated by the strong powers. Therefore, they believed that China must strengthen itself by mobilizing its people and modernizing its culture. In that regard, internationalism was giving a way to nationalism in the wake of the war.

New research angle of Chinese national history

Previously, historians of China both in China and the West have held that the May Fourth Movement was an important turning point in modern Chinese history. Scholars might propose the May Fourth Movement to be a case through which to examine the rise of Chinese nationalism in the context of the decline of Wilsonianism and China's failed pursuit of internationalism. As [Chow Tse-tsung \(1916-2007\)](#) stated, May Fourth was a movement to achieve national independence, the emancipation of the individual and a just society. For Chinese historians, the May Fourth Movement, 1919, is most commonly described as the beginning of a new era, the awakening of Chinese nationalism. This results in the problem that historians have long viewed the May Fourth Movement in the context of Chinese history. Along with this, studies in the international context often focus on the impact of the [Bolshevik revolution](#) of socialist ideas and more generally on the transformation of Chinese nationalism and on the early development of Chinese communism. ^[17]

The traditional view of the May Fourth Movement, however, overlooks the fact that although it was part of a nationalist movement, it was also part of global political process of the anti-colonial protest. As such, the May Fourth Movement should be examined in the global context. After the Paris Conference, actors in distant areas in the world, including China, began to understand the anti-colonial activism as part of a worldwide movement. Researchers have begun to seek global connections for the nationalist movement of the May Fourth, through the analysis of the effects of global networks and transfers of the protests on and after May Fourth 1919. However, research that

follows this approach is yet to be conducted.

Conclusion

As a result, the re-examination of mutual influences between China and the war opens new research angles and directions for future studies about the First World War. On the one hand, it is important to recognize the significance of the war in the Chinese view: China saw it as an opportunity to boost its own international status and therefore sent labourers to work for the Allies, which makes an unforgettable chapter of the history of World War I. On the other hand, a global perspective allows historians of modern China to re-examine the connection between the consequences of the Paris Conference and the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement in China. In the beginning, China contributed to the war with the aim of realizing its internationalization. Right after the war, Chinese hopes for a new international order in the light of Wilsonianism were destroyed and instead, the country suffered harsher humiliation due to the unequal resolution by the super powers. Therefore, nationalism marked by the May Fourth Movement was on the rapid rise in China with the withdrawal of both internationalism and Wilsonianism. As Akira Iriye stated, the polarity of nationalism and internationalism was particularly marked in the decades preceding World War I.^[18] China's involvement with World War I and the post-war settlement with international society demonstrated how the rise of post-war nationalism in China had a complicated relationship with its wartime internationalism.

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Notes

1. ↑ A large amount of research on World War I with a focus on Europe can be found in Higham, Robin and Dennis E. Showalter (eds): *Researching World War I: A Handbook*, Westport 2003; Woodward, David R.: *America and World War I: A Selected Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Sources*, New York 2007.
2. ↑ Xu, Guoqi: *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization*, New York 2005; Xu, Guoqi: *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge, MA 2011; Manela, Erez: *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford 2007.
3. ↑ Manela's book also could be considered as using a global history approach.
4. ↑ Quoted from Xu, *China and the Great War* 2005, p. 7.
5. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

6. † In 1897, Germany forced the Qing government to sign an unequal treaty, leasing it the territory around Jiaozhou Bay in the south of Shandong Province. Qingdao was previously a village, but quickly developed into an industrial city that served German business interests in China.
7. † See Craft, Stephen G.: *Angling for an Invitation to Paris: China's Entry into the First World War*, in: *The International History Review*, 16/1 (1994), pp. 1-24.
8. † Besides Xu Guoqi's two books, see also Summerskill, Michael Brynmôr: *China on the Western Front: Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War*, Michigan 1982.
9. † Xu, *China and the Great War* 2005, p. 117.
10. † *Ibid.*, p. 126.
11. † The number varies in different sources.
12. † Xu, *China and the Great War* 2005, pp. 141-145.
13. † La Fargue, Thomas Edward: *China and the World War*, Volume 12, New York 1973, p. 236.
14. † Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment* 2007, p. 106.
15. † *Ibid.*, p. 110.
16. † *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.
17. † *Ibid.*, p. 195.
18. † Iriye, Akira: *Internationalism*, in: Mazlish, Bruce/Iriye, Akira (eds.): *The global history reader*, New York 2005, p. 202.

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