

China in the First World War: A Forgotten Army in Search of International Recognition

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Abstract

The First World War (1914-1918) has been widely considered as a European conflict and a struggle for dominance among the European empires. However, it is important to note that non-European communities from various parts of the world such as the Chinese, Indians, Egyptians and Fijians also played significant roles in the war. This paper intends to provide an analysis of the involvement of China in the First World War. During the outbreak of the war in 1914, the newly established Republic of China (1912) encountered numerous problems and uncertainties. However, in 1917 the Republic of China entered the First World War, supporting the Allied Forces, with the aim of elevating its international position. This paper focuses on the treatment that China had received from the international community such as Britain, the United States, France and Japan after the war. Specifically, this paper

argues that the betrayal towards China by the Western powers during the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement served as an intellectual turning point for China. It had triggered the radicalization of Chinese intellectual thoughts. In addition, China's socialization during the Paris Peace Conference had been crucial to the conception of the West's negative identity in the eyes of the Chinese that has remained in the minds of its future leaders. It has also reinforced China's uncompromising attitude over territorial disputes till today. This study also highlights the contribution made by the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC). As the involvement of CLC has hardly been recognized after the First World War, this work not only elaborates China's involvement in the war but equally important, it also focuses on the role of the CLC which has been long forgotten.

Keywords: *China, First World War, Paris Peace Conference, Chinese Labour Corps, identity*

1. Introduction

For centuries China had always considered itself to be the centre of civilizations and constructed an identity that was far superior to other countries. However, by the nineteenth century China experienced a decline in its power. The end of 19th century marked China signing unequal treaties due to pressure from European powers such as Britain, France, Russia and Germany. These European powers had established colonies all over China. After the Revolution of 1911, China restructured itself into a modern state and adopted a new identity based on Western liberal democratic ideas. The desire for a new national identity was driven by the motivation to strengthen and enable China to defend itself against external forces. During the outbreak of the First World War in

1914, China faced many external uncertainties. Despite all the problems in 1917, China issued a formal declaration of war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This paper centres on the reasons behind China's entry into the First World War. This paper also seeks to analyse China's role and its achievements in the war. Apart from that, this paper is an attempt to provide answers as to how the Paris Peace Conference had influenced the conception of China's identity in world politics.

After the Introduction, the paper is divided into eight sections. Section 2 provides the background information on the history of China in the 19th century. Section 3 discusses China's efforts to construct a new identity in the early years of the Republic. Section 4 analyses China's entry into the First World War and Section 5 highlights the role of Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) and its contributions to the Allied Forces. Section 6 discusses the Paris Peace Conference and its impact on China and Section 7 demonstrates the reconstruction of China's identity after the First World War. The final sections, Sections 8 and 9, provide a summary of the major findings of this paper based on the earlier research questions.

2. Background: The Decline of Chinese Hegemony in the 19th Century

The discussion on China's entry into the First World War cannot be fully understood without prior analyses on the fall of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in the 19th century. Part of its decline could be attributed to the dynasty's refusal to reform itself to new ideas and technology. Other than that, the decadence and corruption within the Qing court, incapable and backward leaders, outdated military technology and administration, internal struggle among its officials and civil wars also played a part in

its weakening power (Kaufman, 2010: 1-33).

By the 19th century, the Chinese ancient customs and traditions such as the mandate of heaven, middle kingdom, sense of superiority over other races, the social hierarchy, were no more relevant in the modern age compared to the Western technology (Clubb, 1964: 11). It must be noted that Western technology and military power were also some of the major causes that contributed to China's weaknesses. In fact, the conservative Qing officials were persistent to retain its originality and their refusal to conduct any reforms had contributed to the restriction of China's growth. This factor also deterred the Chinese from acquiring Western technology and scientific knowledge.

Some progressive Chinese officials within the Qing court embarked on efforts to conduct reforms and change in accordance with time. It was initiated following various humiliating defeats at the hands of the European powers. The effort was known as the Self-Strengthening movement in China that occurred roughly during 1850-1890. The objective of the movement was to emulate Western science, technology and administration. Its ultimate aim was to transform China into a modern country equal with other European states.

However, this movement was unable to gain the support from the conservative high officials of the Qing Dynasty including the Empress Dowager Cixi (1836-1908). Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908) attempted another similar initiative of reformation and strengthening. Unfortunately the "reform" only lasted for hundred days. The movement was also known as the "Hundred Days of Reform" (*ibid.*). Similar to the Self-Strengthening movement, it failed to transform and modernise China.

In 1898, the Qing Dynasty signed the Sino-German Treaty that relinquished sovereign control of Kiachow Bay in China's Northern Shandong Province to the German Empire (Atwell, 1985: 4-6). One may

consider the event of losing Chinese territories to the European powers as the “scramble for China”. Even Japan, an Asian country, was able to force the Qing Dynasty to surrender Formosa (Taiwan) after defeating the Chinese during the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895 (Jansen, 2002: 335). These wars had massively weakened the Chinese government. By the end of the 19th century the European powers such as Britain, France, Russia and Germany had created colonies all over China.

Another major problem that weakened China was the constant internal rebellions. Prior to the 19th century, China was considered as a major power in Asia. In fact, the Chinese had a sense of superiority over other nations. However, following the defeat by the European powers, China was reduced to a semi-colonial country, “carved up like a melon” or “scrambled” by foreign powers. It is crucial to discuss China’s domestic political and international standing in the 19th century as the background in order to understand China’s actions in the early 20th century. China felt inferior and humiliated by the European powers. The negative experience led China to construct a new identity for itself.

3. Construction of a New Identity

In international relations, identity can be defined as a set of ideas and images about how a state should behave and guide its interaction with other states (Morris, 2012: 137). A state’s identity is influenced by social factors such as history, collective memory, religion, ethnicity, cultures and traditions. Morris argues that a state identity is a “set of broadly accepted representations of a country’s cultural and societal beliefs about its own orientation in the international political area, as manifested by the rhetoric of official policy academia and popular culture.” (*ibid.*) Hence, a state identity can be conceptualized as constructed boundaries of acceptable behaviour in international relations.

History plays a major role in the formation of a state's identity. History binds together the various societies within the state. However, the relations between past, present and identity are not predetermined but rely on the elites' interpretation of the past (Clubb, 1964: 47). Therefore, the past events are made relevant in the present through collective memory, viable representations of the past that occur on the collective level.

Following the Opium Wars and the failure of the Self-Strengthening movement, China faced an identity crisis. The country was desperate to reconstruct its identity. Dr Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Kuomintang, led the Revolution of 1911 and overthrew the Qing Dynasty (1866-1925). The revolution brought an end to the monarchy system in China and the Republic of China was established in 1912 (*ibid.*: 67-73). However, China was not united and it was still divided among various warlords (Lary, 2007: 29-31). The leadership was passed over from Sun Yat-sen to Yuan Shikai, the former general in the Qing's army.

It is interesting to note that China was socializing itself into a modern state and the previously accepted social structure started to erode and was replaced by new ideas (Pye, 1985: 184). Furthermore, China's socialization with the European powers during the 19th century had forced the Chinese to accept Western concepts such as state, citizenship and nation. The desire for a new national identity was driven by the motivation to strengthen and enable China to defend itself against external forces.

The new identity that China had embarked on after the fall of the Qing Dynasty was based on three major pillars: Chinese nationalism, transformation of China into a modern and democratic republic, respect for international norms and equal treatment by others.

Chinese nationalism or *Zhōnghuá Mínzú* is defined as a united China irrespective of ethnic, cultural and religious differences (*ibid.*).

It is evident in the design of the flag of the Republic of China from 1912-1928, that displayed five stripes representing the “five great races” of China: red represented Han Chinese, yellow represented Manchus, blue represented Mongols, white collectively represented both Huis and Uyghurs, and black for Tibetans. The idea of Chinese nationalism was basically to develop a “national consciousness” so as to unite the people living in China in the face of foreign aggression (Sharman, 1968: 94).

The second pillar of the new identity created a modern and democratic republic for China. It was based on Sun Yat-sen’s Principle of *Mínquán* or democracy which emphasized the relevance of constitutional government and separation of powers (*ibid.*). It is interesting to note that while the Republic of China attempted to modernise the administrative system it also incorporated traditional Chinese administrative tradition to create a government of five branches (each of which was called a *yuàn*, literally “court”). The Legislative Yuan, the Executive Yuan and the Judicial Yuan came from the Western Montesquieuan thought; the Control Yuan and the Examination Yuan originated from Chinese tradition (Clubb, 1964: 73).

The third pillar was respect for international norms and equal treatment by others. China was still recovering from the internal political turmoil; therefore, it extremely required international support and protection against foreign aggression. As China was reforming its domestic politics based on Western democratic values, it also looked upon Western democratic countries as models. The Chinese leaders of that time were convinced that once they became “modern” and “westernized”, the international community would treat them equally and fairly.

Despite being weak, China would like to project itself as a modern state and enhance its international prestige. Hence, it was willing to participate in the First World War in 1917. China was convinced that by

contributing its labours, it would win a seat at the peace conference, and thus regain its former territories held by the foreigners (Lary, 2007: 53-54).

4. China and the First World War

The First World War started in Europe in August 1914. China entered the war three years later to support the Allied Forces. China had interest in the war in Europe especially on Germany's colony in Shandong with great trepidation (O'Neill, 1993: 276). In 1914, during the outbreak of the First World War, Japan took the opportunity to attack the German colony in Shandong. The Japanese troops invaded the province of Shandong and managed to expel the German forces. Finally, the Japanese army was able to take control of the Qingdao territory, Shandong. China was extremely concerned with the presence of Japanese troops in the province. However, it was too weak to send its own troops to counterbalance the presence of Japanese troops. China longed for the return of Shandong province upon the end of the war.

Hence, it requested the support of the United States of America (USA) for a more congenial approach and solution. Unfortunately, the USA was unable to provide the support expected by China (Spence, 1999: 282). In 1915, China negotiated with the Japanese government for the return of Qingdao, but sadly, the outcome of the negotiation was in favour of the Japanese whereby the former German rights in Shandong were to be transferred to Japan and it would continue to lease it from China (*ibid.*).

President Yuan Shikai of China was not capable of objecting to the Japanese army occupation in the province of Shandong. Moreover, he was indebted to the Japanese government for supporting his intentions in declaring himself the new emperor of China. Hence, President Yuan

consented to the Japanese demands to occupy Shandong and Manchuria. However, the Chinese legislature refused to accept the demands made by the Japanese government. The demands were eventually made known to the public and it triggered widespread anti-Japanese demonstrations and national boycott of Japanese goods. In addition, it had also contributed to the decline in the popularity of Yuan's government among its people (*ibid.*).

China remained neutral until 1917 but the action that triggered it to enter the war was due to the attack by German submarine on the French ship *Athos* which carried 900 Chinese nationals on board for France to work behind the war line. As early as 1916, prior to China's declaration of war against Germany and the Empire of Austria-Hungary, Chinese living in the British and French concessions were employed by their colonial masters to work in the warzones in Europe as "coolies" (Lary, 2007: 52-53). Their tasks were to work on front line duty by doing manual labour.

The attack happened on 24th February 1917 and resulted in the drowning of 543 Chinese nationals. The German government refused to issue any formal apology despite China's protest. Hence, in March 1917 China decided to break diplomatic relations with Germany (*ibid.*).

The main factor for China's decision to enter the First World War was rather diplomatic than to really participate in combat and defeat the Germans. As mentioned earlier, China intended to increase its prestige and respect from the European powers. At the time, China was convinced that the Allied Powers would be fair and just during the post-war conference to pressure Japan to return Qingdao, Shandong, if China were to provide assistance to defeat the German forces. The Chinese government wanted a gradual return of all its former territories such as Hong Kong and Shanghai but it was too weak to make any claims. Hence, it had to put on hold its plans except for making use of the

opportunity due to the outbreak of the First World War in reclaiming Shandong from the Germans and Japanese.

It is noteworthy to mention that there was an intense debate within China whether or not to participate in the war. Some members of the National Assembly such as Liang Qichao put forward pragmatic political arguments that the Allied powers would defeat the German and Austria-Hungary Alliance. Therefore, China should align itself with the French and British. Liang Qichao's arguments were in accordance with the stand of the Chinese Premier, Duan Qirui. However, Sun Yat-sen, Vice-President Feng Guozhang and President Li Yuanhong opposed to the idea of getting involved in the First World War (Mühlhahn, 2016). They were in favour of China's neutrality. Sun Yat-sen was convinced that Germany posed less threat to China compared to Britain and France. Historically, both Britain and France had done more damage to China such as the Second Opium War, also known as the Anglo-French Expedition to China (1856-1860). In fact, Sun considered Germany as a potential future ally for China to balance Japanese influence in the region. In addition, Sun also argued that it was morally unacceptable for China to participate in the war by siding with the imperialist powers that had bullied China in the past (*ibid.*).

Although the justification used by the Chinese government was to regain its lost territories but Sun disagreed as he was convinced that "material gains" could not compensate for the "spiritual loss" or else China would be no better than the other imperial powers. There was a split in the Chinese National Assembly between those in favour of the war led by Premier Duan Qirui and those who opposed led by President Li Yuanhong and members of the Kuomintang Party (KMT). Meanwhile, on 1st July 1917 the monarchist warlords led by General Zhang Xun captured Beijing and attempted to restore the Qing Dynasty. President Li Yuanhong was forced to resign but Duan Qirui was able to

restore his position as the Premier. In less than two weeks, the Republican army foiled the monarchist plans but they had caused political instability and uncertainty. With the departure of Li Yuanhong as the President of the republic, Duan Qirui was able to consolidate his position in the Northern government. Therefore, a month after the recapturing of Beijing, on 14th August 1917, China declared war against Germany without any opposition from Li Yuanhong (*ibid.*). Apart from domestic factors, the United States of America also had influenced China's decision to enter into war with Germany.

After China had issued a formal declaration of war against Germany, the Chinese government deported German and Austrian populations from China. In addition, China also seized the assets of several German companies operating in major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Guangdong and Shanghai, most notably the Deutsche Asiatische Bank in Shanghai. In 1918, the Chinese government also offered to send 40,000 soldiers to Europe to fight along with the Allied Forces. However, Britain and France rejected the offer (Ji, 2003: 52).

5. China's Sacrifice during the First World War: The Chinese Labour Corps (CLC)

The Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) was a group of workers from China who served with the Allied Forces during the First World War. As mentioned earlier, Chinese had been working in the battlefields prior to China's declaration of war against Germany. The idea of sending Chinese labourers to Europe during the First World War was actually originated by Liang Shiyi in June 1915. He was one of those in favour of China's participation in the First World War. In fact, he believed that China would benefit both politically and financially if it were to send labourers to Europe.¹ Furthermore, he also hoped to increase his own

popularity and interest by supporting the Allied Forces. It must be noted that Chinese labourers working abroad was not uncommon those days due to the fact that there were already Chinese working in gold mines as far as South Africa in the 19th century (Yap and Leong, 1996: 510).

Initially, Britain was not in favour of having the Chinese labourers but it had to change its policy when it encountered heavy losses during the Battle of Somme (1st July to 18th November 1916). The Allied Forces had faced shortage of manpower caused by the war casualties. It must be noted that the French had shown keen interest in recruiting Chinese to serve as non-military personnel. Negotiations between China and the Allied Forces were carried out in private to protect the Chinese government and its neutrality in 1915. Finally, on 14th May 1916, the Chinese government agreed to supply 50,000 labourers and the first group of Chinese labourers left Tianjin for Dagu and Marseilles in July 1916.² In fact, the Allied Forces also relied on the local indigenous people from their colonies such as India, Fiji, Malta, South Africa and Mauritius to work at the front lines (Fawcett, 2000: 33-111).

There were 140,000 men serving in the CLC for the French and British forces.³ The CLC did not participate in combat; their duties encompassed digging trenches, filling sandbags, repairing roads and railways, unloading goods from trains and warships, and building bunkers (Spence, 1999: 276). Most of them were recruited from Shandong province because they were considered physically strong and capable of working in harsh conditions. In addition, labourers also came from other parts of China such as Anhui, Hubei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Hunan, Liaoning and Gansu (Fawcett, 2000: 35). According to Daryl Klein who served as a Second Lieutenant in the CLC, the labourers were comprised of men from different backgrounds such as peasants, ex-soldiers, bakers, carpenters, former teachers, blacksmiths and stonemasons. For example, Sergeant Sen Shin-lin had served in a warlord's army and Sergeant Tang

Chi-chang had been a teacher in Nanjing before joining the CLC (*ibid.*: 36). They were promised to be paid and a percentage of each worker's wages would be sent back to his family in China.

The labourers were gathered at the Chinese port cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tianjin and Weihaiwei before they boarded ships to Europe. However not all were accepted as labourers because they were subjected to health inspections. Some labourers were rejected due to poor health conditions such as tuberculosis, venereal diseases, trachoma and bad teeth. Upon passing the health inspection, the labourers were given tags with serial numbers and their names both in Romanised and Chinese characters. The journey roughly took two months and the CLC were crammed at the bowels of their transport ships.⁴ The routes taken by the CLC to Europe were either eastward via the Panama Canal or sailing to Canada or westward via the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. These routes were selected to confuse the German navy and to prevent being spotted by the U-Boats (*ibid.*: 40). It is interesting to note that none of the ships were attacked by the German forces despite their presence in the northern waters of China.

Upon arriving in Europe, the CLC were sent to various camps such as Noyelles at Somme. Since they were not combatant soldiers, no army-type uniforms were provided; instead they were allowed to wear their own Chinese native clothing. However, the Allied Forces provided a cap badge with the initials of "C.L.C." that the Chinese labourers had to wear on their sleeves. The Allied Forces also awarded the labourers the motto *Labor Vincit Omnia* (LVO) [Labour Conquers All] (*ibid.*: 39).

The living conditions for the CLC were harsh but they had sufficient food. The CLC were placed in camps surrounded with barbed wires. It is interesting to note that the Chinese cooked their own food in the camp and they had two meals per day: the morning meal before work and dinner in the evening. They were provided with basic equipment such as

boots, two pairs of socks, enamelled mug, towel, soap, one blanket during summer and three in the winter. They were expected to work up to ten hours per day for seven days every week. They were allowed to correspond with their families in China with the conditions that the letters would be strictly vetted. For example, Zhong Yangchong and C.W. Sung, the members of CLC, wrote to their wives in China describing how they celebrated the Dragon Boat Festival and how they managed to impress the French military officers by performing Chinese traditional dance during the festival (*ibid.*: 54). While in Europe, the CLC had continued to practice Chinese customs and traditions such as the Lunar New Year, Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Feast.⁵ The CLC celebrated these feast days by staging operas, making paper lanterns and preparing special meals. In addition, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) used to send men and women to organise recreation such as screening of silent movies and talks for the CLC (*ibid.*: 45-46). They also provided assistance to some illiterate CLC members to write letters to their family.

The CLC were also assured that they would not be exposed to dangers while working in Europe. However, it was far from the truth as many CLC were killed by German bombings while working in the frontlines. It was expected as they were given hazardous tasks such as carrying live ammunition and collecting unexploded bombs from the battlefields. Some of the CLC were trained by the Allied Forces and eventually became experts such as the Tank Corps depot at Auchy-les-Hesdin.⁶

It is noteworthy to mention that the Chinese community in general and particularly the CLC had tremendously contributed to the Allied Forces during the First World War. Some of the CLC were skilled enough to perform repairs of the female and male Mark V tanks. About 70 CLC managed the camouflage section that was responsible for

painting the Allied tanks (*ibid.*: 42-45). Besides, the CLC Chinese from other parts of the British colonies also had contributed in the war efforts against the Central Powers. For example, Eu Tong-sen, an Unofficial Member of the Federal Council of the Malay States, offered to finance building a Mark IV male tank worth 6,000 pounds (Sharp, 2009: 93; *The Singapore Free Press*, 26th June 1915). The tank was later painted with the design of two eyes similar to those on a sea-going Chinese junk and was named Fan-tan (*ibid.*).

In fact, after the Armistice, the situation had worsened as orders were given to the CLC to clear the battlefields of unburied corpses that died due to the outbreak of Spanish Flu. According to the British and French records, around 2,000 CLC died while performing their duties in Europe between 1918 to 1919. Some of them had contracted the Spanish Flu pandemic.⁷

It is estimated that 10,000 CLC died during the First World War but Chinese sources had argued that the number maybe almost double. It is interesting to note that the last survivor of the CLC was Zhu Guisheng who passed away on 5th March 2002 at the aged of 106 years old. He died in La Rochelle as he was one of the former CLC members who had remained in Europe after the war. In fact, he had also served with the French Army during the Second World War (1939-1945) (O'Neill, 2012: 120).

Most of the CLC who perished during the war were buried in France, Belgium and the United Kingdom. These burial areas were Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension, Arques-la-Bataille British Cemetery, Beaulencourt British Cemetery, Caudry British Cemetery, Ebblinghem Military Cemetery in France, New Irish Farm Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery near Ypres, Poperinge Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Reningelst Military Cemetery in Belgium, Efford Cemetery of Plymouth, Shorncliffe

Military Cemetery near Folkestone, and Anfield Cemetery of Liverpool, United Kingdom (Fawcett, 2000: 33-111). Members of the CLC were buried with the Commonwealth dead but separated from the European graves. Evidently, the Europeans' attitude at that time regarded themselves far superior to the Asians. Chinese must be buried in their own plots and not be close to the European areas. However, it is interesting to note that some Chinese cemeteries were selected based on its *fengshui* (Fawcett, 2015: 199). For example, the Chinese had chosen the cemetery at Noyelles-sur-Mer, France, due to its location on a slope facing a stream.

The Allied Forces decided that the CLC was not eligible for any military awards or medals as they were not directly involved in combat. Hence, the members of CLC were only eligible for Meritorious Service Medal (Holmes, 2011: 345). There were only five members of the CLC who had been awarded the Meritorious Service Medal such as Liu Dien Chen who had rallied his men under shellfire in March 1918 (*ibid.*). In addition, the British presented the British War Medals to all CLC members as recognition of their contribution to the war. However, no mention had been made for decades until military ceremonies at the Chinese cemetery in Noyelles-sur-Mer in 2002 (*ibid.*).

In November 1918, the first group of CLC left Europe to return to China. Only 3,000 to 5,000 members of the French-recruited CLC had stayed back in France.⁸ They were pioneers of the Chinese community in France. It is interesting to note that after the war, there were 1,850 qualified Chinese workers originally members of the CLC working at metallurgical industries in France. Most of them, eventually, married local French women and two of them had lived long enough to be awarded the French Legion of Honour in 1989.

The CLC members had encountered life experiences in Europe and been able to inform their fellow Chinese of their experience upon

returning home. The fact that the European powers especially Britain and France had to rely on them during the war had boost the morale of the Chinese. For example, Chen Duxiu, one of the Chinese intellectual elites of the New Culture Movement, had considered the contribution of CLC as national pride (Hayford, 1990: 22-27). According to Chen, “while the sun does not set on the British Empire, neither does it set on Chinese workers abroad.” (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, the CLC’s participation in the First World War had also helped to inspire future Chinese leaders such as Zhao Enlai and Deng Xiaoping to gain the confidence to travel to Europe (France) for their education in the 1920s. After the war, China was to discover the reality and true cost of its entry into the conflict.

6. The Paris Peace Conference and China

The First World War came to an end with the armistice signed between Germany and the Allied Forces on 11th November 1918. The commence of Paris Peace Conference on 18th January 1919 led China into euphoria thinking that it was time for China to make its claims and demands during the Conference for the return of Qingdao and Shandong province from the defeated Germany. Moreover, China also would like to end the Japanese occupation in Shandong and hoped that France, Britain and the United States would support its efforts.

Hence, the Chinese delegation led by its Foreign Minister, Lou Tseng-Tsiang left Beijing for Paris with full expectations. China intended to forward several demands during the Paris Peace Conference. China requested, first, for the abolition of extraterritoriality; second, Japan to return Qingdao and Shandong province; and third, to be given the rights to control and manage the railways of eastern China (Clubb, 1964, 83). In addition, China also aspired to restore the leased territory

of Kiaochow and cancellation of all German railway, mining, and other rights in Shandong and the annulment of extraterritorial rights hitherto enjoyed by the subjects of Germany and Austria-Hungary (*ibid.*).

China's representatives, Minister Lou Tseng-Tsiang and Wellington Khoo, had presented the country's demands (Lary, 2006: 54-55). According to Khoo, with China's declaration of war in 1917, it had abrogated of all treaties and agreements between the Republic of China and Germany and Austria-Hungary (Macmillan, 2002: 322-345). In addition, Khoo also appealed to the international community to respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the Japanese representative to the Versailles Treaty, Baron Makino had refused to accept the Chinese argument (*ibid.*).

Most of the European powers were less interested in China's appeal. China only had the United States on its side. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States was assertive to present China's case during the Paris Peace Conference (Griswold, 1938: 239-268). China's representative was unable to be present throughout the conference sessions compared to the Japanese.⁹ Therefore, China had to rely on the representative from the United States to speak on its behalf. Instead of listening to China's appeal, the Paris Peace Conference chose to accept Baron Makino contention that Japan had the right to Shandong Province. On 28th June 1919, all parties involved in the First World War signed the Treaty of Versailles except for China as it decided to abstain from the final ceremony (Clubb, 1964: 86).

China's entry into the war was not due to the European powers, but rather because of Japan. China believed that participating in the war would balance the Japanese hegemony in East Asia. Moreover, China would like to regain its lost territory from the defeated Germany. However, China's hopes and dreams were destroyed when the Allied powers during the Conference decided to favour the Japanese rather than

the Chinese. Hence, China had failed in its attempt to negotiate for the return of Shandong and the Japanese continued to occupy the province.

Another disappointing moment for China during the Paris Peace Conference was the total denial of the contribution of CLC. Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary at that time, claimed that China's contribution during the war had involved neither "the expenditure of a single shilling nor the loss of a single life". In fact, the Allied Forces attempted to put the blame on the CLC for the outbreak of Spanish flu.

Neither the French nor the British were actually interested in upholding international justice. For the British their goal at Paris Peace Conference was to maintain their imperial power and not to achieve international justice. Similarly, the French at that time was not interested in championing the rights of weaker states or justice except to demand compensation and retribution for the losses during the First World War.

It is noteworthy to mention that the Chinese delegates adopted the Wilsonian ideas in order to gain again political and diplomatic support for their claims. Nevertheless, the Chinese delegates were disappointed with the outcome of the Peace Conference.

Nicholas Keegan who wrote about Minister Lou Tseng-Tsiang argues that "China in coming to the Peace Conference, has relied on the Fourteen Points set forth by President Wilson and formerly adopted by the Powers associated against Germany. She has relied on the spirit of honourable relationship between states which is to open a new era in the world and inaugurate the League of Nations. She has relied, above all, on justice and equity of her case. The result has been, to her, a grievous disappointment." (Keegan, 1999).

Similarly, it was reported in *The Washington Post* as early as 1919 itself: "Basing their attitude on the Wilsonian idea of the League of Nations, the Chinese delegates make no secret of their hope that out of the peace conference will come a new China, free of all alien

interference. Nor do they hesitate to affirm that unless the Far Eastern question is solved the hope of preventing and or minimizing the chances of future wars by the League of Nations is illusory.”¹⁰

7. Reconstruction of China’s Identity in the Post-First World War Era

After the First World War, the sense of betrayal and humiliation was very strong in China. In addition, at that time China also had to endure the feeling of inferiority compared to Japan especially after being defeated by the Japanese twice within a period of less than half a century. The first defeat was during the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895 when the Japanese imperial army vanquished the Chinese troops; the second defeat was at the Paris Peace Conference when the Chinese delegation was unsuccessful in making its claim over the province of Shandong compared to the Japanese delegation.

It was extremely difficult for China to come to terms with these two events. It was a hard psychological blow to China’s identity. Historically, China had always considered itself an advanced nation compared to Japan. China believed that Japan was culturally less superior because it was the Chinese who introduced the manuscripts and brought Buddhism to the Japanese. However, due to advancement in science and technology, the Japanese were able to overtake the Chinese both in military and economy in the 19th century.

The Sino-Japan War of 1894-1895 and the “21 Demands to China” in 1915 by the Japanese government had contributed to the anti-Japan feelings and upsurge of nationalism (Chow, 1967: 22-23). China’s failure to regain its Shandong territory during the Paris Peace Conference was no longer perceived as the defeat of the Republic of China but rather turned into a defeat of the Chinese people. All these events had led to the

eruption of the May Fourth Movement.

The May Fourth Movement was a political movement led by university students in Beijing to demonstrate their frustration especially anti-imperialist sentiments on 4th May 1919. The students protested against the Chinese government's failure during the Paris Peace Conference. These demonstrations in Beijing eventually led to protests in all major cities of China and inspired Chinese nationalism in the early 20th century.

The May Fourth Movement also contributed to the shifting of political mobilization from cultural and intellectual activities towards a populist base (Hao, 1997: 11-21). In addition, it had inspired many political and social activists who eventually became leaders such as Mao Zedong, Deng Zhongxia, He Shuheng (Clubb, 1964: 87). The May Fourth Movement was a watershed in China's history because it had inspired intellectuals to be more radical in their approach. Therefore, many of them started to mobilize peasants and workers into the Communist Party. It is crucial to note that it eventually managed to garner support from the masses and solidify the success of the Communist Revolution.

Furthermore, the May Fourth Movement also radicalized the Chinese intellectual thoughts prior to the Paris Peace Conference. Initially, the Western-style liberal democracy had a degree of attraction amongst the Chinese intellectuals but it gradually lost much of its appeal. The Chinese intellectuals were convinced that the European democratic states such as Britain and France did not practice democratic principles such as equality, morality and fairness when dealing with international affairs but rather their actions were based on national interests.

Moreover, the Chinese intellectuals at that time were also disappointed with the United States for not doing enough to convince its

fellow democratic powers such as France and Britain to adhere to the Chinese requests during the Paris Peace Conference. Instead, they adhered to the Japanese delegation based on their own national interests. From China's perspective, the betrayal by the Western democratic countries led to its shift from the Western liberal democratic model. According to China's envoy to the Paris Peace Conference, Liang Qichao, "in international relationship there is the principle of 'might is right'". Evidently, it was not only Germany who was dissatisfied with the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference, China too was very disillusioned and demoralised by the actions of the Western democratic countries during the conference. China considered the United States to be insincere because it eventually supported the decision made by other European powers namely Britain, France and Italy to reject China's claim over Shandong. Hence, China viewed Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points as Western-centric and hypocritical although they were based on liberal democratic principles (Schoppa, 2005: 177-179).

The betrayal of Western democratic powers towards China during the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement had contributed to Marxism gaining more attention among the Chinese intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao. While China was going through political protest over the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution the Marxist-Leninist ideology was spreading all over the Eurasia region including into China. It is noteworthy to mention that Marxism began to take hold in Chinese intellectual thoughts, particularly among those already on the Left. It was during this period that communism was studied seriously by some Chinese intellectuals such as the leading founders of the 1921 Communist Party of China (CPC) namely Li Lisan, Qu Qiubai, He Shuheng and Chen Tanqiu (Schwartz, 1951: 32-35).

The Chinese intellectuals were beginning to compare the discredited Western European system, which had been viewed with increasing pessimism, with the Soviet Union as a model of dissident modernization. Professor Xu Guoqi from the University of Hong Kong argues that World War I was a crucial moment when China, with little military and diplomatic power, recognised it had to be an active participant in international affairs to shape an emerging world order.¹¹ It is important to note that China sought to be treated as an equal member in the international community. Xu added: “What China learned from the aftermath of the war was that the West was not always reliable and might be more powerful than right.”

The Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement had a decisive impact on the history of modern China and its identity. After the fall of Qing Dynasty in 1910s, prior to the Paris Peace Conference, most of the Chinese intellectuals were impressed by the Western democratic ideas such as separation of powers and elections. They were convinced to construct a new identity for China based on Western democratic principles. However, the results of the Paris Peace Conference made the Chinese intellectuals reconsider the Western democratic ideas and eventually led to the re-construction of another identity for China. Marxism became increasingly popular following the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s. Therefore, Marxism was eventually socialized into becoming China’s new identity.

8. Involvement in First World War and the Construction of China’s Contemporary Behaviour

It is noteworthy to mention that the experience China encountered during the First World War and May Fourth Movement had impacted on its subsequent behaviour. For example, protest in the aftermath of May

Fourth Movement bear relevance to contemporary China. In the area of territorial dispute such as the South China Sea or East China Sea involving China, Beijing is extremely cautious as it fears any action may provoke nationalist backlash, or worse, cause national embarrassment.

Therefore, for a better understanding on China's contemporary actions it is necessary to understand its past. From the Opium War, First World War to the Second World War, China was in the condition to recover from the aggression of external powers. China's bitter socialization is known as the "Century of Humiliation" (Kaufman, 2010: 1-33).

For example, the humiliation it encountered during the Paris Peace Conference had left a scar and contributed a proportioned impact on Chinese thinking and political landscape. It has shaped China's identity and affected its nationalism, foreign policy, and how it views the world. Chinese nationalism had focused on recovering from the Century of Humiliation by enhancing its territorial integrity through reclaiming its territories lost to the foreign aggression such as the islands in the East and South China Seas.

In addition, China was convinced that it should benefit from international respect and influence. The experience it encountered during the Paris Peace Conference had taught China a bitter lesson in dealing with other major powers. China felt that it was not treated on equal footing by the European powers. This had convinced China to be suspicious of multilateral engagements especially involving issues related to overlapping claims and boundary disputes. Its scepticism explains the reason why China has been so assertive to engage the Southeast Asian states on a bilateral manner rather than multilateral while managing the South China Sea disputes.

The Paris Peace Conference had socialised China to be sceptical and doubtful with multilateralism and placed less trust on the international

community to safeguard its borders and interest. The impact is still felt until this present time. For example, China has demonstrated the attitude of distrust in 2013 that it refused to participate in all the deliberations at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague over the South China Sea dispute when the Philippines presented its case. Subsequently, it rejected the decision made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. The Chinese media Xinhua called the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration as “ill-founded” and “naturally null and void”.¹² In addition, it also emphasized: “The Chinese government and the Chinese people firmly opposed the ruling and would neither acknowledge it nor accept it.” (*ibid.*)

It is undeniable that the Chinese attitude has changed and has been much more assertive in recent years but its leaders encounter the fear of “losing” a war should matter escalate in Asia. If such backlash were to occur, it would certainly tarnish the legitimacy and popularity of the Chinese Communist Party.

Another outcome from the Paris Peace Conference which impacted contemporary China is the increase in anti-Japanese sentiments. The anti-Japanese sentiment had continued to be strong in Chinese nationalist discourse especially during the aftermath of First World War. Worst of all China felt insulted by a fellow Asian country which had relied on China in the past. This sentiment continues to exist. According to Jiang Yang, “anti-Japanese nationalism is particularly effective in generating support for the government simply because resentment against Japan can be tapped so easily” (Yang, 2006: 86-105). The sentiment also has an impact on China’s attitude in dealing with the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. China’s quest to regain control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is part of its efforts to achieve its regional revival.

9. Conclusion

China's entry into the First World War (1914-1917) can be considered as a tortuous route. In fact, it left an indelible mark on China's internal politics and its foreign relations. The First World War also pulled in 140,000 Chinese workers who served at the Western front. Unfortunately, little has been known about the 140,000 Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) who had participated in the Western front during the First World War.

This paper examines the impact of China's entry into the First World War. The Republic of China intended to construct a new identity based on Chinese nationalism and Western-style liberal democracy. It was convinced that it would gain international recognition by constructing a new identity for itself. In the 1910s, China was very eager to re-establish its prestige that was lost since Opium Wars in the 19th century. It must be noted that China's entry into the war was more important on the diplomatic front than on the actual combat itself. This paper, specifically, analyses pertinent issues related to the factors that have influenced China to participate in the First World War.

During the outbreak of First World War in 1914, the newly established Republic of China (1912) was only two years in existence. It had to encounter many internal problems and external uncertainties such as warlord problems and regaining lost Chinese territories such as the province of Shandong, Formosa (Taiwan) and Weihaiwei. However, despite all odds China entered the war in 1917 with the aim to elevate China's international position.

China's initial impression was that by joining the war it would gain international recognition and be treated equally at war councils and peace conference. In addition, it would have the opportunity to rid itself of the encumbrances of unequal treaties. Unlike previous studies on

China and the First World War, this paper focuses on factors that had contributed to the May Fourth Movement and civil unrest due to the annexation of Shandong province to the Japanese despite China's objections during the Versailles Treaty in 1919. More importantly, this paper also focuses on the treatment China received from the international community such as Britain, the United States, France and Japan.

This paper argues that the betrayal of Western powers towards China during the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement served as an intellectual turning point in China as they had radicalized Chinese intellectual thoughts. Western-style liberal democracy had previously been popular amongst the Chinese intellectuals. However, it had lost its attractiveness after these events. Communism started to gain more attention from intellectuals who shifted to the Left and some were among the leading founders of the 1921 Communist Party of China (CPC). It had also intensified the distrust towards the West (deemed hypocritical) and Japan. China's socialization during the Paris Peace Conference had contributed to the conception of a negative identity of the West in the minds of Chinese leaders. In addition, it had also intensified China's uncompromising attitude over territorial disputes till this day.

This study has also highlighted the contribution made by the CLC. The involvement of the CLC was hardly recognized after the end of First World War. After the First World War, the CLC were asked to return to China immediately. Hence, there were no war memorials honoured by the Britain or the French. Besides, records of their services were destroyed during the Second World War.

In recent years, the international community started to give attention to the role of the CLC. There are not many works published regarding the CLC compared to the recognitions received by other non-Europeans

who participated in the war. A few scholars such as Xu Guoqi from Hong Kong University, Zhang Yan from Shandong and Dominiek Dendooven (a curator and researcher from the Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium) had conducted research on the CLC.

This study is intended to serve as a basis for future research regarding the role of the CLC and their endurance during the First World War. The aim of this research is to inspire interest with the hope that further work can be conducted on the CLC and their contributions during the First World War.

Notes

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