

OPPORTUNITIES SEIZED, OPPORTUNITIES DENIED: WORLD WAR I IN ASIA

Mark Johnson, Concordia International School, Shanghai, China

“ Then came your honorable war. The newspapers said it was a world war. It must have been for even I who lived eight thousand miles away felt its influence...I saw in this notice an opportunity I had not dreamed would be mine.”¹

Both China and Japan saw World War I as an opportunity to advance their strategic interests in Asia. Japan expanded its territorial claims as Europe's hold on Asian territories loosened. China instead focused on providing help to the Allied war effort, in hopes that contributing to an Allied victory in Europe would earn China a voice in determining the postwar situation and defining a new national identity for itself. As the Chinese worker expressed in the above quote, World War I also gave individuals never-before-dreamed-of opportunities to see the world and come into contact with Western ideologies, doctrines that

would influence and help to reshape China. Japanese and Chinese involvement in the Great War altered the balance of power in Asia, foreshadowed further conflict in the 1930s, and caused a surge of Chinese nationalism infused with Western ideas gained through the experience of workers who had labored close to the front lines.

At the war's outset, China quickly declared neutrality on August 6, 1914. The recently formed Republic of China was not sufficiently stable or militarily strong to take an official role in the conflict. The warring nations held territory throughout Asia, however, and China wanted to prevent the conflict from spreading to fighting between European-held areas in China. It was believed that such strife would further weaken, divide, and humiliate China.

¹ Quoted in Xu Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 50. Xu's research is the key source of information regarding the Chinese involvement in World War I. In addition to *Strangers on the Western Front*, also see Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Japan was on a far different trajectory at that point. After successes in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Japan was a growing power in the region, further expanding its influence with the annexation of Korea in 1910. Japan saw World War I as an opportunity to advance its interests in the region while the European nations were preoccupied with events thousands of miles away. An ally of the British since 1902, Japan declared war on Germany on August 23, 1914, quickly moving against German-held areas in China and the Pacific. While this undoubtedly worked into the Allied strategy against German power worldwide, an added benefit for the Japanese was that it advanced Japan's territorial interests in China.

In September 1914, Japan attacked Shandong (Shantung) Province, held by the Germans since 1898. Shandong and its key city of Qingdao (Tsingtao) were of vital importance to Japan's expanding sphere of influence in China. Japan hoped to establish de facto control of the region and maintain possession at war's end, when the victors would decide the fate of German possessions. Encouraged by its successful conquest of Shandong, Japan furthered its claims by issuing the Twenty-One Demands to China in January 1915, pressing Japan's claims throughout China, and including extensive economic and political concessions to Japan that, if agreed to, would seriously compromise China's sovereignty.



A Japanese lithograph, probably showing the Japanese fighting German troops during the conquest of the German colony Tsingtao (today Qingdao) in China between September 13 and November 7, 1914. Image courtesy of the United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division.

China, too weak to militarily rebuff Japan's advances, sought a creative solution. Chinese leaders believed the conflict and postwar negotiations would give China the opportunity to become involved in international affairs and carve out a new national identity, in contrast to the humiliating status that had characterized China's position since the Opium Wars. Unable to protect its territorial integrity through force of arms, China sought to earn a seat at the postwar peace conference by actively assisting the Allies in Europe.

Realizing that Britain and France faced manpower shortages, China approached both of those powers with a "laborers-as-soldiers" strategy. China would offer thousands of Chinese workers to serve in support roles, freeing up native manpower for military service. In June 1915, Chinese officials offered to supply the British with 300,000 laborers. Both the British and French initially rejected this plan, as officials were worried labor unions would object to employing Chinese workers. Additionally, some British officials feared accepting assistance would recognize China's equality, necessitating a changed relationship after the conflict that would mean declining British power

in China. These workers were not colonial subjects answering the call to aid the mother country in its moment of need; rather, they would be volunteers, under contract to be paid, protected and respected, with a larger goal of earning the sponsoring nation equal standing in international affairs. But while the initial Chinese offering of laborers-as-soldiers was declined, the unfolding realities of the war soon altered the scenario.

The enormous number of casualties in the Battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916 made the British realize they could spare no effort to win the war. As Winston Churchill stated in the House of Commons in 1916, "I would not even shrink from the word Chinese for the purpose of carrying on the War...There are great resources in Africa and Asia that, under proper discipline, might be the means of saving thousands of British lives and of enormously facilitating the whole progress and conduct of the War."² Aware that overt participation in the fighting might make it more likely imperialist powers would attack China, however, Chinese diplomats emphasized the need to keep the collaboration secret. The British and French agreed; as they saw it, keeping the Chinese workers secret would reduce chances that their own domestic labor unions would protest the move.

In the fall of 1916, recruitment efforts commenced, with Chinese government agencies—under the guise of private contractors—soliciting volunteers. In exchange, the Chinese government requested that Britain help China gain a seat at the postwar peace conference. The workers, most of whom would come from Shandong Province, volunteered due to difficult economic conditions at home and a desire to see the world. They would travel from China to the west coast of Canada, then by train across Canada to ports of departure for France. All told, the French employed 40,000 Chinese workers, who would mostly replace factory employees who had become soldiers. Great Britain contracted



Japanese War Service Medal. (Image courtesy of the National World War I Museum)

² Quoted in Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front*, 27.

95,000 Chinese laborers to transport machinery, dig trenches, and clear battlefields after combat.

While their contract explicitly stated they were not to be used in active engagements, service near the front still exposed these workers to danger; more than 10,000 Chinese were killed as a result. Though their contribution has largely been forgotten today, the sacrifices these workers made in the service of France did earn some recognition at the time.

Chinese workers were all physically fit, whereas the best workers from nations actively engaged in the fighting had already been drafted for military service, leaving behind those who were less able. The Chinese also tended to show a willingness to work that made them especially valuable. Fearless under fire, many of them were killed while digging trenches and placing barbed wire entanglements.³

In 1917, China officially entered the conflict on the Allied side. Having supported the winning side to that point and contributed 140,000 crucially needed workers, China now believed it had earned a voice in postwar negotiations. Chinese diplomats, greatly encouraged by Wilson's Fourteen Points, especially the call for national self-determination, were confident that previously held German concessions would be returned to Chinese control. At the Treaty of Versailles, however, Shandong would be awarded to Japan rather than China. Japan's seizure of German-held territory to advance its strategic interests in China turned out to be more effective than China's strategy of aiding the victors in Europe.

On May 4, 1919, when news that Versailles negotiators had awarded Shandong to the Japanese reached them, Chinese students, workers, and merchants protested. The May Fourth Movement swept the nation. The protestors decried China's weakness as well as the hypocrisy of Western rhetoric. The May Fourth



Troops from Southeast Asia serving in the French army. (Image courtesy of the National Archives)

Movement marked the birth of modern Chinese nationalism. Unsurprisingly, many of the workers who had experienced contact with the West returned to their homeland with ideas to propose new directions for China. In addition, connections the workers had made in France continued to provide access to the West and to western ideologies. Both Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai had the opportunity to study in France in the early 1920s, as a result of the laborers-as-soldiers policy.

Japan's decision to advance its territorial interests in China during World War I can be seen as demonstrating continuity in Japanese policy through the 1930s. But China's attempt to earn favorable treatment from the European powers by contributing workers, though nominally a failure, led to a watershed moment in both Chinese and world history. The May Fourth Movement in China, as well as the infusion of new ideas resulting from prolonged contact with the West, ultimately led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

³Quoted in Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front*, 88.