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0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

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[More information](#)

Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Charles Dickens¹

Stanley Hoffmann recently noted that France had “two obsessions” for the whole of the twentieth century, namely, Germany and concern for its position in the world.² The Chinese, one might argue, have been obsessed with one thing and one thing only since the turn of the twentieth century: how to join the world community as an equal member. One could write Chinese history from many perspectives and approaches, but this single-minded passion is surely key to understanding modern China. This fixation on its status in the world has fundamentally defined China's perception of itself, the world, its foreign relations, and national identity.

We could further argue that the many revolutions and events in twentieth-century China were closely linked to and motivated by China's desire for integration into the world community (what I will call internationalization); in this sense, they can be seen as a natural extension of Voltaire's “century of revolutions.”³ On March 11, 1925, one day before he died, Sun Yat-sen, who has been lionized as a revolutionary pioneer by the Communists, signed his Political Testament, a short but influential document that summarizes his lifelong political actions and his instructions to followers of the Nationalist party. It reads,

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.

² Stanley Hoffmann, “France: Two Obsessions for One Century,” in Robert A. Pastor, ed., *A Century's Journey: How the Great Powers Shape the World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 63–89.

³ François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) wrote on September 16, 1772 to Jean le Rond d'Alembert, “My dear philosopher, doesn't this appear to you to be the century of revolutions?” Cited from Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 203.

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 China and the Great War

For forty years, I have devoted myself to the cause of national revolution, the objective of which is to restore to China its liberty and a rank equal [to that of the other nations]. The experience of those forty years has convinced me that if we wish to attain that objective, we must rouse the popular masses and unite with the peoples of the world that treat us on an equal footing, so as to pursue the common fight. Today, the revolution has not yet triumphed. May all our comrades . . . continue the struggle for this victory.⁴

For Sun, the revolution meant not only the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty or the Three Peoples' Principles; more fundamentally, it concerned China's status in the world. Sun's many political foes might disagree with him, but most of them shared a belief in the push to international recognition that underpinned his revolution. Accordingly, if we call the twentieth century "the Chinese century of revolution," the Chinese upheavals, like the French Revolution in 1789 and the Russian Revolution in 1917 – both focusing on domestic politics and exportation of the revolutionary experience to the world – addressed not only internal political contests, but also aimed to thrust China into the world as a new nation and into the family of nation-states.

Many seemingly isolated and non-political events in China today may be understood in light of this obsession with international prestige and Chinese national pride and historical frustrations. Nationwide responses to Beijing's bid to host the Olympics are a most recent case in point. For the Chinese, the Olympics are not simply a sports event, but represent something deep and fundamental. The Chinese see hosting the Olympics as a validation of their nation's long road to international acceptance, a sign that China has overcome its "century of humiliation and shame" and become a full member of the community of nations. It was exactly because of this deep feeling that many Chinese, especially urban youth and intellectuals, felt the West treated it as a third-rate country and had conspired to keep it from taking its rightful place on the world stage when in 1993 Beijing lost its first bid to Sydney for hosting the 2000 Summer Games. Accordingly, when Beijing was successful in its bid for the 2008 Summer Games, people all over China welcomed it as a giant step toward international recognition as an equal. They were overjoyed. The night of July 13, 2001 (the day the selection was announced) was, as a *People's Daily* editorial the next day called it, "a sleepless night for all 1.3 billion Chinese." According to *New York Times* reports the next day, many in Beijing celebrated the happy news with the national anthem,

⁴ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Sun Yat-Sen*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 406.

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

which revealingly begins, “Qilai, bu yao zuo nuli de renmen” (Rise up, you people who no longer want to be slaves).⁵

Chinese exuberance at hosting the Olympics clearly demonstrates the depth and significance of the Chinese passion for international status and asserting their national pride. But how did this clearly seminal concern take shape historically, and under what circumstances? Can these vital concerns be traced to or identified with a particular historical event that crystallized them in action? Although few scholars have addressed these questions, they are crucial for students of China and world history. I contend that this passion was first clearly articulated and acted upon during China's struggle to play a part in the First World War.

China's Great War: an unwritten chapter in world history

How was it that the First World War triggered Chinese interest in world affairs and compelled China to rethink its perception of itself and the world? This book will consider how the Great War became a defining moment, a turning point in shaping the Chinese worldview, and its further development. This essentially European war would affect the fate of China in many unexpected ways.

One might wonder, if the war was so important to China, why have historians failed to credit the China connection and largely ignored the topic of Chinese interest and participation in it?⁶ Why does no book in any language consider Chinese participation in the First World War from the perspective of China's quest to establish its national identity and pursue increased international engagement? The neglect of the Chinese angle is even more obvious given the richness of studies of the First World War and its impact on other countries, in which the war is universally recognized as one of the most significant events in world history.⁷ No wonder the Great War has continued to absorb scholars for decades. Historians have studied it from every possible perspective, covering its

⁵ Craig S. Smith, “Joyous Vindication and a Sleepless Night,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2001.

⁶ For existing Chinese studies on the First World War, see Huang Jiamu, “Zhongguo dui Ouzhan de chubu fanying,” *Zhongyuan yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo jikan* 1 (1969); Chen Sanjing, “Zhongguo pai bing canjia Ouzhan zhi jiaoshe,” in *Zhonghua minguo lishi yu wenhua taolunji* (Taipei: 1984); Peng Xiangjin, “Dui Qirui tuidong Zhongguo canjia Ouzhan zhi yanjiu” (M.A. thesis, National Taiwan University, 1969); Huang Jinlin, “Lishi de yi shi xiju: Ouzhan zai Zhongguo,” *Xin shi xue* 7, no. 3 (September 1996).

⁷ For the most recent survey of the study of the war, see Michael Howard, “The Great War: Mystery or Error?” *The National interest* 64 (2001).

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 China and the Great War

wider significance as well as particular themes and incidents. We can easily find fine works on broad issues such as the war's impact on American society,⁸ and the generational issue and the war in Europe.⁹ The period of the war symbolized, according to Henry May, the "end of innocence" in the United States¹⁰ and the "end of an era" in Spain, according to a more recent study.¹¹ The fascination continues.

Given the rich scholarship on the First World War, it is surprising that China's participation passes with little or no notice. No book dealing with the war in general pays much attention to the China factor. For example, John Keegan, a prominent historian of military history, totally ignores China's interest in the war in his otherwise excellent book called simply *The First World War*.¹² Another book on the Great War by Niall Ferguson entitled *The Pity of War* mentions nothing about China, although an account of Chinese involvement would have provided poignant support for his major theme.¹³ No wonder William C. Kirby points out that "[o]ne could read widely on the history of the First World War and never know that China took part in it."¹⁴

We have a legitimate reason to ask why such a gap exists. Where are the studies of Chinese popular responses to the war to counterbalance Robert Wohl's seminal *Generation of 1914*? Where are the systematic analyses of the impact of the war on Chinese society to match the brilliant study of American society by David Kennedy's *Over Here*? Where are the studies like Frederick Dickinson's work on World War I Japan?¹⁵

The current scholarship in this area leaves many key questions unanswered. Was this period, as is commonly supposed, simply a politically confused warlord era, in which China was too passive in its diplomacy and so got pushed around by other powers? What impact did the war have in China? Did China contribute to it? To what extent was the Chinese interest in world affairs piqued by the war? Finally, how did the war experience help shape China's national identity and push to internationalization? All these issues have yet to be explored through a close examination of Chinese engagement in the First World War.

⁸ David Kennedy, *Over Here* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁹ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912–1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Francisco J. Romero Salvado, *Spain 1914–1918: Between War and Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1999), 135–49.

¹² John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1999).

¹³ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: The Penguin Group, 1999).

¹⁴ William C. Kirby, "The Internationalization of China: Foreign Relations at Home and Abroad in the Republican Era," *The China Quarterly* 150, no. 2 (June 1997): 442.

¹⁵ Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard East Asia Center, 1999).

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

To be sure, the early Republic of China was weak and its domestic politics chaotic. China had been marginalized in the international system and its internal political structure was unstable. But these facts still do not justify the conventional view that China was not capable of effective diplomacy or lacked the motivation to change its status. This assumption discounts the fact that while stronger powers commonly rely on non-diplomatic means, weaker ones pay special attention to diplomacy because that is perhaps the only way to promote or protect their national interests. Weakness rather than strength sometimes gives rise to a brilliant stroke of diplomacy. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand's France after Napoleon was defeated is an excellent example. Thanks to Talleyrand's skillful negotiations, the recently vanquished France not only kept its territory intact but, more importantly, was even allowed to join the ranks of top world powers.

Another conventional argument, that China really had nothing to do with the essentially European war, is simply not accurate. As a semi-colonial country where many European nations such as Germany and Britain had carved out spheres of interest, China was bound to be dragged into the war one way or another. Therefore, it was better to take the initiative. With the First World War China abandoned its traditional isolationist foreign policy and initiated several attempts to get involved. Although China did not succeed in entering the war until August 1917, this response to world affairs reflected new thinking about the country's international role that had begun to emerge in the late nineteenth century.

China's performance during the war period might not have been politically impressive, but diplomatically it did rather well. Kirby was right when he wrote recently, "The story of Chinese diplomacy in the Republican era is one of stunning accomplishments from a position of unbelievable weakness." For Kirby, "The Qing fell, but the empire remained. More accurately, the empire became the basis of the Chinese national state. This was perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Republican diplomacy."¹⁶ Arguably it was the early Republic of China that provided the foundation for this overall achievement. In its first years the Republican government initiated a series of impressive diplomatic actions aimed at protecting Chinese national sovereignty and for this it deserves due credit. But one cannot make full sense of Kirby's argument without appreciating China's new internationalist approach during the First World War era, an extremely important transition period across the entire global community.

¹⁶ Kirby, "The Internationalization of China: Foreign Relations at Home and Abroad in the Republican Era," 437.

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 China and the Great War

Although during much of the Great War period the Chinese people suffered from political chaos, economic weakness, and social misery, this was also a time of excitement, hope, high expectation, optimism, and new dreams. It may be compared to the Warring States era in ancient Chinese history and the revolutionary period in Charles Dickens's famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The clash of ideas, political theories, and the prescription of national identities provided high stimulation to China's ideological, social, cultural, and intellectual creativity and engendered a strong determination for change. New ideologies, explanations of history, and even reactions to developments in the Great War abounded and could be found in new print media across the country. The appearance of new political ideologies (nationalism rather than Confucianism; nation-state instead of culturalism), the return to China of Western-trained students, the activism of a new bourgeois class (rather than the old gentry and traditional mandarins), the emergence of a public sphere and modern print media, and above all, the changing international system itself all pushed China toward self-renewal. At no other time in modern Chinese history has the mobilization of public opinion and its social and intellectual resources played such a crucial role in shaping China's political, cultural, and social directions, at the same time fueling its search for a national identity. At no time previously had the Chinese shown such enormous interest in international affairs and initiated a new diplomacy aimed at renewing the state and preparing its entry onto the world stage. Unfortunately, all this excitement, vitality, and passion have gone missing in traditional treatments of China's foreign relations in the Great War period.

International history in the study of Chinese national identity

An international history perspective on China and the First World War may help us project new light on this subject. The methodology of international history as practiced by master historians Akira Iriye and Michael Hunt, among others, who have brought this relatively new sub-field to a level of excellence, seems more promising than the traditional approach.¹⁷

¹⁷ See, for instance, Akira Iriye, *China and Japan in the Global Setting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Michael Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Iriye points out that unlike traditional diplomatic history, international history tries to “go beyond the national level of analysis and to treat the entire world as a framework of study.” Moreover, since international relations are essentially “interactions among cultural systems,” the study of these extra-systematic relations must consider “the essential features within the given systems and see how they affect their interactions with one another.”¹⁸ To put it another way, international history is a methodology that focuses on macro-history, emphasizing culture and society in addition to traditional diplomatic history. It explores the relationship between an international power system and a particular cultural outlook, between nationalism and internationalism, between national ambitions and collective disappointments, and, to cite Iriye again, it examines international affairs “in terms of dreams, aspirations, and other manifestations of human consciousness.”¹⁹ This approach emphasizes communication within and among nations and seems a more reliable compass for reaching a new understanding of China's negotiation of two systems of world order: its own official worldview, focused on culture and morality, and the Western world order, primarily based on economic and military power.

Thus we can base our analysis of Chinese interest in the First World War on the neglected intellectual foundations of Chinese diplomacy and come to understand how China was affected by the world order as a whole, even as it contributed to defining that order. The international history approach will also highlight the connections between Chinese domestic politics and international affairs.

If a new methodology can enrich our assessment of China and its European war connection, the perspective of national identity and internationalization may open new vistas for us to consider. Su Dongpo, a famed poet of the eleventh century, once wrote “bushi Lushan zhen mian mu, zhi yuan shen zai ci shan zhong.” Loosely put, one cannot appreciate the true face of Mt. Lu if he or she stays within the boundary of the mountain. In other words, we have to go beyond the subject in order to get at the truth. The problems of national identity and internationalization present an excellent angle from which to examine the place of China in the world of the early twentieth century. The desire for internal renewal and full membership in the world community is key to understanding the

¹⁸ Akira Iriye, “Culture and Power: International Relations as Intercultural Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 3, no. 3 (1979): 115. Akira Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 1 (1989): 4.

¹⁹ Akira Iriye, “Culture and International History,” in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 214–25.

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 China and the Great War

nation's mood, its domestic and foreign policy, its approach to the world affairs, and its perception of itself. The passions aroused by concern with international status, the process of internationalization, and the creation of a new national identity meant that in the wake of humiliations and the fear of spreading colonization, Chinese were determined to forge ahead toward realization of their collective aspirations in the new century.

The idea of "national identity" is a relatively new one for historians, although sociologists and especially psychologists have used the word "identity" widely since the 1950s. Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst, is perhaps most responsible for making the identity issue popular. He defined identity as "a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity."²⁰ Just as the general notion of personal identity is about who one is and how one defines oneself, national identity can mean how a country associates with other nations and the sense of its position in the world. As Anthony Smith points out, the process of "self-definition and location is in many ways the key to national identity."²¹

But like the identity issue in general, national identity is multidimensional, vague, and often difficult to pin down. Its precise content may differ from time to time and from region to region, and there is still no agreement among scholars on how best to define the term. Most students of the subject agree that national identity is, to a certain extent, a cultural identity, consisting of a shared tradition and history, as well as identification with the state.²² Culture, tradition, and a nation's self-perception of its status in the world, among other things, are the fundamental features of national identity.²³ If a country has problems with these issues, it will certainly face a crisis.

With this working definition, we can observe that China after 1895 had extremely serious problems with its existing identity. Prior to the First World War, China had gone through a tremendous cultural upheaval and

²⁰ Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968), 19.

²¹ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 17.

²² About different definitions, see William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Smith, *National Identity*; Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, *China's Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1–31, 237–40; Sidney Verba, "Sequences and Development," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Lucian Pye, "Identity and the Political Culture," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 110–11.

²³ Smith, *National Identity*, 14–16; Edward Friedman, *National Identity and Democratic Prospects in Socialist China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); G. Hoston, *The State, Identity, and the National Question in China and Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Peter Boerner, ed., *Concepts of National Identity: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1986).

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

social transformation that had significantly changed and destabilized its political system as well as its understanding of itself and the world. The New China was determined to develop a new national identity, shake off its sorry recent past, and rethink its traditional view of the world order. It wanted to join the new international system, now dominated by the West, which was itself experiencing historic changes. Reflecting upon their country's status in the world after its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, many Chinese began to seriously doubt the value of their traditional culture, history, language, and even civilization. China's foreign policy and thinking about the outside world also came under critical scrutiny. In many ways, the Chinese lost their sense of sameness and historical continuity with pre-1895 China. To understand the country after 1895, and especially its foreign relations, this identity crisis is key.

Sorting out a new national identity was crucial for several reasons. First, there were the painful humiliations and diplomatic isolation China had experienced in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The hope for a new China provided the impetus for a broad consideration of just what it meant to be Chinese and what China could become. Moreover, the desire for internationalization was closely linked to this internal renewal. From the perspective of international history, then, the concept of national identity can serve as a bridge linking China's internal and external orders.

The Great War in Chinese history

If national identity and internationalization are useful concepts for understanding China, the First World War seems to be a particularly appropriate time frame for examining the identity issue. China's social transformation and cultural revolution coincided with the war, and moreover, the First World War compelled China to associate with other countries whether it wished to or not. The war provided the momentum and opportunity for China to redefine its relations with the world through its efforts to inject itself into the war and thus position itself within the family of nations. Finally, the era of the First World War not only coincided with a period of tremendous change in China; it also came to stand for, as James Joll has noted, "the end of an age and beginning of the new one" in the international arena.²⁴ The war signaled the collapse of the existing international system and the coming of a new world order, an obvious development that fed the desires of the Chinese to change their country's international status. In consequence, the First World War was profoundly

²⁴ James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Longman, 1984), 1.

Cambridge University Press

0521842123 - China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

Xu Guoqi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 China and the Great War

significant in shaping Chinese society, politics, diplomacy, foreign relations, and popular perceptions about what it meant to be Chinese. If the First World War was a watershed event in China's search for national identity and efforts to enhance its position in the world, it also left a lasting legacy by shaping Chinese perceptions of the world order and the West. Chinese bitterness at the injustice of the postwar peace conference would be rekindled whenever China was wronged by the powers. The war and its aftermath, therefore, should be considered pivotal in shaping modern Chinese historical consciousness and national mooring.

China's very weakness and domestic political chaos proved strong motivations to enter and alter the international system. The implications of the 1911 Revolution also forced the Chinese to shift their attention to changes in the world system. The opening of the First World War was the first major world event to engage the imagination of the Chinese social and political elite, generating great fascination and excitement. Changes in the Chinese worldview and the destabilizing forces loosed by the war set the stage for China to play a role in world affairs, even though the war seemed to have no immediate impact on China itself. Using the war as a window on building national identity, I will go on to analyze China's internationalization in its wake; this will shed new light on Chinese diplomatic strategies and goals in the First World War.

In the course of examining how China used the occasion of the First World War to reinsert itself into the international system, I will also try to identify the roots of Chinese idealism or romanticism about the West, the origins of its new diplomacy, and the consequences of its quest to enter and alter the world system.

My focus is not on the war itself, but the war as a vehicle for China's regeneration, renewal, and transformation. I argue that because the Chinese were eager to move away from their old isolationist world outlook, the European war was considered an excellent opportunity for joining the emerging world order. In strong contrast to the conventional view that China was pulled into the war by outside forces, my view establishes that the Chinese leadership deliberately manipulated circumstances in its effort to join the war.

Unlike a traditional diplomatic history, this project includes the study of the mood, emotions, inspirations, ambitions, and frustrations of the Chinese people. When the war broke out in Europe, Chinese counterparts to Wohl's "generation of 1914" in Europe were clearly a new force in the struggling nation. They shared with the Europeans a sense of destiny and crisis and responsibility. Unlike the European generation, however, the Chinese elite were not "wanderers between two worlds"; they were determined to make a new China out of the old. They declared a cultural