

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



Between Condescension and Contempt: China and the Allies in the First World War

Dr Frances Wood, Author of *Betrayed Ally: China in the Great War*

The recent growth in interest in the CLC is most welcome, taking the subject beyond the academic sphere which has already produced rich and well researched works by Xu Guoqi and the contributors to Li Ma, *Les Travailleurs chinois en France* (2014), for example. Though the CLC's major contribution to the Allies' success is finally gaining wider recognition, the greater picture of China's attempts to join the Allies remains relatively unknown.

China's first two attempts to join the Allies were rebuffed. In 1914, Yuan Shih-kai offered 50,000 troops to aid the Allies in taking the German concession in Qingdao. This was rebuffed by Sir John Jordan and a further offer of 300,000 'military labourers' by Liang Shiyi in 1915, was also turned down. It was not until late in 1917 that China was finally 'permitted' by the Allies to declare war on Germany and Austria-Hungary and then only after much obstruction by Japan and selfish argument about payments of the Boxer indemnity.

Yuan Shih-kai's offer seems to have been barely noticed, except by Morrison, whilst Liang Shiyi's first offer of 'military labourers' was rejected after some discussion in London which dismissed the entire Chinese military as unfit for purpose, 'a useless machine'. The arguments in 1917 over allowing China to join the Allies by declaring war were conducted after Lloyd George and Clemenceau had signed their secret treaties handing German interests in China over to the Japanese, and at a time when Britain was engaged in resistance to Japanese proposals to encroach into Britain's 'sphere of interest' along the Yangtse.

Britain's position was difficult: concerned to preserve British interests in China against increasing Japanese encroachment, there was also the complication of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902, 1905, 1911), an agreement of mutual support in the face of threat. Japan marched into Qingdao without bothering to invoke the Alliance and throughout the war, Sir John Jordan muttered helplessly about Japan 'not playing straight', playing a 'game... which is hard to characterise in terms suitable to the role of an ally', 'there is no reasoning with a highwayman well-armed and Japan's action towards China is worse than that of Germany in the case of Belgium...' His mild protests had no effect in London.

Given the generally dismissive attitude towards China and its struggle to create a new form of government and achieve international recognition, it was unhelpful of Yuan Shih-kai to describe the newly founded Republic of China as 'a very young baby' which needed careful nursing. Most European diplomats in China seem to have adopted this view, describing the members of parliament as mere boys with unbroken voices. Even the serious matter of diplomatic recognition was something of a farce as Norway was late since her representative had completely forgotten about the meeting, and the complexities of formal dress and decorations before and after recognition led Sir John Jordan to strip to his shirt in the entrance hall of the Foreign Minister's residence.

Contempt and condescension filled the reports that moved between the Foreign Office and the British Legation in Peking and even after China had officially joined the Allies, her official attempts to curb German activities in China were, predictably, dismissed with ridicule: 'picnics prohibited!'

Despite the essential work of the CLC, despite China's continuing attempts to support the Allies: 'two cruisers and three destroyers' were offered in September 1917 'for patrol purposes in Far Eastern waters' and '30,000 to 40,000 men' in October (neither offer was taken up seriously), the European attitude of contempt persisted and, at the end of the war, discussions on the future of German possessions in China that took place in Paris in 1919 revealed a continuing assumption of China's low status. Clemenceau, Wilson and Lloyd George respected treaties when it was convenient to them and, to the dismay of Italian President Orlando, disregarded them as it suited. Balfour, whose famously terrible memory meant that in 1917 he failed to alert America to the existence of the secret treaties with Japan of 1916, dismissed China's claims for consideration in the Versailles treaty by declaring that China had not contributed a shillings worth to the war and did not deserve to be given something (Qingdao) that she could not have taken for herself.