

The Impact of World War I on China's Modern History

Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, 03.–05. July 2014

Numerous conferences and academic events with rows of expert speakers are scheduled around the globe this year, discussing the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War (WWI). In China, however, what was originally known as the “Great War” in the western world is referred to as the “European War” (*Ou zhan*). It was without special concern for (neutral) China, except that at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the former German colony in Shandong, China, passed to Japan.

Despite this concern, the Vienna conference on WWI and China from 3rd till 5th July 2014 at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, included 30 speakers, mostly from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. In six panels, the speakers addressed issues of modernization, foreign policy, economic development, Sino-Japanese relations, philosophical discourses and intellectual development. The relevance of the approach was highlighted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent comparison of the current quarrels between China and Japan with English-German relations at the outbreak of the WWI (<http://asienspiegel.ch/2014/01/abes-historischer-vergleich/>). Abe gave this warning at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January and was cited, among others, by Philip Blom in his keynote speech. In her closing remarks, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik found that while WWI is bygone history for many in the West, Abe's remarks – and many of the papers at the conference – show that its relevance is increasing in Chinese academia. The contributions also established a close relation to the January 2012 Vienna conference “Reform and Revolution”, held in commemoration of the Xinhai Revolution, and the necessity to do more work in the still under-researched field of the early decades of the Chinese Republic, in the same period as WWI.

Following the keynote presentation by Philip Blom, a round table with participants from all parts of Greater China, Japan, Austria, and Switzerland attempted to relate the WWI European history to China. For example, western “anxiety” of the pre-war years was certainly also found in China, which had lost its 2000 years of Confucian background and had to establish a new (political) culture. Furthermore, the war and the Paris Peace Conference forced not only China and Japan, but also the whole of Asia to reform and re-institute their diplomatic services. China, specifically, had to re-think not only its diplomatic relations within Asia, but also towards the world. The post-WWI Chinese diplomats had to be global persons. Significantly, Japan, unlike China, has adopted the Western terminology of a Great War or a Global War, thus defining WWI as their own and as a part of Japanese history.

In the second keynote address, Xu Guoqi (University of Hong Kong) also underlined the globality of events around WWI for China. When it became a republic in 1911, China lost its emperor, preceding Austria and Germany by just a few years, as the change there came after the war. Here, the role of WWI needs a much better understanding and global analysis than is available today. Worldwide, including China, the WWI generation was a distinctive group of people, who had a sense of destiny, of crisis and of their own responsibility in shaping the nation. In China the first World War became a vehicle for internationalization, bringing it global acceptance as an equal member of the community of states. Whereas in imperial times China did not accept the West, after WWI Western countries rejected China. Having gotten rid of their own traditional tribute system, and being excluded from the Western system (which had actually been favored by China before the Paris Peace Conference), China was left with the third way, namely, the Soviet Russian one. For China, Xu summed up, this was “unfortunate.”

Other papers dealt with the Chinese concept of “neutrality” and the changes that China was forced to implement during the war. In defining China as neutral, the country had relied both on the neutrality of Japan and the USA, and disregarded Japan’s commitment towards Great Britain. China thus facilitated the “legality” of the Japanese occupation of Shandong. The Japanese battle against German Qingdao on Chinese soil used detailed maps that continue to be used in Qingdao’s urban planning today.

Although China was “neutral,” it exported a sizeable workforce both to Europe, mainly France and Belgium (Paul Bailey), and to Russia (Olga V. Alexeeva) during WWI. The French work-study program that is famous in China because of its participants Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, actually had a predecessor during WWI. Another Chinese community was also established in France. While some Chinese workers remained in France voluntarily after the war, the Chinese in Russia were trapped in the Russian Revolution and unable to go back for years.

Two-thirds of the panels (panels III to VI) and discussions were held in Chinese. In his closing remarks, Zhu Jiaming, one of the conference organizers and a dissident former member of the think tank of Zhao Ziyang, summed up the suitability of the University of Vienna to run a conference on China in Chinese: “That is because we have freedom (*ziyou*) here.”

Astrid Lipinsky

Manoeuvring Through Physical and Virtual Spaces: Mobility and New Media in Asian Cities

National University of Singapore, 04.–05. August 2014

The workshop “Manoeuvring Through Physical and Virtual Spaces: Mobility and New Media in Asian Cities: Mobility and New Media in Asian Cities”, was held at the National University of Singapore from 4–5 August 2014, and jointly organized by the Migration Research Cluster, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Asian Migration Research Cluster, Asia Research Institute, and the Department of Communications and New Media. The workshop explored how migrants’ lives, practices, communication, networks, movements, and economic ventures are influenced by new media (the internet and mobile communications). It considered how migrants actively participate in and shape various virtual spaces, further questioning how their online interactions alter the contours of their everyday activities, societal integration, individual identities, and emotional bonds to the cities they migrate to or pass through. The papers of the workshop shed light on the role of ICT use by migrants from various cultural, educational, professional, and socio-economic backgrounds, with differential levels of ICT access, and varying migration motivations and intentions, aspirations, and expectations.

The workshop offered a multi-disciplinary perspective on the topic by showcasing research by communication and media scholars, geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists, all working in the field of mobility, media, and the city. The workshop was designed as a small and intimate gathering with selected experts comprising both established and emerging scholars, so as to enable discussion and mentorship. Most of the sessions consisted of two papers and they addressed the following themes: social change brought about by new media, empowerment and recognition through mediated communication, migrant adaptation and assimilation via mediated communication channels, the communication of affect through mediated platforms, student migration and their translocal networks, as well as the role of mediation in