

China Intercontinental Press



Xu Guoqi

# LONG JOURNEY FOR CIVILIZATION

STORIES OF CHINESE LABORERS ON THE  
WESTERN FRONT IN WWI

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Western Front in WWI

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## 为文明出征：第一次世界大战期间西线战场华工的故事

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Preface

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, I would like to pay homage to my deceased father, Mr. Xu Jinxiang, and the Chinese laborers who died overseas during that conflict, with this book representing a bunch of joss sticks in my mind.





# Preface

## A History Worthy of In-Depth Research

After years of study, Professor Xu Guoqi wrote his book, *Chinese Laborers in France during the First World War*. It introduces the life and work situation of 140,000 Chinese laborers who went to France during the First World War to present full and accurate historical data on their contribution to the war effort. It also probes the impact brought about by their presence in France from the perspective of the exchanges between oriental and western civilizations. This effort of Mr. Xu is worthy of praise as being significant in ensuring this history is never forgotten but, indeed, should be the starting point for further exploration.

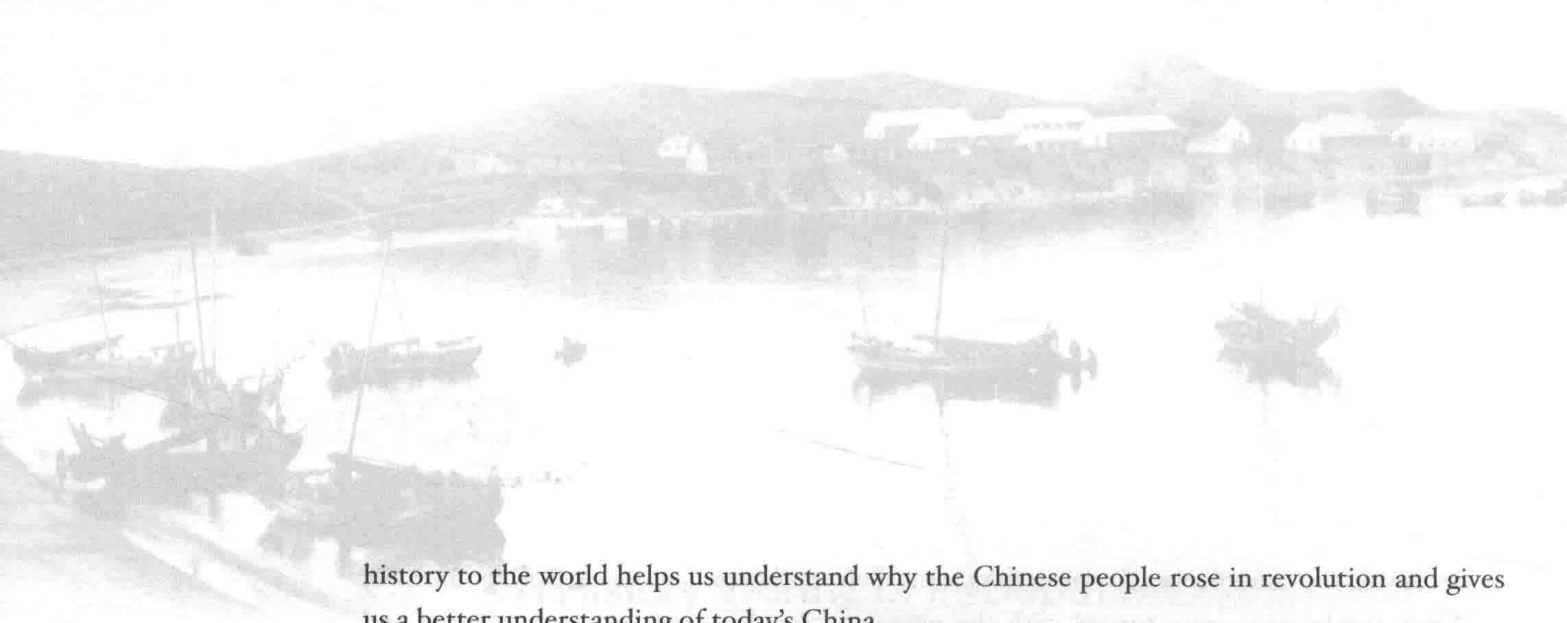
On August 1, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, triggering the calamitous First World War. The Chinese people thought this European conflict was far removed from them; they had suffered imperialist aggression from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century to the fullest extent, so there was no need for them to participate in this war. Therefore, China declared its neutrality. However, this was one of the most cruel and bloody wars in human history. Within two years, the warring parties had suffered heavy losses. France and Britain, for example, faced a severe labor shortage. As a result, they hoped China would be willing to send laborers to Europe. At that time, some Chinese men of insight had already been prompting the government to dispatch laborers abroad, believing participation in the war would help restore China's status as a great power after the conflict ended. Finally, China agreed to send labor forces to Europe. A total of 140,000 Chinese thus went to France to engage in the arduous and dangerous task, to support the country facing a determined enemy camped on its territory. According to incomplete statistics, about 20,000 of them died in France.

In the spring of 2002, as the Chinese ambassador to France, I went with the leaders of Chinese associations in France and official French representatives to the cemetery of Chinese laborers in the northern part of the country where the conflict had been most intense in order to pay respects to them. Over 700 persons, old and young, attended this event. The scene was a moving one. Then French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin each sent a letter of condolence to the families of these Chinese people who had sacrificed their lives in France.

After the activity, I walked around the well-maintained cemetery covered by green grass. Rows of neat white marble tombstones seemed to reflect the souls of the deceased

accepting the condolence of compatriots from their motherland under the spring sunshine. Many tombstones were carved with the names of the deceased and such militant and lofty words as "Advancing Bravely," "Working with Might and Main," "Living on in Spirit," "Leaving a Good Name for Posterity." At the same time, many tombstones carried no name, only a number. A pang of sadness struck me. The use of a number reminded me of prisoners! After that, I also met with the offspring of the Chinese laborers living in France. Their appearance bore few features of Chinese people. But they were still proud of their Chinese descent, and stressed that the French should not forget this history.

So many Chinese laborers making an arduous expedition to Europe shouldn't be forgotten because this had significant impact on China's subsequent development. Looking back to modern Chinese history, we can see that during the 79 years from 1840 to 1919, the dominant trend of thinking was to learn from the West. China, a country that had led the world for over a millennium in the history of human civilization, was invaded by imperialist powers after the Opium War broke out in 1840. Then, the Chinese people realized their country had lagged behind, and believed the only way out was to learn from the West and catch up. However, a radical change took place due to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. At the beginning of 1919, the Chinese representative Wellington Koo made a strong speech, claiming the right to regain the Shandong Peninsula that had previously been incorporated in a German sphere of influence. Since Germany was now defeated, China, as one of the victors that had sent many laborers to take part in the war, should naturally recover the lost territory. However, on April 29, 1919, the United States, Britain and France formally notified the Chinese representative of their decision to place Shandong Peninsula under Japanese control. The news provoked all Chinese, who felt they had been cheated. "It is too much that the teacher is bullying students!" Hence, students in Beijing marched onto the streets, launching the "May Fourth Movement," shocking the world. As the way of seeking to learn from the West had got nowhere, the Chinese people embarked on the road of revolution. Two years later, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was born. Under CPC leadership, the Chinese people finally overthrew the "three big mountains" after 28 years of arduous struggle. On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded. This history shows us that, without these Chinese laborers going to Europe, without the Paris Peace Conference at which the Chinese people refused to sign the humiliating *Treaty of Versailles* and without the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese people might not have been completely awakened. That Mr. Xu Guoqi presents this



history to the world helps us understand why the Chinese people rose in revolution and gives us a better understanding of today's China.

This history shouldn't be forgotten because this is an important event in the history of Sino-French relations. When the French people were in the most difficult times, the Chinese supported them. This kind of support was sincere, disregarding cost and claiming no return. After the war, the vast majority of Chinese laborers went back to China, but the war had brought severe mental trauma to them. The children of some Chinese laborers told me that when speaking of their experience in France a number of years later, their fathers still couldn't get the horror of war out of their mind. A small number of Chinese laborers remained in France. During my visit to La Rochelle, a coastal city in western France, at the beginning of 2002, the mayor of this city introduced me the city's oldest citizen, a 106-year-old Chinese laborer named Zhu Guisheng. He was highly respected there. His French wife had died. It was his daughter who accompanied him to see me. Mr. Zhu was a native of Liyang in China's Jiangsu Province. He was very pleased to see me, saying, "I am too old to return to China!" Infinite regret and sadness could be read in his eyes.

The contribution of Chinese laborers to France is a much-told story in the history of Sino-French relations. As President Jacques Chirac said: "No one will ever forget these warriors who came from afar and cast in their lot with France in the brutal war. They defended the territory, ideas and freedom of France with their souls and bodies." In 1998, the French government, following a strong request of overseas Chinese communities, erected a monument in Chinatown in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. It states: "Commemorating the Chinese laborers and soldiers who sacrificed their lives for France during World War I."

This history shouldn't be forgotten because these Chinese laborers were part of the early wave of Chinese people "going global." After the Opium War, such a movement generally fell into two parts. The first involved Chinese students studying abroad. In 1872, the Qing government dispatched the first batch of students (aged 10-16) to America. Some of them became prominent figures in the modern history of China including railway engineer Zhan Tianyou, the first premier of the Republic of China and founder of Fudan University Tang Shaoyi, the first president of Tsinghua University Tong Kwo On and mining engineer Wu Yangzeng. Subsequently, there was an upsurge of dispatching students to study in Japan and France, while more students went to the United States in two distinct batches in the 1940s. The second upsurge occurred after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, i.e. sending students to the Soviet Union and eastern European countries. The third upsurge appeared after the reform and opening up that was unprecedented in the number of

students and their destinations; this continues to develop and move forward. From a historical point of view, these peaks in people movements have had huge and far-reaching impact on China. The first upsurge brought about a large number of leaders and backbone personnel who overthrew the Qing government and the subsequent reactionary rule of the KMT government; the second one played an important role in China's economic construction; and the third one has already served and is serving as a way to cultivate a backbone force for China's modernization drive.

The other part of the Chinese people who went global in the modern times refers to laborers. Those going to the United States to build the grand railway traversed the American continent from east to west. According to American statistics, from 1865 to 1869, about 14,000 Chinese laborers participated in the construction of this railway. It should be noted that the 1,800-mile-long Central Pacific Railway goes through mountains rising to an altitude of 2,000-3,000 meters. The temperature difference between winter and summer was very large, and there were often snowstorms in winter. The most difficult sections were completed by Chinese labor. Later, the construction of an east-west Canadian railway traversing the Rocky Mountains also involved large numbers of Chinese laborers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition, a large number of Chinese laborers also took part in the building of the Panama Canal and related railway across the isthmus, playing an important role in promoting world trade. After that, more than 100,000 Chinese laborers went to Europe during the First World War.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there are no exact statistics on the number of Chinese laborers going global, but a rough estimate puts the figure at hundreds of thousands of people. They went to Europe, America and Latin America as coolies. They were looked down upon and discriminated against; they often took on the hardest jobs of a project, and did a good job. Both Americans and Canadians say that, without the participation of Chinese laborers, their large railways couldn't have been completed in such a short time. A considerable part of the Chinese labor force stayed there and became the early overseas Chinese. Our study of this history is not enough, but foreigners have begun to pay attention to it. Not long ago, I met a former foreign minister of Peru, who had written a book about Chinese laborers. He said to me, "I feel ashamed that our government so disgraced and ill-treated Chinese laborers at that time. However, the Chinese laborers left a deep impression on local people with their hard work and spirit of braving danger in the course of participating



in various tasks.” The Chinese laborers who stayed there generally integrated into the local society well.

The Chinese students studying overseas and Chinese laborers belong to two different groups. The Chinese students were generally from the social elite; but the laborers were drawn from the lower stratum of society. However, all of them were edified by Chinese culture from childhood. They unconsciously brought Chinese culture to the world while being influenced by foreign culture, in turn. The overseas Chinese have a prominent feature: they have always maintained contact with the motherland, and the exchanges between Chinese and Western cultures also exerted influence on the domestic development of China.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is now witnessing Chinese going out into the world, and large numbers of foreigners coming to China. From 1949 to 1978, less than 280,000 Chinese people went abroad; in 2006 alone, the number hit over 34 million, and 22 million foreigners came to China. Such a large-scale exchange is unprecedented in China’s 5,000-year history. Looking forward, this kind of two-way exchange has just begun. It is a subject worthy of in-depth research to study how the Chinese went global in the past and the exchanges between Eastern and Western culture, and the influence thereof. To get a better understanding of the past will be helpful for us to know ourselves, our Chinese culture and the role of exchange between Chinese and Western cultures in promoting the progress of human civilization, which will surely be a great help to the Chinese going to the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Professor Xu Guoqi’s main research is on China’s internationalization. I sincerely hope that he will produce more such works.

吴建民

Wu Jianmin, October 2007 in Beijing

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# Foreword

Since the early 1990s, I have been specially interested in the issues concerning the relationship between China, and Asia and the First World War. After reading relevant archives around the world and decades of hard work and thinking, I finally felt I knew enough to make my own contribution. From 2005, I launched a series of research results. In the same year, Cambridge University Press published an English hardcover edition of my *China and the Great War* (the English paperback edition was published in 2011). SDX Joint Publishing (Shanghai) Co., Ltd. included it into its “Library of Humanistic Classics” in 2008, and published a Chinese version. In 2011, Harvard University Press published my work *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*, whose Chinese version entitled *Chinese Workers in the Great War* was published by Shanghai People’s Publishing House in 2014. Upon the invitation of Oxford University Press in the summer of 2015, I completed the manuscript of *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History*. If everything goes well, this English version will appear at the end of 2016. As for this small book in your hands, it is a popular edition based on my English academic monographs on the First World War published over a 10-year period, thus containing the important results of my academic research. It is also a supplement to, and a revised version of, my book *Chinese Laborers in France during the First World War* printed by China Intercontinental Press in Beijing in 2007, with many chapters containing new contents. After over 20 years of research on the First World War, I intended to put it aside, and devote my energy to the systematic study of the subject – “What is China and Chineseness,” a long-cherished wish. However, China Intercontinental Press was anxious for me to revise *Chinese Laborers in France during the First World War* to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, so as to include new research results to it. It was hard to turn down such a warm-hearted offer, and, after some hesitation, I finally agreed.

I was willing to spend valuable time writing this book also because the Chinese people still lack understanding of the First World War and the Chinese laborers who had a role in it. In my humble opinion, both are of extreme important significance for China and its people. China’s participation in the First World War also constitutes an important chapter in the history of world civilization. My book *China and the Great War* probes the long course of the Chinese people’s struggle for internationalization and new national identity from the perspective of World War I, and analyzes how the international community responded to China’s active participation in the reconstruction of international order and the Chinese nation’s self-renewal. In the lengthy interview with the magazine *West Lake* in 2009, I even stated: “Without the First World War, there would be no May Fourth

Movement.” On the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First World War, the Chinese should have a soberer, objective understanding of the war. First of all, let’s review the history of the First World War. Under the Chinese calendar, 1914 was the Year of the Tiger, as well as being the third year of the Republic of China. This was when the “Great War” broke out (after another world war erupted over two decades later, the earlier conflict became known as the First World War).

In the beginning, it was defined as a “civilized war” by the warring parties. There is such inscription carved on the Inter-Allied Victory Medal awarded to the soldiers after the war: “Fight for Human Civilization, 1914-1919.”<sup>2</sup> A Western scholar pointed out that, “The First World War didn’t only concern gains and losses on the battlefield or even economically. For the British people, it was a war defending the order of the British Empire.” Similarly, the Germans regarded it as the “Holy War of the German Nation.” Therefore, “for the Germans, it was a war for changing the world, while, for the British, it was a war defending the world order. The Germans fought for the future, the British for tradition.”<sup>3</sup> The famous American scholar Henry James wrote on August 5, 1914, “The outbreak of the First World War might plunge civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness, and will break our illusion that the world will become better.”<sup>4</sup>

An American official also wrote shortly after the end of the war: “When the world war is truly recorded and the victory objectively evaluated, we will find that no country is worthy of the title of a civilized victor.”<sup>5</sup> Whatever one’s viewpoint, the First World War had far-reaching impact in human history, a cruel test of blood and fire to Western civilization. Moreover, in a wide sense, the First World War was far more important than the Second World War. This is not only because the latter was a continuation of the former; more importantly, until today, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War I, we still lack real understanding of its significance for China, with its influence and consequences still being debated.

In fact, scarcely had an armistice been declared than a debate on the significance and impact of the war began in the East and West. German scholar Oswald Spengler declared that the First World War marked the decline of the West, which is well understood. Chinese political thinker Liang Qichao (1873-1929) said in his work *Thoughts during European Travel* written at the end of 1918 that the result of World War I showed the oriental spirit and civilization still had certain advantages. He remarked: “Europeans had a dream that science is omnipotent, but now they claim that they have been bankrupted due to science. This is a key reason for the recent change in thinking.” He even warned



the Chinese people affectionately, “Our lovely youth! Stand at attention! Step forward! Several billion people on the opposite coast of the ocean are worrying about the bankruptcy of material civilization, and crying for help desperately. They are waiting for your enlightenment. Our three sages and many predecessors in paradise are eagerly expecting you to complete their undertakings and blessing you with their spirit.”<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, World War I almost destroyed human civilization, and the social Darwinism promoted in the West bears the blame. In addition to Liang Qichao, other Chinese like Liang Shuming and Gu Hongming were also major generals in the camp emphasizing the advantages of oriental civilization.

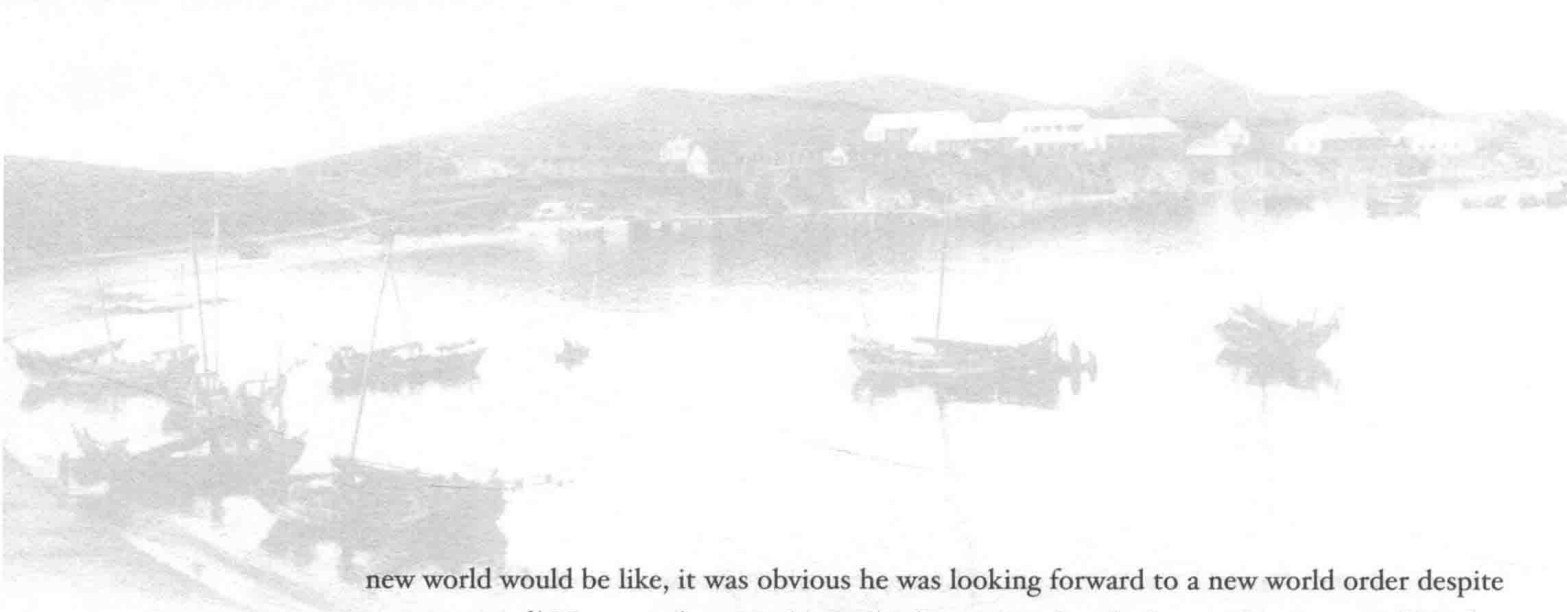
There were so many Chinese and foreigners advocating the supremacy of oriental civilization that American philosopher John Dewey mentioned in his review of British philosopher Bertrand Russell’s book *The Problem of China in 1923*, “China tends to become an angel of light to show up the darkness of Western civilization. Chinese virtues are made a whip of scorpions with which to lash the backs of complacent Westerners.”<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that it was not the case at that time of everyone lining up on the side of the Eastern or Western civilization and comparing their advantages and disadvantages. Some very rational Chinese called for a clear understanding of the First World War as a watershed of human civilization, and that Chinese should take the opportunity to find a suitable path for their nation’s own development instead of sticking to the dispute over the relative advantages of Eastern and Western civilizations. For instance, a Chinese article published in the *Morning Post* in 1918, saying, “With the ending of the Great War, 19<sup>th</sup> Century civilization also comes to a conclusion, but 20<sup>th</sup> Century civilization just sprouts therefrom. In other words, the world enters a new era from the old.... Therefore, to adapt to the trend of the times, the Chinese people must seek a guiding principle for education, and the principle mustn’t go against the new trend of the world, or we will be eliminated. The Chinese must be very clear about this.”<sup>8</sup>

After the First World War, the Indian Rabindranath Tagore launched the severest and most influential criticism on Western civilization in Asia. He won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, the first Asian winner of this honor, so his remarks were naturally more influential. In 1921, he wrote: “Those who live away from the East, have now got to recognize that Europe has completely lost her former moral prestige in Asia. She is no longer regarded as the champion throughout the world of fair dealing and the exponent of high principle, but rather as an upholder of Western racial supremacy, and the exploiter of those outside her own borders.”<sup>9</sup> In his letter to French writer Romain Rolland, also a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, after the war, he observed: “There is hardly a corner in the vast continent of Asia where men have come to feel any love for Europe.”<sup>10</sup> For Tagore’s part, “the poison that civilized Europe pushed down the gullet of such a great country like China has severely

impaired its own forever,” and “the torch of European civilization was not meant for showing light, but to set fire.”<sup>11</sup>

A huge challenge to Western civilization, World War I gave rise to a great debate between Eastern and Western civilizations and also had an important impact on the reorganization and layout of the world civilization map. It was regarded as a “heaven-sent opportunity” by Japan.<sup>12</sup> By virtue of the war, Japan rose to be a world power, and became one of the top five powers in the world at the Paris Peace Conference. However, among the Japanese people who struck it rich due to foreign affairs and the war economy, many harbored doubts and a strong sense of loss after the war. Despite Japan’s strength, the Western powers still sniffed at the “racial equality” proposal made by Japan at Paris Peace Conference, and denied it. In regard to racial ranking, Japan, like other Asian countries, couldn’t assume equal footing with the white nations. Moreover, Japan had made its way forward by following Germany’s military mode; however, the latter’s defeat and the post-war tendency of anti-militarism permeating the world made large numbers of Japanese people wonder if Japan had selected a wrong founding pattern fundamentally, and whether its policy of “departure from Asia for Europe” pursued since the Meiji Restoration was wise or not. This was also the case with America, a rising power via the First World War. It was also full of misgivings about the impact and aftermath of the war. After joining the war under the slogan of “war for democracy,” Americans found the post-war world order was not what they had expected. President Woodrow Wilson was once regarded as savior bringing hope to the world. Even French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau sighed that, “God gave only ten commandments to mankind, but this man provided a ‘14-point’ new world order blueprint.” Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, claimed that Wilson was the “No. 1 Good Man” in the world.<sup>13</sup> Tagore gave him a personally-signed book. At the post-war Paris Peace Conference, Wilson, with soaring ambition, vowed to establish a new world order dominated by the United States as well as an international alliance for eternal peace. However, Americans abandoned Wilson and his international vision, and Congress refused to approve the Treaty of Versailles and even forbade the United States to join the international alliance the president had founded.

It can be said that all people with lofty ideas, scholars and politicians under the sun were puzzled, pondering what impact the recent conflict would have on humankind, and discussing whether it meant the decline of the West, the bankruptcy of science or a new opportunity for human advancement. Philosopher John Dewey initially had high expectations. In an interview in August 1917, he said: “We are fighting for democracy. Because of this great war, the world dies, but long live the world! A great civilization has disappeared, replaced by a completely new society and civilization.” Although he declared that he didn’t know what the post-war



new world would be like, it was obvious he was looking forward to a new world order despite some unease.<sup>14</sup> However, he was ultimately disappointed with the new postwar world order, and plunged into confusion. Did that mean even Mr. Dewey had begun to doubt the benefits of science and Western civilization? During the May Fourth Movement, he came to China and stayed for over two years. He was also deemed as the personal incarnation of “science” and “democracy,” two popular slogans in China at that time. Due to his great influence, Dewey was even called the “American Confucius” or “second Confucius” by Cai Yuanpei and others.<sup>15</sup>

The First World War was also of great significance to China even though few people realized it at the time. In a broad sense, it could be regarded as having originated in 1895 and ended in 1919. During this period, various kinds of ideological trends, oriental or Western, were tried in China as if replicating the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BCE). The republic, democracy, Dewey’s philosophy, Russell’s philosophy and various schools of thought debuted in China. As British writer Charles Dickens described in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, “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.”<sup>16</sup> A new generation began to emerge. The First World War marked an important historical turning point in Chinese and Western civilization. In 1912, advanced Chinese overthrew the monarchy and founded the Republic of China. The New Culture Movement, new ideological trends and nationalism raged like a storm. Since the Opium War, the Chinese had become fed up with the old system in which might is deemed right. The Chinese eagerly expected the old international order would be replaced by a new one established on the basis of equality, justice and national self-determination; they strove to participate in the wider international community and become a member of equal standing with others therein. The outbreak of World War I marked a strong attack on the old order that had been so unfair to the Chinese, and they struggled to take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild civilization and revitalize the country.

The years from 2014 to 2018 form the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First World War. The global debate on the world order, the rise and fall of the Eastern and Western civilizations and science and machinery, however, still continues without any conclusion. People today are still debating and doubting, failing to come to any agreement. In fact, after the great trial of two world wars, Western civilization still holds an advantage, and science and machinery play an even more important role in life, advocated and pursued by the whole world.<sup>17</sup> Earth-shaking

changes have taken place in China since World War I: when the war broke out, China was a poor, weak disunited country, partitioned by other powers at will; but today, China has become the world's second largest economy and largest trading nation with growing international status. Other powers can no longer behave arrogantly towards China. However, the confusing problems widely discussed by our ancestors during the period of the May Fourth Movement still exist, such as "What is China and Chineseness," the status of Chinese civilization in the international arena and what kind of national identity does China really need?

Currently, Chinese leaders are vigorously promoting realization of the "Chinese dream" and implementation of the grand program of "Chinese nation's great rejuvenation," mirroring the ideals of the May Fourth Movement. A century has passed. It is a good moment to ask what significance the First World War brought to China. In fact, this is a long-neglected topic that needs to be urgently reviewed now. First, the whole world, including China, has paid little attention to the interrelationship and the influence imposed by the First World War on China. Second, the passage of 100 years makes no difference to its influence on today's Asia. Especially when we try to understand why Sino-Japanese relations are always so problematic, we are particularly impressed by the impact of the war. Third, the war greatly influenced China's national development, foreign policy and national or international consciousness. Fourth, the Chinese are still seeking a new national identity suited to national conditions and the country's corresponding international status. It is undoubtedly extremely important for China and the world to understand the impact of the war in this regard. Perhaps a correct understanding of the World War I history is the key to solving many current problems.

The year 2015 was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of the Second World War, and also the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China's creative proposal of "sending laborers instead of soldiers" to the Western front in World War I, thus linking its fate with the outcome of that conflict. On the occasion of worldwide reflection on the legacy of World War I and commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of the Second World War, perhaps we should ponder the following questions: was the Second World War a continuation of the first? Was the aftermath of World War I a direct contributor to the outbreak of World War II and should their far-reaching impact on human civilization be considered together or separately? We also need to consider what constitutes the Second World War and whether its duration varies between different countries. For China, at least, one cannot understand the Second World War without gaining a proper understanding of the first. Yet, we still lack real understanding of the global significance of the so-called "great war," and its impact and consequences are still being debated.

When reviewing the impact of World War II on Sino-Japanese relations and the historical