



Guoqi Xu. *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 275 pages \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-965819-0.

Reviewed by Joseph Fonseca

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An enduring facet of the memory of the First World War is its horror. Western perspectives naturally focus on the often fruitless daily violence faced by soldiers serving on the western front. Stories told of the war convey scenes of destruction, the rending of men and machines along trenches and scarred countryside, while people at home questioned the why and how of it. The Great War was a disaster, and represented for many a low point in the reign of Western civilization; a reckoning between European peoples and the industrial might that brought them to world power. A Western perspective of the war is crucial, and always will be, but it is important to consider that this conflict was, in fact, a world war. Xu Guoqi's *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History* serves as an important introduction to the notion of the First World War as a global experience, focusing on the impact the war and accompanying ideas had on Asia while concisely arguing that the conflict itself, as a great European civil war, was as much an opportunity in Asia as it was a tragedy in Europe.

Asia and the Great War seeks to explore, at the surface level, how several Asian nations responded to the upheaval brought about by this predominantly European conflict. Beginning with a sketch of China and Japan's rivalry and the positions of great powers in East Asia, Xu moves to in-

dependently assess the experiences of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean volunteers, thinkers, and politicians as they engaged with the Great War. Xu then ends with a more thorough look at the negative impact the postwar peace conference and the rejection of Japan's push for racial equality had on ideological and political thinking in East Asia. Xu uses a variety of primary sources to underscore the narrative at key moments throughout the work, though the majority of his research comes from a wide variety of excellent secondary sources by leading figures of their respective fields. These works are well integrated, and it is clear that Xu is attempting to provide the reader with a distilled version of those authors' arguments for ease of consumption. Detailed footnotes and a thorough bibliography provide for much additional reading for those interested in expanding upon Xu's narrative.

Exploring Xu's theme of shared history, one finds the work's most significant strength, as well as its most irksome issue. The importance of Wilsonian ideals around the world at the time, and especially as the war wound down and the construction of a new world order began, is common knowledge. Yet, Xu makes the connection between the importance of Wilsonian ideals in Asia and the way in which the ideology affected individuals and movements that in turn influenced

each other. This is best demonstrated in Xu's assessment of Korea's relation to the war. While a Japanese colony, and not directly a participant in the war, many Koreans recognized the importance of the conflict. The shared feeling of opportunity, carried higher by Woodrow Wilson's mythical ideals, encouraged Korean students and activists to use the message to demand freedom. The resulting March First Movement, the largest such movement in colonial Korea, remains a key moment in the historical memories of both North and South Korea. Xu continues his exploration of shared history by making connections between the March First Movement and the May Fourth Movement, which would rock China's intellectual world just two months later. Xu also connects the more personal experiences of volunteers and soldiers who saw the western front for themselves. Xu shines when discussing the experiences of Chinese workers and Indian and Vietnamese soldiers in France. Here he demonstrates through letters, newspapers, and official military reports that these men, from different worlds in Asia, came upon similar realizations about their status vis-à-vis the Europeans who had occupied their countries. The stark contrast between their experience at the front and the relative safety of an exotic but comforting France allowed Asians from across the continent to collectively begin to reassess the implied superiority of European civilization and morals. These musings were accentuated through enduring contact between these Asians and the civilian population, both male and female, and disseminated back home through letters and post-war political activity. Connections like these help cement Xu's argument for a shared Asian history of the Great War while exploring the experiences of less represented Asian peoples.

Often, and to its detriment, *Asia and the Great War* errs on the side of expediency and omits important details about the complicated nature of East Asian politics and diplomacy. Most unfortunate is the almost complete omission of any assessment of the fractured nature of Chinese

politics during the period under consideration. The republican revolution in 1911 saw not only an inefficient state led by Yuan Shikai (which contributed to Japanese economic and political aggression), but also the rise of regional warlords and cliques that dominated large swaths of territory after his death. The fractured nature of China makes statements about unified Chinese decision making questionable. Similarly, the assessment of Japan's interest in China in the first chapter is lacking a great deal of relevant information about Japan's actions and motives in the region.

The last two chapters, "The Japanese Dream of Racial Equality" and "Asia Rethinks Its Relations to the World," offer insightful commentary. Here Xu reinforces the argument that the Japanese, while decidedly *realpolitik* in their interactions with the powers, legitimately believed in the importance of a racial equality clause in the League of Nations, a sentiment that was echoed by the rest of Asia, even if some Chinese harbored concerns about Japanese motives. Xu also offers an insightful examination of the lingering effects of the unfulfilled sense of opportunity afforded by the war in Asia, and how such feelings, accompanied by a growing revulsion at the idea of Western moral superiority, fed a growing introspection amongst thinkers and politicians throughout Asia, fueling not only nationalism and ideas of Asian regional solidarity, but also heightening the allure of communism.

Asia and the Great War is an excellent work for what it is, an informative and concise introduction to the various Asian experiences of the Great War as well as a compelling argument for the continued exploration of concepts of shared experience in history. Though potentially not detailed enough for specialists of the period in East Asian history, it can rightfully claim a spot among those works well suited for use by nonspecialists and especially in undergraduate classrooms. This work provides enough detail and narrative style to engage students and broaden their understand-

ing of another side of one of the most important conflicts in our collective history.

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