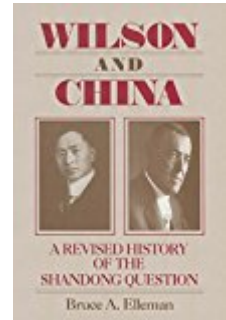


**Bruce A. Elleman.** *Wilson and China: A Revised History of the Shandong Question.* Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. vii + 227 pp. \$82.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7656-1050-8.



**Reviewed by** Roger Chapman

**Published on** H-US-Japan (June, 2003)

China's Misrepresentation of the Past: The Shandong Province and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919

As China attempts to emerge as a superpower, recovering from the trials and tribulations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, old myths are utilized in order to magnify the past injustices of foreign imperialism. One of those lingering myths pertains to Japan's leasing of China's Shandong (Shantung) peninsula following World War I. The story, as traditionally told, is that China was betrayed at Versailles (the Paris Peace Conference), set free from the Germans only to fall into the clutches of the Japanese. Since the United States under President Woodrow Wilson was the presiding power at Versailles, it receives the brunt of the blame for the decision pertaining to Shandong.

This viewpoint has had wide circulation, even among historians outside of China. An example of this traditional interpretation may be found in E. H. Carr's study of international relations following World War I, where he writes, "By the Treaty of Versailles she [Japan] had acquired from Ger-

many the 'leased territory' of Kiaochow in Shantung province of China--a decision which caused China to refuse her signature on the treaty." [1] More recently, J. M. Roberts writes, "The Chinese had much to feel aggrieved about ... they were unable to obtain a reversal of the Shantung decision. Disappointed of American diplomatic support ... the Chinese refused to sign the treaty." [2]

By presenting and analyzing the primary diplomatic documents from the Japanese, Chinese, and American archives, Bruce A. Elleman's *Wilson and China* unravels this myth and shows that China had actually betrayed itself. In 1918, China and Japan signed two secret agreements, which conferred on Japan political and economic rights over the Shandong province. To solidify its position on the matter, Japan signed four other secret treaties with Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia. Later, China claimed it signed the secret treaties with Japan while under duress (p. 44). The evidence shows, however, that China "gladly agreed" to the secret agreements (p. 27), pleased to receive the infrastructure improvements (such as the railroad line and mining technology). But

China's real self-betrayal came after the war when it insisted on receiving back Shandong from Germany and not Japan, a ridiculous demand that would force Japan into a humiliating position that the circumstances did not warrant (pp. 46-48).

Why did China insist on receiving back its province from defeated Germany rather than Tokyo? The main reason was "self-respect," the saving of "face" (pp. 46-49, 93, 107-108). Germany was viewed as a great European power, whereas Japan was viewed as a traditional tributary state of China. Japan could not agree to such a demand because it would have amounted to a unilateral revocation of agreements it had signed with China from 1915 to 1918. Furthermore, during the nineteenth century Japan had leased from China the Liaodong Province (as part of the Twenty-one Demands), but in 1895 China used Germany to force Japan out and Germany was subsequently rewarded with Shandong. Japan's acquisition of Shandong was, in the eyes of Tokyo, just recompense. Also, Japan had made sizeable infrastructure investments in the Shandong province, where many Japanese lives were lost against German forces. Meanwhile, China tarried in entering the war for three years after the conflict began, which was after the hard fighting was over (pp. 28-29). From Japan's viewpoint, China wanted to be accepted as a full ally and receive a full portion of the fruits of victory, even though it was a Johnny-come-lately. In other words, Japan had its own "face" to save.

China wanted to follow the rule of law and order, but only when it was to its own advantage. Beijing sought to negotiate secret treaties and then, when it was personally beneficial, to have the secret treaties rescinded. The Chinese government was not candid with its own representatives to Versailles, sending them off on a diplomatic mission without providing them with all the necessary details. Matters for Beijing were ruined when, in disregard to orders, its delegation raised the Shandong question and consequently "face"

required that China insist on having the territory returned (p. 49). The Chinese delegates did not know that the Shandong question had already been settled by their government, which had signed two secret agreements with Japan. As Elleman notes, "none was more surprised than those in the Chinese delegation when Japan made public the existence of these secret agreements on the floor of the conference" (p. 34). In other words, "[T]he Beijing government had neglected to inform them [its delegates] about the complete range of Chinese agreements affecting Shandong" (p. 36).

One reason the Shandong myth came into existence is because many of the sessions at Versailles were held in closed executive session, with the press barred. The secret minutes of the January 28, 1919 meeting reveal that the Chinese delegation were in the dark about the agreements on Shandong that had been signed between China and Japan. Wellington Koo, the Chinese spokesman, gave an impassioned speech about the importance of Shandong province to China, describing it as "the cradle of Chinese civilization" and "a Holy Land for the Chinese" (since it was the birth land of Confucius and Mencius). Moreover, Koo continued, if Japan was allowed to continue its lease of the Shandong territory, then it would provide the government of Tokyo with a strategic "gateway" to all of north China (p. 42). Koo, ignorant of the secret Shandong agreements between China and Japan, went on to argue that the 1915 treaty China had signed with Germany was null and void in the wake of Germany's defeat and Japan had no right to the territory it seized from Germany (p. 43). Such rhetoric made it impossible, thereafter, for Beijing officials to publicly endorse Japan's presence in Shandong, regardless of any secret treaties. At the same time, China took advantage of the secret meetings at Versailles and offered the press a self-serving account of the diplomatic proceedings that does not match the record found in the archival documentation.

The final verdict shows Wilson did an exemplary job of protecting China's sovereignty while at the same time adhering to the principle of abiding by signed international treaties. As Elleman argues, "[F]or Wilson to have unconditionally backed China would have meant overlooking no fewer than six internationally recognized treaties. But by doing so, Wilson would have called into question the sanctity of treaties. This would have undermined the very legal tradition on which Western democracy is founded" (pp. 5-6).

Elleman devotes three chapters to Wilson's involvement in the Shandong matter: "President Wilson's Compromise Proposal," "The Myth of Woodrow Wilson's Betrayal," and "Wilson's Failed Attempts to Secure a Japanese Statement of Intent." In the end, it is shown that Wilson helped China regain political control of Shandong in 1922, but since the transfer was from Japan and not Germany, the Chinese saw it as a betrayal. Had China signed the Treaty of Versailles, the transfer of the Shandong from Japan to China would have been swifter (p. 130). China, it seems, should have counted its blessings--under the 1898 treaty with Germany there was no legal obligation for Shandong to be returned to China until 1997 (p. 28). Looking for a scapegoat for its mismanaged diplomacy, Beijing blamed Wilson. On July 28, 1919, the *Beijing Daily News* published an open letter to the U.S. Senate, recommending that it reject the Versailles Treaty. The letter blamed Wilson for allowing imperialists to continue their exploitation of China (p. 128). This letter, argues Elleman, contributed to the Shandong myth, its perception that Wilson had betrayed China, and it helped convince the U.S. Senate to reject America's joining the League of Nations. Perhaps Wilson's ultimate failure was his lack of success in setting the record straight about the Shandong question.

An important consequence of the Shandong myth is that it "opened the door to Bolshevik propaganda and influence" in China (p. 135), provid-

ing the Chinese Communist movement with an issue (pp. 2, 107, 130, 135-154). The 1919 May Fourth Movement, largely a reaction to the Shandong question, turned many Chinese intellectuals away from the West. Wilson was seen as being hypocritical when he spoke in favor of national self-determination. The Soviet Union was able to exploit what happened and thus exert an ideological influence over its neighbor next door. Indeed, the same year that the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the Comintern sent its first operative to China. The Chinese people, believing they were betrayed at Versailles by the United States and its European allies, looked to Soviet Russia for an alternative political model. Elleman writes, "To a large degree the Chinese rejected the American model because they truly believed that Wilson had betrayed China's national interests; by contrast, the Chinese believed that Soviet Russia would treat China fairly" (p. 136). The question as to "who lost China" that certain political conservatives in the United States were asking during the 1950s might have an answer in the Shandong myth (pp. 2, 4, 180-181). According to Elleman, "After World War II, the long-term impact of the Shandong question can be seen in the origins of the cold war in Asia" (p. 179).

Bruce A. Elleman's *Wilson and China* is an excellent resource for shedding light on the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, providing a worthy analysis of American diplomacy under the Wilson administration, and showing its long-term impact on East Asian politics. If Elleman's findings are correct, then some important Chinese history will have to be revised, although this will undoubtedly be painful and threatening for those factions that rely on victimhood status for the purposes of ideological posturing. Elleman has provided in his work many photocopies of key primary documents to bolster his argument. Some readers will find the book very repetitive, but this is due to the author's meticulous care in presenting his overall thesis. As it is easier to tie a knot

than to undo it, so it is easier to create a myth than to expose it as falsehood.

The question hovering over Elleman's thesis is whether or not the secret treaties China had signed with Japan pertaining to the Shandong province represented coercion. Did both parties perceive the secret treaties, at the time of the signing, as a win-win situation? Or did China feel that it was making an agreement in a position of weakness and so had little choice? This is the issue that will need further addressing.

#### Notes

[1]. E. H. Carr, *International Relations between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper & Row/Torchbooks, 1947, 1966), p. 19.

[2]. J. M. Roberts, *The New History of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 919.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

**Citation:** Roger Chapman. Review of Elleman, Bruce A. *Wilson and China: A Revised History of the Shandong Question*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7733>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.