Xu Guoqi, China and The Great War. China’s Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization

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NOTE DE L’ÉDITEUR
Translated from the French original by Nick Oates

1 This work changes somewhat the vision that historians have provided to this day of China’s participation in the First World War. The sending to Europe by the fragile government of Duan Qirui of around 140,000 Chinese coolies, two-thirds of whom were recruited by the British army and the rest by the French army, has always appeared as the result of dealings between Peking and the Allies in search of a workforce in service of their military logistics in the rear and at the front. Xu Guoqi demonstrates that this dispatch was also in keeping with the continuation of very active Chinese diplomacy, the aim of which was to allow China to take advantage of the Great War in order to rejoin the concert of nations and start to regain its national sovereignty so badly damaged since the Opium Wars.

2 Not limiting his examination solely to the Paris Peace Conference, where it is known that China suffered a humiliating reverse over the Shandong question and from which was to emerge the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the author revisits this Chinese intervention from the upside: despite its extreme weakness in an era of its history characterised as the “warlord period”, China obtained at the Washington Naval Conference during the winter of 1921 the beginnings of the restoration of its autonomy in customs matters and re-established its sovereignty over Shandong province. In fact, these sombre years show
China commencing its development as a modern nation-state that is reaching completion in our present-day era.

This book is well constructed and solidly documented. Two reservations, however: the total absence of any Chinese characters is awkward, even more so because the pinyin transcriptions are often incorrect (for example on pp. 22, 35, 60, 162, 276, etc.). Secondly, the good presentation of the Truptil mission and the Laoxikai anti-French riots in Tianjin in 1916 (pp. 117-122) could have been rounded out by the Chinese sources published in January-March 1996 in Tianjin, Wenshi ziliao : xuanji, in three volumes, which also contain three dossiers of memories gathered from Chinese workers who served in the British army at the front in Artois, including one Chen Baoyu: Wo ceng zai Ouzhou dang huagong (“I was a Chinese worker in Europe”). I used these texts, provided by Laurent Galy, in an article co-written with Xiao-Planes Xiaohong, in which we came to conclusions similar to those of Xu Guoqi.

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