




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The making of ‘public opinion’: Media and open diplomacy in China’s strategy at Versailles and the May Fourth Movement

Rong Wu 

Wolfson College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Email: [rw492@cam.ac.uk](mailto:rw492@cam.ac.uk)

(Received 26 April 2022; revised 12 December 2022; accepted 12 December 2022)

## Abstract

This article makes an intervention in the study of the May Fourth Movement by examining the role the mass media played in the diplomatic and domestic mobilization processes set in motion by China’s experience at the Paris Peace Conference. In contrast with the mainstream narrative that constructs the May Fourth Movement as a spontaneous response to the loss of Shandong at Versailles, this article shows that it was preceded by a proactive diplomatic strategy to mobilize ‘public opinion’ over the Shandong question. The Chinese delegation’s decision to launch a media campaign in support of their diplomatic agendas at Versailles inadvertently turned domestic media into a platform for political debate. As a result of competition between the political elites who dominated the mediascape, discussions over the Shandong question shifted from focusing on international diplomacy to domestic politics in the spring of 1919. An examination of the ‘media war’ during the May Fourth Movement further demonstrates that the political elites’ variable ability to adopt media strategies to shape and channel public opinion resulted in changing the political landscape of the post-May Fourth era. By focusing on the role of the mass media in the diplomatic and domestic mobilization in China’s strategy at Versailles and during the May Fourth Movement, this article forges new connections between the international and the domestic. It also invites further reflections on the nature of the May Fourth Movement by showing that the media was a tool of political mobilization that connected the political elite to the masses.

**Keywords:** May Fourth Movement; Paris Peace Conference; media; public opinion; political mobilization

## Introduction

China’s experiences at the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the First World War have become an integral part of the country’s discourse on its ‘century of humiliation’.<sup>1</sup> The failure to return to China German rights in Shandong, which were instead

---

<sup>1</sup>The ‘century of humiliation’ refers to the period in modern Chinese history that started with the Opium War in the 1840s and ended with the Second Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s, with a focus on the

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

transferred to Japan under the Treaty of Versailles, is thought to have triggered the May Fourth Movement. The outpouring of public indignation and the nationwide mass protests it set in motion made Mao Zedong mark May Fourth as the beginning of the New Democratic Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Right to the present time, the Versailles-May Fourth episode still provides an important archetype of China's foreign policy mentality. In a conversation he had with the American President Donald Trump during the G20 summit in 2019, for example, Xi Jinping compared what he considered to be an unequal deal then proposed by the USA to the humiliation China suffered at Versailles, and he warned of the possible upsurge of patriotic feelings in China should this humiliation be repeated.<sup>3</sup>

Historians have challenged this narrative of the 'betrayal and disillusionment leading to awakening and rebirth' underlying the depiction of China's experiences at Versailles and during the May Fourth Movement by highlighting the complexity of both events.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, while numerous works have examined the bargaining,

---

impairment of sovereignty China suffered from invasion by a succession of foreign powers. In contemporary Chinese political discourse, the term is often used to justify the need to rejuvenate the Chinese nation, and the emphasis on 'humiliation' and 'shame' in the official historiography of modern China's encounter with the outside world has fuelled nationalist sentiments in its current foreign relations.

<sup>2</sup>Although the Chinese Communist Party was founded two years after the May Fourth Movement, the event is claimed by the CCP to be an important milestone in the party's development, as it paved the way for transmission of Marxism into China and provided the intellectual, class, and organizational foundations for the birth of the party. See Mao Zedong, 'Xin minzhu zhuyi lun' ['On New Democracy'], available at <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-194001.htm>, [accessed 1 November 2021].

<sup>3</sup>John Bolton, *The room where it happened: a White House memoir* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), pp. 301–302.

<sup>4</sup>For a literature review of research on China's experiences at the Paris Peace Conference, see Tang Qihua, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajiao* [*The Paris Peace Conference and China's diplomacy*] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2014), pp. 7–9. Numerous works examine the May Fourth Movement from different aspects, of which Chow Tse-tsung's *The May Fourth Movement: intellectual revolution in modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) remains one of the most important to have been published in English. For summaries of literature on the May Fourth Movement following Chow's foundational work, see for example: Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Student protests in twentieth-century China: the view from Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 9; Shakhar Rahav, *The rise of political intellectuals in modern China: May Fourth societies and the roots of mass-party politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5. Rana Mitter has also made a comprehensive review of May Fourth studies in *A bitter revolution: China's struggle with the modern world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 19–24, followed by his own discussion of how the event has resonated in China's more recent history. More recently, the centenary of the May Fourth Movement in 2019 gave rise to a new wave of scholarship revisiting this topic. It is worth noting the different focuses in the re-evaluation of the May Fourth across different geographical regions, especially within the Sinophone world in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. A few examples among the many monographs, collected volumes, and journal articles produced include: Ouyang Zhesheng (ed.), *Bainian huikan wusi yundong: Beijing daxue jinian wusi yundong 100 zhounian renwen xueshu luntan lunwenji* [Revisiting the May Fourth Movement on its centenary: an edited volume of the papers for the Humanities Forum at Peking University commemorating the centenary of the May Fourth Movement] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2020); Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (ed.), *Wusi yundong yu minzu fuxing: jinian wusi yundong yibai zhounian guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* [The May Fourth Movement and national rejuvenation: an edited volume of the papers for the international conference commemorating the centenary of the May Fourth Movement], 2 vols (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2022); David Der-wei Wang and Song Mingwei (eds), *Wusi yibai: wenhua, sixiang, lishi* [May Fourth at 100: culture, thought, history] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2019); and Sixiangshi bianweihui (eds), *Sixiangshi: wusi bainian zhuanhao*

networking, and negotiations that took place in the grandiose halls of Versailles, as well as the speeches, protests, and strikes in the streets of Beijing, much less attention has been paid to a key link connecting these two arenas: the Chinese delegation's decision to launch an open diplomacy campaign via the mass media, which led to a widescale political mobilization process at home.<sup>5</sup> Without understanding why and how this policy was put into practice, it would be difficult to understand the correlation between the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement. We need to ask, for example, how was the general public in China informed of the diplomatic negotiations at Versailles? And why did the Shandong question, which was an unresolved case that had existed before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, become the focal point of domestic politics and public debate in China in the spring and summer of 1919? In other words, if the request for the direct return of Shandong and the decision not to sign the Treaty of Versailles were made based on the 'public opinion' of the Chinese people, as diplomats and politicians at the time claimed, how, then, was this public opinion formed?

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap in the existing literature by examining the mobilization strategy in China's policy at Versailles and its consequences in domestic politics. In particular, it focuses on the role of the mass media – especially newspapers and circular telegrams – in the process.<sup>6</sup> It starts by looking at how the use of the mass media as a means of diplomatic mobilization turned the Shandong question

---

[*Intellectual history: special issue on the centenary of the May Fourth Movement*] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>Erez Manela, in his book on how the global ramifications of the Wilsonian ideals of self-determination gave rise to nationalist movements in countries including Egypt, India, China, and Korea, contextualizes the May Fourth Movement in the milieu of international liberalism at the end of the First World War. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment: self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Manela's focus, however, is mainly on the American propaganda team's communications strategy and its reception among the Chinese intellectuals. Less attention has been paid to the Chinese delegation's conscious efforts to mobilize the domestic public. On the latter topic, the most important work is Tang Qihua's *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajijiao*, in which he provides a thorough review of the Chinese diplomatic team's changing agendas throughout the Paris Peace Conference and its implementation. Xu Guoqi's book on China and the First World War also offers important insights into broadened participation in foreign affairs and the formation of a 'foreign policy public' during the period. Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). All three works have identified new developments in communications technology as essential in strengthening the connection between domestic and international politics during this period. This paper will build on these existing works, but aims to specifically focus on the mass media as a central link that connected the Chinese delegation's Versailles strategy with May Fourth politics.

<sup>6</sup>Many scholars have paid attention to the important role media played in the mobilization process of the May Fourth Movement. Both Timothy B. Weston and Barbara Mittler have done excellent works on how newspapers nurtured public opinion in the months leading up to the May Fourth Movement. Timothy B. Weston, *The power of position: Beijing University, intellectuals, and Chinese political culture, 1898–1929* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), 2004, pp. 163–175; Barbara Mittler, *A newspaper for China? Power, identity, and change in Shanghai's news media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), pp. 384–390. Shakhrah Rahav, in his work on radical activism and the rise of mass political parties during the May Fourth period, highlights the periodical as a form of mass media in fostering networks of radical politics. Rahav, *The rise of political intellectuals in modern China*. In comparison, the telegraph, which had become an important tool for political mobilization during the republican period, has received less attention. One example is Guo Shuanglin, 'Dianbao yu zhengzhi shijian' [Telegram and the

into a public affair and opened channels for wider political participation at home. This is followed by an examination of the debate over the Shandong question in the mass media and how the focus of the discourse shifted from diplomacy to domestic politics. Finally, it looks at how the political elites' variable ability to adopt media strategies as well as Beijing's ineffective control of the mediascape resulted in the reshaping of national politics during the May Fourth Movement.<sup>7</sup>

By highlighting the role of the mass media in the diplomatic and domestic mobilization in the political May Fourth Movement, this article makes an intervention in the research of this important episode of modern Chinese history. Firstly, it complicates the causal links between China's diplomacy at Versailles and the domestic politics during the May Fourth Movement. By tracing the changing discourse over the Shandong question during the first half of 1919, this article suggests that the May Fourth Movement was not an entirely spontaneous response to the loss of Shandong at the Paris Peace Conference. Instead, the narrative of China's 'diplomatic failure' was largely the product of a media campaign over the Shandong question. As a trigger of the May Fourth Movement, it was the result of domestic political competition as well as an unintended consequence of the Chinese delegation's open diplomacy campaign. Secondly, the mass media offers a prism through which to look at the interactions between the elite and the masses in the May Fourth Movement. While the mass media, as an increasingly important tool of political mobilization, was instrumental in contributing to the development of the May Fourth into a nationwide movement, a close examination of the mediascape shows the dominant role of the political elite in shaping and channelling the direction of public opinion in the process.<sup>8</sup>

---

Political Time], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, Vol. 11, 2019, pp. 44–63. Guo identifies the telegram as an essential way of communications which the Beijing government adopted during the Paris Peace Conference and which provided the technological foundation for the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement. In contrast to the relatively limited discussion on the role of the telegram in republican politics, there is a richer literature on how the telegraphic technology transformed politics in the late Qing. The most important monograph on the topic is Zhou Yongming's *Historicizing online politics: telegraphy, the internet, and political participation in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), in which he gives a comprehensive review of how telegraphy, particularly the 'public telegram' or 'circular telegram', became a channel for political participation and facilitated the emergence of 'national politics' since the late 19th century. More recently, a growing number of historians in mainland China have started to examine the role of the telegram in late Qing politics, from perspectives including domestic governance and international relations. See, for example, papers presented at the Peking University workshop 'Information Communication and National Order' in 2021. <http://www.ihss.pku.edu.cn/templates/detail/index.aspx?nodeid=134&page=ContentPage&contentid=4138>, [accessed 10 October 2022].

<sup>7</sup>I use the term 'mediascape' here to refer to the various forms of media existent during the republican period as a whole, including the institutions within which they operated and the contents they disseminated, although this article mainly focuses on the newspaper and the telegraph. Arjun Appadurai defines the term 'mediascape' as including both the distribution of the media's capabilities to produce and disseminate information and the images of the world created by these media. This definition, which highlights the fact that media traverse boundaries and brings to our attention the issues of presentation, is relevant to the case we are looking at in this article. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup>In terms of the elitist dimension of the May Fourth Movement, most existing scholarly works have focused on how the New Culture intellectual groups, which significantly expanded in the 1910s, 'enlightened' the public and prepared the ground for the mass protests that took place in 1919. A few examples are: Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*; Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals*

### The open diplomacy campaign: making Shandong a public affair

In the spring and summer of 1919, the Shandong question occupied the headlines in the Chinese media. Instead of being an inevitable result of the Paris Peace Conference, however, the fact that Shandong eventually became central in the May Fourth Movement was largely thanks to the Chinese delegation's promotion of an open diplomacy campaign as part of its strategy at Versailles.<sup>9</sup> The delegation's decision to open a home front early that year to make a breakthrough at the post-war peace conference opened up China's diplomacy at Versailles to public influences, and its use of the mass media at home to implement open diplomacy helped fix the nation's attention to the fate of Shandong in the months following.

### China's changing peace conference agendas

To understand the origins of the Shandong question, a brief review of China's experiences in the First World War is needed. China became an arena of war during the First World War in August 1914, as a result of Japan's declaration of war on Germany and the subsequent Anglo-Japanese takeover of German concessions in Jiaozhou Bay in Shandong. In early 1915, in an attempt to secure its advance on the Chinese continent, Japan presented China with a set of demands claiming special privileges in regions that included Shandong. Faced with an ultimatum backed by military threats, China partially accepted Japanese demands. The eventual 1915 Treaty, a modified version of the original Twenty-One Demands, acknowledged the Japanese inheritance of German rights in Shandong.<sup>10</sup>

---

and the legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); and Leo Ou-fan Lee, 'Incomplete modernity: Rethinking the May Fourth intellectual project', in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král (eds), *The appropriation of cultural capital: China's May Fourth project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 31–65. More recently, historians have started to pay more attention to the role the political elite—in particular government ministers, diplomats and provincial governors-general—played in the mobilization process of the May Fourth Movement and how coordination and competition between elitist political groups shaped the trajectory of May Fourth history. Two pioneering works are Deng Ye, *Bali hehui yu Beijing zhengfu de neiwai boyi* [*The Paris Peace Conference and Beijing's internal-external struggles*] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2014) and Tang Qihua, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajijiao*.

<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that the Shandong question had caught the attention of the public before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. In May 1918, when students learned that Prime Minister Duan Qirui had consented to negotiate a Military Mutual Assistance Convention with Japan, they responded by holding public protests in Beijing. Timothy Weston identifies the 1918 demonstration as 'the first large-scale student protest of the Republican era'. Weston, *The power of position*, pp. 156–157. But these protests lasted for only a few days, were entirely peaceful and mainly organized through co-provincial societies. This made a contrast with the May Fourth protests, which were long-lasting, escalated to national in scale and resulted in more violent incidents. I argue in this article that this transformation and escalation in the response to the Shandong question was largely the result of the Chinese delegation's open diplomacy strategy and its ramifications in domestic politics.

<sup>10</sup>For details about this event, see Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: ershiyi tiao jiaoshe* [*Historical materials of Sino-Japanese relations: negotiations over the twenty-one demands*], 2 vols (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1985).

In 1917, China joined the First World War.<sup>11</sup> With the eventual victory of the Entente powers, Beijing was granted a seat at the post-war peace conference to discuss issues arising from the war. Although the Shandong question was a direct consequence of the First World War, it was not initially listed as a priority in the Chinese government's proposals outlining its peace conference goals. Instead, heartened by the anti-imperialist tone that undergirded the post-war peace—epitomized by American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points—the Chinese government aimed to improve its overall sovereignty at Versailles.<sup>12</sup> Rather than Shandong, its primary focus was the revision of the Boxer Protocol, the acme of all the unequal treaties that China had signed as the result of its defeats in successive encounters with Western powers ever since the Opium War.<sup>13</sup>

The Shandong question became the focus of China's policy at Versailles only after the opening of the Paris Peace Conference. On 27 January 1919, during a session to discuss the displacement of German colonies, Woodrow Wilson and US Secretary of State Robert Lansing insisted that the Chinese delegates should be present at discussions over Jiaozhou Bay. Gu Weijun (顾维钧, 1888–1985, also known as V. K. Wellington Koo), the Chinese minister to the USA and one of the five plenipotentiaries, was entrusted by the delegation to present China's case to the Council of Ten the following day.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>China had attempted to join the First World War as early as in 1914, under the presidency of Yuan Shikai. Those initial attempts, however, failed against the complicated international situation following the outbreak of the war in Europe. The biggest obstacle came from Japan, which was concerned that to let China join the Entente powers would promote China's international standing and compromise its own imperial project on the continent. Both Xu Guoqi and Tang Qihua have provided detailed analysis of this episode. See Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War*, pp. 81–113, and Tang Qihua, *Hongxian dizhi wajiao [Diplomacy of the Empire of the Grand Constitution]* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017), pp. 134–190. China's entry into the First World War in 1917 was facilitated by the USA, which, after joining the war on the Entente's side in protest to Germany's unlimited submarine warfare, invited all neutral states, including China, to take similar actions. Although different opinions existed in China as to whether joining the Entente side would be the best decision to make, the USA's participation in the war raised hopes for an Entente victory. Another important development that cleared the path for China was Japan's changing China policy under Prime Minister Terauchi Masatake. Having realized that his predecessor's aggressive China policy had resulted in strong anti-Japanese sentiments in China and dissatisfaction among the Entente allies, the Terauchi administration reoriented its China policy to one that supported China's central government, in the hope that this would result in China's dependency on Japan. To support China's participation in the First World War was one of the initial gestures made to Duan Qirui under this new policy. Japan also had hoped to do so before the USA did, so that it would pre-empt the USA, which had become its rising enemy in East Asia. For a full discussion of China's formal entry into the war in 1917, see Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War*, pp. 155–199. On Japan's changing China policy and rising US–Japan competition during the period, see Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and national reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), pp. 154–203.

<sup>12</sup>Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War*, pp. 244–252; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian moment*, pp. 99–117.

<sup>13</sup>'Fa fajing Zhongguo shiguan dian' ['Telegram to the Chinese Embassy in Paris'], 28 November 1918, Beiyang zhengfu wajiaobu dang'an, 北洋政府外交部档案, Archives of the Foreign Relations of the Beiyang Government, hereafter WJBDA, 03-13-067-01-001; 'Shou guowuyuan ba ri laidian' ['Telegram received from the State Council on the 8<sup>th</sup>'], 12 January 1919, WJBDA, 03-13-006-01-001; Cao Rulin, *Cao Rulin yisheng zhi huiyi [A life's memory of Cao Rulin]* (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2016), p. 198.

<sup>14</sup>Gu's speech would later be remembered as symbolizing China's experiences at Versailles, and his image as a passionate patriot was to be popularized by *My 1919*, a film released in 1999 when nationalist sentiments were soaring in China after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. *Wo de 1919*

Contrary to what is often depicted in the public discourse as a vehement attack on imperialism and an outburst of nationalist sentiments, Gu's 28 January speech was far from radical in tone. With diplomatic finesse, he expressed gratitude to Japan and Britain for their efforts in expelling Germany during the battle of Qingdao. What was radical, however, was the proposal that Gu then made to the Council of Ten. Although he made it clear that China 'had every confidence in Japan's assurance' that it would not retain the leased territory and other rights in Shandong which it had obtained from Germany, he declared that 'between direct and indirect reinstatement', 'China would prefer the first', as 'it was always easier to take one step than two if it led to the same place'.<sup>15</sup> Gu's response signalled a significant turn in China's strategy at Versailles and as a result Shandong replaced the Boxer Protocol as the centre of debate. Instead of the two-step handover agreed in Sino-Japanese bilateral arrangements, the Chinese delegation now asked for the direct return of Shandong at the multilateral peace conference.

To confront Japan over Shandong at Versailles, however, the Chinese delegation had to argue their case against the international treaties Japan had signed with the allies over Shandong. In the desperate winter of February 1917, in return for Japanese naval assistance in countering Germany's unlimited submarine warfare, Britain promised to support Japanese claims over German settlements in the Pacific and in Shandong. France, Russia, and Italy followed suit the next month.<sup>16</sup> Japan had also taken precautions to pre-empt possible attempts by China to retrieve Shandong at the post-war peace conference: before urging China to join the war in the summer of 1917, Japan had obtained reassurances from the four Entente powers to 'minimise the consequent strengthening of China's voice at an eventual peace conference'.<sup>17</sup> In November, it signed another communique with the USA, known as the Lansing-Ishii Agreement, which pledged to maintain the Open Door policy in China but also with the USA recognizing that 'propinquity' gave Japan 'special rights' in China, especially in northern China, including Shandong.<sup>18</sup> With Japan's closely knit diplomatic web over the Shandong affair, the Chinese delegation's efforts to enlist help from the Entente allies ended in disappointment. Although he was sympathetic, the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George told the Chinese delegation that Britain was unable to help due

---

[My 1919], directed by Huang Jianzhong (1999; Beijing: Huayi Brothers), DVD. According to historian Tang Qihua, Gu and his family, especially his daughter, played active roles in promoting his patriotic image. Tang's comments during Jin Guangyao's online talk, 'Gu Weijun: yi gongli zheng qiangquan de waijiaojia' [Wellington Koo: a diplomatic who upholds 'right' over 'might'], 19–20 September 2021. Summaries of the talk and comments are available at [https://m.thepaper.cn/rss\\_newsDetail\\_14988025?from=](https://m.thepaper.cn/rss_newsDetail_14988025?from=) [accessed 16 April 2022].

<sup>15</sup> 'Speech at the Paris Conference', in Jin Guangyao and Ma Jianbiao (eds), *Gu Weijun waijiao yanjiang ji* [Collected diplomatic speeches of Wellington Koo] (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2006), pp. 19–20. The English text is based on the secretary's notes of the conversation held in M. Pichon's Room at the Quai d'Orsay, Paris. The original document is included in the Wellington Koo Papers, which are currently archived at Columbia University.

<sup>16</sup> Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and national reinvention*, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> Hans van de Ven, 'Xianshi zhengzhi zhong de wusi yundong' ['May Fourth as real politics'], *Twenty-First Century*, Vol. 6, 2019, p. 38.

to the existence of Anglo-Japanese treaties. Replies from France and Italy were less straightforward but equally lukewarm.<sup>19</sup>

What further complicated the issue were the existing agreements that the Chinese government had with Japan over Shandong. Following China's entry into the First World War in 1917, Duan Qirui's cabinet exchanged notes with Japan over railway rights in Shandong as well as military cooperation in Siberia in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Unlike the 1915 Treaty, the 1918 agreements were not signed under duress but had the consent of the Chinese Prime Minister, Duan Qirui, in return for war resources. To avoid complications, the Chinese delegates had agreed among themselves that the 1915 Treaty and the 1918 agreements should be treated separately, as they were aware that the mentioning of the existence of the 1918 agreements would weaken China's case.<sup>20</sup> Gu's surprise attack during the 28 January session, however, forced his Japanese counterpart to bring to the attention of the Council the existence of the 1918 agreements, and thus to suggest that the case of Shandong had already been settled between China and Japan.

### From secret to open diplomacy

While Japan's claim over Shandong was supported by international treaties, the Chinese team decided to resort to soliciting public opinion as a new source of legitimacy in diplomacy and international affairs. On 27 January, the night before Gu Weijun presented China's case to the Council of Ten, Lu Zhengxiang (陆徵祥, 1871–1949), foreign minister and leader of the Chinese delegation, telegraphed Beijing, suggesting it mount a strategy of 'using public opinion (民意) as a backing', in support of Gu's speech the next day.<sup>21</sup>

Although, in retrospect, the attempt to deny the validity of international treaties seemed to be a risky foreign policy decision, in the global context at the end of the First World War, the Chinese diplomats had good reason to believe in the power of public opinion in diplomacy. The First World War had changed the way that politics was performed. By mobilizing the whole society, competition between belligerents became not only a war of tanks and aircrafts, but also a war of 'hearts and minds'. This was the first time a government had started to use propaganda in an organized, systematic, and quasi-scientific manner.<sup>22</sup> As the war had enveloped most of the continents, it also rendered the mass media omnipresent and communications global: through the use of

<sup>19</sup>'Fa Waijiaobu dian' ['Telegram to the Foreign Ministry'], 5 April 1919, WJBDA, 03–13–068–02–001.

<sup>20</sup>'Speech at the Paris Conference', in Jin and Ma (eds), *Gu Weijun waijiao yanjiang ji*, p. 20; Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup>'Shou fajing Lu Zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian' ['Telegram received from Foreign Minister Lu in Paris'], sent on 27 January 1919, received on 30 January 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti* [Historical materials of Sino-Japanese relations: the Paris Peace Conference and the Shandong question] (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2000), p. 36.

<sup>22</sup>David Welch and Jo Fox (eds), *Justifying war: propaganda, politics and the modern age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 72. A few examples of works on war propaganda during the First World War include Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the World War* (Eastford, CO: Martino, 2013); M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British propaganda during the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: the making of American Propaganda* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); David Welsh (ed.), *Propaganda, power and persuasion: from World War I to Wikileaks* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Tilman Lüdke, *Jihad made in Germany: Ottoman and German propaganda and intelligence operations in the First World War* (Münster: Lit, 2005).



new communications technology such as the telegraph, the public could be informed about the developments of the war in a timely manner through the press.

As a result, diplomacy, which in the age of the Congress of Vienna had been the business of high-brow diplomats behind closed doors, now became increasingly subjected to public scrutiny. With an informed public, diplomats were no longer able to 'simply ignore the telegraph and carry on in their traditional custom of long delays'.<sup>23</sup> As the war drew to an end, the peacemakers at Versailles knew very well that the international conference was as much a public performance as business among themselves.<sup>24</sup> Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points set the basic tone for a new era of international relations and further affirmed the demand for diplomacy to be more democratic and responsive. Of particular relevance were the first article, which advocated that 'diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view', as well as the fifth article, which proposed an adjustment of all colonial claims, 'based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the Government whose title is to be determined', commonly known as the principle of self-determination.<sup>25</sup>

The new generation of Chinese diplomats, who had been closely monitoring the developments of the war, were well aware of this trend.<sup>26</sup> Before the end of the war, they had already advocated heeding public opinion, as represented by the global press in conference diplomacy. The Chinese minister to Brazil, Xia Yiting (夏诒霆, 1878–1944), for example, reminded the Foreign Ministry in one of his telegrams that, 'as recent trends show, although diplomacy is chaired by the government, the direction of its development is now largely decided by public opinion'.<sup>27</sup> Gu Weijun and Shi Zhaoji (施肇基, 1877–1958, also known as Alfred Sao-ke Sze), ministers to the USA and UK respectively, both sent detailed proposals to the Foreign Ministry, suggesting an active propaganda strategy that would nurture public opinion in favour of China's

<sup>23</sup>Daniel R. Headrick, *The invisible weapon: telecommunications and international politics, 1851–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 74–75.

<sup>24</sup>While journalists from all over the globe gathered in Paris, restrictions were placed on reporting the internal dealings and manoeuvring among the Allied leaders. *The New York Herald* published a cartoon showing the American President Woodrow Wilson, 'the new wrestling champion', wrestling the press down to the floor. See Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its attempt to end war* (London: John Murray, 2001), p. 282. The Japanese government was also struggling to deal with domestic opposition which demanded participation in Japan's policies at Versailles under the banner of 'people's diplomacy' (*kokumin gaikō*). See Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, race and equality: the racial equality proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 48, 52–53.

<sup>25</sup>Woodrow Wilson, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress on the conditions of peace' ('the fourteen points'), American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/206651>, [accessed 11 April 2022].

<sup>26</sup>For an overview of research on Chinese diplomacy and the new generation of diplomats during the early republican period, see Tang Qihua, "'Beiyang waijiao" yanjiu pingjie' [A literature review of research on Beiyang diplomacy] *Lishi yanjiu*, Vol. 1, 2004, pp. 99–113. Xu Guoqi also gives a brief introduction to the rise of professional diplomats and institutional changes in diplomacy during the period in his book on China and the First World War. See Xu, *China and the Great War*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>27</sup>'Shou zhu ba Xia gongshi 7 ri dian' [Telegram received on 7th from the Minister to Brazil], 9 November 1918, WJBDA, 03–37–002–03–023.

position at Versailles.<sup>28</sup> One day after the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, Lu Zhengxiang also telegraphed the Foreign Ministry, reporting that ‘the countries of the world have been paying close attention to public opinion, and this has especially been the case recently’.<sup>29</sup>

The Chinese diplomats considered the turn from secret to open diplomacy to be particularly beneficial to weak countries such as their own. With limited national power and resources that could back up their claims at the negotiation table, weak states were often disadvantaged in the traditional diplomatic negotiations. In 1917, Wang Shijie (王世杰, 1891–1981), a fresh PhD student at the University of Paris who was to become the future Nationalist Government’s foreign minister, published a serialized article entitled ‘The European War and China’s Future’ (欧战与中国之前途) in *Lü’ou Zazhi* (旅欧杂志), in which he elaborated this point. ‘Diplomacy by the people’, wrote Wang, ‘should be seen as the most advanced weapon in politics today’. This was especially true for China, as

when a nation’s existence was at stake, if there is no military power to defend against foreign aggression, the only thing diplomacy could rely on was not the diplomats, but the opinion of the public who were standing behind them.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Wang’s argument was supported by a recent precedent in Sino-Japanese diplomacy. During the negotiations over the Twenty-One Demands in 1915, Lu Zhengxiang, who was leading the bilateral talks as China’s foreign minister, adopted a publicity policy and made Japan’s claims known to the public. Despite the protest of the Vice Foreign Minister Cao Rulin (曹汝霖, 1877–1966) that public opinion could ‘easily run rampant’ and that revealing the truth would place the government in an ‘increasingly awkward situation’, Lu, together with Gu Weijun, who was then serving as President Yuan Shikai’s English-language secretary, actively reached out to journalists to disclose Japan’s aggressive demands.<sup>31</sup> With the efforts of G. E. Morrison, former journalist of *The Times*, and the Australian journalist William Henry Donald, details of the demands were published in the Western press, successfully countering Japanese propaganda, which had misled the Allies into believing that the reports sent from Beijing had ‘exaggerated’ the seriousness of the situation.<sup>32</sup> Reports decrying the Demands also started to appear in the *Peking Gazette*, *Peking Daily News*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *Pall Mall*

<sup>28</sup>After being appointed Chinese minister to the USA, Gu established a Far Eastern Information Office in Washington to counter the frequently negative reports about China in the US press. See ‘Koo to Morrison, 19 December 1913’, and ‘Morrison to Koo, 16 December 1913’, George E. Morrison Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Vol. 77, cited in Stephen G. Craft, V. K. Wellington Koo and the emergence of modern China (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), p. 33. ‘Shou zhumei Gu gongshi 11 ri dian’ [‘Telegram received on the 11th from the Minister to the United States’], 13 November 1918, WJBDA, 03–13–067–01–001. ‘Shou guowuyuan han’ [‘Letter received from the State Council’], 27 December 1918, WJBDA, 03–37–002–04–036.

<sup>29</sup>Fa wajiaobu dian’ [‘Telegram to the Foreign Ministry’], 19 January 1919, WJBDA, 03–13–010–05–001.

<sup>30</sup>Wang Shijie, ‘Ouzhan yu Zhongguo zhi qianxu (zaixu)’ [‘The European war and China’s future (continued)’], *Lü’ou zazhi*, Vol. 15, 1917.

<sup>31</sup>Jingbao zhong zhi zhongri jiaoshe jinqing’ [‘The *Peking Gazette*’s report on the recent developments in Sino-Japanese negotiations’], *Shenbao*, 4 February 1915.

<sup>32</sup>Morrison to L. G. Fraser, 12 October 1916, in Lo Hui-min (ed.), *The correspondence of G. E. Morrison*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 560; Luo Zhitian, ‘National humiliation and national assertion: the Chinese response to the Twenty-One Demands’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, 1993,

*Gazette*.<sup>33</sup> In February, the complete list of the Twenty-One Demands were published in *The Washington Post*, which turned Western public opinion against the Japanese and won sympathy and moral support for the Chinese.<sup>34</sup> As a result, in the eventual Sino-Japanese Treaty Japan had to withdraw the Fifth Group, which would have made China a protectorate of Japan. When looking at the event in retrospect, Morrison commented that 'owing to the publicity given to the Demands China got off much more lightly than at one time seemed possible'.<sup>35</sup>

Having to face Japan again at Versailles, there was therefore good reason for the Chinese diplomatic team to believe in the efficacy of open diplomacy in maximizing their odds of recovering Shandong. In fact, aware that the Peace Conference could be a good public platform for China to defend itself, the Japanese Foreign Minister Uchida Kōsai warned his Chinese counterpart against making the Shandong question public during a meeting they had prior to the Peace Conference. 'During the conference', Uchida told Lu, 'it is unavoidable that countries will take advantage of news policies. I sincerely hope that China will not use anti-Japanese newsmen, so that it does harm to bilateral relations.'<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, encouraged by international developments, Lu and his team now saw a better prospect for Shandong in the opportunities offered by a multilateral peace conference than in the existing arrangements made under a bilateral framework. They denounced the 1918 Sino-Japanese agreements as products of secret diplomacy, saying that a few government officials had conducted them in a secret manner without the consent of the Congress or the knowledge of the general public. By doing so, the Chinese delegation drew a line between the government position and public attitudes over the Shandong question. Between the two, they had decided to side with the public. Now the task was to substantiate their claims by presenting evidence of public support.

### Diplomatic mobilization: making public opinion through the media

To support their claims at Versailles, the Chinese delegation opened a diplomatic home front over the Shandong question. The aim was to present the direct return of Shandong as a demand by the general public. However, to do this public opinion itself had to be presented and represented. An examination of the diplomatic mobilization process shows that the government played a dominant role in orchestrating the

p. 299; 'Morrison to Ts'ai T'ing-kan', 16 February 1915, and 'Morrison to Ts'ai T'ing-kan', 16 February 1915, both in Lo Hui-min (ed.), *The correspondence of G. E. Morrison*, Vol. 2, p. 373. For a detailed description of how the Japanese media and foreign journalists in China competed over the reporting of Twenty-One Demands in the Western media, see Peter O'Connor, *The English-language press networks of East Asia, 1918-1945* (Kent: Global Oriental, 2009), pp. 42-43.

<sup>33</sup>O'Connor, *The English-language press networks of East Asia, 1918-1945*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup>Xu, *China and the Great War*, p. 72; 'Minister Reinsch to Secretary of State', 15 February 1915, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1915, China, ed. Joseph V. Fuller (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1924), Document 86; 'Minister Reinsch to Secretary of State', 15 February 1915, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Document 87; Oliviero Frattolillo and Anthony Best (eds), *Japan and the Great War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 47; Luo Zhitian, 'National humiliation and national assertion', p. 299.

<sup>35</sup>'Morrison to L. G. Fraser', 12 October 1916, p. 560.

<sup>36</sup>Zhang Zongxiang, 'Dongjing zhi sannian' ['Three years in Tokyo'], in Jindaishi ziliao bianjuzi (ed.), *Jindaishi ziliao [Historical materials on modern China]*, Beijing: Zhonghua Books, 1979, Vol. 38, pp. 62-63.

presentation of public opinion over the Shandong question and they used newspapers and the telegraph as the main media outlets for the mobilization of public opinion.

### *Representing public opinion: qualifying the ‘public’*

The focus on nationalism in research on the Versailles–May Fourth episode has resulted in an emphasis on the spontaneity and voluntariness of the Chinese public’s participation in the debate over the Shandong question.<sup>37</sup> What is often overlooked, however, is that the public outcry over Shandong was preceded by an open diplomacy campaign led by the government and targeted at the political elite. After first suggesting to Beijing that it should mobilize public opinion to support Gu Weijun’s speech in late January, in late March Lu Zhengxiang, predicting that the Shandong question ‘was likely to be solved within two weeks’, advised the Foreign Ministry to step up its efforts so as to create a solid foundation for the delegation’s claims.<sup>38</sup> On 3 April, both Houses of the Congress received messages asking them to telegraph the leaders of the great powers in English to relay domestic opinions on the Shandong question. In a follow-up two days later, the Foreign Ministry informed Lu that the remaining telegrams would be ‘sent in succession’.<sup>39</sup>

During the Paris Peace Conference the Council of Ten received numerous petitions from China demanding the direct return of Shandong. However, many of them were choreographed by the Chinese government in response to the delegation’s open diplomacy strategy. That these petitions were engineered was revealed by one telegram sent in late April. When asking domestic institutions to send their petitions to Paris, the Foreign Ministry reminded them that ‘although the titles and addresses of the foreign leaders could be copied’ from the standard template, they should nevertheless avoid copying the exact contents of the request.<sup>40</sup> The government also intentionally selected representatives from the province of Shandong and sent them to Paris. In an attempt to prevent ‘unnecessary trouble’, the authority consciously gave them student visas.<sup>41</sup>

While the definition of the term ‘public’ remained fluid during the early republican period, the Chinese delegation’s proposals delineated the institutions they saw fit to represent public opinion.<sup>42</sup> Legislative bodies, including the Congress and provincial

<sup>37</sup>Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, pp. 77–83, 89–92.

<sup>38</sup>Fa waijiaobu dian’ [‘Telegram to the Foreign Ministry’], 28 March 1919, WJBDA, 03–13–068–01–001.

<sup>39</sup>Shou waijiaobu 5 ri dian’ [‘Telegram received from the Foreign Ministry on 5<sup>th</sup>’], 7 April 1919, WJBDA, 03–13–068–01–001; Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 72.

<sup>40</sup>Shou Shandong dujunshu Han’ [‘Letter received from the Governor-General of Shandong’], 26 April, 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 113.

<sup>41</sup>Fa Lu zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian’ [‘Telegram to the Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang’], 18 April 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup>Scholars of early twentieth century China have pointed out the lack of precise sociological referents of concepts such as the ‘public’ and the ‘citizen’ during that period. Depending on the context and political agenda, the terms could refer to literate urbanites, which was cognate with the Japanese concept of *kokumin* (国民), or to all educated non-officials—literati, merchants, and educators (绅, 商, and 学界), or even to a range that could include the lowest levels of society (下流社会, or 下等社会). See, for example, Joan Judge, *Print and politics: ‘shibao’ and the culture of reform in late Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

assemblies, were the first to be mobilized. In his January telegram, Lu Zhengxiang suggested the Foreign Ministry should mobilize Congress to veto the 1918 Sino-Japanese agreements.<sup>43</sup> Nongovernmental representative bodies, such as chambers of commerce, student bodies, and trade unions, which underwent a period of rapid growth as a result of the development of professional spheres (界) during the republican period, also became important institutionalized representations of public opinion.<sup>44</sup> Lu Zhengxiang's March telegrams included a list of organizations to target in the open diplomacy campaign:

Please urgently ask the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Provincial Assembly of Shandong, the General Chamber of Commerce of Shanghai, to send telegrams to Paris today, to respectively, the American President Wilson, the French Prime Minister Clemenceau, the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, the Italian Prime Minister Orlando, and the London China Association, asking them to uphold justice and support China's claim that Qingdao should be returned to China as a result of China's participation in the war, in order to eradicate the roots of war in East Asia.<sup>45</sup>

The Ministry's representative in Shanghai, the Governor-General of Shandong, and the civilian Governor of Shandong all received messages from the Foreign Ministry, passing on Lu's proposal and asking them to mobilize the provincial assemblies and chambers of commerce to do as suggested. They were ordered to send telegrams to lobby decision-makers at Versailles, so as to 'demonstrate public opinion in support [of the delegation]'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the widespread attention that the Shandong question later attracted in public discourse, the initial target of the Chinese delegation's open diplomacy campaign was mainly limited to the political elite.

The government-orchestrated nature of the diplomatic mobilization process was rooted in an elitist understanding of the concept of public opinion in the Chinese political tradition. The idea of *minyì* (民意)—the phrase the Chinese delegation used to refer

---

University Press, 1996), pp. 88–91. Xu identifies three sources of public opinion in diplomacy, including the government, the press, and citizens' groups. Xu's categorization, however, may be too comprehensive to be useful when applied to an examination of how public opinion operated in diplomacy, and he does not give detailed analyses as to how the three categories interacted with each other in real politics. Xu, *China and the Great War*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>43</sup>Shou fajing Lu Zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian', in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 36.

<sup>44</sup>On professional associations in the early twentieth century, see, for example, Xu Xiaoqun, *Chinese professionals and the republican state: the rise of professional associations in Shanghai, 1912–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Zhao Jianguo, *Fenjie yu chonggou: Qingji minchu de baojie tuanti* [Collapse and reconstruction: journalistic associations in late Qing and the early Republic] (Beijing: SDX, 2008).

<sup>45</sup>Fa wajiaobu dian', WJBDA, 03–13–068–01–001; Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 71.

<sup>46</sup>Fa Shanghai tepaiyuan Yang Shisheng, Shandong dujun Zhang Shuyuan, shengzhang Shen Mingchang midian' ['Secret telegram to the Special Commissioner of Shanghai, Yang Shisheng, the Governor-General of Shandong, Zhang Shuyuan, and the Civilian Governor of Shandong, Shen Mingchang'], 2 April 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 71.

to public opinion—can be traced back to the dynastic concept of ‘*yulun*’ (輿論), a term that is used to describe elite opinion within the bureaucracy. During the late Qing, to advocate a more open mode of politics, political reformers redefined the idea as the ‘collective opinion (公論) of the common people (一般人民) about government and society’. However, as Joan Judge has pointed out, it was the elites’ role that remained dominant in the formation of public opinion. For the political elite, the public was both to be represented and informed, but the *vox populi* also always needed to serve elite political agendas.<sup>47</sup> As Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929), one of the leading political figures in early twentieth-century China who was to play an instrumental role in the mobilization of public opinion in the May Fourth Movement, suggested to President Yuan Shikai not long after the founding of the Republic, ‘skilful politicians will secretly direct public opinion but publicly declare that they themselves are subject to it’.<sup>48</sup>

By promoting public opinion over the Shandong question, the Chinese delegation was mainly aiming to distinguish itself from the Shandong policy of Duan Qirui’s cabinet, but it showed limited willingness to devolve diplomatic policymaking to the public. In fact, Lu Zhengxiang had hoped to keep the diplomatic mobilization process strictly under control and avoid possible ramifications from it in domestic politics. While advising Beijing to rally domestic support for the delegation’s claims, Lu cautioned the government against revealing the specific details of the 1918 Sino-Japanese agreements in his 27 January telegram:

Please present this as soon as possible to the President, and if the President agrees, the government should secretly submit it to both Houses and to request a secret meeting. When (the treaties were) vetoed by the Houses, they should again be secretly sent back to the government, and this should not be known by the public.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, while the delegation carefully designed the representation of public opinion, their simultaneous decision to present public opinion in the open realm of the mass media made it nearly impossible to control the diplomatic mobilization process strictly.

### **Presenting public opinion: the newspaper and the telegraph as media**

While representative bodies served as the institutional embodiment of the ‘public’, public opinion would have to be demonstrated, transmitted, and circulated through the media. The newspaper and the telegraph became the two essential tools in the implementation of China’s open diplomacy strategy. On 31 January, Lu Zhengxiang telegraphed the Foreign Ministry. ‘In order to reflect the nationwide opinion of the people and to show the solidarity of the country’, he suggested, the

<sup>47</sup>Joan Judge, *Print and politics*, pp. 68–75.

<sup>48</sup>Liang Qichao to Yuan Shikai, 23 February 1913, in Ding Wenjiang (ed.), *Liang Rengong xiansheng nianpu changbian chugao* [A draft of a chronicle of Liang Qichao’s life] (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1959), Vol. 2, p. 381.

<sup>49</sup>Shou fajing Lu Zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian’, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 36.

Ministry should secretly order government newspapers to publicize China's argument at Versailles.<sup>50</sup> In a reply sent to Paris on 5 February, the Ministry informed the delegation that the proposal to cancel the Twenty-One Demands had been 'advocated through both Chinese and foreign newspapers on a daily basis', and that the Ministry had also ordered the gist of Gu Weijun's speech to be 'publicized and disseminated in the format of news articles'. The process, concluded the telegram, was 'going on continuously'.<sup>51</sup>

Newspapers and the telegraph transformed the way political information was transmitted by breaking the temporal and spatial limits of traditional communication channels.<sup>52</sup> Western types of newspaper were introduced to China in the late Qing and the print media became closely intertwined with politics after 1895.<sup>53</sup> Political reformists saw the newspaper as a new 'middle realm' that negotiated between the court and the common people, and provided the foundation for a new mode of politics.<sup>54</sup> The founding of the Republic brought a legally free press to the country and opened up a new era in terms of the relationship between print and politics. Although an opposition press was suppressed during the presidency of Yuan Shikai, the period following his death witnessed a boom in newspapers as well as a period of unprecedented press freedom.<sup>55</sup> The vernacular movement further led to the development of periodicals in the years following. In the meantime, international developments contributed to the professionalization of the press in China.<sup>56</sup> In particular, the booming growth of foreign news agencies in China during the First World War for the purpose of war propaganda facilitated the acquisition of modern Western journalistic norms and practice.<sup>57</sup> In 1919, when the Paris Peace Conference opened, there were some 300 daily newspapers alone in the country.<sup>58</sup> The birth of a modern press made

<sup>50</sup>'Fa wajiaobu dian' ['Telegram to the Foreign Ministry'], 31 January 1919, WJBDA, 03-13-010-05-001.

<sup>51</sup>'Shou wajiaobu dian' ['Telegram received from the Foreign Ministry'], 5 February 1919, Wellington Koo Papers, cited in Guo Shuanglin, 'Dianbao yu zhengzhi shijian' [The Telegraph and 'Political Time'], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, Vol. 11, 2019, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup>Traditional channels of political news dissemination included by word of mouth, private correspondence, official communications, public notices and publications, and newspapers such as *Dibao* (邸报), *Xiaobao* (小报) and *Jingbao* (京报). See Zhou Yongming, *Historicizing online politics*, pp. 42-45.

<sup>53</sup>Stephen R. MacKinnon, 'Toward a history of the Chinese press in the republican period', *Modern China*, Vol. 1, 1997, pp. 5-6.

<sup>54</sup>Joan Judge, *Print and politics*, pp. 1, 4.

<sup>55</sup>In 1916, the number of newspapers in the country increased by 85 per cent compared with 1915, a change that was even more dramatic than in 1912. See Timothy B. Weston, 'China, professional journalism, and liberal internationalism in the era of the First World War', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 2, 2010, p. 340. For more on the press history of China, see for example, Stephen R. MacKinnon, 'Toward a history of the Chinese press in the republican period', pp. 3-32, and Timothy B. Weston, 'China, professional journalism, and liberal internationalism', pp. 327-347.

<sup>56</sup>Lin Yutang, *A history of the press and public opinion in China* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1936), pp. 120, 125.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>58</sup>Hans Schmidt, 'Democracy for China: American propaganda and the May Fourth Movement', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 1, 1998, pp. 4-5. Chow Tse-tsung estimated that some 700 new periodicals were founded between 1915 and 1923, and he lists 587 of them by name. See Chow Tse-tsung, *Research guide to the May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 1; Lin, *A history of the press and public opinion in China*, p. 124.

politics more public. As Timothy Weston notes: ‘in urban China people viewed newspapers as a critically important tool for discussing and finding solutions to society’s problems’.<sup>59</sup>

Along with the newspaper, the technology of the telegraph also brought about seismic changes to China by significantly increasing the speed of information transmission and forging closer ties across geographic borders. China was incorporated into the global telegraph network in the late nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup> With the installation of the Danish Great Northern lines, which extended from Shanghai to Nagasaki and Vladivostok to the north, and the British Eastern Telegraph Company lines, which started in Hong Kong, the country was connected to Europe, the Americas, Australia, and Africa.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the First World War, the Chinese public was able to keep updated about the global developments thanks to the telegraphic technology.<sup>62</sup> In the meantime, a comprehensive domestic telegraph network gradually came into place after the late Qing, which significantly sped up the circulation of political information between the centre and the provinces. As a result, news from Europe could reach China within three days and then be disseminated over the country through domestic channels. During the Paris Peace Conference the telegraph enabled the Chinese delegation to communicate with their colleagues and the general public at home in a timely manner. It was also through the telegraph that Chinese public opinion was relayed to the decision-makers at Versailles. Known as the ‘electric newspaper’ (电报) in Chinese, the telegraph brought simultaneity between the local, national, and global.

As Zhou Yongming argues, the appearance of modern newspapers, assisted by the telegraph, made the formation of large-scale public opinion possible.<sup>63</sup> In particular, the combination of telegraphic technology and the newspaper in the form of the circular telegram (通电), or public telegram (公电), established a new tool for political mobilization during the early republican period. Instead of being transmitted to a single specific terminal, circular telegrams were sent to multiple recipients, which usually included news agencies. Once a message was sent it would be passed down different levels of terminals until it reached all the recipients connected to the line.<sup>64</sup> The broad audience of the circular telegram contributed to its public nature. As they were often sent as open-coded, circular telegrams were subsequently reprinted in newspapers, therefore having the amplifying effect of a broadcast system. The combination of the telegraph’s speed and the newspaper’s wide reach made circular telegrams a favourite way of publicizing political opinions during the late Qing and the early republican

<sup>59</sup>Weston, ‘China, professional journalism, and liberal internationalism’, p. 344.

<sup>60</sup>Zhou, *Historicizing online politics*, pp. 20–38.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22, 32–36.

<sup>62</sup>For the technical problems of telegrams written in the Chinese language, see for example, Jing Tsu, *Kingdom of characters: the language revolution that made China modern* (London: Allen Lane, 2022), Ch. 3; Ma Boyong and Yan Naichuan, *Chudian de diguo: dianbao yu Zhongguo jindaishi* [When the empire encountered the telegraph: telegraph and modern Chinese history] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2012), Ch. 7; and Thomas S. Mullaney, *The Chinese typewriter: a history* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 103–114.

<sup>63</sup>Zhou, *Historicizing online politics*, p. 49.

<sup>64</sup>For an explanation of the technical mechanism of circular telegrams, see Ma Boyong and Yan Naichuan, *Chudian de diguo*, p. 158.



period.<sup>65</sup> The circular telegrams released by governors-general and military commanders during the 1911 Revolution, for example, became potent political declarations of their opposition to the Qing court.<sup>66</sup> When sent in tandem, they created a public realm for political mobilization and significantly tilted the balance of power in national politics.

Developments in print media and telegraphic technology thus brought new levels of connectedness and openness to the practice of politics. When trying to implement its open diplomacy strategy at Versailles, the Chinese delegation decided to present public opinion on Shandong through newspapers and telegraphs to show their policies had broad-based support. This decision, however, also shifted the diplomatic battlefield from the negotiation table to the domestic media. While modern media could serve as important tools of political mobilization to facilitate elite policies, the mediascape was also a realm open for contestation. Against the decentralized political landscape in early republican China, once it was made a public affair in the media, the Shandong question became an arena for competition and resulted in unexpected consequences in domestic politics.

### Domestic mobilization: the changing narrative over Shandong

The Chinese delegation's decision to showcase public opinion over Shandong opened up its diplomacy at Versailles to the influence of domestic politics. However, the political situation in China by the end of the First World War was deeply divided. Once the issue was debated in the media, the narrative over the Shandong question changed from one that was focused primarily on diplomacy to being increasingly oriented to domestic issues. Contrary to the intentions of the Chinese delegation, it was the Beijing government, instead of Japan, that became the main target of criticism.

### Competing forces in diplomacy

China's policy for the First World War was formulated during the premiership of Duan Qirui, who had been the de facto leader of the Beijing government after the death of Yuan Shikai. Throughout his tenure, the chief objective of Duan's foreign policy was to seek support for his domestic agendas, which were centred on the reunification of the country and political centralization. In 1917, the Entente allies invited China to join the First World War on their side. In return, they agreed to offer military and financial aid to facilitate Beijing's efforts to participate in the war. Realizing that these military and financial resources could be channelled to fuel his reunification project, Duan obtained the endorsement of the Congress during a military coup and took China into the First World War. The end of the war in late 1918, however, disrupted Duan's domestic project. Fifteen months after China's entry into this war, Duan had not finished training the War Participation Army with which he had hoped to reunite the south with the north. Against the backdrop of a global pacifist movement, its Western

<sup>65</sup>Zhou, *Historicizing online politics*, p. 55; Ma and Yan, *Chudian de diguo*, pp. 158, 161–162.

<sup>66</sup>Patrick Fuliang Shan, *Yuan Shikai: a reappraisal* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), pp. 160–161.

allies now urged China to seek peace and Duan's militaristic policy became increasingly unpopular both domestically and internationally. In the face of soaring anti-militarist sentiments, Duan had to step down as prime minister in December 1918. However, by remaining Director of the War Participation Bureau—a government organ established after China's entry into the First World War to oversee all matters related to China's participation in the war—Duan was able to maintain his influence over China's policy at Versailles. His leadership, however, now faced growing challenges, as his opponents seized the opportunity of the post-war peace conference to undo his domestic and foreign policies.

A rising star in China's diplomacy by the end of the First World War was Liang Qichao. A former ally of Duan, Liang had realigned himself with the peace advocates in the Beijing government when the First World War drew to an end.<sup>67</sup> His chief sponsor was the newly elected President Xu Shichang (徐世昌, 1855–1939). Actively embracing Wilsonian principles, Xu and Liang capitalized on the end of the First World War to press for a peaceful solution to domestic politics.<sup>68</sup> In light of the upcoming Paris Peace Conference, they further sought to change the domestic balance of power through active participation in diplomacy. In December 1918, a Committee of Foreign Affairs (外交委员会) was set up under the Presidential Office, with Liang as its central figure. As an advisory body for the preparation of the peace conference, the Committee had under its wing political dignitaries both in and outside the government and became a diplomatic force independent of the War Participation Bureau.<sup>69</sup> Twenty days before the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, the Committee entrusted Liang to lead a 'Delegation to Europe' (欧洲考察团) to be at this global diplomatic event.<sup>70</sup> Once the Shandong question was raised at Versailles, the President supported the delegation's decision. After Gu Weijun proposed to the Council of Ten in January 1919 that Shandong should be directly returned, Xu Shichang sent a telegram to Paris, in which he compared Gu's performance to 'plucking a pearl from the black dragon' (探骊得珠), a Chinese idiom that refers to actions with high risks but promise high gains.<sup>71</sup>

A further complication was the fact that China was represented by two governments at the Paris Peace Conference. In 1917, in protest against Duan Qirui's unconstitutional act of reinstating a Congress to take China into the First World War, the Guomindang leader Sun Yat-sen declared the founding of an independent government in Guangzhou. Joined by Guomindang members and governors-general of the southern

<sup>67</sup>On Liang's relationship with Duan, see Zhang Pengyuan, *Liang Qichao yu minguo zhengzhi* [*Liang Qichao and republican politics*] (Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing House, 2013).

<sup>68</sup>'Dazongtong ling' ['The presidential order'], *Zhengfu gongbao*, 16 November 1918.

<sup>69</sup>For an introduction to the Committee of Foreign Affairs, see Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo waijiao*, pp. 245–257.

<sup>70</sup>Ding Wenjiang and Zhao Fengtian (eds), *Liang Qichao nianpu changbian* [*A chronicle of Liang Qichao's life*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1983), p. 874; Yan Huiqing, *Yan Huiqing riji* [*Diaries of Yan Huiqing*] (Beijing: Chinese Archives Publishing House, Vol. 1), p. 826. For more on the role that Liang Qichao and the Yanjiuxi played in China's diplomacy at Versailles, see Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo waijiao*, pp. 244–277.

<sup>71</sup>'Shou waijiaobu 30 ri dian' ['Telegram received from the Foreign Ministry on the 30<sup>th</sup>'], 31 January 1919, WJBDA, 03–13–006–01–001.

provinces, the southern government became the focus of Duan's reunification project. Duan's failure to bring the civil war to a close before the First World War drew to an end, however, meant that by the time the peace conference had started, the southern government remained the de facto regime over a large region in southern China. To show unity and at the request of Western powers, the Beijing government agreed to include Wang Zhengting (王正廷, 1882–1961), the Vice Foreign Minister of the southern government, as one of the five plenipotentiaries of the Chinese delegation at Versailles. Other influential figures from the south, including Wu Chaoshu (伍朝枢, 1887–1934), the Deputy Foreign Minister, and Wang Jingwei (汪精卫, 1883–1944), who had spent most of his time in France after the founding of the Republic, were also present in Paris. Although the reason given for their presence was 'to observe the Chinese delegation and the international situation that China was facing at Versailles', with domestic agendas incompatible with those of the Beijing government, the southern representatives would not miss seizing upon opportunities to advance their own cause at the right time.<sup>72</sup>

A converging point for those who opposed the Duan cabinet's First World War policy was the Association of Citizens Diplomacy (ACD) (国民外交协会). Founded in February 1919, the ACD was a non-governmental gathering of those who had been sidelined under the Duan administration, including political dignitaries within the Guomindang and the Yanjiuxi (研究系), a political group under the leadership of Liang Qichao.<sup>73</sup> The mission of the ACD was to advocate public diplomacy as an alternative to traditional, government-led diplomacy. Seizing on the opportunities of the Paris Peace Conference, members of the ACD hoped to reclaim their political standing by influencing China's policy at Versailles. In early April, the Association appointed Liang Qichao as their representative in Paris. Through telegrams, Liang regularly updated the Association on the latest developments of the peace conference back home.<sup>74</sup>

When the Chinese delegation decided to launch its open diplomacy campaign, it legitimized the participation of competing forces in China's policy at Versailles. The subsequent decision to present public opinion through telegrams and newspapers further opened up the Shandong question to debate in the media. Although Lu Zhengxiang had hoped to control the diplomatic mobilization process, given the decentralized political situation at home, the delegation would have no monopoly over the public opinion it was trying to shape.

### *The changing narrative over Shandong in the media*

When writing about media reporting in *Shenbao* during the May Fourth Movement, Barbara Mittler observes that the general tone was 'not anti-imperialist but anti-Chinese'. The Chinese government became the primary target of criticism, to the

<sup>72</sup>Gu Weijun, *Gu Weijun huiyilu [Memoirs of Gu Weijun]* (Beijing: Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1983, Vol. 1), p. 179.

<sup>73</sup>Zhang, *Liang Qichao yu minguo zhengzhi*, p. 195.

<sup>74</sup>For Liang Qichao's relationship with the ACD, see, for example, Zeng Rong, 'Guomin waijiao xiehui yu jindai guomin waijiao "duinei" quxiang' ['The Association of Citizens Diplomacy and the trend of "internalization" of citizens diplomacy in modern Chinese history'], *Zhongshan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)*, Vol. 4, 2016, pp. 89–92.

extent that newspapers engaged in what she calls ‘brutal acts of self-laceration’.<sup>75</sup> Mittler’s observation captures a significant turn in the narrative over the Shandong question through the spring and summer of 1919. While it started out as an issue of diplomacy, the Shandong question ended up being closely entangled in domestic politics.

The first pivotal shift in the focus of the discourse over Shandong came in early March 1919, with a telegram Liang Qichao sent from Paris to Beijing. Contrary to the delegation’s intention to downplay the 1918 Sino-Japanese agreements, Liang’s telegram directly targeted criticism at those who negotiated the bilateral arrangements over Shandong:

Last September, the German military was on the verge of failure. What was the intention of our government in signing those agreements with Japan at that exact time, and thereby posed restraints on itself? Now we must make those who signed the treaty shoulder responsibility for this, in order to make up for the loss and move forward. Otherwise, this once-in-a-thousand-year grand conference will be destroyed by a few individuals. What a great pity that would be.<sup>76</sup>

Simple, clearly targeted, and inflammatory, Liang’s depiction of the Shandong question as a few villains jeopardizing China’s diplomatic efforts and bringing calamity to the nation redirected the focus of the discussions to domestic politics. Through Liang’s Yanjiuxi colleagues the telegram was presented to President Xu Shichang and was subsequently re-printed in influential newspapers including *Chenbao*, *Dagongbao*, and *Shenbao*. The significance of Liang’s March telegram was widely acknowledged. In a later compilation of telegrams received by the Presidential Secretariat during the presidency of Xu Shichang, an editorial note commented that as a result of Liang’s telegram, ‘public opinion collectively blamed [the Shandong question] on those who negotiated the 1918 agreements, which eventually led to the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement in Beijing’.<sup>77</sup>

Echoing Liang’s telegram, the southern government’s ‘traitor’ narrative further made the discourse over Shandong increasingly moralizing. On the day that Liang sent his telegram, the southern representative in the Chinese delegation, Wang Zhengting, also cabled the southern government. In his telegram, Wang argued that, although it was true that Japan had tried to impede China’s diplomatic efforts through threats and inducements, it was much more shocking that some Chinese were trying to sell out their own country for personal gain. In order to save China’s diplomatic efforts at Versailles, Wang asked his government to ‘mobilize nationwide public opinion and denounce them unanimously’.<sup>78</sup> Later, *Minguo Ribao* (民国日报), one of the official

<sup>75</sup>Barbara Mittler, *A newspaper for China? Power, identity, and change in Shanghai’s news media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), p. 390.

<sup>76</sup>‘Shou fajing Liang Rengong xiansheng dian’ [‘Telegram received from Mr Liang Qichao in Paris’], sent on 6 March 1919, received on 11 March 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Tianjin Historical Museum (ed.), *Beiyang junfa shiliao* [Historical materials of the Beiyang warlords], the volume on Wu Jinglian (3) (Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House), pp. 297–298.

newspapers of the Guomindang, gave Wang's telegram headline treatment. The manager of the newspaper, Shao Lizi (邵力子, 1882–1967), wrote an editorial to accompany the original telegram, in which he denounced the targets of Wang's criticism as 'traitors'.<sup>79</sup> As similar reports appeared in other Guomindang papers, the 'traitor' narrative quickly caught on and dominated discussions on the Shandong question in the mediascape.<sup>80</sup>

The divisive effect of the changing discourse over Shandong is illustrated by the rising fissures within the militarist camp led by Duan Qirui, most notably by the case of Wu Peifu (吴佩孚, 1874–1939). As a military general sent to the frontline of Hunan, Wu had made considerable contributions to Duan's military unification project but was alienated by Duan's refusal to reward him properly for his service.<sup>81</sup> When the Shandong question became the focus of the nation in early 1919, Wu embraced the bifurcated discourse by positioning himself as a patriotic general who opposed the 'warlords' who had willingly sold out national interests. In the numerous circular telegrams he sent during the period, Wu identified the military leaders who advocated peace and strove for the return of Shandong as part of 'our military community' (我军人团体), which aimed at nothing but 'to uphold justice in Asia and strive for righteousness in the world', and to 'heal national humiliation and to defend our territory'. As 'brave leaders never hiding from their enemies', they were 'closely following in the steps of the diplomats and providing support for diplomacy' and were already prepared to 'fulfil their responsibilities without hesitation'.<sup>82</sup>

The wide attention the Shandong question received in China's domestic media raised the stakes of the diplomatic negotiations on it at Versailles. Given the way in which the issue was now being framed, that is, as a battle between patriots and traitors, the way the issue would be resolved internationally was to have important bearing on domestic politics. As the direction of the Paris Peace Conference took a turn in the spring of 1919, a new wave of reporting on the Shandong question dominated the mediascape in China. Following the binary and moralistic tone of the traitor narrative, it was to prepare the ground for a nationwide movement that would change the course of modern Chinese history.

### May Fourth as a 'media war': elite competition over the mediascape and the reshaping of early republican politics

Two approaches dominate the research of the political May Fourth Movement. The first approaches it from the perspective of mass politics, focusing on the participation of the students, workers, and merchants.<sup>83</sup> The second sees it as the product of elite

<sup>79</sup>'Wang Zhengting shengtao maiguozei' ['Wang Zhengting denounces traitors'], *Minguo Ribao*, 2 April 1919; Lizi (Shao Lizi), 'Zai cu guomin su tao maiguozei' ['Once again, we need to urge the people to denounce traitors urgently'], *Minguo Ribao*, 2 April 1919.

<sup>80</sup>'Cao Rulin deng maiguo mimi shi' ['The secret history of how people like Cao Rulin sold out the country'], *Minguo Ribao*, 22 June 1919, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup>Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, p. 127, fn. 1.

<sup>82</sup>Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, p. 305; Peng Changlu (ed.), *Gaoben Wu Fuwei (Peifu) shangjiangjun nianpu* [A draft chronicle of the life of General Wu Fuwei (Peifu)] (Beijing: China National Microfilming Center for Library Resources, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>83</sup>Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*; Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Student protests in twentieth-century China: the view from Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

politics, highlighting the competition between the elite political groups that underlay the unfolding of the mass movement.<sup>84</sup> While they complement each other to provide us with a clearer picture of this important event, a gap exists between the bottom-up and top-down approaches, which leave some important questions unanswered. If the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement was the product of elite politics, why were some elite groups more successful in mobilizing the masses than others? The previous sections have shown that the mass media was instrumental in turning diplomacy at Versailles into a focal point in domestic politics. This section will demonstrate that the outcome of the May Fourth Movement was significantly shaped by competition between elites in the media war over the Shandong question. In particular, the political elites' variable ability to adopt media strategies resulted in the changing balance of power in national politics.

### *The decision over Shandong at Versailles and the May Fourth Movement*

Despite Beijing's initially realistic expectations for the Paris Peace Conference, the launch of the open diplomacy campaign raised hopes for the successful settlement of the Shandong question at Versailles. The outcome of diplomacy at international peace conferences, especially ones such as the Paris Peace Conference, which had numerous conflicting interests to mediate, however, was unpredictable. In the spring of 1919, prospects for the direct return of Shandong at Versailles diminished. In late April, Italy left the Council of Four due to disputes over Fiume, and Belgium was on the verge of doing so. To return Shandong to China would risk Japan excluding itself from the conference as well, thus endangering the founding of the League of Nations, which Woodrow Wilson deemed to be 'the first item of business at the Peace Conference'.<sup>85</sup> As a result, Wilson had to give in to Japan over Shandong to keep it on the negotiating table. As the Chinese Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang himself admitted: 'After all, the American President cannot risk letting Japan follow the steps of Italy by helping China'.<sup>86</sup> On 30 April, the Council of Four (now the Council of Three after Italy's departure) made its final decision. Instead of a direct return of Shandong to China, the former German economic privileges and railroad rights in Shandong would be transferred to Japan.<sup>87</sup> Wilson justified the decision by explaining that this settlement was temporary: he promised the Chinese that it would eventually be resolved under the League of Nations once it came into existence.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup>Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajiao*; Deng, *Bali hehui yu Beijing zhengfu de neiwai boyi*.

<sup>85</sup>Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), Vol. 58, pp. 112–113; Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 326.

<sup>86</sup>'Shou fajing Lu zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian' [Telegram received from Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang in Paris], 6 May 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, pp. 157–158.

<sup>87</sup>World Affairs Press (ed.), *Guoji tiaoyue ji (1917–1923)* [A compilation of international treaties] (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1961), p. 137.

<sup>88</sup>Attempts were also made to pin the Japanese side down to a promise over Shandong. Japan was asked to make a public oral statement that it would inherit only the economic privileges granted to Germany in Shandong and to renounce any intention of assuming permanent administrative control of the territory. See Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (ed.), *Miji lucun* [A compilation of

As hopes had been raised for the direct return of Shandong, the failure to achieve that goal had significant consequences at home. On 4 May 1919, student protests broke out in Beijing and quickly spread to other cities including Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Harbin. With the participation of workers and merchants, the May Fourth Movement eventually developed into a national event.<sup>89</sup> John Jordan, the British minister to China, reported to London that ‘this was the first time public opinion in China was fully aroused’. ‘The power’, observed Jordan, ‘was immense’.<sup>90</sup>

The May Fourth Movement was no doubt an outburst of public opinion over the Shandong question. However, recent scholarship has also pointed out that the intense emotions released and radical actions taken during the Movement were not entirely spontaneous and that the political elite had played an essential role in eliciting, shaping, and channelling public opinion.<sup>91</sup> Built on earlier works that have identified the Yanjiuxi and the Nationalist Party as two of the most important players in this Movement, this section first offers a closer examination of their use of the mass media in the course of the Movement. This is followed by an analysis of the rise of Wu Peifu from a general in the middle of Hunan to a national opinion leader, a case that illustrates how the media offered leverage in increasing the political clout of those at the periphery of power. Finally, a comparison is made between the media policies of the Beijing government, whose legitimacy was shattered as the nation was engulfed by this mass movement. Overall, by examining the media strategies of the winners and losers, it brings to attention the mediascape as an important field on which the result of elite competition in the political May Fourth Movement was decided.

### Media war: style and networks

As a mass movement, May Fourth involved large-scale mobilization on different grounds. Among its various facets, the media war was essential in creating the momentum for the political events that changed the course of republican history in 1919. Those who were successful at maintaining their dominance over the media networks as well as in mastering the rhetorical device of media texts emerged as winners. Their leading role in making public opinion was translated into political power, which significantly increased their standing in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement.

In her work on *Shenbao* Barbara Mittler compares the differences between the way the May Fourth Movement played out in the media and on the streets. While the May Fourth nationalism was ‘iconoclastic in its actions’, it was nevertheless ‘traditionalistic in its words’.<sup>92</sup> In particular, media texts in the May Fourth Movement shared the traits

*telegrams received by the Presidential Office*] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1984), pp. 136–137; Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol. 58, pp. 130, 183–184.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Meeting at Tsinan’, ‘Demonstrations in Nanjing’, and ‘Demonstration at Hangchou’, *North China Herald*, 17 May 1919, cited in van de Ven, ‘Xianshi zhengzhi zhong de wusi yundong’, p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Sir J. Jordan to Earl Curzon, 15 June 1919, received on 2 August 1919’, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs. Part II, Series E, Asia*, (eds) Kenneth Bourne and Ann Trotter (Bethesda, MD: University Publication of America, 1994), Vol. 23, p. 77.

<sup>91</sup> Deng, *Bali hehui yu Beijing zhengfu de neiwai boyi*; Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajijiao*; Zhang, *Liang Qichao*.

<sup>92</sup> Mittler, *A newspaper for China*, p. 390.

of a specific literary genre that had a long tradition in Chinese history—*xiwen* (檄文). As a category of political text, *xiwen* were used to denounce usurpers or political rivals and as a call to arms in wartime.<sup>93</sup> Contrasting one's virtues with the brutality of one's rival, it was intended to boost the morale of one's own camp and to expose the bad government of the enemy.<sup>94</sup> The combative stance and inflammatory tone of *xiwen* made them a powerful tool for military and political mobilization throughout the dynastic period. In a pioneering work, Zhou Yongming has shown how the *xiwen* style facilitated the rapid emergence of the public telegram as an increasingly important political text in late Qing.<sup>95</sup> In particular, during the May Fourth Movement, *xiwen*, when reincarnated in the modern media forms of newspaper articles and circular telegrams, became a style that was widely adopted in the media texts. A typical May Fourth *xiwen* often started by upholding a just cause, followed by a detailed elaboration of the cause to enhance its moral persuasion, claiming the wide support it enjoyed and ending with a rallying call to the public to join the campaign.

Liang Qichao and, under his leadership, the Yanjiuxi were instrumental in initiating the media war in the Movement. The widespread dissemination of Liang's reporting and commentary benefited greatly from his unique literary style, which had much in common with *xiwen*. In late April, when the situation turned sour for the Chinese delegation, Liang relayed the message home that China was going to lose Shandong. On 24 April, a telegram was sent to the ACD, in which Liang informed his colleagues that he 'had heard that Qingdao would be directly handed over to Japan' and asked them to 'warn the government and the people to put pressure on the Chinese delegates against signing the Treaty of Versailles' in order 'to show our determination'.<sup>96</sup> Liang's colleagues responded swiftly. On 4 May, an inflammatory essay entitled 'A Diplomatic Warning to Our People' (外交警报敬告国民) appeared on the front page of *Chenbao* (晨报), the official paper of the Yanjiuxi, under the heading 'Warning'. Authored by Lin Changmin (林长民, 1876–1925), Liang's close ally and director of the ACD, the article was printed in a large, eye-catching poster font. Starting with a statement that 'Jiaozhou is lost, Shandong is lost, and the survival of the nation is in danger!', it echoed Liang's March telegram and re-emphasized that it was the 1915 Twenty-One Demands and the 1918 agreements that had led to this disaster.<sup>97</sup> The essay ended with an emotional claim that 'the day of national demise is approaching', and called on the '400 million people to defend it with our lives!'<sup>98</sup>

The extensive network in the print media that the Yanjiuxi had built up over the years was essential for Liang Qichao's characterization of China's experience

<sup>93</sup>Zhou, *Historicizing online politics*, p. 105.

<sup>94</sup>Liu Xie, *Wenxin diaolong [The literary mind and carving dragons]* (Beijing: Zhonghua Books, 2012), pp. 239–248.

<sup>95</sup>Zhou, *Historicizing online politics*, pp. 105–110.

<sup>96</sup>'Shandong jing ruci duansong ye' [How can the future of Shandong be ruined like this], *Chenbao*, 2 May 1919. See also Ding Wenjiang and Zhao Fengtian (eds), *Liang Rengong xiansheng nianpu changbian [A chronicle of the life of Liang Qichao]* (Beijing: Zhonghua Books, 2010), p. 460.

<sup>97</sup>Liang Jingchun, 'Wo suo zhidao de wusi yundong' ['The May Fourth Movement that I know'], *Zhuanji wenxue*, Vol. 8, No. 5, (1966), p. 4. See also Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajiao*, pp. 273–274.

<sup>98</sup>Lin Changmin, 'Wajiao jingbao jinggao guomin' ['A diplomatic warning to the citizens'], *Chenbao*, 2 May 1919.



at Versailles as a 'diplomatic failure' to prevail in the May Fourth Movement. Liang's original telegram was reprinted in *Chenbao* with the provocative title, 'How Can the Future of Shandong be Ruined Like this?' (山东竟如此断送耶). It also appeared in other newspapers owned by the Yanjiuxi, such as *Shishi Xinbao* (时事新报), as well as the biggest commercial newspapers in the country such as *Shenbao*.<sup>99</sup> The circulation of these telegrams and newspaper articles in the domestic media formed an important part of the Yanjiuxi's political strategy. With a coordinated and consistent narrative, it built up the momentum for political campaigns launched during this period, including the national convention scheduled to be held on 7 May but which nevertheless broke out prematurely on 4 May.

The southern government's 'traitor' narrative was also typical of the *xiwen* style. A circular telegram sent to all provincial governments, for example, started by depicting the diplomats who negotiated the Sino-Japanese agreements as traitors: 'Traitors Cao Rulin, Zhang Zongxiang, and Lu Zongyu have willingly served as the running dogs of the foreigners and secretly colluded with the Japanese'. It was the morally corrupt nature of these ministers, argued the piece, that led them to 'impede the [Chinese] representatives' request to cancel the Sino-Japanese treaties and hand over Qingdao'. To attribute the rationale for Duan's policy on Japan to its problematic moral standing, instead of concerns over real politics, the southern government was able to extend its accusations from foreign relations to domestic issues, which were their overarching concern. 'Regarding domestic politics', the article continued, 'they [the ministers] hoped to torpedo the north-south peace talks so as to realize their traitorous intrigue'. Drawing on Chinese idioms widely used in *xiwen*, the article ended with a direct and affective denunciation: 'Their crimes are evident, which will be denounced by Heaven and people alike.'<sup>100</sup> Accompanying the moralizing nature of the accusation was the alarming tone of the southern government's media narrative. The 4 May edition of *Minguo Ribao*, for example, was filled with reports and commentaries on the Shandong question, some of which had provocative titles, including 'Shandong is Indeed in Danger and Doomed' (山东危乎殆哉), 'Warning about the Diplomatic Fiasco' (外交大失败警耗), and 'Shandong Is Doomed; What Can We Do about It' (山东殆矣可奈何).<sup>101</sup> The combination of the directness of the warnings and the literary phraseology resulted in the effectiveness of the traitor narrative in the political mobilization process of the southern government.

Apart from using the news outlets under its control, the southern government used the circular telegram to create a media network within which it was able to gather broad support for its call to arms against Beijing. When the Beijing government ordered students to be arrested during the protest, Sun Yat-sen responded by telegraphing it in protest. The telegram was open coded, with the collective signatures of the six governors-general of the southern government. Solidarity around the southern government was further displayed by another circular telegram sent by the Extraordinary Congress to all provinces, in which it denounced the pro-Japanese ministers of the Beijing government.

<sup>99</sup> *Chenbao*, 4 May 1919; *Shishi xinbao*, 4 May 1919.

<sup>100</sup> Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, pp. 125–126.

<sup>101</sup> *Minguo Ribao*, 4 May 1919.

The example of Wu Peifu perfectly demonstrates how, with the adroit use of media, one could rise from the periphery of national politics to its centre. Wu Peifu's often lengthy circular telegrams also shared some of the most important characteristic of *xiwen*, being imbued with historical references and classical literary allusions. Positive and negative examples were quoted from history to admonish the government for risking its legitimacy by suppressing public opinion. When the government tried to suppress dissent as the May Fourth Movement developed into a nationwide protest, Wu warned it with the ancient adage, 'to gag the voice of the people is more dangerous than to dam the flow of a river' (防民之口甚于防川), a quote from the *Discourses of the States*, which was used to admonish the tyrant King Li of Zhou (周厉王, 890 BCE–828 BCE) about the importance of hearing the voices of the ruled.<sup>102</sup> When further pleading to Beijing to release the students and encourage the nation to unite in this hard time and retrieve Qingdao, Wu quoted the reminder by King Wu of Zhou (周武王, 1087 BCE–1043 BCE) — 'Heaven sees what the people see, and Heaven hears what the people hear (天视自我民视, 天听自我民听)'.<sup>103</sup> In maintaining that a government's rule is legitimate only if it reflects the thinking of the people, Wu presented himself as a representative of public opinion.

The most famous rallying call in Wu's circular telegrams was the saying, 'every man has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country' (天下兴亡, 匹夫有责). Quoting from the anti-Manchu writings of the late Ming philosopher Gu Yanwu (顾炎武, 1613–1682), Wu used the phrase to make the point that military men should share the blame for the loss of territory and the national crisis. While successfully curating Wu's image as a military man who cared deeply for his country and stood with the people, the quote was ubiquitous during the May Fourth Movement.<sup>104</sup>

With his circular telegrams, Wu Peifu became the centre of public opinion in the spring and summer of 1919. A growing number of military figures joined him in showing their anti-war and patriotic stand. Li Zonghuang (李宗黄, 1888–1978), an envoy of the Governor-General of Yunnan, for example, spoke on behalf of the southwestern generals in a press interview:

The mission of a military man is to serve his nation. Only an army that aims at defending the nation against foreign aggression rather than internal strife can be called a national army. One that defies this principle can only be called a private army. A national army belongs to the nation, not to a specific party or clique. It should not be manipulated by any individual or faction.<sup>105</sup>

Wu's rank in the military was no higher than a division commander, yet as *Shenbao* commented, by 'sending successive circular telegrams to criticize the current cabinet', Wu made sure that 'every move he has made has caught close attention nationwide'.<sup>106</sup> By using successful media strategies, Wu successfully broke through the

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Peng, *Gaoben Wu Fuwei (Peifu) shangjiangjun nianpu*, pp. 125, 128.

<sup>104</sup> Chen Tingxiang, *Wanqing minguo zhengfu yingdui minzhong yundong shilun* [A study of the late Qing and republican governments' response to public movements] (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2016), p. 65.

<sup>105</sup> 'Zonghuang duiyu Wu Peifu zhuhu zhi tanhua' ['Li Zonghuang's speech on Wu Peifu's peace proposal'], *Shenbao*, 3 September 1918.

<sup>106</sup> 'Wu Peifu tongdian zhi xiangxun' ['News from Hunan about Wu Peifu's circular telegram'], *Shenbao*, 3 September 1918.

spatial constraints of the small city of Hengyang in Hunan and became a political figure with nationwide influence.<sup>107</sup>

### Beijing government's unsuccessful media strategy

While its opponents launched their offensives towards the Beijing government in the media, Beijing's media strategy was much less successful. The limited sovereignty and weak political control enjoyed by the republican government also led to its inability to control the mediascape effectively. Duan and his supporters did have a few newspapers under their influence, including *Gongyanbao* (公言报), *Xin Minguobao* (新民国报), and *Xinminbao* (新民报). Their circulation, however, was much smaller than those controlled by their opponents.<sup>108</sup>

Its failure to counter its opponents' barrage of attacks also resulted from Beijing's inability to enforce consistent and effective censorship. This was testified by a statement made by writer and translator Lin Yutang (林语堂, 1895–1976): 'I have always remembered with gratitude and deep appreciation the generosity of Tuan Ch'ijui [Duan Qirui] who allowed other writers and myself to criticize him in the Peking newspapers in no polite terms.'<sup>109</sup> The freedom Lin enjoyed, however, was not so much due to Duan's generosity as to the Beijing government's inability to control the press. Although the government attempted to tighten its grip on the media when the newspapers started to be filled with attacks on the government in early May, the fragmented domestic political landscape meant that the effectiveness of censorship enforcement often varied according to the local situation.

The damaging effect of the anti-government circular telegrams induced the Beijing government to cut the telegraph cables connecting the capital with strategic cities, including Shanghai, Tianjin, and Wuhan.<sup>110</sup> Its limited sovereignty in the face of the foreign presence in the country, however, meant that the effect of these measures was compromised. A week after the outbreak of the protests on 4 May, the Beijing–Tianjin and Beijing–Shanghai lines were reconnected at the request of the foreign legation.<sup>111</sup> The existence of foreign concessions and settlements also prevented the enforcement of full-scale censorship.<sup>112</sup> Students of Beijing managed to send telegrams from foreign agencies in the international settlements in Tianjin, where the messages were relayed to Shanghai and continued to be broadcast all over the country and overseas through international networks.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>107</sup>Ma Jianbiao, 'Meijie, zhuyi yu zhengzheng' ['Media, ideology and political competition: the rise of Wu Peifu around the May Fourth Movement and the change in the balance of power'], *Anhui shixue*, Vol. 4, 2017, p. 82.

<sup>108</sup>Hu Shi, 'Duo yanjiu xie wenti, shao tan xie zhuyi' ['Study problems more, and talk about '-isms' less'], *Meizhou Pinglun*, 20 July 1918.

<sup>109</sup>Lin, *A history of the press and public opinion in China*, pp. 135–136.

<sup>110</sup>'Shuilu dianxian tongshi zhongduan' ['Underwater and land telegraph lines were simultaneously cut'], *Shenbao*, 4 May 1919.

<sup>111</sup>'Dianbao butong zhi yiwen' ['Questions about cutting the telegraph lines'], *Chenbao*, 12 May 1919; also in *Shenbao*, 14 May 1919.

<sup>112</sup>There was also censorship in the concessions, but it was imposed mostly on xenophobic reporting, and not so much on Chinese domestic politics.

<sup>113</sup>Chiang Monlin, *Tides from the West: A Chinese autobiography* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012), pp. 226–227; Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, p. 124, fn. 25.

Beijing's ineffective control of the mediascape also resulted in the escalation of student protests in the capital to the rest of the country. Indeed, the outburst of mass movements in the provinces was often heralded by the appearance of reports in local media about student protests in the capital. Correspondents of regional newspapers, such as *Yishibao* (益世报) in Tianjin, *Dadong Ribao* (大东日报), *Minzheng Ribao* (民政日报), and *Qilu Ribao* (齐鲁日报) in Shandong, as well as *Chuanbao* (川报) in Sichuan, were able to communicate developments in Beijing back to their headquarters, which contributed significantly to the outbreak of mass movements in the provinces.<sup>114</sup> Among these flare-ups, the most important turning point of the May Fourth Movement was the outbreak of a general strike in Shanghai in June, which paralyzed the Chinese economy.<sup>115</sup> Among the many reasons that gave rise to the escalation of the situation in the city, Shanghai's status as China's media centre—both as its publishing epicentre and the node of the telegraphic network—played an essential role in the successful mobilization of merchants and workers. Reports and commentaries on the nationwide student protests published in newspapers such as *Minguo Ribao*, *Shenbao*, and *Xinwenbao* paved the way for the wider public's participation in the movement.<sup>116</sup>

In terms of style, while the anti-government narratives derived their efficaciousness from their appeal to pathos, Beijing tried to construct its counternarrative on the basis of logos. When discussions on diplomacy at Versailles went far beyond foreign policy per se and became increasingly moralizing, the Beijing government tried to redirect their course by providing a rational, legal explanation for the Shandong question. In a telegram the Congress sent to the Paris Peace Conference, it clarified the fact that China's declaration of war on Germany had nullified all Sino-German treaties. The real intention was not so much to persuade the leaders of the great powers as to address the domestic public. By denying that Japan had legal grounds for inheriting German rights in Shandong, Beijing tried to convince the public that their rage was irrational and without foundation.<sup>117</sup> Because they had remained aloof from the raging public opinion and were unresponsive to public emotions, this only served to confirm the widely circulating accusation that the government was apathetic to the appeals of the people.

What further alienated the public were Beijing's attempts to protect its ministers from the simplistic traitor narrative. Refusing to succumb to the vilifying attacks directed at the diplomats chairing the Sino-Japanese negotiations, the Beijing government acknowledged their diplomatic careers by praising them as 'unselfish and loyal to the nation' (体国公诚) and 'having contributed positively to the overall situation' (有裨大局).<sup>118</sup> When placed alongside measures to rough up demonstrators,

<sup>114</sup>Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (ed.), *Wusi yundong huiyilu* [Memoirs of the May Fourth Movement] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1979, Vol. 2), pp. 599, 750, 872.

<sup>115</sup>Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 'Chinese students and anti-Japanese protests, past and present', *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 22, 2005, p. 59.

<sup>116</sup>Chen Zhiqiang, 'Meiti youfa xinwen: meiti yu Wusi yundong de ge'an yanjiu' ['How a news event was produced by the media: case study of media in the May Fourth Movement'], *Nanchang daxue xuebao* (*Rensheban*), Vol. 31, 2000, p. 132.

<sup>117</sup>Deng, *Bali hehui yu Beijing zhengfu de neiwai boyi*, p. 96.

<sup>118</sup>Cao Rulin, *Cao Rulin yisheng zhi huiyi*, p. 211; Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, p. 134, fn. 53; Chen, *Wanqing minguo zhengfu yingdui minzhong yundong shilun*, p. 57.

shut down universities, and impose martial law, this was a fatal gesture and led to Beijing's debacle in the May Fourth media war. While the *xuwen*-style anti-government discourse prevailed in the mediascape with its concision, clarity, and cogency, Beijing's counter-offensive was indeterminate, inconsistent, and ineffective.

### Epilogue: the derailing of the strategy at Versailles and the collapse of the Beijing government

Beijing's poor strategies led to the quick dilution of its political authority. This is best demonstrated by the disobedience of its delegation at Versailles. In mid-June, after a long deliberation over whether to sign the Treaty of Versailles, the Beijing government ordered its delegates to put their names on the treaty. Although the decision would 'definitely cause commotion at home', the government explained that to sign the treaty would give China the opportunity to revise the Boxer Protocol, which would considerably improve the country's sovereignty and fulfil its original agendas at Versailles, despite the fact that the public now deemed it trivial compared with Shandong.<sup>119</sup> The delegation, however, decided that it would not go against public opinion and defied the government's order. By the time they received Beijing's final directive, the delegates had received over 7,000 telegrams from home, demanding that they refuse to sign the treaty.<sup>120</sup> The recent experiences of the diplomats who had been bitterly attacked during the May Fourth Movement served as a perfect reminder about what would await the delegates should any of them decide to put their name on the Treaty of Versailles—no one would ever want to be remembered in history for 'humiliating the nation and forfeiting its sovereignty'. Although it was the delegation that first decided to resort to public opinion to win support for their diplomatic goals, they now found themselves captive to public opinion. When stopped by an agitated crowd of Chinese compatriots in Paris on the evening of 27 June, Gu Weijun told them that 'China certainly will not sign the Treaty of Versailles if our reservations over Shandong cannot be accepted'. 'You should not worry', Gu assured the gathering, 'as there will be no one signing the Treaty'.<sup>121</sup>

As the Chinese delegation disintegrated with the resignation and departure of several representatives, so did the Beijing government. Unable to balance the public's demands and a more favourable foreign policy decision, the whole cabinet resigned, followed by the submission of the resignation from the President himself. In the circular telegram sent to the provinces, President Xu Shichang explained that he had to resign because of the impossible task of reconciling 'the difference between government and public opinion'.<sup>122</sup> Although his resignation was eventually rejected by

<sup>119</sup>'Shou waijiao cizhang 14 ri dian' ['Telegram received from the Vice Foreign Minister on the 14<sup>th</sup>'], 18 May 1919, WJBDA, 03-13-068-03-001; 'Fa fajing Lu zongzhang (Zhengxiang) dian' ['Telegram to Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang'], 14 May 1919, in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (ed.), *Zhongri guanxi shiliao: Bali hehui yu Shandong wenti*, pp. 149–150.

<sup>120</sup>Ye Yongdong, 'Bali hehui qianhou Zhongguoren dui Wei'erxun renshi de zhuanbian' ['The Chinese public's changing understanding of Woodrow Wilson before and after the Paris Peace Conference'], *Hubei shifan xueyuan xuebao (Zhexue shehui kexue ban)*, Vol. 1, 1997, p. 96.

<sup>121</sup>Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo waijiao*, p. 323; Gu, *Gu Weijun huiyilu*, Vol. 1, pp. 206–207.

<sup>122</sup>Shen Yunlong, *Xu Shichang ping zhuan [A biography of Xu Shichang]* (Taipei: Biographical Literature, 1979), p. 504.

Congress, Xu's plan to achieve domestic peace now seemed improbable in the face of the dire political situation. The Sino-Japanese dispute over the Shandong Question would eventually be settled at the Washington Conference in 1922.<sup>123</sup> By then, however, the rule of the Beijing government had become increasingly precarious. Labour movements were flaring up over the country and the Guomindang and the nascent Chinese Communist Party would soon form a united front that held 'anti-imperialism' and 'anti-warlordism' as its slogans. Many of the themes that manifested in the May Fourth Movement—the important role of the mass media and propaganda as well as the power unleashed in mass demonstrations—would come to define much of Chinese politics in the decades that followed. The May Fourth Movement, in this sense, signified what Shakhbar Rahav has called 'the dawning era of mass politics'.<sup>124</sup> The events that took place in 1919 surrounding the settlement over the Shandong Question, starting from the negotiation tables at Versailles and ending in the demonstration on the streets of Beijing, permanently changed the course of republican politics.

## Conclusion

By revisiting the interactions between domestic and international developments at the end of the First World War, this article enriches our understanding of the cause of the May Fourth Movement. It shows that the mass movement in 1919 was not so much a natural result of China's diplomatic failure to retrieve Shandong at Versailles, but the unintended consequence of the implementation of a diplomatic strategy that aimed to have Shandong returned by mobilizing public opinion in the mass media, but nevertheless derailed against the backdrop of the decentralized domestic landscape.

The official historiography tells China's Versailles-May Fourth story as one of tragedy, of the Chinese people's patriotic and nationalist spirits awakened by the hypocrisy of imperial powers, which fits neatly into the grand narrative of the 'century of humiliation'. What has been less talked about, however, is the more embarrassing and elitist aspects of the episode. While the participation of the wide public made the May Fourth the opening chapter of a new era in modern Chinese history, the role of elites in mobilizing and shaping public opinion was indispensable in this process. This silence has been brought about largely by the intentional choice of the elite in the face of the triumph of the masses in both the revolutionary historiography and political discourse of modern China. For the diplomats who initiated the open diplomacy campaign, the contingencies of history and their diplomatic miscalculations could be safely covered up under the fervour of the public's nationalist quest for the restoration

<sup>123</sup>For the settlement of the Shandong question at the Washington Conference, see, for example, Bruce A. Elleman, *Wilson and China: A revised history of the Shandong question* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 160–162. Although the mainstream narrative of China's experiences at Versailles have portrayed the Council of Four as having totally failed to resolve the Shandong question according to the principle of self-determination and therefore 'betrayed' China at the Paris Peace Conference, scholars have pointed out that the negotiations over the Shandong question at the Paris Peace Conference laid the foundation for its eventual settlement at the Washington Conference. See Tang, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajiao*, p. 358; Xu, *China and the Great War*, p. 280.

<sup>124</sup>Shakhbar Rahav, *The rise of political intellectuals in modern China*, p. 144.

of sovereignty.<sup>125</sup> Their own image as patriots would also be redeemed in the judgement of history.<sup>126</sup> For the winners of history—both the victors of the May Fourth Movement and the revolutionary parties that subsequently ruled China—to portray the eventual overthrow of the Beijing government as one demanded by public opinion, which they had ardently followed rather than led, would serve to justify their own legitimacy. What this article has endeavoured to do is to show the shadowy side of this history.

The modern media was the link that connected the international and the domestic spheres as well as the elite and the masses.<sup>127</sup> The wide reach of the mass media enabled it to become an important tool for political mobilization—a channel to tap into the immense power of the masses—both in diplomacy and domestic politics. On the other hand, control over the mediascape remained largely in the hands of the elite. The genuine patriotic sentiments displayed in the mass media during the May Fourth Movement should not blind us to the fact that public opinion was shaped and carefully channelled by the political elites who remained the dominant players in early republican politics. The outcome of the competition over the hearts and minds of the masses depended on how successful each of them was in controlling the mediascape and in making use of the rhetorical tools with which the mass media contents were produced. Without a sufficient appreciation of the role that the mass media played in the May Fourth Movement, it is hard to understand fully the mechanism by which political support was mobilized in this defining moment in modern Chinese history. It should be noted, however, although a considerable larger proportion of the ‘public’ participated in the debate over the Shandong question than had been intended by the Chinese delegation, it still only constituted a limited percentage of the country’s population. The newspaper articles and circular telegrams that set in motion the domestic mobilization process over the Shandong question were crafted in a style that would be familiar to those who shared the literary tradition. In other words, those who responded to the media contents that formed a crucial part of the political debate in the May Fourth Movement would be literate, educated, and often living in urban areas which were covered by extensive media networks.<sup>128</sup> The majority of the Chinese population, namely

<sup>125</sup>Tang Qihua has noted the warm welcome Lu Zhengxiang received from the patriotic crowds in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beijing upon his return from Paris in January 1920. Tang Qihua, *Bali hehui yu Zhongguo wajijiao*, p. 366.

<sup>126</sup>When recounting their Versailles-May Fourth experiences in their later years, both Lu Zhengxiang and Gu Weijun told the story in a much more streamlined way, in which they portrayed themselves as patriots supporting the claims of the public and rejecting the unreasonable proposals offered by Western imperialists. This made a stark contrast with their more ambivalent and elitist attitude towards public opinion in 1919, as well as the more complex stories they told at the time. See Gu, *Gu Weijun huiyilu*, Vol. 1, pp. 172–234. Dom Pierre-Célestin Lou Tseng-Tsiang [Lu Zhengxiang], *Ways of Confucius and of Christ*, (trans.) Michael Derrick (London: Burns Oates, 1948), p. 42.

<sup>127</sup>Rahav identifies the May Fourth period as ‘a transition point to a form of mass politics that relies on the growing print media and its producers’. He notes that the efficacy of print media in cultivating networks and consolidating political associations and small societies—which he calls ‘May Fourth forms of political organization’—both of which ‘came to characterize Chinese politics in the 1920s’, made it an important tool of political mobilization. Rahav, *The rise of political intellectuals in modern China*, p. 144.

<sup>128</sup>Qu Jun’s article on historian Qian Mu’s experiences during the May Fourth Movement shows the amount of New Culture media content Qian was able to access as a young man living in a small town in the lower Yangtze region. It sheds light on the structure and coverage of media networks in this period. Qu

the peasants, were still mostly absent from this story.<sup>129</sup> What this article has shown, however, is that the May Fourth Movement did signal a transition from elite politics towards broadened political participation, and that the mass media was instrumental in facilitating that transition.

The historical experiences of early republican China also help us make sense of the role of media in contemporary Chinese politics. The current Chinese government's successful control over the mediascape offers a stark contrast with the failure of the early republican government to do so. The Chinese party-state's tight grip over the media has been essential in maintaining a largely unitary 'public opinion' over domestic and international issues.<sup>130</sup> The 'heroes versus villains' narrative that dominated the May Fourth Movement and the *xiwen* rhetorical style are both prevalent in China's state propaganda today. 'Wolf warrior' diplomacy is yet another example of how public opinion can be manufactured through the mass media and used to facilitate diplomatic goals. The lessons of the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement, however, show some of the risks and dangers of doing so.

**Acknowledgements.** I am indebted to Prof. Hans van de Ven and my colleagues in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I would like to thank Dr Shirley Ye for encouraging me to develop initial thoughts on this topic into an article. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of *MAS* for their helpful comments which improved the draft. A Chiang Ching-kuo Postdoctoral Fellowship funded this research, and I am grateful for the support I received from Wolfson College during my Junior Research Fellowship there.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

---

Jun, 'Milu de xiaozhen qingnian: Qian Mu yu wusi yundong zaitan' ['A young man searching for his path: a revisit of Qian Mu's experiences in the May Fourth Movement], *Jindaishi yanjiu*, Vol. 2, 2019, pp. 25–40.

<sup>129</sup>A recent study by Bian Donglei provides another perspective on the question by examining the reception of the May Fourth Movement in the countryside. He examines how students tried to mobilize nationalist sentiments after returning to their hometowns and shows that most of their efforts encountered various degrees of resistance at the local level. Bian Donglei, 'Wusi yundong zai xiangcun: chuanbo, dongyuan yu minzuzhuyi' ['The May Fourth Movement in the countryside: communications, mobilisation and nationalism'], *Twenty-First Century*, Vol. 4, 2019, pp. 90–102.

<sup>130</sup>On the topic of censorship under the CCP regime, a few examples are: He Qinglian, *The fog of censorship: media control in China*, (transl.) Paul Frank (New York: Human Rights in China, 2008); Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: distraction and diversion inside China's Great Firewall* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Wang Qingning, *The Chinese internet: the online public sphere, power relations and political communication* (New York: Routledge, 2021); and Robin Han, *Contesting cyberspace in China: online expression and authoritarian resilience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

**Cite this article:** Wu, Rong. 2023. 'The making of "public opinion": Media and open diplomacy in China's strategy at Versailles and the May Fourth Movement'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(4), pp. 1355–1386. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000609>