

Lou Tseng-Tsiang and the Versailles Peace Conference

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This year not only marks the 60th anniversary of the death of the famous Chinese Catholic, Abbot Lou Tseng-Tsiang, but it is also the 90th anniversary of the Versailles Peace Treaty, which brought an end to the First World War, and with which Lou Tseng-Tsiang had a close connection. Although representing one of the winning countries in the war, he was the only representative to refuse to sign the peace treaty with Germany. It was an outstanding decision, to show the other countries at the Peace Conference that they had treated China unfairly, and as a Chinese citizen, to seek justice and respect for his country on the world stage.

As early as 1915, Lou Tseng-Tsiang was thinking about the post-war situation. He once said:

“After the war is over, there must be a conference. If we look at history, in the past there were the Berlin Conference and the Conference of Vienna. Any country, which was even indirectly involved, could participate. This war involves all the countries of Europe, but even countries, which are indirectly involved, can participate in the peace conference.” (Shi Jianguo 石建國, 1999, p. 203).

From this we can see that, even before China declared war on Germany, Lou Tseng-Tsiang was supporting China's right to have a voice in the new world order after the war.

Unexpectedly, in February 1917, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany, and it urged China to do the same. The cabinet of the northern warlord government, in the name of opposing attacks by German submarines on the ships of neutral

countries, declared, on March 14, 1917, that it was cutting off diplomatic relations with Germany. Thus China became directly involved in World War I.

On November 11, 1918, Germany surrendered unconditionally, and World War I came to an end. A peace conference to handle questions regarding the division of spoils among the victorious countries was arranged in Paris. The opening ceremony took place at the Palace of Versailles on January 18, 1919. The Chinese people at that time had high hopes for the Paris Conference. The historian, Hu Sheng, wrote about it in this way:

“Before the Paris Conference began, U.S. President Wilson had announced the ‘14 Points’ to the American Congress, and said that these would be the objectives of the Paris Conference. He also said that the advantages of peoples living in a situation of colonialism would be taken into account, and that large and small countries would mutually protect the political freedom and the completeness of territory of one another’s countries. This caused Chinese intellectuals to have high hopes for the peace conference. They thought that this conference could be used to strive for equality and independence for China among the other countries of the world.” (Hu Sheng 胡繩, 1981, p. 958).

The expectations of the Chinese delegation can be summarized in four points:

1. get back all the privileges Germany had in Shandong Province before the war, and not allow Japan to take them over;
2. abolish the 21 Demands, in whole or in part;
3. abolish all the special privileges enjoyed by foreigners in China; and
4. conclude the special political and economic privileges Germany and Austria, the two defeated countries, had previously enjoyed in China.

Lou Tseng-Tsiang and the Formation of the Chinese Delegation

Lou Tseng-Tsiang, the Foreign Minister of the Beijing government, headed the delegation of Chinese representatives to the Paris Peace Conference. Foreign Minister Lou chose the other members of the delegation. When he was choosing the delegates, he deliberately left out anyone who favored Japan. Formal delegates, with full voting rights, were Gu Weijun, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Wang Zhengting, a representative of the Southern government, Shi Zhaoji, the ambassador to England, and Wei Chenzu, the ambassador to Belgium (*Seventy Years of Japanese Aggression in China* 《日本侵華七十年史》 1992, p. 182) .

The split between the southern government and the northern one at that time was caused when President Li Yuanhong, the replacement of Yuan Shikai who died in 1916, disbanded the Chinese parliament in 1917. Sun Yat Sen invited the representatives in parliament to gather in Guangzhou to exercise their powers. This led to a division between the Beiyang government in the north and the southern Revolutionary government, based in Guangzhou.

The four representatives, Gu, Wang, Shi and Wei, went to Paris on their own. Only Lou Tseng-Tsiang started out from Beijing. Although the four were well educated and were ideal representatives, their arrangements were not well planned. Lou carried with him all the important documents prepared by the northern government. However, the ship he was traveling on passed through Japan. The Japanese seized one case of the documents. Thus they learned all the matters that China was going to bring up at the conference. (Liu Yan 劉彥, 1979, p. 542)

Although Lou Tseng-Tsiang tried to avoid the control of the Japanese, while he was waiting in Japan for the ship to continue his journey to France, the Japanese brought him around to meet all kinds of government officials, and to attend many banquets. From this we can see that the Japanese were conspiring to maintain their privileges in China. Foreign Minister Lou tried to put these overtures off with all his strength.

The Process of the Paris Conference

Scholars in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences consider the Paris Conference as a model for seizing political power. Seventy delegates from 27 countries took part. Japan was one of the two largest countries. Japan had five seats at the conference, whereas China only had two. The whole assembly seldom met together, and it had no real power. All power was in the hands of a 'Group of Four': U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, the English Prime Minister Lloyd George, the French Prime Minister Clemenceau, and the Italian Prime Minister Orlando. The four leaders met in extreme secrecy. Even the American Secretary of State, Lansing, called the conference "secret diplomacy" (*Seventy Years of Japanese Aggression in China* 《日本侵華七十年史》, 1992, p. 184).

Regarding the background to the Shandong question, Professor Xu Zhongyue has written:

"In 1898, when Germany leased Jiaozhouwan from the Qing Dynasty government as a base, the lease was to last for 99 years. When the First World War broke out, China was a neutral country. However, Japan joined the Allies (the Entente). They kicked the Germans out of Jiaozhouwan, and occupied not only Jiaozhouwan, but also the majority of Shandong Province. In order to legalize this occupation, Japan included a recognition of their position within their 21 Demands." (Xu Zhongyue 徐中約, 2001, p. 503).

During the preparatory stages of the conference, when China and Japan were maneuvering for position, Lou Tseng-Tsiang's contribution was admirable. Shi Jianguo has described it in this way:

"Before the conference started, the Chinese delegation ran into a terrific obstacle. The Japanese extremely despised China. So at the preparatory meeting, they announced: 'China did not deploy troops, so they did not fight in the war. They should not have been invited to the conference, and they should not take a seat at it.' Lou Tseng-Tsiang, in his capacity as Chinese Foreign Minister, retorted: 'As

foreign minister I approved of many Chinese citizens going abroad, including to France, to work. In the front lines of the European War, 200,000 Chinese workers dug trenches, transported bombs, and made guns. No matter whether in the back, or on the front lines, the bravery of the Chinese workers was second to none.” (Shi Jianguo 石建國, 1999, p. 215).

As a result, Lou Tseng-Tsiang won the admiration of all the representatives, and every country’s delegation voted in favor of inviting China to take a seat at the conference. The machinations of the Japanese were unsuccessful. On January 27, 1919, when the conference was discussing the establishment of the League of Nations, Lou Tseng-Tsiang stood up, and in fluent French, stated that China supported the League, and that it joined with other Western nations to help in the effort to eliminate war in the future. Many European commentators praised his words. (Shi Jianguo 石建國, 1999, p. 217).

When the conference discussed the question of Shandong, Lou Tseng-Tsiang did not directly take part. He left this to Gu Weijun to address. On January 28, 1919, Gu Weijun stood up before the whole assembly, and stated frankly:

“The Chinese delegation asks the conference to return Jiaozhouwan, the Shandong Railroad, and all the privileges previously enjoyed by Germany in Shandong to China. The reasons for this have already been stated. Germany’s lease on Jiaozhouwan, the railroad, and all the privileges should be directly returned to China. The land belongs to the sovereignty of China, and cannot be lost. The 37,000,000 people living in the territory are all Chinese. Throughout history, they have belonged to the Chinese race, speak the Chinese language and believe in Chinese religions. The whole world knows how Germany, because of a missionary case, seized that land by force of arms. China cannot but ask for it back. Regarding the importance of the territory, Jiaozhouwan is a port for northern China. The route from the sea to Beijing goes on the two railroads, which meet there. It is a direct route to the capital. Because of national

policy, the Chinese delegation cannot entertain any other country's reasons for occupying this important piece of territory. We must fight to preserve it. Speaking of culture, Shandong is the birthplace of Confucius. The Chinese people consider it a holy place. In the development of China, this province has contributed a lot. The eyes of all the people in the country are focused on this province. Speaking of economics, the province is narrow, but the people are outstanding. The area of the territory is only 25,000 square English miles. The population is 37,000,000. So, the people are crowded together. Survival is not easy. If another country invades and occupies it, they are only oppressing the local people; the place is not suitable to be a colony. This conference has recognized the principle of the preservation of the race and the completeness of the land in each country. Therefore, this territory should be returned to the sovereignty of China. The Chinese delegation regards this as a requirement in justice and peace..." (Liu Yan 劉彥, 1979, pp. 558-559).

The Failure of the Paris Peace Conference and the May Fourth Movement

Although Gu Weijun's speech was very persuasive, yet it did not help to resolve the question. Professor Xu Zhongyue has pointed out:

"The matter of Shandong was already decided in September 1918 through a secret agreement between Beijing and the Japanese government. Japan gave the Chinese warlord government a loan of 20,000,000 Japanese yen, and they obtained the rights to build two railroads. At each site they could station soldiers. They even obtained the right to train and to supervise China's railroad police. Under the instructions of Beijing, the Chinese ambassador in Japan, Zhang Zongxiang, 'agreed with pleasure' to these stipulations." (Xu Zhongyue 徐中約, 2001, p. 504).

Therefore, at the conference, the Japanese representatives quietly revealed the 1918 secret agreement with Beijing. They

pointed out that China had already “happily agreed” to the resolution of the Shandong question. The arguments of the Chinese delegation could not change this fact. The fate of Shandong was sealed, and could not be undone.

After the news of the failure of the Peace Conference to favorably resolve the Shandong question reached Beijing, on May 4, 1919, over 2,000 students organized a demonstration in Tiananmen Square. They shouted slogans, like: “Return Shandong to China,” “Reject the Peace Treaty,” “Overseas fight for China’s territory; at home punish the domestic robbers.” After the gathering, they marched in protest. Demonstrations also took place in other cities in China. During May and June, telegrams flew to Paris like snowflakes. At least 7,000 were sent. It was the beginning of the famous “May Fourth Movement.”

The Chinese Delegates Refuse to Sign the Peace Treaty

In Paris, the Chinese delegation decided to refuse to sign the peace treaty as a sign of their opposition to it. The members of the delegation were even ready to resign from office as proof they opposed the treaty. Archbishop Luo Guang has written in detail about this:

“On June 28, 1919, at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, the delegates to the peace conference gathered in formal attire in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. After half a year of negotiations, the representatives of 27 countries formally signed the peace treaty. The Chinese delegation was the only one not to sign, for they were absent from the signing ceremony. On that same day, Lou, Gu, Wang and Wei, in a joint letter to the government, resigned as delegates of China to the Paris Peace Conference” (Luo Guang 羅光, 1949, p. 114).

Regarding the refusal to sign the treaty, the Chinese people at that time gave Lou Tseng-Tsiang high marks. An article in the *Shen Bao* (《申報》) called him “without doubt a great historical figure.”

Shi Jianguo has made an analysis of Lou Tseng-Tsiang's negotiations at that time, and pointed out:

“1. The Chinese delegation's decision to refuse to sign the Versailles Treaty was taken with difficulty and on their own. They respected the will of the people, and did not follow the Beijing government's confusing instructions. 2. Lou Tseng-Tsiang continually lobbied the Beijing government to issue an order to refuse to sign the peace treaty. In the refusal to sign, Lou Tseng-Tsiang was the leading official.” (Shi Jianguo 石建國, 1999, pp. 236-238).

At last, the Beijing government, after seeing the violent opposition to Japan on the part of the citizens of the whole country, the demonstrations in many places, and the boycott of Japanese goods, on July 10, 1919 formally issued, through the Foreign Ministry, the order of refusal to sign the treaty (Luo Guang 羅光, 1949, p. 115). Thus, after passing through many difficulties, the Chinese delegation accomplished an impossible task. They turned a weak country, with no diplomatic power, into a China with a respected position in the world.

The Chinese delegation's refusal to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty was in response to the Chinese people's fearlessness in the face of violence, and their unwillingness to submit to tyranny. In the end, Japan was never able to obtain legal rights in Shandong, and the problem became an unsettled question. This was the case up until 1922, when after the Washington Conference, the international scene witnessed a great change. Then the Shandong question was settled in China's favor.

Wilson had sacrificed China in order to get Japan to join the League of Nations. But the irony was that he could not persuade his own country to join this international body. Even more ironic was that Japan, along with several other countries, withdrew from the League in 1933. Although China refused to sign the peace treaty with Germany, it did eventually sign one with Austria, which automatically made it a member of the League of Nations.

Conclusion

Lou Tseng-Tsiang's courage is worthy of admiration, and at the Paris Peace Conference it was displayed for all to see. Not for a moment did he weigh advantages or disadvantages. Rather, he only judged according to principles. Thus we had the brilliant act of the refusal to sign the treaty. Lou Tseng-Tsiang unselfishly thought of others. Although he was an official of the Beiyang government, he resolutely considered the whole situation. He invited a representative of the southern government, Wang Zhengting, to be a member of the delegation. Wang Zhengting did not disappoint the hopes of the people. After the Nationalist government united the country, Wang Zhengting became Foreign Minister, and made a great contribution to his country.

Some people, in weighing Lou Tseng-Tsiang's successes and failures, always criticize his weakness and fear. However, considering the Paris Peace Conference, and the unfavorable circumstances of China in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period, Lou Tseng-Tsiang always exerted the greatest effort to protect China's rights, and to not bring shame upon the country. The mainland scholar, Shi Jianguo, quoted Huang Yuanyong's comments about Lou Tseng-Tsiang's qualities during those critical days:

“Lou was very humble, and gave a well presented speech. He dressed like a western gentleman. His personality was strong, but his body appeared weak. His speech was not secular, and therefore it was difficult for common people to understand him. He preferred to step back from the crowd and converse with his own people. In the political arena of China, he was like a small boat tossed about in the stormy sea, easy to capsize. But in calm waters, he sailed lightly ahead, like one of the immortals!” (Shi Jianguo 石建國, 1999, p. 117).

That is a well-balanced critique. It explains why Lou Tseng-Tsiang in the early years of the Republic was not able “to put down rebellion and restore order.” It also indirectly explains why

Lou entered the monastery later in life. He took to the monastic life like a fish to water. It is also a beautiful description of what one cultured gentleman with ideals accomplished in one period of Sino-Western diplomatic relations.

(Reference works are listed at the end of the Chinese version of this article in this issue of Tripod.)