

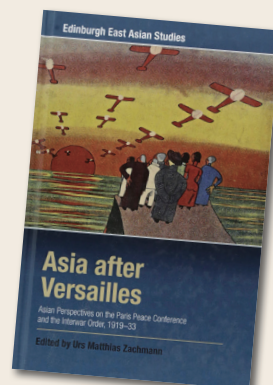
BOOK REVIEW

*Asia after Versailles:
Asian Perspectives on the Paris
Peace Conference and the Interwar
Order, 1919–1933*

Edited by Urs Matthias Zachmann

Edinburgh University Press, 2017
248 pages.

Reviewed by Andrew COBBING



At first glance, the premise of this volume seems almost counterintuitive. The project is to search beyond the confines of Eurocentric scholarship, yet Paris appears, ironically, at the centre of the Asian experience here. There is also a familiar European look to the temporal framework, with the interwar period sandwiched between two world wars. As Cemil Aydin points out in one chapter, however, the Muslim experience involved a sustained conflict from the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911 up until World War Two. In East Asia as well, armed conflict was underway before 1914, including Japan's wars against China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905), a contest even described as World War Zero.¹ Thirty years later, fighting in China again preceded the outbreak of World War Two, while the notion of “transwar Japan” also reflects a growing awareness of long-term developments bridging these years of conflict.²

Nevertheless, Urs Zachmann justifies the focus on Versailles by pointing out the intense global interest in the Paris Peace Conference during the early months of 1919. Its importance for people in Asia also becomes apparent when considering the long-term psychological impact of unfulfilled expectations across the continent. There was, briefly, widespread optimism, or as John Lobreglio puts it, “global intoxication with Wilsonian idealism” (p. 144), before the onset of disillusionment and, in turn, disgust at the perceived hypocrisy of Western powers for preserving an old imperial order in the new clothes of the League of Nations. Seen in this light, the legacy of Versailles appears more profound than revisionist scholars have suggested when trying to distance the peace conference from the origins of World War Two.

Zachmann, for example, claims that Margaret MacMillan, a prominent advocate of this approach, ignores her own evidence in her monograph *Paris 1919*. Similarly, Lobreglio questions MacMillan's conclusions by stressing the deep psychological scars the peace conference left on Buddhists in Japan. Disappointed by the failure of Japan's proposal for a racial equality clause, they also condemned the victorious powers as “mountain bandits” for the harsh terms imposed on Germany (p. 158). For this group, moreover, Wilson's notion

1 Steinberg 2005.

2 Gordon 2007.

of self-determination made awkward reading, prompting fears it might sow unrest among “our people” in Korea. In India, however, it was the popularity of Wilson’s idea that would lead to a sense of betrayal, as self-determination was applied only to new successor states in Europe, not to European colonies beyond. Maria Framke shows how some activists still supported recourse to the League of Nations, but there was soon a wider perception that Wilsonian ideals had failed. It was thus a source of discomfort rather than pride to be the only colony signed up to league membership, with financial contributions to match, for as one newspaper put it in 1927, “this venomous reptile is also nourished by India” (p. 131).

This collection is divided into two parts: the first three essays discuss transnational themes that accompanied the war and aftermath, such as pan-Muslim and pan-Asian initiatives; subsequent chapters address topics specific to India, Japan, and China. Mark Metzler calls the war a “storm of globalisation,” featuring unprecedented flows of people, among them 140,000 Chinese labourers and over a million Indian labourers and soldiers (p. 46). Other effects included a global influenza pandemic, national awakenings in a wave of mass protests during the Paris Peace Conference, and the onset of a boom-bust cycle in the world economy. As Metzler points out, it was Japan that set the pace in terms of experiencing deflation, then a newly coined term, as early as March 1920.

Conflicting loyalties also transcended borders, such as the Indian soldiers attached to both the Raj and the Caliphate. As Aydin explains, there was a postwar revival of Muslim regionalism, but this soon fractured with the emergence of new national entities, like the Saudi state in control of Mecca and Medina. Further east, attempts were made to convene All-Asia Congresses, in Nagasaki (1925) and Shanghai (1926). Torsten Weber notes that the legacy of Versailles was always present in Japanese Asianist rhetoric from below, ironically providing a framework later co-opted from above by the Japanese state in the 1930s. The differences among delegates at these conferences outweighed their commonalities, however, soon dissipating any sense of unity formed by collective outrage at the rejection of Japan’s racial equality proposal in Paris, and new legislation in 1924 curtailing Asian immigration to the United States.

In Japan, meanwhile, public confidence in the diplomatic process more broadly was undermined by the “lacklustre performance” of the Japanese delegation in Paris (p. 116). Naoko Shimazu argues that this negative reception at home was the price paid by the Japanese representatives for overlooking the new importance of staging in public diplomacy, a point illustrated with statesman-like images of Wilson and the Council of Four. A series of cartoons used in advertising also illustrates Hiroko Sakomoto’s survey of nationalist messages in interwar Shanghai.

Exploring the ambivalence present in these postwar years, Kevin Doak then traces the attempts of one Japanese intellectual, Tanaka Kōtarō, to reconcile the themes of internationalism and particularism inherited from Versailles. As he points out, Wilson’s vision of the state was hardly liberal, his vaunted self-determination always prone to fostering an unfettered ethnic nationalism that could undermine his own League of Nations. Similarly, Gotelind Müller stresses the role of anarchists in orchestrating the May Fourth Movement, questioning the established textbook narrative of a turning point for nationalism in China by noting that the protest was less spontaneous than often portrayed.

Overall, this is a lively, thought-provoking collection, uneven in parts, but offering good breadth of coverage. Perhaps it would also be useful to learn more about Southeast

Asia, which is featured only in passing here when Aydin mentions Indonesian Muslim elites who monitored developments in the new state of Turkey (p. 68). Each chapter is accompanied by an extensive bibliography, and there is a carefully produced index at the end. The volume certainly explores some of the contradictions that arose from Versailles, and their broader impact on Asia.

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