What Peace Meant to Japan
The Changeover at Paris in 1919

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A Clash of Diplomacies?

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the United States and Japan entered an intense diplomatic dispute over the disposition of ex-German possessions and interests in China and its colonial islands in the Pacific. Many previous works evaluate this dispute as one of the typical representations of, in a manner of speaking, a “Clash of Diplomacies” between the new and old systems in the wake of the first “total war” in human history – World War One.¹

Indeed, it is difficult to reduce this meeting at Paris to a mere conflict between two great powers who, despite contradictory national interests, were able to come to a compromise through give-and-take. Japan and the United States, and especially their political leaders, had come to hold widely differing opinions of international politics and envisaged peace from different viewpoints when the Great War ended. Most Japanese political leaders recognized the outbreak of the war as “one chance in a thousand” to obtain new territories in the western Pacific and, in particular, enhance its interests and “spheres of influence” in China. Spheres of influence were the geographical areas in China in which a particular great power virtually monopolized important economic interests and privileges. For example, the Yangtze Valley, with Shanghai at the mouth of the river, was a sphere of influence for the United Kingdom; Canton

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¹ For previous and related major works in English, see Selected Bibliography for Chapter 8 and note 23, 26. For the Japanese research, refer to endnotes of Tadashi Nakatani, “Wilson to Nippon: Pari Köwa-kaigi to Santō-mondai,” Dōshisha Hōgaku, 56(2) (July 2004) and the bibliography of Shūsuke Takahara, Wilson-Gaikō to Nippon: Risō to Genjitsu no Aida 1913–1921 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 2006).
for France; Shandong for Germany; South Manchuria for Japan; and North Manchuria for the Russian Empire. The United States never had a sphere of influence nor approved of them formally, continuing to give a tacit nod to them until the advent of Wilson’s New Diplomacy.²

In contrast, Woodrow Wilson, who had assumed the American presidency in 1913, repeatedly denounced the traditional features of international politics based on military alliances, secret agreements, colonial rules, unequal treatment of “backward” countries, and the “balance of power” as the war dragged on, giving such diplomatic ways the generic name of the “old diplomacy,” because he considered it the main cause of the war. “To end all wars,” the President believed in changing the entire sphere of international politics through innovation, although he hardly intended to progress radical changes.³ This is Wilson’s interpretation of “New Diplomacy,” and he left very little room for allowing the Japanese to enjoy the fruits of their wartime old diplomacy when the peace conference opened.

As a natural consequence, during the course of the peace negotiations, Japan persistently claimed ownership of ex-German possessions and interests in China and the Pacific, of which it had already seized control by force early in the war. The United States openly opposed this, trying hard to ensure that the disputed assets came under international control of the victorious great powers, led by the United States, for the sake of China and its own principles of New Diplomacy.

The outcome appears, however, to have largely satisfied Japan’s claims. The Treaty of Versailles clearly stated that all ex-German possessions and privileges in Shandong, which included the leased territory and the main railroad, should be transferred legally to Japan with no reservations, and that all ex-German islands north of the equator in the Pacific were to be put under a trusteeship rule of Japan, which would enable the Japanese to govern the islands as if they were their own territories.

² See note 14.