

General Joseph W. Stilwell and China
1918-1920
By Philip Chin

Joseph Stilwell had impressed many officers with his diligence, energy, and competence during World War I. He'd also offended a number of them. During the American offensive of 1918 he'd been getting hourly calls from Colonel Sherman Miles, head of 1st Corps intelligence, demanding to know if any special news had arisen. Stilwell, who had a decided lack of patience for busybodies, made up the story that a senior German officer, Colonel Otto Schmeercase, who was the leading expert in gas warfare, had been captured. Stilwell chose the German name for "cottage cheese" to make it clear that this was a joke to anyone that knew German. His excited superior hung up on Stilwell before he could say it was a joke and sent an officer to collect this important prisoner for interrogation. That officer was told that Colonel Schmeercase had just been sent to First Army headquarters five minutes before he'd arrived. The joke was continued with the mystery German officer always one step ahead of his hapless custodian. Stilwell noted gleefully in his diary, "He swallowed it. In office all night; only 3 calls after midnight."

The publicity grew and the capture was even reported by the Reuters news service as serious news. It was thus picked up by the newspapers in London, Paris, and back in the United States by the New York newspapers, who led the rest of the country in running stories. The whole division and army soon knew about the joke, which reflected poorly on Colonel Miles. Publicly humiliating a superior officer was not normally something to build a career on. Another officer who was less than impressed by this bit of humor was the Assistant Chief of Staff of the First Army, George C. Marshall, who would be destined to play a major role in Stilwell's future career. Months after the war ended, Marshall made a visit to Cochem, near Coblenz, where Stilwell had been assigned as part of the Army of Occupation, and castigated Stilwell over the Schmeercase incident. The famously humorless Marshall didn't appreciate Stilwell's humor, but had been very impressed with his abilities as an officer and leader.

Stilwell was initially excited to be in Germany and sounded like a tourist as he described visiting churches and historic sites across the Rhineland. He noted that the occupation force suffered an attack on one of their cars as they arrived, "Only demonstration was when one kid threw a rock at the machine." He was less than impressed though with the Germans he met, regularly using the denigrating French term, "boche," for them, which roughly translates into "cabbage head."

He developed a reputation for sporting interests. He climbed mountains and hiked across the countryside. He even found a four-oared cockle boat in Sehl and with others officers paddled it in the Rhine River. He noted in his diary that a bulletin that attracted attention back in Trier had said about him that, "Stilwell is all right in a battle, but when it's over, he will play."

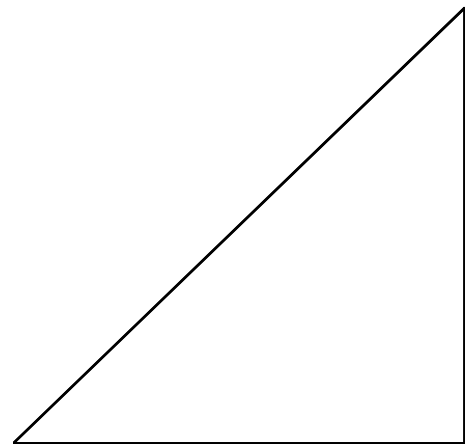
The routine of occupation though soon bored Stilwell. He was anxious to get home to his wife and kids and he fretted over announcements of promotions of officers less senior than him at West Point or with less time in the army. He fumed to his wife in January 1919, "Sitting, just sitting, and hoping our addle-pated boob of a president will soon weary of the applause, homage, and other mush that he is receiving so that peace negotiations can begin and the American Army can go home." Stilwell had earlier shown antipathy towards President Wilson in one of his earlier diary entries of 1918. A French town had rededicated a street in honor of President Woodrow Wilson on Bastille Day. Stilwell noted this in his dairy, "Dedication of President Wilson Street here." This was followed by a scatological epithet in capital letters. He showed no love for Democrats throughout his life.

Because Stilwell spoke fluent German he was tasked with dealing with the various towns and cities across the Rhineland in and around Coblenz. The American occupation forces acted as a kind of higher level police authority in their assigned area. He described shutting down a newspaper for a couple issues as punishment for a venomous editorial that had denounced the French. He also wrote gleefully, "Indoor sports, cussing out the Germans. Put the customs inspector through the 3rd degree. Abject sort of a cuss. Scared the pee out of him. Later put the tailor over the jumps for charging 10 marks for a 2 mark job. Next up was the baker for charging 10 marks for a pie. Gave him a jolt. The bad boys of the firemen's assn. are to be tried tomorrow (Told the judge what to do with them!!)"

He was assigned to escort the Prince of Wales around during his visit. The future King Edward VIII, surprisingly, didn't attract the usual venom that Stilwell attached to many other Englishmen as arrogant stuck-ups. He described the prince admiringly in his dairy as, "A quiet, unassuming, well brought up, well-mannered, likeable English lad. 24 yrs. old, with the King's legs & feet. Likes ragtime & being with a gang."

In May 1919, he was promoted to full colonel and a few days later received word that he'd been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, one of the highest medals created to recognize non-combat service for his intelligence and operational planning for the American offensive that had helped end the war. Soon after that, he made ready to return back to the United States. He used his final leave before embarkation to travel across France and Belgium, visiting such picturesque cities as Lourdes as well as the Louvre in Paris, but also some of the battlefields of France and Belgium; The Marne, Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres. He described destroyed towns, decomposed corpses still being dug up, and the melancholy sight of parents looking for the lost bodies of their sons. The sight of one such former battlefield was still so gruesome, nine months after fighting had ceased, that the officer accompanying him had to stop their car and vomit.

Stilwell suspected his next assignment would be in Panama or the Philippines as he came back to the United States from France. The United States Army in 1919 was undergoing a radical



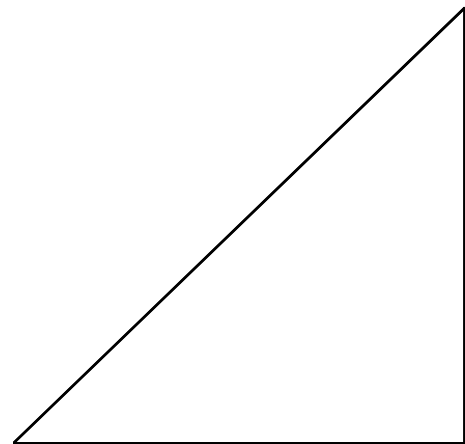
reduction in size as draftees and volunteers were discharged. Not wanting to leave his next assignment to chance, he consulted with a friend who'd been assigned to the army personnel department and said he wanted an assignment as far away as possible from the United States. His friend said it was funny but they'd just been talking about sending officers to learn the language in Japan or China. Stilwell wanted to go to Japan but was told all the spots had already been taken. He made the fateful decision to go to China. He noted laconically in his diary, "heard of language detail – Japan & China. – Chose China rather than detail in M.O.D. in Washington." He probably meant M.I.D., the Military Intelligence Division.

In the aftermath of World War I, the army realized that the United States needed to expand and make systemic their military language and attaché program to keep track of what was going on overseas before they got taken by surprise again as they had by America's entry into World War I. Previously, this kind of posting, at least in the more prestigious assignments, required a private income. Military pay was low and the post of military attaché in many countries were definitely part of the polo playing social set that Stilwell resented and often expressed his contempt for. Stilwell came from a wealthy family, but his father didn't provide him with any steady independent income as many other army officers had. These straightened circumstances often set Stilwell and his family apart from other American officers and their families in the 1920s and probably contributed greatly to Stilwell's resentment of the equestrian set that he often expressed in his letters and diaries.

For his language training, Stilwell was sent to UC Berkeley in California to take a year-long course to learn Mandarin along with another officer, Lloyd Horsfall. Within a month, Stilwell realized that learning Mandarin would be difficult. There wasn't anyone available to talk to in the language after school other than his fellow novice, Horsfall. He requested that they be sent to China to learn the language, but no action was taken by the army. Probably none of the Chinese in the large Chinatown community in nearby San Francisco could have helped. Almost all Chinese in the United States at the time had emigrated from Southern China and would have only spoken Cantonese or Taishan dialect. These are almost mutually unintelligible languages in spoken form from the Mandarin spoken in Beijing that Stilwell and Horsfall were studying even though the written characters are the same.

As part of the reduction in force the army was undergoing in 1919, Stilwell was demoted from colonel in the National Army, created for World War I service that combined draftees and Regular Army soldiers, back to his permanent rank of captain in the Regular Army. This was precisely the rank he'd earned in 1916 and held when the United States entered World War I in 1917. His diaries failed to mention his demotion but it must have been of some disappointment for him.

He spent his summer leave of 1920 in Carmel, California, where he bought several adjoining property parcels. He planned to build his retirement home there overlooking the Pacific. In July, he received the welcome news of his promotion to major in the Regular Army. In August,

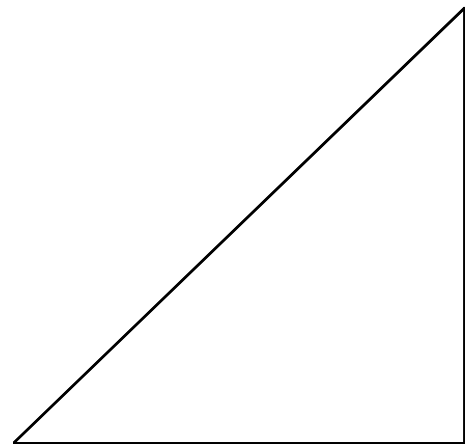


he and his family embarked for China via the Philippines with orders to go to Peking (Beijing) to join the American diplomatic delegation.

The situation that Stilwell found in China was entirely different than the one he'd faced in 1911 when comparative order still existed at the start of the Chinese Revolution and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Sun Yat-sen had been declared as the first provisional president of the new Republic of China when it was created in January 1912. It was soon realized though that he didn't have the military backing to maintain the new state. The military balance of power was held by Yuan Shikai, a former senior official in the Qing military. Yuan was a political opportunist. He'd originally belonged to the reformist faction behind the Guangxu Emperor who'd wanted to modernize China along Western lines. Yuan had been placed in charge of building the Han Chinese army forces chosen to undergo modernization.

In 1898, the Empress Dowager Cixi, led the conservatives in a coup that displaced the liberals and put the Emperor under house arrest. The emperor's supporters were hunted down and killed or forced to flee to Japan and the West. China reverted to ignoring the outside world and modernization with disastrous consequences as they were unable to resist further encroachments on Chinese territory by Western and Japanese colonialists. Yuan chose to support the conservatives instead of using his modernized force to defend the Emperor, thereby earning the hate of liberals across China. For this betrayal, he was richly rewarded by the Qing conservatives by being appointed Imperial Governor of Shangdong Province. He then supported the Western forces against the Boxers in 1900, thereby betraying Empress Dowager Cixi who supported the anti-Western revolutionaries. This won him the favor of the Westerners who extended loans that made his Beiyang Army the strongest of the Qing regime and hard for the Qing to displace. In 1908, he was finally dismissed from Qing service, ostensibly for health reasons. Yuan maintained close ties to his army, which probably prevented further action from being taken against him. In 1911, when the Chinese Revolution broke out, he held out against Qing requests for his help until he was appointed as Prime Minister. He then chose to betray the Qing again and refused to attack the revolutionaries, opening up negotiations with them instead.

Yuan then arranged the abdication of the last Qing Emperor Pu Yi and his own elevation to the office of provisional President of the Republic of China. Instead of having the national capital in Nanjing as the revolutionaries insisted he established the capital closer to his own military center in Beijing. In 1913, the leading Nationalist Party (KMT) candidate for president against Yuan was assassinated. Evidence connected the assassination with people around Yuan Shikai but it proved impossible to bring any charges against him because of his position. Through arrests and coercion, Yuan came to dominate the democratically elected Parliament. Sun Yat-sen was forced to flee to Japan to save himself. Yuan took out a hundred million dollars in loans from foreign banks, leading to serious questions of his financial management, especially since a lot of that money came from Japanese sources. Japan had been regarded as an enemy of China since the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 that had formalized the Japanese seizure of Korea from

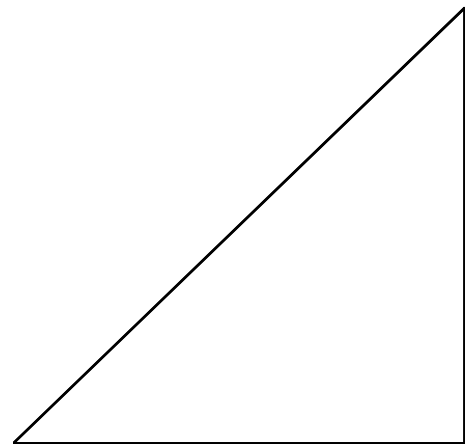


Chinese control and its reincarnation as a Japanese colony. Japan took Manchuria from Russia after the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. The Treaty of Portsmouth that ended that war, and guaranteed by the United States, organized the withdrawal of Japanese and Russian troops from Manchuria. But the treaty allowed Japan to retain control of Port Arthur (now Lüshunkou) and railroads in Manchuria. These territories had all been originally Chinese until they'd been seized by Russia. The Japanese control of Manchurian ports and railroads would provide an excuse and a springboard for increasing Japanese interference in China that would later ignite into the Sino-Japanese War that started in the 1930s.

Japan had declared its support for the Allies in order to take the German colony in China of Qingdao, and thereby control of Shangdong Province for Japan. As part of a secret deal to keep them on the Allied side in the war, the Westerners had agreed that Japan would be allowed to keep this territorial gain after the war. In 1915, Japan issued the infamous "Twenty One Demands" on China. China would have to agree to cede control of Inner Mongolia and Southern Manchuria to Japan. They must also recognize the Japanese claim to territory seized from German control. Most controversially, China would also allow Japanese control of Chinese finance and police and cede effective control of Fujian Province to the Japanese, opposite the Japanese colony of Formosa (now Taiwan.) Yuan Shikai refused the most outrageous provisions that would have effectively made China into a Japanese protectorate. But he agreed with the rest of the demands to avoid war with Japan and to continue receiving loans and support from Japan. This led to increasing nationalist agitation and protests against Yuan Shikai.

Yuan declared himself as Emperor of China in 1915, then proceeded to hold a formal coronation ceremony at the start of 1916. Far from garnering support though, he encountered vehement opposition not only from his KMT enemies but also from the Chinese public and even from his own military officers. Province after province declared their independence from his rule. Seeing that Yuan had little popular support, the Western powers and Japan refused to support him as he'd expected. Yuan was forced to back away from his declaration and reduce himself back to president of the republic, but he'd lost any respect for his authority. He died soon afterwards and China was left in the hands of competing factions and warlords that took the country into increasing chaos as they fought for control of their provinces.

In 1919, the Versailles Treaty ending World War I explicitly recognized Japanese control of the former German colony in China. China had also declared war on behalf of the Allies during World War I, sending millions of laborers to Europe to perform vital support roles behind the lines on behalf of their Western allies. They fully expected to regain their territory in Shangdong as a reward. They, along with many other people around the world, believed in Woodrow Wilson's idealistic vision of the aims of World War I contained in his Fourteen Points. One of the points had included an ambitious demand for national self-determination saying that, "A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial 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 population concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.”

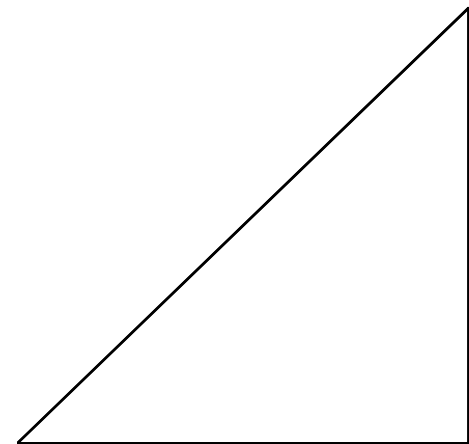
The problem was that Woodrow Wilson had no interest in the self-determination of non-white people. He was solely concerned with the self-determination of white people in Europe. A whole slew of new and independent countries were carved out in Eastern Europe in the Treaty of Versailles as a result of the collapse of the German, Austrian-Hungarian, and Russian Empires. The unresolved tensions and hatreds of Eastern Europe between new and old countries was one of the crucial factors that set the stage for the cruelties and atrocities of World War II in Europe.

The territories of the collapsed Ottoman Empire in the Middle East was divided among the victorious French and British, with bloody consequences that still reverberate in the 21st Century. The young Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam had gone to Versailles and tried to meet with Wilson to discuss Vietnamese independence from France. He was rebuffed without any American consideration. Vietnamese independence would have to wait until the defeat of the French colonialists and the creation of communist North Vietnam and American-supported South Vietnam. Unification of Vietnam would only follow the final humiliating withdrawal of American forces in 1973 and the even more humiliating collapse of South Vietnam in 1975. Of more immediate interest for China in 1919, was Wilson’s rebuff of the Japanese request that a statement about the equality of the races be included in the treaty. Woodrow Wilson was an open proponent of white supremacy and refused. The insulted Japanese delegation held out even harder to hold onto Shandong as a result.

Wilson felt that all the burning issues left by World War I would eventually be solved by his League of Nations, the first international body created to discuss and solve world issues. To win British and French support for the creation of the League of Nations he compromised (many would say abandoned) the principles laid out in his Fourteen Points. The eventual failure of the League of Nations would have significant implications for Japan, China, and for the world.

On May 4, 1919, the announcement of the provisions of the Versailles Treaty inspired a mass protest by university students and citizens in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The protests soon spread across China. Not only were the Japanese attacked but also the ineffective and compromised government in Beijing calling itself the Republic of China that had no strength or will to resist encroachments on Chinese territory. The increasingly nationalistic Chinese public demanded the end of extraterritoriality rights by the foreign powers in China. This provided immunity for the colonialists from Chinese laws and courts. If foreigners were even arrested at all for their crimes by their own colonial police forces, they were judged by their own foreign courts and laws setup in China. The protesters also wanted a withdrawal of Japan’s “Twenty One Demands” and the return of Shangdong Province to Chinese control.

Strikes and boycotts against Japanese goods and businesses began all across China. The



economic damage was immense. In the face of such big protests the authorities were forced to release arrested protesters and the Chinese negotiators at Versailles were directed not to sign the treaty in protest. It was the first taste of the power of the people in modern China and proved to be an inspiration for mass protest and modernization that continues to resonate today.

President Wilson's agreement to the grant of Chinese territory to Japan in the Versailles Treaty was seen as a crass betrayal of American ideals and especially the promises made in his Fourteen Points. The attraction that some Chinese intellectuals had expressed for introducing American-style democracy to China was nearly immediately extinguished. For examples of how a Chinese government should be formed the examples of the pariah nations anathema to the Western democracies became increasingly popular in China. Chinese political intellectuals looked for inspiration in the Soviet Union and later in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Stillwell and his family arrived in Beijing on September 21, 1920. He was miserably recovering from an attack of dengue fever and was decidedly not in a happy mood, writing in his diary, "No Q.M. or representative on boat or any other God damned son of a bitch of a thing in sight. Went ashore in a navy gasoline cutter & hustled trunks. Got yanked into Chinwangtao finally & hooked on to Peking train. No provision for transp. for families. The son of a bitch in Manila ran true to form on promises. Many interesting things to see but I was too god damned near dead to see them. I just did make Peking alive."

Barbara Tuchman, *Stillwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1971, ASIN B0006WI3CO

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