The Shandong Problem

Shandong (Shantung)
Located in the northeastern part of China
1898 Germany controlled Shandong
1915 China agreed to give Shandong to Japan
1919 Shandong was given to Japan
1922 Shandong returned to China

Pressure from Japan and Great Powers
The liberal-leaning Japanese negotiators at Versailles—Baron Makino Nobuaki promised Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary, that the Japanese would not protest the racial equality decision at the plenary session if their claims to Shandong were approved. While it is possible that the Japanese were bluffing, the Council of Four approved Japanese concessions in Shandong on April 30, 1919.

Anti-China Sentiment in the United States
Many Chinese immigrants came to the western part of the US in the second half of the 19th century. They were mostly men, working in the gold fields of California, but by the last decades of the century, they faced expulsion from cities such as Seattle and Denver. There were over 200 purges in California. In early 1917, xenophobia was at a new high, and a bill restricting immigration was passed over President Wilson’s veto.

Woodrow Wilson &

Wilson’s Goal in Paris & His Failed Promise
Wilson’s goal in Paris was to pass the League of Nations. Although Wilson wanted to support Wellington Koo to reclaim Shandong, Japan, and many other great powers disagreed with Wilson. As a result, Shandong was given to Japan. This led to the May Fourth movement in China. National self-determination and territorial integrity, those Wilsonian principles, seemed unrealistic.
Washington Naval Conference

Japan and China signed a bilateral agreement, the Shantung (Shandong) Treaty, which returned control of the province and its railroad to China.

Koo refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

Wellington Koo, One of the Republic of China’s representatives at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919

China Felt Betrayed

Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, said, “This time the war in Europe is over. Have we ever dreamed that humanity and peace won the victory...It’s just a fake signboard of a robber government. Let’s look at what was decided at the Paris Conference, which action had the slightest trace of humanity, justice, peace, and light? No decision was made without robber states sacrificing the freedom and rights of weak nations!”

Italy, France, Britain, and the United States nationalized the railways in Shandong, and Germany returned the province to Japan. Wellington Koo, one of the Republic of China’s representatives at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

The Chinese Communist Party Established in 1921

After Shandong was given to Japan, Chinese nationalists were angry. Some concluded that democracy itself was flawed and wrong for China and that the West would never be China’s friend. It was a time of radical change and intellectual ferment. Chinese were impressed that the new communist regime in Russia repudiated old unequal treaties with China. Many Chinese radicals moved towards Marxism.

References:
- Wellington Koo, Wikipedia.
- Liang Yulong, the May Fourth Movement, oil painting, 1976.
- "Shandong", Wikipedia.
- "Shandong Problem", Wikipedia.