

FEATURE

The Forgotten Chinese Army in WWI

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For centuries, the roots of Cheng Ling's family burrowed deep into the wheat and potato fields of Shandong province. Yet one family member ventured far away, farmer Bi Guide. The family has one memento of that journey, in fact the sole possession Cheng has to remind her of grandfather Bi. It is a bronze medal bearing the profile of a sombre King George V on one side, and St George on horseback, clutching a sword, the steed trampling the shield of the Central Powers. The sun of victory rises above. The sun of victory rises between two years: 1914, 1918.

The British medal of merit marks Bi's sacrifice in helping the British military to win the first world war.



The honour arrived after peace had been made, along with some money for his widow. All the family knew is that Bi had died, somewhere abroad. Cheng first discovered the disc when she visited her ancestral home in Laiwu in the

1970s. Then a teenager, she was curious about the number etched along the rim: 97237.

For decades, no one in her family knew what that number meant.

The first world war pitted the allied powers, including Britain, France and Russia, against the Central Powers, including Germany and the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian empires. Years into fighting, the male

populations were depleted. Soldiers were hunkered in trenches carved into the countryside of Europe. The allies needed help, and it came from China.

Chinese workers dug trenches. They repaired tanks in Normandy. They assembled shells for artillery. They transported munitions in Dannes. They unloaded supplies and war material in the port of Dunkirk. They ventured farther afield, too. Graves in Basra, in southern Iraq, contain remains of hundreds of Chinese workers who died carrying water for British troops in an offensive against the Ottoman Empire.

Bi joined hundreds of thousands of Chinese men, mostly from the countryside, to help Britain, France and the other members of the Entente win the war that toppled the empires of Austria-Hungary, the Ottomans and Germany.

The story of the largest and longest-serving non-European labour contingent in the war has largely been forgotten but is slowly being rediscovered a century later.

It is the story of farmers, intellectuals and young students joining French, British, American and Russian forces for money and even for education in Europe.

Many of the Chinese who survived returned home with savings, but without the recognition that came to the troops they served. Asian labourers who remained in Europe set up immigrant communities in districts of Paris, London and elsewhere.

Chinese workers helped rebuild war-torn Europe, says Hong Kong University historian Xu Guoqi. About 140,000 worked for American, British and French troops in France, his research shows. Up to half a million Chinese workers laboured on the eastern front for Tsarist Russia,

before the empire crumbled in the 1917 Communist revolution, according to the unpublished research of historian Li Zhixue of Jinan University.

Xu, who traced the journey of Chinese laborers from Shandong to France in his 2011 book *Strangers on the Western Front* published by Harvard University Press, says the mostly illiterate farmers played a crucial role not only in the war, but in shaping China's role in the new world order that emerged as empires fractured into nation-states worldwide.

“Chinese people directly helped save Western civilization when the Western powers were determined to kill each other with anything at their disposal,” says Xu.

On July 28, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on the Serbian kingdom. As mortar rounds rained down on Belgrade, nations worldwide rushed to declare their allegiance to one side or the other. The nearly four-year-old Chinese republic declared its neutrality.

In secret, Chinese President Yuan Shikai lobbied Britain to let China to enter the war, if the republic could retake the colony of Qingdao, in Shandong province, that had been seized by Germany in 1898. Yuan offered the British ambassador 50,000 Chinese troops. Britain rejected the offer. London had commercial investments, concessions in China, as well as the Hong Kong crown colony. The British war cabinet wanted China to have no leverage to rid itself of those vital economic interests, Xu says. British officials also feared that Chinese demands could inspire the rising Indian nationalists in Britain's largest colony to agitate for greater self-rule, Xu says.



Chinese Labour Corps recruits exercising in Weihaiwei prior to departure to Europe.

THE LABOURERS' LEGACY

China was struggling to control regional warlords. The fragile republic was in danger of disintegrating. China's leaders needed to look strong and the Great War created an opportunity.

If China managed to get into the war, if they got to sit at the negotiating table, it would cement its claim to power.

Europe said it didn't need Chinese soldiers. But they certainly needed workers, reasoned President Yuan's adviser, Liang Shiya.

In 1915, Liang again approached the Russian, the French and the British ambassadors. China would provide tens of thousands of unarmed labourers in return for a chance to sit at



The Men of the Chinese Labour Corps — they carried no rifles, but they still helped the Allies win the First World War. More than 140,000 Chinese workers, along with tens of thousands of migrants from Egypt, India and elsewhere dug trenches, built roads and hauled supplies all along the Western Front. Only recently, have their sacrifices come to light.

the post-war conference. The French and Russians agreed. The British at first rejected the offer, but reconsidered a year later.

Liang Shiyi, adviser to President Yuan Shikai, and later Prime Minister.

Trench warfare had wiped out hundreds of thousands of lives in Europe in the war's first two years. Both sides were desperate for manpower. It was an offer the West just could no longer refuse, says Xu.

To maintain the appearance of Chinese neutrality, Liang established companies in China to recruit workers. The largest was Huimin in Tianjin, established in May 1916, only a month before Yuan's death. The president's death that year, and the political turmoil that resulted, forced Liang to flee to Hong Kong.

French Lieutenant Colonel Georges Trupit set a goal of recruiting 50,000 Chinese workers. The initial group of 1,698 Chinese recruits left the port of Tianjin for Marseille in southern France, on August 24, 1916. By then, Britain had also decided to recruit Chinese labourers. "I would not even shrink from the word Chinese for the purpose of carrying out the war," said Winston Churchill, a member of parliament 24 years before he became prime minister. "These are not times when people ought in the least to be afraid of prejudices."

British recruitment began in November 1916 in its concession Weihaiwei in Shandong province, and later in Japanese-occupied Qingdao. Liang travelled to Japan to offer providing Chinese workers to the in exchange for capital and technology. The British ruled out recruiting in Hong Kong almost immediately after the colony's governor, Francis Henry May, argued against it in telegraphs to London. The local Chinese population was "impregnated with malaria" and not "amenable to discipline", he wrote to the secretary of the colonies in London.

Still, some Hong-kongers worked for French forces. The Huimin Company recruited 3,221 laborers and Limin, another company for

the French, hired another 2,000 men in Hong Kong.

Most of the workers came from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei. Many travelled along the railroad built by German colonizers, taking the recruits to the once-German port of Qingdao.

'HERDED LIKE CATTLE'

By trains and ships, the Chinese made their way to Europe. Hundreds, if not thousands, died along the way. Xu estimated at least 700 perished. Between 400 and 600 workers died on February 17, 1917, alone when a German submarine sank the French passenger ship *Athos* near Malta. Many more died crossing Russia, according to Li's research.

About 3,000 Chinese workers died in France, on their way to the Western front in Northern France, or on their return to China between 1916 and 1920, Xu estimates. Up to 30,000 Chinese died on the Russian front, estimates Jinan University scholar Li.

To avoid further German submarine attacks, Britain shipped more than 84,000 Chinese labourers through Canada in a campaign kept secret for years in the then British dominion.

"In view of the suspicion that certain Chinese are being used as a medium of communication by enemy agents", Canada banned news outlets from reporting on the train convoys that crossed the country on their way to France.

Six weeks after the *Athos* sank, the first contingent of Chinese workers arrived in Vancouver on board the *RMS Empress of Russia*. There, they boarded trains, journeying more than 6,000 kilometers to Montreal, St John or Halifax on Canada's Atlantic coast. "They were herded like so much cattle in cars, forbidden to leave the train and guarded like criminals," the *Halifax Herald* reported in 1920, when transports had ended and Canada's censors allowed coverage.

Once in France, 140,000 workers went to ports, mines, farms and munitions factories. They repaired roads, transported supplies and dug trenches near the front lines, risking German artillery shells.

“The village we arrived at had been knocked about a great deal by shell fire, while I saw one or two very exciting air fights,” wrote Chow Chen-fu, an interpreter for the 167th Chinese Labor Corps in France, in a letter to a Shanghai friend. The letter was printed by the *South China Morning Post* in 1918.

The Chinese republic kept a watchful eye on its workers abroad.

In 1917, China set up a Bureau of Overseas Chinese Workers to handle workers’ grievances. In one case envoy Li Jun protested that the French government was feeding horse meat to Chinese workers. After another intervention by Beijing, Britain granted compensation for blindness, deafness or “incurable insanity” incurred at work.

By 1919, the Post estimated that the workers had taken home £6 million in savings, roughly HK\$17.3 billion today. China’s ambassador to France, Hu Weide, expressed hope that workers equipped with much-needed technical knowledge would develop China’s economy when they returned home. “The best ones, who may be able to learn about the management of French factories can become excellent managers in China when they return,” he wrote at the time in a telegram preserved in Chinese government archives.



A display on stilts. Photo: National Library of Scotland

Beijing’s interest in these farmers was also political, says historian Xu.

THE CHOICE TO STAY

With the United States’ entry into the war in April 1917, Britain and France needed to transport American troops, not Chinese laborers. China

abandoned its neutrality and declared war on German and Austria-Hungary in August, eager to have a seat in postwar negotiations.

Russia quit the war as the Tsarist empire crumbled in the world’s first Communist revolution in October 1917, stranding hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers in the former empire. Ten days before Germany’s surrender on November 11, 1918, Britain sent back the first batch of 365 Chinese workers, beginning repatriations that ended in September 1920.

By the end of the war, the Chinese had already begun to form an established community in France. The republic had workers stay to help rebuild after the fighting. About 3,000 Chinese labourers remained in France and settled down, forming Chinatowns.

In his memoirs, Belgian priest Achiel van Walleghem noted how shopkeepers had started to learn Chinese to cater to these new customers. Video footage preserved at the Imperial War Museum in London shows Chinese workers in France performing traditional opera and dances on stilts.

The workers hosted young students, such as Zhou Enlai, the future Chinese premier, and Deng Xiaoping, the future architect of China’s economic reforms.

A NEW IDENTITY

French socialists influenced these future Communist Party leaders as much as the new Chinese identity that emerged among the emigrant workers. More than 1,500 young Chinese students worked in French factories and studied in Chinese schools living among the remaining war labourers. The wartime labourers were the perfect role models for the first generation of China's Communists, Xu says.

China gained its promised seat at Versailles, but remained an outsider. Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang's (Lou Tseng-Tsiang) delegation was given two seats, three fewer than Japan.

China's main demand, the return of Shandong, the birthplace of Confucius, was ignored. When the Western powers agreed to hand the former Western colony to Japan, street protests in Beijing forced minister Lu to leave the conference in disgrace, making China the only country that participated in the conference that did not sign the peace treaty.

The men who returned to China did not develop the Chinese economy with their newly acquired skills. They returned to a divided country, its economy in ruins, where savings from Europe were quickly spent.

Zhang Yan, a researcher at the University of Shandong, interviewed the descendants of 65 "returned workers" in 2009, finding that they had no significant impact on their communities upon coming home.

Dai Chuanxin, a wheat farmer who had left an impoverished Shandong province to work for French troops in Europe, returned to poverty



Chinese entertain British troops in France. Dragons ready for the Dragon fight. Photo: National Library of Scotland A dragon day celebrated by the Chinese workers.

in the same village. He swapped his war medal for food, says Dai Hongyu, his grandson in Linyi.

The grandson never met his grandfather, who died a year before his birth. But years ago, the village buzzed with details of a story about his ancestor.

The older Dai returned from France with a photograph of a tall young French woman wearing a large hat, Dai learned from villagers who had seen the photo. During the Cultural Revolution, the farmer feared it would be discovered, that he'd be labelled a traitor to Mao Zedong's mass movement. The former wartime worker destroyed his treasured souvenir, his only memento from his time in Europe.

The grandson says he doesn't know how to learn more about his grandfather's past.

But Cheng Ling, who held on to her grandfather's British wartime medal, had a clue: 97237.

While her daughter was studying in Britain a decade ago, she prodded the student to

see if the number etched on the medal could tell them more about what happened to Bi Cuide.

The number was his identity in the British Chinese Labor Corps. It's the number on his wartime employment records, his death compensation. And his grave.

Bi's family found his grave in Beaulencourt, a city in northeastern France near the Belgian border. He had stayed in France after the war to clear battlefields. Live artillery shells littered the fields in a town briefly occupied by Germany. One exploded on September 27, 1919, killing the farmer from Shandong, the family says.

In 2008, nearly 90 years after his death, Bi's descendants flew to France to visit his grave. The family poured Shandong liquor on the grass and left red dates from home.

"We were the first in our family to finally pay our respects to him," Cheng says. "We never forget our ancestors."