

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



British-born Chinese in the Armed Forces 1914-1918

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Introduction

The part played by ethnic Chinese men in support of the Allied Forces in World War 1 is a complex one. Many non-British ethnic Chinese were recruited in China and moved to Europe to serve in the British and French Labour Corps. Many ethnic Chinese men, British by accident of birth in a British territory, served in locally recruited British units both overseas and in Europe. But it seems that very few British born and domiciled Chinese enlisted in UK-based units – with the exception of the Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine – in World War 1.

My task is to try to identify these men and track down their Service Records.

Why me?

I was a career officer in the Army, obtained a Chinese Interpretership and Diploma in Classical Chinese at HKU, lived many years in the Far East, and worked with The Hong Kong Regiment, HKMSC and HK RNR.

After Army – VSO Programme Manager for China, S E Asia and Pacific Regions – travel in Chinese speaking areas

Moved to Australia – Volunteer at Australian War Memorial and Ph D course at Australian National University – no PhD but book 'Chinese Anzacs', covering Australian and NZ Chinese who served in WW1.

On return to UK, determination to research British-born Chinese who served in WW1 – a work in progress!

Discussion/Explanation of Research Areas

Explain Proposed Book Title – **not** Chinese nationals serving with British Forces such as CLC (tribute to Gregory James book), RE Inland Water Transport Service and ASC Transport Units – nor units raised in British Colonial and Dominion Territories – too many and their stories have been told elsewhere. Purely those males (both Chinese and part-Chinese) with British citizenship who had either been born in or become naturalised/domiciled in Britain or one of its overseas territories and settled in Britain between 1860 and 1900 (to cover the 17-41/50 conscription age eligibility criteria).

Finding a starting point

Given that the British Armed Services Personal Records of those who served in them in WW1 are very thin – war damage in WW2 bombing and interwar destruction of records to save space – and the fact that I had no ethnic Chinese family history records to start from (unlike Australia), I chose the **1911 Census of England and Wales** as my base line. There are 2 searchable transcriptions of these databases available on line but their quality and spelling varies! The Census Report shows 1319 foreigners of Chinese birth, including about 480 seamen, 20 children in British schools and 64 university students.

The 1911 Census. Some problems

No ethnic data collected until 1991 Census, purely country of birth. Nationality determined from place of birth, even for ethnic British who had been born in Chinese and whose parental citizenship had not been registered. Many children of missionaries, traders, teachers shown as foreigners. Under the Naturalisation Act of 1870 ethnic British wives who married foreign nationals lost their British citizenship on marriage and were required, with their children, as aliens and should have been shown in the Census as Chinese – but as often as not, the census enumerators were reluctant to classify an obviously ethnic British woman and her children as Chinese. Official Census Report showed Census enumerators also had no knowledge of Chinese family names – frequent misspelling and use of a given name rather than family name. Also very lax control over crew list accuracy in merchant ships.

Finding family names

In early 20th C the Chinese Government published lists of the 100 most common family names - a contemporary sort of 'Lao bai xing'. The lists included the Anglicisation of the Chinese family names from most of common Chinese dialects. I used such a list to search the databases.

Results

The Census report shows that in 1911 there were about 750 British Chinese males resident in UK who would have been eligible for enlistment/conscription in WW1 plus the 84 Chinese nationals who in 1911 were serving in RN overseas. Have details and address of each British based family plus a list of the officially licensed Mercantile Marine seamen's boarding houses. These nominal rolls are now awaiting my further scrutiny.

Explain grey areas in extrapolating these figures forward to 1914-1918 . RN Chinese crews of RN requisitioned Mercantile Marine ships were offered the opportunity to remain on their ships now under RN command. Became members of RNR and Mercantile Marine Reserves. More checking needed.

Where now? A lot of tidying up to do. Also checks with local history societies

Checking of family names against British Medal Records. Checking Crew Lists to see how many eligible Chinese seamen on British merchant ships took up RN offer of a transfer to RNR if their ship was requisitioned for war service. They then stayed with the ship under RN control and would have received the British War Medal and Mercantile Marine Medal on discharge (or posthumously).

Casualties

The HK First World War Memorial Register contains details of 945 Chinese nationals who served (and died) in British ships and land units during the First World War, and have no known grave. These can be cross-checked with the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission records. More checking needed.

Summary – fascinating subject with a lot of detective work still to do

Very detailed picture emerging of life of British Chinese families during WW1, especially in the major ports and London. I look forward to hearing your views and comments.