

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



The Making of De-Politicized Professionals: the Hong Kong Chinese Servicemen in the British Military, 1891-1997

Dr Kwong Chi Man, Assistant Professor of History Department, Hong Kong Baptist University

This paper attempts to trace the history of the Hong Kong Chinese Servicemen in the British Military from the late Victorian period to the end of the colonial rule, with special attention paid to the process of the emergence of this group of soldiers being trained and portrayed as professional soldiers who were aloof from the political changes around them in both China and Hong Kong. The earliest Chinese unit of the British Army emerged during the Second Opium War (1856-1860). At that time, the British forces established the Canton Coolie Corps at Hong Kong and recruited around 4,000 men from Hong Kong and the nearby area to be trained as porters of the British Expedition Army that operated in Central and North China. As their performance was much appreciated by some senior officers of the Expedition including General Garnet Wolseley, the British forces in Hong Kong proposed to raise a local unit as part of the garrison during the 1870s. However, the idea was rejected by Duke of Cambridge, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Herbert Giles, who was apprehensive of the loyalty of the soldiers during an Anglo-Chinese conflict. It was not until 1891 the British Army finally started to recruit Chinese as regular troops, when the British recruited locals as auxiliary troops. These Chinese sappers were present during the Diamond Jubilee of the Queen Victoria in 1897, and some even participated in the "Six Days War" in 1899 in the New Territories and the Boxer War of 1900. During the First World War, the company remained part of the garrison.

During the 1930s, more Hong Kong Chinese were recruited into service as the British Army deemed that it was more cost-effective to employ locals than stationing more British or Indian battalions. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the British decided to further improve the defence of Hong Kong. As the performance of the Chinese sappers won the praise of the commander of the British forces in Hong Kong, other branches also started to recruit Chinese servicemen. In 1937, the 22nd Field Company of the Royal Engineers started to recruit more Chinese sappers (known as waa-gung-cing-bing), and the Royal Artillery in Hong Kong also recruited Chinese gunners (known as waa-pau-bing). The HKVDC also increased the number of Chinese and Eurasians in the 3rd and 7th Companies as well as its artillery contingent. Students of the Hong Kong University also joined the Field Ambulance unit of the HKVDC led by Lindsay Ride, who taught at the University. With the agreement of the War Office, the first regular Chinese infantry unit, the Hong Kong Chinese Regiment, was formed in September 1941. Thus, by the outbreak of the Pacific War, there were already close to 1,000 Hong Kong Chinese soldiers and seamen serving or undergoing training in the Hong Kong garrison.

During the Battle of Hong Kong in 1941, these Chinese servicemen served in the British forces in different capacities alongside their British, Indian, and Canadian colleagues. Some were killed in the battle but most of them survived. When Hong Kong surrendered, many of these Chinese servicemen escaped capture and later reported to the British Army Aid Group at mainland China. Many of these soldiers continued to contribute to the Allied war effort by serving as intelligence agents and special forces operatives against the Japanese in China and Burma. A group of these soldiers was organized into the Hong Kong Volunteer Company and joined the fighting in Burma as part of Brigadier Orde Wingate's Chindits. After the Second World War, Hong Kong Chinese servicemen also served as part of the Hong Kong garrison until 1997. Although Hong Kong was relatively peaceful during this period, the Cold War and the influence of the Chinese Nationalist and Communist parties had much impact on the experience of these Hong Kong Chinese soldiers. On the other hand, the British also introduced measures to ensure the soldiers would not be affected by the political propaganda of the Chinese political parties. Soldiering in Hong Kong was also being increasingly portrayed as a profession that was entirely apolitical, with a heavy emphasis on vocational training and the transferability of skills learned from the military.

The political context and prevailing Chinese nationalism in the Hong Kong society ultimately shaped the identity of these soldiers as apolitical-professionals rather than the nucleus of a potential "national soldiers" of Hong Kong. Thus, the political and social aspirations of these soldiers were limited to seeking greater rewards from the colonial government after their service rather than striving for recognition or political identity.