

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



The Forgotten Chinese Labourers of the First World War

Mark O'Neill, Author of *The Chinese Labour Corps: The Forgotten Chinese Labourers of the First World War*

First, let me say a big thank you to the organisers for their kind invitation. In this room are leading specialists in this field. I am honoured to be among them. I would like to talk to you about the Chinese participants in this story. When WWI broke out, the young Republic of China, just three years old, was determined to be neutral. It had soldiers of the combatant nations stationed on his territory and had no authority over them. The last thing it wanted was for the war to spill over into China, with German forces in Jinan and Qingdao attacking British ones in Weihaiwei. It was still paying the crippling Boxer indemnity of 450 million taels of silver to eight countries, a debt that would run for a further 26 years. But Liang Shi-yi, a senior adviser to President Yuan Shi-kai, saw the war as an opportunity to win back control of some of the 27 foreign concessions if China backed the winning side. He was convinced that the Franco-British-Russian alliance would win. He was the one who offered Chinese soldiers and then workers to the French and British sides. After initial reluctance, both countries accepted the offer in 1916.

Chinese intellectuals in France saw a golden opportunity in the workers. Among them was Li Shizeng who had lived in France since 1902 and regarded it as a model republic from which his own country should learn. He wanted the workers to use their time in France to learn new skills and social customs and form the nucleus of an industrial working class when they went home. He set up the Work Study Movement (WSM) for this purpose; it ran evening classes for the workers and published a magazine in vernacular Chinese that was easy to read. By 1918, its circulation reached 30,000; for the workers, it was the main source of information about the war and the outside. It campaigned against spitting, talking loudly and gambling. For Li, the curse of Chinese was smoking, gambling and drinking. He and his colleagues did much to improve the quality of life for the workers employed by the French army and government.

For those on the British side, this support was provided by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). By the end of 1918, it had set up more than 80 centre, with 1,600 volunteers. Among them was my grandfather, an Irish Presbyterian missionary from Liaoning who spent two years with the workers, from 1917-1919. It is from his writings that I first learnt of the CLC. For his services to the workers, he received a medal from the Beiyang government, as did another Presbyterian missionary. Several years ago, I bought the medal at an auction in the Holiday Inn Golden Mile Hotel in Kowloon for US\$5,000, plus 12% commission, and donated it to his church in Belfast. He was based at a hospital in Noyelles-sur-Mer in the Somme department of France dedicated to the Chinese; with 1,500 beds, it was the largest Chinese hospital in the world, with Mandarin-speaking doctors and nurses. He tended to the sick and wounded, conducted funerals for the dead, wrote letters for those who were illiterate and arranged entertainments for them on their days off. He found them more open to his Christian message because of this strange and difficult situation they found themselves in. I like to think that he and his fellow volunteers provided a love and warmth to the men thousands of li away from their homes and their families, close to this terrible war.

Another Chinese we must mention here is James Yan (Yan Yang-chu), a graduate of Yale University, whose life was completely changed by his encounter the workers. "I found for the first time in my ignorant intellectual life the value of the common people of my own country," he said. "What they lacked was education." He organised literacy classes for the workers that were extremely popular and wrote a primer with 1,000 basic characters; he published a weekly magazine that only used those characters. After the war, Yan declined a career in diplomacy, business or the government and set up the National Association for Mass Education in China in 1923. It spread to villages in every province of the country. He devoted the rest of his life to spreading literacy in China, the Philippines and other countries. Lin Yu-tang, one of the great Chinese intellectuals of the 20th century, cut short his studies at Harvard to volunteer with the workers. "I found that these men were just as good as I," said Yen. "The only difference between us was that I had had advantages and they had not."

Thanks to the efforts of these intellectuals, thousands of the workers learnt to read and write and acquire knowledge they would never have gained if they had stayed at home. Meeting and living with them profoundly marked the volunteers, Chinese and non-Chinese. This we know because they have written about it. What I cannot tell you is the impact on the workers themselves. For this, I am waiting eagerly for the presentations of Professor Xu and Doctor Zhang Yan tomorrow. Let me conclude with a letter from Yuan Chun, one of the workers, to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany: "the war in Europe is something that does not concern the Chinese people. We Chinese came to Europe, hoping to make a paltry living ... a virtuous ruler's name will be remembered for 10,000 generations. So why not halt your troops and select an auspicious location to build a palace of peace?" Does he not show more wisdom than the leaders of the countries of Europe who master-minded the most hideous war in human history?