

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage Symposium & Conference



The “Unbearable Lightness” of the CLC Diaspora

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Historians tend to shy away from discussing how individuals became involved in the course of history, and conflicts such as the First World War are most often taught by listing the events and battles instead of addressing how people personally experienced this conflict.

The Forgotten Heroes 14-19 Foundation hopes by unveiling the personal stories of hundreds of thousand Soldiers and Labors, to foster a dialogue that is truly transnational, multicultural. Indeed, we aspire to find a common humanity, based on universal values, between peoples of different nations, religions, languages and identities.

As various forms of conflict, war and terrorism specifically, have become more prominent topics in recent years, it is important that we explore how people viewed and experienced events like the First World War. Understanding the human aspect of conflicts is important because it not only gives one an understanding of the real consequences of certain actions; it also helps us to better understand why things are the way they are.

The numerous meetings we've had with other organizations proves that World War 1 commemoration is not about military victory but about creating bridges of peace, raising awareness of our shared history and teaching the importance of mutual respect. It is therefore of utmost importance to include the global Chinese Labor corps contribution in the narratives of the First World War, and we must build unity on the basis of our diversity of languages, cultures and beliefs, and raise our voices against everything that stands in the way of such unity.

Academics already have a good idea about the Chinese labors corps structure at the Western Front, how they were recruited, how much they earned and where some of them are buried in Flanders Fields.

However, while we were traveling around the globe descending in basements full of moisture and crawling in spooky attics in search of the legacy of the millions of Muslims who contributed in the First World War, again and again we were confronted with personal documents, artifacts and testimonies of the lost legion of the Chinese Labor Corps. They did not only left a trail of evidence at the places where they had stayed or passed through (Russia, Singapore, Malta, Egypt, South Africa, Mesopotamia, Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Canada) but also the people they had been in contact with, and who dispersed over the globe took crucial evidence of their existence with them.

So did we not only meet some of their grandchildren in Canada and USA but did we had a look at precious objects from Chinese labor Corps members that were given to soldiers, civilians and nurses as payment or gift. It opened an amazing world of how these hundreds of thousands individuals experienced the First World War, but to none available.

Performing research to the Chinese labor corps on a regional or national level is therefore as reading Wikipedia in one language, meaning we will never have a correct view on the total Chinese contribution and the personal stories of these men as long as no consolidated international initiatives are taken to unveil the story of these men and trace their diaspora.

China is a world power, and deserves the recognition they and these men are due after 100 years. With a project as this and a team of “British Lions and Chinese Dragons”, it will certainly happen... one day.