

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



“A Man behind the Man behind the Gun”: The British Forces’ Chinese Labour Recruitment during the First World War

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The huge losses on the Somme in the summer of 1916 – with 57,500 casualties, including over 19,000 men killed, on 1st July alone – as well as the rupture of road and rail links, forced the authorities into a reluctant recognition that the available resources were insufficient to make good the increasing human and material losses. Thus the services were sought of foreign and – as one author put it – “even” Chinese labour.

However, the use of civilian labour from overseas constituted a dilemma for the government, whose alternatives were to take manpower into Britain, thereby releasing home workers for combat; or to take men into the war theatres themselves. Against the former, there was pressure from trade unions, which feared that wartime importation would not be let up once peace came, and home livelihoods would be at stake. Against the other, was the argument that the labour could only be being used for war purposes: this was not a problem where workers from the British Empire were concerned, but China’s neutrality was a barrier to hiring its citizens.

Nevertheless, in response to the military commanders’ urgent demand for workers, the War Office decided to recruit volunteer non-combatant Chinese labourers for deployment in continental Europe, and took up responsibility for the scheme, with a structure of battalions offered by British personnel. This military organisation was an imposition by the French, who insisted that Chinese labourers employed on their soil should be subject to military law. In this way, the French obliged the British to shoulder the liability for the discipline of their Chinese personnel.

The Chinese authorities were also anxious that the labourers be readily identified – hence uniforms – and not deployed in dangerous proximity to the ring line; they also wanted assurances concerning the pay rates and family allowances, and procedures for tracing labourers’ relatives.

By October 1916, arrangements were in hand for sending Shandong labourers to Europe. It was proposed to set up a transit camp in Hong Kong, where labourers would be brought from British-administered Weihaiwei (now Weihai) by ship, and thence embarked on ocean-going steamers. The decision to take labourers from northern China was based on practicalities: as the governor of Hong Kong, Sir Francis May, wrote, “(1) They are inured to cold. (2) They eat farinaceous food. (3) They are more amenable to discipline. (4) They are not impregnated with malaria.”

The recruitment followed three years’ drought and low harvests, which had led to penury and starvation in the northern provinces. And, despite strenuous obstruction from German spies in China, the project took off because the wages, with board and lodging, supplemented by monthly allowances to the recruits’ families, were too tempting to resist.

The units would be led by British or imperial military officers. China’s neutrality prohibited it under international law from assigning its own officers. After China’s entry into the war in August 1917, command could have been transferred, but this would have entailed an obligation to bear the operational expenses of the organisation, which China’s financial position did not permit it to take on, and the country therefore appointed consular supervisors to inspect the labourers’ camps in Europe and verify that contracts were being adhered to.

For the recruitment, advertisements were distributed around Shandong, and a call went out via the Christian mission stations. As Weihaiwei had no rail link, it was suggested that a recruiting centre be opened in Qingdao, a port with a good rail connection, but under Japanese administration. Tokyo was therefore approached for consent to send recruits by rail to Qingdao, thence to Weihaiwei by coastal steamer. The Japanese replied, promising “every facility”.

In early 1917 the first liner, with over a thousand labourers in the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC), set sail for Europe, via Colombo, and the Cape of Good Hope, and within a few months British had deployed some fifty thousand Chinese labourers on the Western Front.

This presentation will detail some of the practicalities, and successes and failures, of the scheme, in which, in the words of Arabella Rodman in *Through opening doors* (1947), “China saw to it that there was a man behind the man behind the gun”.

No.	Name	Native Place	Investigation time	Remarks
24074	史寶善 Shih Paoshan	Zichuan 淄川, Shandong	August 3, 2009	Both he and his brother Shi Baoyu enrolled in the Chinese Labor Corps, aged 20 and 18 years respectively. Before he went to Europe, his family has already fixed him up with a girl. But he was not satisfied and fell in love with another girl, who lived in oil mill. Shi Baoshan's job in Europe was to load and unload clay (白土). Unfortunately, he was killed in a collapse accident. Later his brother learnt this bad news and hoped to bring his bones home. His brother took his bones out, then covered them with yellow paper, and cremated them with kerosene. Finally, his brother brought back the ashes with the yellow paper box. Coincidentally, the girl he loved got sick and died at that time. So the two families buried them together. Died 10 May 1918. Headstone in Noyelles-sur-Mer Chinese Cemetery, France.
97237	畢粹德 Pi Tsui Te	Laiwu 萊蕪, Shandong	August 13, 2009	His name had been listed in the genealogy and had married with six children. His youngest son was only eight months old when he signed up with the CLC. His wife did not agree to his going abroad. But he insisted on going, perhaps because he could play some Kung Fu. Then his wife said, if you want to go, don't come back. At that time eleven people in the village went to Europe, and only he did not come back. So the family blamed his wife for saying that sentence. One of those who came back said that he had been killed by shells during a meal (or cooking). His wife did not remarry. Died 17 September 1919. Buried in Beaulencourt British Cemetery, France.
28995	欒樹德 Lan Shu Te	Jiaoxian 膠縣, Shandong	December 31, 2009	He ran away from home because of dissatisfaction with his brothers, and the family did not know his whereabouts. He had not got married when he left home. Only after receiving a medal did his family knew he had gone to Europe. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29073	李希順 Li His Shun	Pingdu 平度, Shandong	January 1, 2010	The villagers only heard that a person surnamed is Li went to Europe, and before he left China, he had been a wanderer. Later his family learnt that he had died in the Europe. Died 14 or 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29135	王章 Wang Chang	Weixian 濰縣, Shandong	January 2, 2010	He lived in a poor family. It was a good choice to sign up the CLC, where he could not only be fed well, but also make some money. It is said that he was killed in an air raid because he refused to hide in the trenches. He has no descendants. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29147	劉萬起 Liu Wan Chi	Chanyi 昌邑, Shandong	January 2, 2010	He was the second of four siblings and unmarried. He was "hired" to go abroad with a few other locals. After going to Europe, someone brought money to his family from Fangzi 坊子 where was a recruitment station. And later when the wages were suspended, the family speculated that he must have died abroad. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
28996	郭玉喜 Kuo Yu Hsi	Anqiu 安丘, Shandong	January 3, 2010	He was unmarried and had a younger brother Guo Fengxi 郭豐喜 at that time. The village also had two other people—Hao Lanhua 郝蘭華 and Yang Chongyu 楊崇玉—being recruited. Even since he left his hometown, there was no more news of him. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29119	趙秉文 Chao Ping Wen	Changle 昌樂, Shandong	January 4, 2010	There is not his name in the genealogy and we did not find an insider. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29992	王長和 Wang Chang Ho	Lingxian 陵縣, Shandong	January 14, 2010	There is indeed a person surname is Wang, who ran away from home. But we are not sure whether it is Wang Changhe. In addition, the village had a few people signing up with the CLC, such as Yan Fuming who has taught children in the village to speak English after his return. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.

29038	劉秉奎 Liu Ping Kuei	Linqing 臨清, Shandong	January 15, 2010	There is not his name in the genealogy and we did not find an insider. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29501	邵鎮江 Sha Chen Chiang	Yutai 魚台, Shandong	January 16, 2010	We have not found an insider yet. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
28957	馬孝林 Ma Hsiao Lin	Caoxian 曹縣, Shandong	January 16, 2010	We did not find any clue in the village Sunzhuang 孫莊 which was recorded in the archive. However, we found a "Ma Ailin(outside)" 馬愛林(外出) in the genealogy of the Ma clan in the neighboring village of Ma Zhuang. It is said that Ma lived with his maternal grandfather who was from Sunzhuang. It was probably around the period of WW1 when he was away. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29149	欒成僧 Luan Cheng Tseng	Changqing 長清, Shandong	February 1, 2010	We did not find the village Luan Jianzhuang 欒家莊. A village similar to its pronunciation is Ruan Jiazhuang 阮家莊. But no villagers know of Luan Chengseng. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29009	李喜茂 Li Chi Mao	Guangrao 廣饒, Shandong	February 5, 2010	The village has an unmarried person named "Li Jimao" 李吉茂 going to the Europe and never returning home. There is another one called Cai Xintian who also went to Europe. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
29029	王永鈞 Wang Yung Chun	Guangrao 廣饒, Shandong	February 5, 2010	There is not his name in the genealogy and we did not find an insider. Died 15 November 1917 in an air raid. Buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, France.
2964	考文之 Kao Wen Chih	Weixian 濰縣, Shandong	October 5, 2010	He had just been married for months, without a child. A total of more than 40 people were recruited and only he died abroad. It is said that he died of lovesickness. His wife Kao Liushi did not remarry and died at the age of 87 in 1988. Died 24 March 1918 in N° 30 General Hospital, Calais, France. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery.
5856	丁和玉 Ting Ho Yu	Rongcheng 榮成, Shandong	June 4, 2011	It's said that he was recruited by the Eight-Nation Alliance and never returned. Died 2 April 1918 in N° 30 General Hospital, Calais, France. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery.
96340	楊逢義 Yang Feng I	Linyi 臨邑, Shandong	September 25, 2011	He had got married, with a seven or eight-year-old son at that time. His wife died in the thirties after remaining a widow for decades. Died 17 or 18 February 1919. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery, France.
2352	崔連昭 Tsui Lien Chao	Weixian 濰縣, Shandong	November 1, 2012	He ranked the oldest of three brothers. He went to Europe in his thirties and had not married. All the villagers in his village were sharecroppers. Among them, 7 people were recruited. It is said that he was killed by a bomb. Later the others brought back a wooden memorial tablet for his family. Died 21 March 1918. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery, France.
1461	許君德 Hsu Chun Te	Changshan 長山, Shandong	December 27, 2013	His name Xu Junde 許俊德 had been listed in the genealogy. Died 21 March 1918. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery, France.
34857	趙明珍 Chao Ming Chin	Tianjin 天津	March 22, 2014	He was a Muslim Chinese from a Muslim village. 36 people in this village were recruited by British and French. He had not married when he left. It is said that he was killed in an air raid because they were spotted by enemy planes when someone struck a light for a smoke. Later his family received a wooden tablet (maybe a memorial tablet). Died 21 March 1918. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery, France.
76583	蕭銘勳 Hsiao Ming Hsün	Jinghai 靜海, Tianjin	March 23, 2014	Xiao's family has already moved away from this village and we did not find other insider. Died 1 December 1919 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, aboard the hospital ship <i>Dongola</i>. Buried at sea.
35279	胡殿元 Hu Tien Yuan	Jinghai 靜海, Tianjin	March 23, 2014	There is not his name in the genealogy and we did not find an insider. Died 21 March 1918. Buried in Les Baraques Military Cemetery, France.

41412	王金祿 Wang Chin Lu	Jinghai 靜海, Tianjin	March 23, 2014	A villager whose surname is Wang signed up with the CLC and never returned. His nickname was Big Willow 大柳樹 and has no descendants. Died 8 April 1919 aboard the hospital ship <i>Neuralia</i>. Buried at sea.
99636	王敬連 Wang Ching Lien	Shanxia 單縣, Shandong	April 10, 2014	He was the fourth of four brothers. He went abroad by ship with another villager Chu Deikang 朱德剛. Zhu once said Wang Jianlian suffered from indigestion and disappeared later. Died 15 February 1920. Buried in Metchosin (William Head Correctional Institute) Cemetery, Canada.
22086	龐洪清 P'ang Hung Ch'ing	Yucheng 禹城, Shandong	April 13, 2014	His name had been listed in the genealogy and had married with two sons. It is said that he was recruited as a soldier by the Eight-Nation Alliance and died in the Pacific. His wife did not remarry. The village had another laborer Pang Zhenglong 龐正龍. Died 27 or 29 March 1919, aboard the hospital ship <i>Neuralia</i>. Buried at sea.

Note: The dates of death and cemetery details were added by Prof Gregory James.