

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



The Journey of Chinese Workers in the Great War as Transnational History

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My talk today is about the journey of 140,000 Chinese, most of them illiterate peasants, to Europe during the First World War and why we should treat the journey as an important chapter of the transnational history. These laborers were recruited by the governments of France and Britain to help both countries in their Great War against the Germans; later when the United States joined the war, the Americans took advantage of their labor as well. South Africans, Indians, Vietnamese, and many other laborers went to France during the war to support the British and French. Many went because they came from colonial countries and had to answer the call from their imperial masters. But China, no country's colony, sent by far the largest number of men, and its laborers worked in Europe the longest. The Chinese came voluntarily and their contributions were the most significant. This is the story of their personal experiences of the war, of Europe, of working, and of Western people. In this talk, I will examine how their race and class impacted not just their treatment by various Westerners, but by their own country and its elites. More importantly I want to highlight their unrecognized contributions to the war, and also to China's historic search for a new national identity, and their place in the first large-scale encounter of civilizations East and West in the early twentieth century.

By focusing on this group of Chinese who became directly involved with the Great War, I address questions such as why China wanted to send laborers; what happened to them when they arrived in Europe; and most importantly, what role they played in China's struggles to gain a fair foothold in the emerging international order. Even though they were frequently derided by Westerners as coolies, Chinks, or Chinamen, I will argue that these Chinese not only made a crucial contribution to the Allied war effort, they also figured importantly as messengers between Chinese and Western civilizations. After all, the Great War was allegedly about civilizations.

In this talk, I will further discuss just how the laborers contributed to the Allied victory and how they triggered new ways of thinking about China and the world among Chinese elites. A key theme in modern Chinese history is China's search for a new national identity and its place in the world community. Few realize the important role the laborers played in that project. I will demonstrate that although most of them were illiterate farmers with no clear ideas about China or the world when they were selected to go to Europe, the Chinese laborers had a part in developing that new national identity and would play an important role in internationalizing society at home. As a result of their personal experience in Europe and daily work with Americans, British, French, and fellow laborers from other countries, the Chinese developed a unique perception of China and world affairs. Through their work with the Chinese laborers in Europe as YMCA secretaries or educators, future Chinese leaders—Yan Yangchu (James Yen), Jiang Tingfu, Lin Yutang, Cai Yuanpei, and Wang Jingwei, among many others—became convinced that China could one day emerge a powerful nation. This book will examine how the experience of working with the laborers gave the Chinese elites a new appreciation of the Chinese working class as well as new ideas about fixing China's problems. Their perceptions of China's future changed dramatically. This book will further explore what the laborers learned from their personal experiences and from their interactions with YMCA secretaries and other Chinese elites, and how the laborers eventually developed a new understanding and appreciation of China and its position in the world. Besides offering an analysis of the laborers' physical journey—an interesting topic itself—in this talk, I will try to chart China's journey to becoming a key player in a new international political system.

The broadly defined World War I years coincided with a period of tremendous change within China as the old Confucian civilization began to collapse and China struggled to become a nation and sought to assume equal relations with the West. With the Great War, China embarked on a new journey, namely that of internationalization and national renewal. Their journey actually stands as a success story, a success at least in the sense of their role in China's active participation in national and world affairs and China's powerful demand in the post-war world arena for equal treatment of China and its people. Internationalization and nationalism were the two sides of the same coin in early twentieth-century China. By studying the Chinese laborers in Europe and their stories, we not only recover a neglected chapter in Chinese history but we also improve our understanding of how this seemingly obscure episode affected both Chinese and Western societies as well as the modern world order.