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Echoes of the Great War: A Look at the Lives of the Chinese Labourers Who Returned from the European Front

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Abstract

The First World War marked a transformative period in the national histories of numerous Asian countries. For China, the war aligned with profound societal changes that contributed significantly to the nation's trajectory toward self-determination. China's most substantial contribution to the Allied war effort came in the form of over 300,000 labourers dispatched to Europe, where they supported military operations behind the front lines in France and Russia. These labourers undertook a range of critical tasks, including the construction of military fortifications, the repair of roads and railways, the production of munitions, and battlefield clearing. While some returned to China following the Armistice, many remained in Europe until 1922 to aid in the reconstruction of war-ravaged regions in northern France. Those recruited by Russian forces found themselves caught in the upheaval of the Russian Revolution and subsequent civil war, with many taking active roles in these conflicts. This article explores the long-term impacts of these wartime experiences on returning labourers and their reintegration into Chinese society. It examines whether their exposure to new ideas and technical skills influenced China's evolving social and political landscape and contributed to shifts in national historical development during the 1920s. By analysing primary sources from French, British and Russian archives, this study assesses the complex legacies of these labourers and their contributions to the broader trajectory of Chinese national transformation in the early twentieth century.

Introduction

The First World War marked a pivotal turning point in the national history of many Asian countries. It gave rise to diverse political expectations worldwide - hopes for a new global order, the end of colonial exploitation, and above all, the aspiration for participation in international democratic processes. However, the post-war disillusionment, driven by the refusal of major Western powers to honour promised political and economic concessions, led to the gradual radicalisation of national elites in many Asian countries, ultimately sparking anti-colonial uprisings. Asian soldiers and labourers who had supported the Allied cause in Europe returned home carrying firsthand experiences of war, brutality and violence, which further escalated the intensity of these uprisings. In China's case, the war coincided with profound transformation of the Chinese society that culminated in the process of national self-determination.

In the decades following the war, few attempts have been made to cover China's relations with the various belligerents during the conflict. However, the approaching centenary of the Great War spurred renewed interest among both Chinese (Ren, 2006; Xu, 2007; Zhang 2009) and Western scholars (Ma, 2012; James, 2013; Tsao, 2018; Dornel & Regnard, 2018), leading to fresh examinations of China's participation in the conflict. The majority of these studies focus on the wartime experience of thousands of Chinese labourers sent to France to support the Allied war effort on the Western front and to assist in post-war reconstruction.

Chen Sanjing's ground-breaking work, 华工与欧 (*Chinese labourers and the Great War*, 1986), based on a comprehensive analysis of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, has exerted enduring historiographical influence and remains today a starting point for any study of the subject. More recently, Xu Guoqi's *Strangers on the Western Front* (2011) has emerged as one the most influential and widely recognised works in the revival of academic interest in China's involvement in the Great War. Xu's research highlights the Chinese government's active role in sending labourers to Europe and emphasises the war's significance for China's search for national identity. This new interpretation, which has gained prominence in recent Chinese scholarship, appears to reflect Beijing's growing official focus on China's global interactions. This perspective seeks to demonstrate how China's relations with great powers in the early 20th century prefigured the People's Republic of China's current "peaceful rise" in the global economy and geopolitical sphere (Alexeeva, 2020).

Historians understandably differ in their evaluations of the significance of labourers' experiences in wartime Europe for China's national development and its pursuit of international recognition and inclusion in the 1920s and 1930s. Some scholars paint their story in nationalist colours, emphasising the labourers' role in advancing China's journey toward self-determination and global integration (Xu, 2011; Zhong 2017). Others, while acknowledging that labourers' time in Europe was an important chapter in China's twentieth-century labour history" (Bailey 2011),

argue that their impact on China's political trajectory and its quest for sovereignty and national identity was marginal and should not be overstated (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012; Dornel & Regnard, 2019).

This article, while analysing aspects of Chinese labourers' wartime experiences in Europe, focuses on the period following the conflict, when these workers returned to China. How did they settle back into their communities after the trauma of war? Did they bring back new ideas and new skills that could transform their lives and those of others? Were they able to capitalize on their wartime experiences for personal advancement? We argue that although the labourers never emerged as direct agents of political or economic change and showed limited interest in the discourse and actions of burgeoning Chinese nationalist movements, their wartime experiences nevertheless played a modest but noteworthy role in shaping the political consciousness of Chinese intellectual and political elites during the interwar years. The primary sources examined in this study include materials from *The National Archives*, in the United Kingdom, the *Archives nationales* and *Service historique de la Défense* in France, as well as from several Russian central and regional archives. By analysing these records, which trace the post-war lives of returned labourers, this article assesses the significance of their wartime experiences in contributing to China's social and political transformation during the 1920s.

The Outbreak of the War and China's Response

At the outbreak of World War I, China was navigating a tumultuous post-imperial transition. Following the 1911 Revolution, which ended the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), China became a republic. Although the Revolution was driven by the desire for modernization and liberation from foreign domination, the Chinese Republic ultimately fell short of realizing these ambitions. The republican government established in Beijing was weak, often corrupt and brutal. Its arbitrary political rule based on military power and behind-the-scenes deals, only hastened nation's slide into warlordism. In the eyes of the contemporaries, China was a republic in name only. Despite general disillusionment with the republican experiment, the Republic gave the Chinese people a chance to experience some degree of political equality, encouraging intellectuals and politicians to question traditional hierarchies and conventions (Strand, 2011).

The European belligerents, each maintaining settlements and troops in China, rendered the country's position precarious - particularly in Shandong province, where Germany held a fortified concession at Qingdao. The German leased territory was situated near Russian and Japanese spheres of influence in Manchuria, as well as the British naval base in Weihaiwei, along Shandong's northeastern coast. In these circumstances, the spreading of the war onto Chinese soil was a real possibility. In attempt to avoid this scenario, Beijing declared neutrality on August 6, 1914.

Nevertheless, the Allies disregarded China's wishes. As Britain's ally, Japan launched an assault on Qingdao, capturing it by November 1914. Several weeks later, Tokyo capitalized on the temporary political vacuum in Asia, created by the absence of the major Western powers preoccupied with fighting each other in Europe, and presented its infamous Twenty-One Demand in order to secure its territorial and economic gains in China.

In the eyes of Chinese intellectuals and political elites, Japan emerged then as one of the greatest threats to nation's sovereignty. This threat, they believed, could only be mitigated through diplomacy rather than force. In this context, participation in the peace conference that would be held at the close of the war was widely seen as China's best opportunity to assert its interests and reclaim Qingdao (Craft, 1994). But how to secure an invitation to the peace conference while staying neutral in the war? This dilemma shaped China's war policy and its engagement in war-related activities.

One solution for China to participate in the war without breaching its neutrality was to supply workers to the Allies, who suffered severe labour shortages due to mass mobilization and the growing number of battle casualties. Russia was the first belligerent power to recruit Chinese labourers to support its war effort. The Russians used the Chinese labour since late 19th century, when the rapid economic development of the Russian Far East called for a large workforce. The emerging local industries as well as the major state projects – construction of the port of Vladivostok and of the Trans-Siberian railway - employed thousands of Chinese labourers whose numbers in the region were steadily growing (Alexeeva 2018). When the war broke out in Europe, Russia expanded its existing Sino-Russian recruitment system to address labour shortages, first in Siberia and later in the European part of the Empire.

According to Russian official records, some 160,000 labourers were recruited from northern China between January 1915 and April 1917 to work in war-related industries in Russia (Petrov, 2003). However, according to Chinese sources, estimate the number to be between 100,000 and 450,000 (Li, 1988). Determining the exact figure is challenging, as neither Russian nor Chinese authorities maintained regular records. These Chinese recruits were employed in various capacities: mining copper in the Urals, extracting coal in Donetsk (Ukraine), loading and unloading ships in Petrograd and Riga on the Baltic Sea, constructing the Murmansk railroad in polar zones of northern Russia, and felling trees in the Siberian taiga.

France and Britain began recruiting Chinese labourers later in the war, in May-October of 1916. Nearly 130,000 Chinese men arrived in France under Allied auspices, with 36,941 recruited by the French and 93,474 by the British (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012). They were primarily drawn from coastal regions such as Shandong province and from treaty ports and concessions, including Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. In France, the labourers were assigned to general labour duties: repair and maintenance of the roads, loading and unloading of ships and trains, agricultural works, and

other kinds of manual but necessary work. Many were stationed in the regions close to the front in northern France, small towns and villages along major rivers, and key ports like La-Rochelle or Marseille (Xu, 2011; Tsao, 2018).

In Russia's case, the recruitment process was rather chaotic, managed by private brokers who used different employment contracts with widely varying conditions (Alexeeva, 2018). In contrast, the French relied on local Chinese intermediaries whose activities were sanctioned by the Beijing government and overseen by French military agents dispatched specially to supervise the recruitment operations. The British, however, bypassed private contractors altogether, conducting recruitment directly. Both, France and Britain used standardized contracts officially endorsed by the Chinese government. Allied recruitment schemes primarily targeted young men from impoverished rural areas, typically aged between 20 and 30 years, most of whom were illiterate and unskilled (Xu, 2011; Tsao, 2018).

With the death of the Republic first elected president, Yuan Shikai, in early 1916, China's war policy became increasingly inconsistent, shaped by the competing interests of regional warlords and foreign powers vying for influence through loans and infrastructure promises (Craft, 2004). In April 1917, the United States abandoned its careful neutrality, declared war on Germany, and urged other neutral nations, including China, to follow suit. Influential Chinese intellectuals advocated for China's entry into the war, believing that supporting the Allies would raise China's international standing and help resolve the Shandong issue. After months of hesitation and internal political manoeuvring, China declared war on Germany on August 14, 1917, securing a seat at the post-war peace conference.

At the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, Chinese representatives aimed to reclaim the former German concession in Shandong, which had been occupied by Japan and hoped to discuss other important issues, including the abolition of extraterritorial privileges and the revision of the customs and tariffs. These expectations were unmet, as the Allies confirmed Japan's rights in Shandong, igniting the May Fourth Movement - a wave of nationwide protests that became a turning point in modern Chinese history and a source of inspiration for the nascent Chinese nationalist movement. Once the war was over, many Chinese labourers returned home, but some remained in France until 1922 to assist with post-war reconstruction. Those in Russia found themselves caught in the turmoil of the Revolution and Civil War, with some staying in Soviet territories into the late 1920s.

Back from the Front

By 1922, most labourers had returned to China. In the beginning of their repatriation, there were some calls in the Chinese press to channel the returned labourers' newfound skills for the good of China. However, little attention was given to how they would reintegrate into society. The

fate of the majority remains unknown, as neither Chinese nor Western authorities made significant efforts to track or assist them. The eclectic historic evidence left behind by foreign missionaries and Chinese officials suggest that most labourers returned to their rural communities, resuming their pre-war lives and occupations (James, 2013).

Some returnees who managed to save money in Europe bought farms, built new house, or started small businesses, while others, having spent or gambled away their earnings in Europe, came back home empty handed (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012). For example, Jiang Shiguang recalled returning from France in December 1919 with 80 silver dollars and a few pieces of clothing, while others came back with noting: "My father used the money I earned to buy land, but we had to pay so many taxes back then, that (…) my family barely survived the famine and had to beg for food" (Jiang, 1999).

While labourers' monthly allowances and savings have supported their families for several years and thus slightly improved living standards of in their villages, these gains had no lasting impact on Northern China's economy. This region, already ravaged by famines and droughts in the early 1920s, saw any labourers' savings quickly eroded, leaving them in the same impoverished conditions as before the war.

The challenges persisted into the late 1920s, as illustrated by British Vice-Consul in Tokyo, M.E. Dening. In 1929, while reporting on Japanese recruitment of labourers in Shandong and Zhili provinces for work in Manchurian coal and iron mines, he remarked that:

> The average immigrant to Manchuria enters under conditions little better than those meted out to animals. (…) Herded together like cattle in ships and trains the immigrants are [transported], during the cold weather, in open trucks devoid of any artificial heating and without sanitary arrangements, traveling for days in conditions so repellent that one marvels how they can be endured. Yet on the whole the immigrant is serenely cheerful in these circumstances. He has had little, or nothing left to hope for in the place has left, while there is just a possibility that he may fare better where he is going (Dening, 1929).

Thus, ten years after the end of the war, peasants from Shandong and Zhili, two major recruitment areas during the war, continued to leave their homes en masse, seeking employment in 'foreign' lands. Japanese labour agencies in these provinces adopted recruitment practices that were remarkably similar to those used by the Russians during the war. Chinese and Russian intermediaries recruited workers with the help of foremen, who were put in direct charge of workers, a convenient scheme that relieved employers of legal responsibility for their labour force. Both recruiting agents and Chinese foremen took commissions from labourers' wages, significantly reducing their

already meagre pay. For example, in June 1915, the Nadezhdinsk Metallurgical Factory in Ural region contracted two Chinese labour brokers, Xu Hong'an from Shandong and Huo Guorong, from Manchuria, to recruit 3,000 labourers for its sawmill. The brokers retained 15% of workers' wages, while the foremen took another 10%. Although the factory supplied labourers with raw rations and accommodation free of charge, brokers controlled the distribution and were responsible for clothing, hiring interpreters, and resolving everyday grievances (Contract of employment …, 1916). This dual exploitation system left labourers vulnerable: they faced gruelling hours under Russian employers while being cheated by Chinese intermediaries on wages, food quality, and living conditions.

The Japanese companies in Manchuria employed similar labour practices in 1929. The South Manchuria Railway Company, for instance, recruited thousands of labourers offering an official average wage of 93 sen per day. However, after deductions by agencies and foremen, workers took home only 50–60 sen. Additional charges for living quarters (5 sen a day) and food (24 sen a day) further reduced their income to as little as 35 per day (Dening, 1929). This unfair system, which allowed employers to address labour shortages with minimal costs, became one of the tragic legacies of the Great War for China.

Most returnees melted back into their communities, but there were also those who felt that they could not fit into the traditional Chinese rural life. They picked up new habits and a sense of independence while abroad, so they refused to conform with the old ways of their village. They found the old traditions and customs too narrow or too binding and opted for an un urban life. Some sought employments at the factories in Shanghai and Canton, while others turned to beggary or illegal activities. The interwar Chinese press frequently reported violent incidents involving returnees, such as the infamous Lincheng Incident of 1923 (临城劫车). In this case, a group of Chinese bandits attacked and derailed the luxurious passenger train "Blue Express", kidnapping over 100 passengers, including 20 Westerners, and demanding a ransom for their release (Billingsley, 1988). While some of these bandits came from the unemployed and landless margins of the rural population of Hebei and Shandong, many were former soldiers from disbanded or defeated local warlords' armies. According to testimonies from hostages, several returnees from France were part of this para-military gang:

> The bandits looked and behaved like soldiers. Well disciplined. Commands passed along lines in a military way. They had parts of uniforms. They gave me impression of being ex-soldiers. Others were just ordinary farmers. Several of bandits could speak French but none English (Pratt, 1923).

Other kidnapped passenger recollected that one of the bandits had served as an interpreter in France during the war, while another, a former member of the Chinese Labour Corps under British

supervision, reportedly saved the life of a hostages marked for execution (James, 2013). Some contemporaries even suggested that the bandits were inspired to attack the train by films they had seen in France (Billingsley, 1988). The social and industrial unrest in early 1920s China created a fertile ground for such individuals to join bandit gangs or the armies of competing warlords. Many returnees who chose not to return to their villages found themselves drawn into these turbulent and often violent environments, emblematic of the chaotic post-war era.

Trauma of War

While in Europe, many Chinese labourers endured extremely stressful conditions. Shell-shocked, injured, and occasionally coerced into combat situations, they faced traumas comparable to those experienced by Allied soldiers. Although their contracts stipulated that they should not take part in military operations, the Allies frequently deployed the Chinese to high-risk zones near the front, where they were tasked with digging trenches and transporting munitions (Tsao, 2018). As a result, hundreds were injured or killed in German bombings, poison gas attacks, crossfire, or accidents involving unspent explosives (Moss, August 11, 1919). During sudden German attacks, Chinese labourers were often caught in the chaos of battle. The terrifying bombing raids spread panic, leaving them restless and traumatized. Some were paralyzed by fear, while others fled their camps in a desperate bid to save their lives (Xu, 2011). In the spring of 1918, as casualties on the Western Front sharply increased, Chinese labourers were tasked with burying fallen soldiers. Gu Xingqing, who served as an interpreter with the British-recruited Chinese Labour Corps, vividly recounted how his unit wrapped countless bodies in blankets as coffins were unavailable, and buried them in mass graves, following a brief religious ceremony performed by a Catholic priest or Protestant pastor (Gu, 1937).

The death toll among the Chinese continued to rise after the Armistice due to both war-related accidents and the outbreak of influenza's epidemic. Following the cessation of hostilities, French authorities, grappling with the monumental task of clearing battlefields in northern and eastern France, deployed many Chinese labourers to these devastated areas. Their living conditions were dire, as the destruction left them without barracks or adequate shelter. Forced to sleep on the ground without blankets or adequate shoes, some suffered frostbite. They scavenged abandoned British camps and battlefields for materials like wood and straw to improve their makeshift accommodations and make their living arrangements bearable (Rapport du secretaire general à la reconstitution, 1919).

Labourers contributed to the post-war reconstruction by bringing back into cultivation the abandoned fields, repairing railways to facilitate debris removal and the transport of construction materials, and building temporary housing. However, with the gradual returning of local population, their presence sparked a lot of conflicts. Amid resource shortages, resentment grew as some of the

supplies were allocated to the Chinese labourers instead of locals. Reports of petty thefts, robberies, aggressions and other crimes attributed to the Chinese exacerbated these tensions. Regional authorities inundated the French government with complaints and demands for the immediate removal of Chinese workers, accelerating their repatriation (Verlot, 1919; Viot, 1919).

Along with the reconstruction works, the Chinese also cleared battlefields, removing shell cases, barbed wire, and debris, as well as filling in shell-holes and trenches (Tsao, 2018). These tasks carried significant risk, as many grenades and shells stayed buried in the soil, often detonating unexpectedly and causing severe injuries or fatalities. This work was often traumatic, as one could never forget the sight of horribly torn remains of men scattered over the fields accompanied by the smell of rotting human flesh. Repatriation records of sick and wounded Chinese labourers suggest that mental afflictions resulting from these harrowing experiences were profoundly debilitating:

> The more serious cases, especially blind, cripples and suicidal maniacs, were accommodated on the ground floor (…) [we] got away first the most seriously sick who were well enough to travel (…) alone or under escort. When possible, we sent with them men from the same district, but in many cases, we had to provide escorts, especially for the lunatics, extremely debilitated tuberculosis cases, cripples and the totally blind. (…) Those who required a few days of rest after voyage and mental cases who were unable to talk coherently or to look after themselves were kept (…) till their relatives came for them. (…) Many of the mental cases were unable to clothe themselves. Some of them had their clothes stolen from them and others tore their clothes (Moss, May 29, 1919).

British medical personnel diagnosed many Chinese returnees with a range of mental health conditions, including melancholia, dementia praecox, mental stupor, 'feeblemindedness', confusional or delusional insanity, delirium, senility, mental epilepsy, hysteria, and mania (HMH Ship Assaye: Africans, Chinese and Egyptians, 1919). Similarly, French authorities reported an unusually high incidence of mental disorders among the Chinese labourers under their employ, many of whom were confined at the "asiles d'aliénés" (asylum for the mentally ill) (Famin, 1917).

In the Russian Empire, Chinese labourers also found themselves dangerously close to the theatre of war. In Ukraine, during a sudden German-Austrian offensive, some Chinese workers employed in the Donbass coal mines were captured and sent to prisoner-of-war camps, while others fled and were forced to beg on the streets of nearby cities. One labourer who ended up in a German prisoner-of-war camp recounted

> The German authorities herded [us] into a concentration camp. They gave us a meagre

> piece of black bread each day, barely the size of a cup. Taking a bite felt like chewing sand. From early morning until late evening, [we] were forced to build prisons and roads. The Germans never skimped on punches, whip's lashes and bayonet's blows. Many prisoners succumbed to beatings and relentless overwork. Every day, trucks would arrive to remove the corpses of those who had perished in the camp (Li, 1959).

After the Bolsheviks signed a separate peace treaty with Germany, Chinese prisoners of war were released alongside with their Russian counterparts. However, they were not repatriated to China and instead found themselves stranded in revolutionary Russia, with limited resources or few means to survive. Zhu Shaoyang, a Chinese student, who tried to help them, vividly described their desperate situation:

> Lately, Chinese labourers in Ukraine have found themselves in the most horrific situation. They were labelled as Bolsheviks or Bolsheviks' spies and accused of being agitators sent by Moscow. In late September, Hetman [i.e. the head of state and commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian State in 1918] issued an order for the arrest of all the Chinese in Ukraine. [The authorities] promptly carried out this directive. Following my petition [for their release], supported by the entire Consular Corps (…), they were eventually freed. However, they had already lost their jobs. Some of the workers knew who their employer was, but others did not. I worked tirelessly, day and night, for nearly two months; I assisted them to the best of my ability, despite the [harsh] winter conditions (Larin, 2009).

The escalation of the Russian Civil War interrupted the repatriation of Chinese labourers, leaving thousands trapped in various Russian cities without work, money, or any hope of returning home. In these dire circumstances, many were forced to pick a side in the conflict. Some enlisted in the Red Army, while others ended up working for the White Forces or intervening Allied troops. For instance, Chinese labourers who had worked on the Murmansk railway project before the revolution found employment with the British and Americans who landed in the Russian North in March 1918. They took on various roles, such as dockworkers and railway depots hands, while others repaired railroad bridges and tracks sabotaged by the Red Army or constructed warehouses. However, the majority of Chinese labourers sided with the Red Army. According to Russian sources, between 30,000 and 40,000 Chinese labourers joined the Red Army's international battalions (Larin, 2009), while Chinese historians give a slightly higher estimate of around 50,000 (Xie, 2014).

The Chinese labourers' involvement in the Russian Civil War was marked by extreme violence and brutality. Xu Moling, a former contract labour turned soldier, recounted his combat experiences

in Ukraine, describing the battles as horrifyingly savage, with heavy casualties. He noted that death was preferable to capture, as prisoners were subjected to torture before being executed (Xu, 1959). His account is corroborated by archival evidence that details these atrocities with excruciating precision. For example, in late 1918, Chinese Red battalions operating in Siberia were cut off and quickly surrounded by White Army forces. Around 300 Chinese were taken prisoner; some were executed on the spot, while others were stripped of their clothing and transported in unheated freight train cars to Tyumen's prison, enduring temperatures as low as – 35°C (Kamenskikh, 2011).

Due to their lack of social ties in Russia, the Bolsheviks frequently assigned them for sensitive tasks. Many former labourers occupied various positions within the Cheka (the Bolshevik secret police) or the Red Guard, which also functioned as a police force and death squad. In these roles, they witnessed and, in some cases, actively participated in some of the most egregious acts of violence and repression against local population (Larin, 2009).

During their sojourn in Europe, many Chinese labourers experienced war firsthand, enduring injuries and profound psychological trauma. Upon their return to China, they found their country on the brink of civil war, plagued by predatory behaviour, rampant violence, and widespread warlord conflicts. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this chaotic environment drove many returnees to join the armies of various warlords, which were largely composed of mercenaries – ranging from military adventurers and members of local militia to bandits, pirates, and former soldiers of provincial troops. Thus, reports from *The North-China Herald* in the early 1920s noted that many former members of the Chinese Labour Corps, leveraging their rudimentary knowledge of arms, enlisted in Sun Yat-sen's Southern Army (The North-China Herald, 1924). Made up of mismatched and poorly integrated groups, these troops constantly negotiated the price of their services before embarking on campaigns and lived more on the pillaging than on their pay. This unprecedented militarization of the Chinese society occurred against a backdrop of political instability and economic hardship, further exacerbated by famines and rural poverty, particularly in Northern China, where most returnees lived.

The Chinese labourers who returned from Russia were also involved in military and bandit activities, as many of them had received extensive military training in the Red Army and were skilled in handling rifles and grenades (Zelentsov, 1919). Their actions were often inspired, and at times directly instigated, by the Bolshevik authorities, who thus hoped to foster a national revolution in China (Larin, 2009). However, these revolutionary efforts ultimately ended in failure, as attested by an account from a Russian Red Army commander who fought alongside the Chinese in the Russian Far East:

> In early July 1921, [Xing Diu] decided to cross the border with his unit. As he bid me farewell, Xing Diu said he was going to fight the traitors of the Chinese people

> – the gang of Zhang Zuolin, (…) and establish the Chinese People's Revolutionary Division. Xing Diu's guerrillas managed to operate one Chinese territory for several months. Their initial successes, including the establishment of revolutionary authority in several district, alarmed Zhang Zuolin's government, which dispatched a large force against the guerrillas. The force eventually surrounded and besieged Xing Diu in the town of Yanjiu. (…) Upon learning of the unit's critical situation, [Soviet forces] intervened, and on November 10, they all retreated to our [i.e. Soviet] territory (Koval, 1961).

This undoubtedly highly edited version of events nonetheless illustrates that the northern Chinese warlords responded swiftly to any attempts to ignite revolutionary flame within the territory under their control. Zhang Zuolin (1875-1928), one of the most powerful warlords in Manchuria at that time, regarded these red guerrillas a little more than bandits on the Bolsheviks' payroll. From his perspective, they terrorized the local population and jeopardized the precarious peace along the border. Determined to curb the spread of Bolshevik influence in Manchuria and reassert control over the Chinese Eastern Railway and other former Russian assets in northern China, Zhang swiftly and decisively countered the incursions of Chinese Red groups across the border (Kwong, 2017).

Greater Knowledge of the World and of the "Western Civilization"

Many Chinese intellectuals and politicians who supported the Allied recruitment in China during the war regarded the labourers as the representatives of the Chinese people in Europe and as potential intermediaries for fostering friendly relations between the East and the West (Xu, 2011). They envisioned these labourers becoming emissaries of European influences in China, likened to "messengers of the wider world just as the crusaders once were in the late centuries of the Middle Ages," and hoped that, upon their return, they would "be a factor in opening the eyes of the mass of the people" (Chen, 1918).

The Chinese labourers sent to wartime Europe indeed witnessed, and sometimes taken part in a number of important events. However, although their experiences did expose them to many novel aspects of European life, these encounters were not always positive or inspiring. While staying in Europe, they frequently faced restrictions and constant humiliations, enduring the haughty demeanour of Western officers whose attitudes were often rooted in colonial perceptions of Chinese "otherness." These officers held the belief that Chinese labourers required constant supervision to work effectively and lacked the adaptability and technical competence for skilled tasks. In other words, they were considered suitable only for routine and menial labour. As one French employers remarqued, "We cannot employ the Chinese in laying and metalling as they are too weak and have

no aptitude for this kind of labour which requires strong and hard-working men" (Vigner & Millet, 1918).

The colonial mentality and its influence on labour management limited meaningful opportunities for Chinese and European workers to bridge their cultural differences and develop mutual understanding. While there are documented instances of cross-cultural friendship and Europeans treating Chinese labourers as equals, such cases were exceptions. The majority of the French and British who came into the contact with Chinese workers adopted a paternalistic attitude - their working relations often resembled master-servant dynamics, despite the fact that the labourers were contracted workers rather than colonial subjects (Dornel & Regnard, 2018). This perspective persisted long after the war. For example, a British report on Chinese labourers employed by the Japanese in Manchuria in 1929 described them using the same colonial tropes as those applied by wartime officials:

> Generally speaking, the Northern Chinese coolie is of physique above normal. Physically, he is in his prime between the ages of 28 and 35. His powers of endurance are great, (…) but his stamina is nil, and when afflicted with any serious illness he generally dies. Shantung coolies suffer greatly from disease emanating from uncleanliness. The temperament of the Northern Chinese is generally docile, but he is easily inflamed. (…) If he considers he has a grievance and is not dominated by fear, he is very easily roused, becomes hot-headed, sees red, and is very susceptible to mob influence. The Northern Chinese coolie was born lazy and is a master at the art of shirking. Unless on contract work, he requires constant supervision (Dening, 1929).

The physical isolation of the Chinese during their sojourn in France further exacerbated these tensions. Housed in camps surrounded by barbed wire, dilapidated barracks on the outskirts of French towns and villages, or separate lodgings near worksites, Chinese labourers had little opportunity to engage socially with locals or other foreign workers. French labour unions and workers viewed the Chinese as competitors who threatened to drive down wages, fostering antagonism that frequently ended into conflict. For instance, in Rouen, where Chinese labourers were employed at the port facilities, authorities stationed guards during mealtimes to prevent them from going into town (Théry, 1917). After months of working alongside Chinese labourers, French workers' hostility intensified to the extent that a proposal to build a shelter to protect the Chinese camp from German bombardment was rejected on the grounds that it would provoke a public outcry (Detoeuf, 1918). The use of Chinese labourers to break strikes further fuelled this resentment. In the spring of 1920, during a strike by gas workers in Paris demanding higher wages, authorities, fearing gas shortages in the capital, brought in Chinese labourers from neighbouring towns to replace them. To protect

the Chinese from the ire of the French workers, armed guards were stationed at the factories while negotiations with the strikers were underway (Chen, 1923).

Chinese labourers in Russia also faced many cultural and social challenges. However, they were less isolated from local society compared to their compatriots in France, thanks to the presence of an important Chinese diaspora in Russia. These local Chinese communities provided crucial support to distressed labourers, helping them navigate and circumvent the often-bewildering realities of daily life in Russia. Nonetheless, Russians perceptions of the Chinese were often shaped by the same misconceptions and prejudices prevalent in Europe. Racial stereotypes and xenophobic fears associated with the "Yellow Peril" heavily influenced both official policies and public attitudes toward the Chinese. Even before 1914, the increasing presence of Chinese migrants in the sparsely populated Russian Far East and Siberia had raised concerns among central and local authorities, who viewed them as a potential threat to Russian sovereignty in these regions. The arrival of tens of thousands of workers during the war only heightened these anxieties (Alexeeva, 2018). Conservative Russian politicians expressed alarm over the potential impact of Chinese labour on domestic market. Many feared that employing Chinese labourers in factories could provoke conflicts with Russian workers and incite general labour unrest. Thus, the Russian Minister of the Interior, A. N. Chvostov, warned that the extensive use of Chinese workers would likely have serious economic consequences with political ramifications. He noted that revolutionary organisations had already begun exploiting the situation, telling Russian industrial workers that "the government tries to eliminate revolutionary elements within the industrial centres by sending the Russians to the front line and by replacing them with the Chinese" (Chvostov, 1915).

These anxieties were reflected in the treatment of Chinese labourers, who frequently experienced abuse and discrimination at the hands of Russian employers and managers. Such mistreatment usually led to strikes, desertion of workplaces or attacks on management personnel – interpreters, foremen and guards. Much like their counterparts in France, Chinese workers in wartime Russia encountered the harsh realities of local culture, which left many disillusioned. Initially, some Chinese labourers viewed their journey to Europe with a sense of awe and curiosity, marvelling at the unfamiliar sights and experiences. However, as the war dragged on, this sense of wonder often gave way to disappointment and indifference. As one Christian missionary who worked in Chine after the war observed:

> Today, if one speaks about idolatry, one is likely to be taken up sharply by some returned coolie, who informs the crowd that he saw more idols in temples in France, than he ever saw in China, which is his genial way of referring to the plentiful statuary which he has seen in the churches of Rouen or other cities. As for social evils, he goes into details of what he experienced at Dunkirk, Calais and other places with appalling

> frankness, while his appreciation of the material progress of the West is coloured by vivid recollections of bombs dropped around his camp in France, the unpleasantness of the sea passage, and so on (Keyte, 1923).

The unfair treatment and broken promises, inadequate working and living conditions, blatant discrimination, communication barriers leading to reprimands and extra hours of work, untreated illnesses, and other sufferings endured by Chinese labourers in France and Russia likely had a far more lasting impact on their perception of Western civilization than any technical, social, or cultural achievements they may have witnessed during their stay. In 1996, Chen Baoyu, a former member of the Chinese Labour Corps, reflected on these experiences: "I often think about my 400 compatriots buried in the Chinese workers' cemetery [in France], who were betrayed, killed by bombings, or abused to death. I wonder if the cemetery still exists today? Is there anyone who takes care of [their graves]?" (Chen, 1996).

For many Chinese intellectuals who had advocated for greater involvement in the war effort, these accounts of mistreatment, coupled with the broader horrors of war, led to deep frustration and disillusionment with the Western socio-economic order. In their eyes, the brutality and devastation of the war revealed the fundamental flaws and weaknesses of Western civilization. The outcomes of the Versailles conference, which ignored China's aspirations and reinforced imperialist hierarchies, further fuelled their critiques of Beijing's efforts to modernize China through assimilation of European values and development models.

This disenchantment prompted a revaluation of the classic paradigms of East versus West and tradition versus modernity. As a result, many Chinese intellectuals began searching for new impulses and alternative solutions at a time when profound changes were happening in the global environment. Some turned to socialism, finding in it a model that challenged Western capitalism and imperialism. Others attempted to reconcile core Chinese cultural values with Western advancements in industrialization and science, aiming to construct a uniquely Chinese approach to modernity (Fung, 2010).

New Skills and Useful Working Experience

The majority of Chinese labourers in Europe were engaged in unskilled work, contributing to the construction of munitions warehouses, hospitals, and railroads, as well as repairing roads and destroyed buildings. They were tasked with loading and unloading goods from trains and ships, stacking ammunition, cutting wood, or working in coal mines. While these backbreaking tasks were essential to the Allied war effort, they did not require the acquisition of specialised professional skills. Although some Chinese labourers under French supervision worked in arms manufacturing,

gunpowder factories, arsenals, and mechanical construction, they were qualified workers recruited specifically for these industries in Shanghai. Despite their prior experience in China, they still had to undergo training and trade-testing before being allowed to operate in factories and industrial sites in France (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012).

The British also recruited a number of skilled workers from China. However, most were initially limited to performing routine manual tasks, reflecting the prevailing belief that "owing to their lower intellectual standard," training Chinese workers for skilled or semi-skilled positions would require more effort than was deemed practical (Memorandum on Substitution of Coloured for White Personnel in France, 1917). Over time, however, the demands of the war led the British to assign skilled Chinese labourers and artisans to specialised tasks, such as work in foundries and smithies, as well as building, driving, and repairing tanks and motorcycles. All of them underwent training and often worked in pairs with their European counterparts. By 1918, more than ten thousand Chinese labourers were employed in skilled work under British supervision (Work of the labour force during the war: Report, 1918).

In Russia, the shortage of qualified labourers prompted the recruitment of Chinese carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, and miners. However, their skill levels varied greatly. In some cases, Russian employers, frustrated by the need to train some workers before they could perform their duties effectively, occasionally opted to repatriate them and recruit replacements from China (Plaksin 1915). Due to these challenges, Chinese labourers in Russia were rarely employed in ammunition plants or assigned tasks requiring technical expertise, such as machinery maintenance or repair.

Overall, the opportunities for Chinese labourers in Europe to learn new skills were limited, and few managed to gain technical knowledge through training or valuable industrial experience during their time abroad. Whether these new skills led to meaningful contributions to China's development remains uncertain. According to Xu Guoqi, the returned labourers may have indirectly supported the growth of China's industry and improved livelihoods (Xu, 2011). However, concrete evidence supporting this claim is scarce. In the early 2000s, Chinese historian Zhang Yan conducted interviews with 65 descendants of labourers in Shandong in hope to compensate the lack of information on individual experiences of returnees. These testimonies suggest that some labourers were able to apply their newly acquired skills. For instance, Zhang Zongfang built a small pump and a seed drill, while Li Kunzheng invented an irrigation machine and constructed a shallow-water motorboat using the knowledge he had gained in France (Zhang, 2010; Goodrich, 1924).

During the war, Chinese intellectuals expressed optimism that labourers trained in Europe could give "a tremendous impetus to the progress of young China's industry". They nurtured hopes that these returnees would promote broader adoption of machinery and industrial techniques. Despite this rather optimistic forecast, they also acknowledged that these new skills had limited applicability in China, where modern factories were sparse and unable to utilise their expertise

effectively (Zung, 1922). Thus, Zhang Zongfang's and Li Kunzheng's attempts to modernize the agricultural production in their respective villages remained small and local initiatives that lad little lasting impact on local economic development, as no serious efforts were made to promote these new inventions and techniques on a broader scale.

Admittedly, as repatriation from France gathered pace, some Chinese officials briefly considered involving the returning labourers in national development projects. Proposals included employing them to construct a railroad in Shandong province, funded in part by the labourers' savings, or engaging them to build roads in Zhejiang province with potential financial backing from a Singaporean tycoon (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012). However, these ambitious plans proved impractical and were swiftly abandoned, leaving skilled labourers to search for an employment independently.

In addition to the limited capacity of China's industries to absorb returning labourers, many potential employers were reluctant to hire them due to concerns about their exposure to "dangerous ideas" during their time in France. These ideas, particularly regarding labour unions and workers' rights, raised fears that the returnees might foment unrest. Labourers returning from Russia faced even greater suspicion, as they were often accused of being Bolshevik agitators or Soviet spies. Fearing the spread of revolutionary wave from Russia, Chinese authorities implemented a series of measures designed to suppress any instances of subversive activity. These measures included heightened scrutiny in issuing documents, confiscation of communist pamphlets at customs, and, in some cases, placing the returning workers under strict surveillance (Larin, 2009). Factory owners and workshop managers, wary of the possibility that these labourers might organize strikes and encourage other workers to demand better wages and working conditions, chose to avoid employing them altogether (Ren, 2006).

Education and New Political Practices

There were several attempts to provide some form of education to Chinese labourers in France, most notably through initiatives led by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) under the British patronage. The YMCA representatives, many of whom were Chinese graduates from American and British universities and European missionaries deployed in China, began by addressing basic humanitarian needs. These volunteers established over sixty service stations for Chinese labourers across Europe (Zhong, 2017), distributed soap and tobacco, assisted labourers writing letters home – a crucial service, given that most were illiterate – and organized recreational activities. Over time, these efforts expanded to include educational and cultural programmes. Reading lessons, Bible study sessions, and indoor and outdoor sports activities were introduced alongside concerts and film screenings. The YMCA also opened canteens, clubs, and small shops

offering Chinese products in the British sectors where the labourers worked. Jiang Shiguang, who served under French supervision, recalled that YMCA activists were instrumental in helping labourers acquire necessities, as they had very few opportunities to leave the camp. He also noted that cultural events, such as singing Chinese songs and performing traditional Chinese opera scenes on weekends, provided much-needed morale boosts (Jiang, 1999).

Gradually, educational classes were added, aimed at improving literacy and fostering a basic understanding of Western culture and values (Chen, 1923; Gu, 1937). Subjects included the meaning of the war, European geography and social conditions, public health, history, and mathematics. However, the most popular course was in Chinese language, which focused on teaching labourers how to read and write common Chinese characters (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012; Zhong, 2017).

The Allied authorities had mixed reactions to the YMCA's activities. Some British commanding officers overseeing the Chinese Labour Corps considered the YMCA a nuisance, accusing their activists and educators of coddling the labourers and making them harder to manage. Others, however, saw value in the YMCA's efforts, believing that these programmes helped maintain labourers' morale, improved cooperation, and served as a mechanism to prevent or resolve disputes:

> We have secretary of the Chinese Y.M.C.A. who speaks Chinese fluently and who has (…) done much to increase the efficiency of the Chinese as labourers; explaining to them the ways and customs of the West, the reason why the Allies are at war; and many other things which at present are not clear to the average Chinese mind. (…) They need to be reminded of the large part played by the labourers, and the importance and obligation of their doing faithfully their part in the great conflict in which we are engaged (Williams, 1918).

Although the source material on the YMCA's educational programme for Chinese labourers in France is both interesting and abundant, it requires careful analysis, giving differing perceptions and agendas. In the spirit of Progressive era (1890s-1920s), the YMCA actively championed the new philosophy of American philanthropy, which prioritised the literacy as means to address the root causes of social problems. Promoting access to literacy and knowledge thus became a cornerstone of the YMCA's mission (Zhong, 2017).

After the war, the YMCA actively promoted its educational efforts, claiming significant achievements. For example, a YMCA brochure stated that literacy among Chinese labourers in France had improved from 20% to over 38%, which at first glance appears to be an impressive result (Chen, 1923). However, these figures appear to be exaggerated. In reality, only a small number of labourers participated in YMCA programmes. At the Creusot industrial facilities, for instance, after two years of work, the YMCA educational centre, offering Chinese language classes to the 4,000

Chinese labourers employed there, managed to teach basic literacy to only 36 individuals (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012). This level of literacy enabled them to read and write only short and very simple phrases in Chinese.

The French government also thought providing some basic educational programmes for the labourers, but these plans were deemed too costly and were never implemented. Some French employers tried to address recurrent communication problems by setting up evening schools to teach basic French and thus improve labourers' productivity. In Rouen, for example, port authorities initiated a French language course, selecting 20 labourers to receive training with the hope they could serve as interpreters. However, this initiative was soon abandoned, as after three months of studying, they showed no notable progress in mastering the language (Detoeuf, 1918).

The Tsarist authorities in Russia did not implement any educational programmes for Chinese labourers. However, the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks, who viewed the Chinese labourers as 'proletarian brothers', launched vast propaganda and literacy campaigns among them, including Russian language classes. Seeking to promote revolutionary ideas, the Bolsheviks established several political organisations for Chinese workers in Petrograd, Moscow, the Ural region, and other areas of Russia with significant Chinese populations. Their activities were coordinated by the *Association of Chinese workers in Russia* (旅俄华工联合会or *Союз китайских рабочих в Россuu*). The association initially evolved from a charitable organisation founded in 1917 by a group of Chinese students, whose original purpose was to assist with the repatriation of labourers stranded in Russia (Larin, 2009). In 1918, the Bolshevik leadership opted to restructure this student initiative, transforming it into a more centralized structure. This reorganisation aimed to facilitate the politicization of Chinese workers in Russia, positioning them as key agents of revolutionary change. Thus, the Association's new manifesto declared: "Chinese workers in Russia by the will of fate find themselves in the midst of the vanguard of the workers' world revolution", so the Association activists called all the Chinese to "join and follow the path of the Russian Revolution (…) in the decisive, ruthless struggle against European capital" (Benton, 2007).

The Association also edited and published several newspapers in Chinese, seeking to convey egalitarian principles in simple terms. For instance, one publication explained: "The property should belong to everybody. If we take, for example, food or clothes, all of it should be divided equally, so we could avoid the situation when one person is dying of cold, while others are warm; when one person is full, while others are hungry" (Larin 2009).

These efforts reflected the broader Bolshevik strategy of exporting their ideals beyond Russian borders in attempt to ignite a global socialist revolution. By fostering proletarian solidarity among Chinese workers, the Bolsheviks sought to prepare them for an active role in the anticipated revolutionary movement in China— a movement they believed to be both imminent and destined for success. As one propaganda leaflet distributed among the Chinese population in the Russian Far

East proclaimed: "All of humanity is advancing toward communism. In China, due to its unique national and historical characteristics, as well as its traditions, this path is the easiest and most natural to follow." (Larin 2009)

Despite the Bolsheviks' efforts, the results were limited. Literacy rates among the Chinese labourers improved only slightly, and few actively engaged in social or political life in Russia, despite their somewhat heightened political awareness. According to the 1926 Soviet census, in the Middle Ural region - where some Chinese labourers recruited during the war still worked - only 14% could speak and understand Russian, 5% could write in Russian, and only a few (just 5 out of 42) were members of the Communist Party (Kamenskikh, 2011).

Although some activists from the Association would later become professional revolutionaries in China, they were mostly former students or migrants who had spent years living in the Russian Empire. This was the case for Yang Mingzhai (杨明斋,1882–1938), who joined the Bolshevik movement in 1917 and played a prominent role in creating a nucleus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Before the October Revolution, he had spent a decade working in Vladivostok and Siberia, became fluent in Russian language, and was among the first wave of Chinese political cadres trained by the Bolsheviks. In 1920, he returned to China as a translator and liaison for the Comintern mission, led by the Soviet agent Grigori N. Voitinsky, to establish contacts with Chinese progressive intellectuals. Yang accompanied Voitinsky during his pivotal meetings with Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu in Beijing and took an active part in communist recruitment and propaganda activities in Shanghai in the 1920s, including the full translation and publication of the *Communist Manifesto* (Pantsov, 2000). Nevertheless, in the longer term, activists and leaders of labourers' organisations set up under the Bolsheviks in Russia played only a very small part in leading the Chinese national revolution, as none of them managed to rise to prominence in the CCP in the 1930s (Benton, 2007).

In contrast, Chinese labourers in France were even less exposed to the European socialist and radical ideologies than their compatriots in Russia. Although there are accounts of collective protests by Chinese workers against contract breaches, hazardous working conditions, and harsh treatment, these actions were spontaneous and had little connection to the French labour movement or unions. Instead, Chinese labourers formed small mutual aid associations, informal savings and anti-gambling clubs, and established cooperative stores to supply themselves with soy sauce, sesame, vegetables and other Chinese products (Chen, 1923). These organisations resembled traditional secret societies and trade guilds, which had existed in China for centuries, rather than European-style labour unions.

By late 1918, several Chinese labour organisations were established in France, including the *League of the Chinese overseas labourers* and the *Chinese labourers' Union*, each claiming a membership of 2,000 people (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012). These organisations primarily aimed to help labourers in remaining in France after the war and finding jobs under more favourable labour contracts. However, their efforts yielded little tangible results, and with the repatriation of most

labourers to China, these organisations gradually ceased to exist. Upon on their return to China, a group of labourers formed their own union in Shanghai in September 1919 (James, 2013). But, despite the fear of the authorities that they might use their knowledge and skills to try bringing about some social changes by violent means, the union did not play any noticeable role in the development of the Chinese labour movement (Bastid-Bruguière, 2012).

Conclusion

The wartime experiences of Chinese labourers in Europe contributed, to some extent, to the development of nationalist discourses in China during the interwar period. Their participation in the Allied war effort, along with the injustices they endured, became symbolic references for Chinese politicians and diplomats in the 1920s as they pressed European powers for the abolition of unequal treaties, tariff revaluation, and financial and military assistance. For the labourers themselves, the benefits of their stay in Europe were largely experiential. Some returned with heightened awareness of labour rights and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility, while others carried back scars of violence, psychological trauma, injury and a profound feeling of alienation. Their time in Europe and interactions with local residents and workers inspired them to strive for self-reliance and to challenge the prevailing belief in Western superiority, the belief questioned by former labourer Fu Xishan, who, reeling after the deception and humiliation of the Versailles Conference, remarked: "when still in China, we thought that the Westerners were superior to us fellow Chinese. Now that we are competing with them in intelligence and physical strength, we have come to the realization that they are hardly any better than we are" (Zhong, 2017). Although few labourers personally engaged in nationalist or anti-foreign movements, their collective experiences left a certain impression, resonating in subsequent efforts to assert Chinese sovereignty and push for self-determination. In this sense, the return of Chinese labourers from Europe played an indirect role in shaping China's evolving national identity during the interwar. For better or for worth, their legacy, recently rediscovered and reinterpreted by contemporary Chinese scholarship, has become an integral part of current Beijing's official narrative, emphasising China's historic struggle for dignity and equality on the global stage.

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