THE CHINESE LABOUR FORCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

On July 28, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on the Serbian kingdom. As mortar rounds rained down on Belgrade, nations worldwide rushed to declare their allegiance to one side or the other. The nearly four-year-old Chinese republic declared its neutrality.

In secret, Chinese President Yuan Shikai lobbied Britain to let China to enter the war, if the republic could retake the colony of Qingdao, in Shandong province, that had been seized by Germany in 1898. Yuan offered the British Ambassador 50,000 Chinese troops. Britain rejected the offer. London had commercial investments, concessions in China, as well as the Hong Kong Crown Colony. The British war cabinet wanted China to have no leverage to rid itself of those vital economic interests. British officials also feared that Chinese demands could inspire the rising Indian nationalists in Britain's largest colony to agitate for greater self-rule.

As the First World War progressed, the need for more manpower became acutely problematic. The increased use of ammunition and supplies necessitated by trench warfare led to increased imports, which in turn put enormous strain on the transportation services. Depots, workshops, factories and ports were all desperate for manpower. At the start of the war in August 1914, there was no body of men trained or designated for these tasks. The British War Office had to put forward its troops for manual work near the front lines in the form of Pioneer Battalions, added to each Division.

It was the realisation of this huge task that would be necessary to prepare for the great offensive of 1917 that first persuaded the British Authorities to consider the importation of Chinese labourers to France and Belgium. The tremendous losses seen during the series of British offensives of 1915 meant that labourers who previously worked behind the front line were now required at the front.

By August 1916 the War Office had made an enquiry to Sir John Jordan, British Minister in Peking, for his view regarding the prospect of employing Chinese labour. The scheme was given the go-ahead and by 3rd September 1916, the War Office had appointed Mr T. J. Bourne – Engineering Chief of the Pukow-Hsinyangchou Railway – as a representative and recruiter. At first, the scheme was to recruit labourers from British Territory in Hong Kong to avoid difficulties regarding China's neutrality. However, it became clear that labourers from Hong Kong were not suited to the cold climate, as stated by Military Attaché' Robertson:

'…the men would be Cantonese and Cantonese are not accustomed to a cold climate. This might be sufficient to prevent the scheme being carried out.'

As the recruitment in Hong Kong was not recommended, the Military Attaché presented two alternatives. The first was to enlist Chinese labourers under private contractors as the French did. Once recruited, the labourers would be shipped from the treaty ports (i.e. ports that were open to foreign trade and residence). This method would be carried out under Liang Shih Yi, Director-General of the Customs Administration.

The second option was the enrolment by the British Government of Chinese labourers in Wei-Hai-Wei, a British-leased territory. The War Office – after consultation with Sir John Jordan and the Foreign Office – approved the latter method and by the beginning of October 1916 recruiting agent Forbes and Co., who ran the scheme that recruited Chinese labourers to South African gold mines in 1904, was appointed.

On the morning of 16 November 1916, as New Yorkers were browsing the New York Times for news about the terrible war in Europe, they came upon a short article that probably aroused little interest among non–Chinese New Yorkers: **London, November 15**—The official London Gazette announces that Lieut. Col. B. C. Fairfax of the Liverpool regiment has been appointed to the command of the Chinese Labour Corps. This is the first announcement of the organization of such a corps in the British Army. This was probably the first time that the English–speaking world outside military and diplomatic circles had heard about the Chinese Labour Corps.

About four months earlier, at the end of the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916, a staggering 57,470 British soldiers lay dead or wounded. The Battle of the Somme, which eventually extended into a military campaign lasting until almost the end of November 1916, cost the British Army some 400,000 casualties. Because of the high casualty rate, the British military were faced with the dilemma of organising manpower from a depleting source: more men to fight at the front – the 'teeth' – meant fewer hands at the rear to move supplies and perform other logistical tasks critical to the war effort – the 'tail'. British war planners needed a non– British manpower solution to supply the 'tail' in order to free sufficient men to serve as the 'teeth' in the trenches.

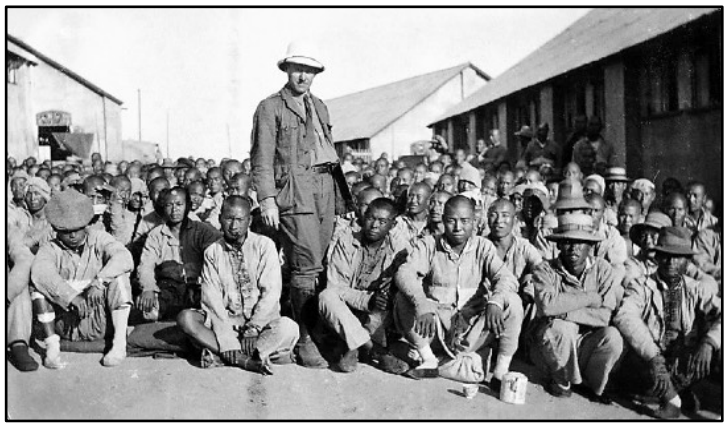
This was where the story of the Chinese Labour Corps began. In early September, Sir John Jordan, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to China, suggested to the War Office a creative solution: recruiting '10,000 coolies' from northern China's 'hardier population,' who were considered to be 'best suited for cold climate and least for extreme heat.' The War Office took up the suggestion, and on 8 October 1916 appointed Thomas Johnstone Bourne, an official in the Ministry of Munitions who possessed extensive experience as a railway engineer in China, as the 'War Office representative for the purpose of recruiting labour in North China for the British Expeditionary Force.' With this appointment, recruitment of manpower for the CLC began in earnest at the British leased territory of Wei–hai–Wei (today's Weihai) in northern China's Shantung (Shandong) province.

Even though it was a 'recruitment' operation in the normal sense of the word, the term carried different implications in the British military in terms of responsibilities and obligations to the welfare of the men and their families. The War Office advised Bourne not to use the word 'recruitment' and, instead, substitute it with 'enrolment' to render it legally a business arrangement bound only by a contract. On 18 January 1917, a little more than three months after Bourne's appointment as the recruitment chief, 1,088 'enrolled' labourers set sail from Wei–hai–Wei. But the number was a disappointment; a mere 1,000 labourers in three months wasn't deemed to be an effective solution to the significant labour problem – rather like administering two aspirin to a soldier with a severe and life–threatening haemorrhage.

Wei–hai–Wei was far away from the railways, the only means of economical mass transportation for potential recruits; the second was active obstruction by local Chinese authorities who were rightly weary of foreigners exploiting the local population. The Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two British recruiting agents operating outside the British leased territory, and they only relented after the Chinese Foreign Ministry intervened, probably under British pressure. Tsingtao Depot The solution to the recruitment problems was found by John Thomas Pratt, British Consul General at the Shandong provincial capital of Tsinan (today's Jinan), who realised that the British would have virtually a free rein in recruitment within areas in which the Shantung Railway ran.

The recruitment

The French pioneered the scheme to recruit labourers to serve as non-military personnel, with negotiations being conducted by government officers posing as civilians to protect the Chinese Government and its neutrality. The contract to supply 50,000 labourers was agreed upon on 14 May 1916 and their first shipment left Tianjin for Marseilles in July 1916.



Workers at Wei-hai-Wei during the recruitment process

British plans following the negotiations with Beijing, the Government and the War Office made the initial decision to use Wei-Hai-Wei as a recruiting depot. This was a result of a compromise between the urgent need for the manpower and a strict legality regarding the politics and diplomacy of China.

On arrival at the Labour Depot at Wei-Hai-Wei, the prospective recruits were given accommodation and food by Forbes and Co. Each recruit was allotted a number and given a brass disc for identity. In order to become a member of the CLC, the recruit needed to pass medical inspection. They then received a uniform and equipment. The Wei-Hai-Wei depot allowed the British to recruit without restriction and by January 1917 the first Battalion of the CLC was ready to sail. At that time, the War Office appointed Lt. Col. Bryan Charles Fairfax and Major Richard Ireland Purdon to organise the headquarters of the CLC and the Chinese Depot, as well as the Native Hospital at Noyelles sur Mer near Abbeville.

These were areas formerly controlled by the Germans, which had been seized by the Japanese, a close ally of the British during the Great War. The areas, which extended from the provincial capital of Tsinan (Jinan) to the port–city of Tsingtao (Qingdao), had a bigger population than the leased territory of Wei–hai–Wei, which therefore presented a more fertile source for recruitment. As a bonus, there were a number of Chinese speaking missionaries living and practising in areas along the railway route, who could be employed as recruiters. In addition, the port facilities at Tsingtao enabled the docking of large ocean liners alongside the wharves and thereby speeding up the loading of passengers and cargo.

The decision was therefore made to move the headquarters to Tsingtao and keep Wei–hai–Wei as a secondary base. The two ports operating together would help accelerate the process of shipping large number of Chinese labourers to where they were needed Pratt was appointed the person in charge of the Tsingtao recruitment facilities at Tsingtao, which was actually based in the town of Tsangkou (today's Cangkou district in Qingdao), located about 15 km north of the port of Tsingtao.

Tsangkou had been developed by the Germans into a thriving commercial town with a post office, shops, hotels, restaurants and a silk industry that took advantage of its own sea and rail freight facilities. When war broke out, the town and other parts of Tsingtao were seized by the Japanese with support of the British. Pratt and his staff found an abandoned German silk factory complex close to the port. The large and sturdy brick factory buildings were perfect for adaptation into a recruitment depot where thousands of potential recruits could be received and medically examined, and the selected ones quartered, fed, clothed and equipped before being taken by train to the port of Tsingtao for shipping out.

From January to February 1917, Tsingtao Depot at Tsangkou operated as a feeder facility where recruited labourers were ferried by steamships to Weihai–Wei for shipping out. In March 1917, Tsingtao Depot became an independent and the main recruitment centre backed up by Carnabé Eckford and Co. as the local recruiting agent. Almost exactly one year later, the Tsingtao Depot at Tsangkou would recruit the last batch of nearly 2,000 labourers and ship them out on 2 March 1918. The typical journey of CLC recruits who made their way to Tsangkou was described in the memoirs of Sir Alwyne Ogden, a member of the British Consular Service in China, who was assigned as one of the administrators for the CLC recruitment operation:

> *'Coolies came from all over North China, and especially China New Year; they would come back from working in the fields of Manchuria for their annual holidays and very often when they saw our advertisements and heard of the prospects they would come in perhaps 100 miles [about 170 km] or more to our recruitment office.'*

They were ordered to remove their outer clothes, which were confiscated and left in a pile, and stand in line. Unexpectedly, an Englishman in uniform came and doused them with disinfectant. Caught by surprise they inhaled some of the disinfectant spray and fell over in a fit of coughing. The tense and unsmiling Chinese faces gave way too much jeering and laughter. After spending more than an hour in a slow–moving queue, were led into a room and lined up before an Englishman, one of the depot's medical officers, who screened them for medical conditions that would disqualify them for service.

The medical officers were looking for signs of trachoma, tuberculosis and venereal diseases, as well as such poor dental health. Once screened and accepted they were given a contract. It was printed on a single sheet of paper, in English on one side and Chinese on the other, and it began with: 'By the terms of this Contract dated the __ day of __ 19__, I, the undersigned coolie recruited by the British Emigration Bureau, declare myself to be a willing labourer under the following conditions, which conditions have been explained and made clear to me by the British Emigration Bureau…'

The nature of the employment was stated as ‘work on railways, roads, etc., and in factories, mines, dockyards, fields, forests, etc.,’ but ‘not to be employed in military operations.’

The contract also listed the daily rate of pay for various classes of labourers, the lowliest of whom would receive a daily pay of 1 French franc when they were abroad in Europe. An additional monthly allotment of 10 Chinese dollars (equivalent to 1.7 shillings and 6 pence) would be paid in China. The highest class would be interpreters and administrative clerks, who would receive up to 5 francs a day in Europe, with a monthly allotment of 60 Chinese dollars (equivalent to 8.5 shillings) to be paid in China. Most of these English speaking Chinese came from such big cities as Shanghai and Tientsin (Tianjin), where they had learned English in Missionary schools and universities. Many of them were also Christians and members of the YMCA.

Equipment and Pay Being non-combatants, no Army-type uniform was issued to the labourers. They were issued with summer and winter "native-style" clothing. They were also issued with a fur-lined cap made of brown felt, with ear-flaps of grey fur, commonly called the "Shandong hat". These hats were modelled on similar hats worn by British troops in the North China garrisons prior to World War I. On arrival in France, labourers managed to acquire other types of headgear, namely civilian cloth caps, Australian bush hats, French Army kepis and even steel helmets. Pictures, whether stills or movies, show labourers of the CLC with a variety of clothing and headgear.

Coolies after the issue of Clothing and Equipment

European officers and NCOs wore regulation British Army uniforms and insignia, either with an Army General Service Corps badge or the insignia of their parent units during prior service. A cap badge of sorts was issued. Gangers wore chevrons on their uniform sleeves. The Chinese were proud of their contribution to the war effort and were ultimately awarded with an official motto ‘Labor Vincit Omnia’. [Labour Conquers all]. In addition to being clothed, fed and accommodated, the labourers also received a small daily payment, part of which was remitted to his nominated party in China.

Invariably gambling was rife and, on pay days, some debts could not be honoured. Fighting ensued and some ensued killed their companions as a result, eventually paying the price by being shot at dawn. The Army Directorate of Labour laid down payment scales:
Bonus to family on recruitment Chinese dollars Pay to start on arrival at Wei-hai-Wei Per diern, Per mensem in France, in China, in francs in Chinese dollars, Labourers Skilled labourers - Carpenters, Bricklayers, Fitter's mates and Blacksmith Strikers. Gangers [equal to Corporal) Skilled Blacksmiths, Skilled Fitters, Chinese Assistant Interpreters [equal to sergeant], Chinese Interpreter Clerks 1.00. Masons from 1.50.

Deductions from Pay - Pay stopped for time lost owing to sickness or misconduct: - in case of sickness, family pay in China up to 6 weeks. Misconduct - entails deductions of family pay for offences involving 28 days loss of pay and upwards Compensation - Death or total disablement $100 Partial disablement, not exceeding $50 Also, the Ration Allowance per diem as laid down by the Directorate of Labour, subject to modification, was per man [hominum].

Rice Meat or Dried Fish, Vegetables Tea Nut Oil, Salt, Flour, Margarine 24 ounces 8 ounces 8 ounces half an ounce half an ounce half an ounce 4 ounces 1 ounce. (8 ounces of rice, 8 ounces of flour, 14 ounces of meat and three-quarters of an ounce of tea, with the addition of one ounce of sugar, ten ounces of bread and also wheat and lard. Cooking arrangements, as laid down, stated that the Chinese ate two meals a day, one before work and one in the evening. The usual camp cooking arrangements were provided - dixies with a percentage of Solar stoves for heating water. Cooking was done in camp by the Chinese cooks. Amongst the equipment issue to each coolie in France were boots, ankle and puttees, two pairs of socks, one towel and one piece of soap, one groundsheet and one blanket in the summer and three in the winter, and an enamelled mug instead of a tin mug.

As the first world war pitted the allied powers, including Britain, France and Russia, against the Central Powers, including Germany and the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian empires. Years into fighting, the male populations were depleted. Soldiers were hunkered in trenches carved into the countryside of Europe. The allies needed help, and it came from China.

Badge of the Chinese Labour Corps

Discipline among the labourers was generally good. The Chinese were predominantly engaged in carrying out, initially, unskilled labouring work. They were commanded by white officers and NCOs and having, in their midst, some literate and articulate men who could organise and represent their fellow countrymen who had no experience of bargaining, they collectively went on strike for better conditions and more food. Labourers were also subordinated to the equivalent of foremen, fellow countrymen known as Gangers, who exercised informal authority. Because of the strict censorship, members of the Labour Companies were not allowed to mix with others outside their camps.

This, in part, can be explained that some nationalities held animosity against others, e.g. the Indian Labour Corps was made up of many tribal groups; the Basutos and Zulus of the South African Native Labour Contingent [SANLC) were mutually hostile and the Chinese and the SANLC were cool towards each other. It appeared that the Chinese and other foreign Labour Corps members, were, at that time, of unknown characteristics and were therefore separated into their own camps, for their own protection and also so that they could not mix with the British troops in general. They were supervised by their own British officers and NCOs. In death, Chinese members of the CLC were buried in separate cemeteries or, if buried in cemeteries with Commonwealth dead, in separate areas apart from them. However, deceased British officers and NCOs serving with or transferred to the CLC were buried amongst other Commonwealth fallen. In life and in death the Chinese were isolated (reflecting the attitude of Europeans towards Asians in general and non-Christians in particular).

In mid-September 1917, Alec Paton, stationed at Zillebeke, Ypres, and serving with the Royal Garrison Artillery, obtained permission to visit Reninghelst to meet Claude Betts, a friend who had been promoted to company commander in the CLC. Before leaving Paton was in conversation with one of his officers who commented that he thought 'it would be a good idea to use Chinese as infantry, there being so many of them.' Adding that he wondered what the Germans would do if they saw ten thousand Chinamen coming over the top? In reply a wag said *'Run and bring their washing, I should think*.'

Claude Betts had learnt a few Chinese phrases as his labourers could speak no English and they were cunning enough to pretend they could not understand sign language if such meant work. As Alec Paton was passing through Reninghelst he noticed a sign, erected by HQ for the troops, which read 'DO NOT SPEAK TO THE CHINESE.' Underneath, also in large letters, a wit had written, 'WHO THE HELL CAN?'. Once again, to quote from the Directorate of Labour's Notes:

Complaints: The Chinese, in China, are accustomed to seek redress of grievances by means of written petitions: locked petition boxes should be provided. The Notes also included the following facts regarding the Chinese: (a) The Chinese coolie has an inherent contempt for foreigners (b) He comes here purely and simply for money, with no interest in the war. (c) He is a rigid adherent to his contract though agreeable to modifications, e.g. piecework if advantageous to him. (d) He is unequalled as a judge of human character; the best procurable class of white overseer is therefore necessary to obtain the best results. (e) He is fond of litigation and lodging complaints, and, though he can be "sworn," his evidence must be accepted with considerable reserve. (f) He is not addicted to crimes of violence or drunkenness, but, is an inveterate gambler and indulges freely in immorality with women, if opportunity offers.

In spite of all the seriousness there was some humour amongst the British officers and NCOs with the Chinese, as these few examples may illustrate: (a) Four coolies had left a railway truck which they were loading and disappeared, thereby delaying work. When charged with leaving work, each had a ready answer.

No. 1 declared that he was sick and obliged to retire. No. 2 had seen some friends in the distance and had left to talk to them for a few minutes. No.3 felt the need for some tea, so had slipped away to get it. No. 4 was forlorn at being left alone and so left to escape the solitude.

(b) I, The Officer Commanding, had occasion to rebuke some gangers (Chinese NCO's) for slackness. They listened intently and on conclusion of his speech a babel of sound poured forth from the delinquents. The O.C. asked as to what they were saying and the interpreter, a graduate of Peking University replied, 'They wish to say. Sir, that they all like you very much!*

(c) A melancholy coolie asked the British Orderly Officer if he could make a complaint. I wish to be sent back to the Depot. The men in my hut are wicked men.' 'How's that?' enquired the officer. 'I am a Christian, Sir.' 'Very good,' replied the officer, 'I hope I am one too.' 'But I am a Presbyterian, Sir, and at the Depot there were others of that religion, and we could have a service together. In my hut now there are no Presbyterians, and all are wicked.'

Mutinies did, however, occur, not only amongst service personnel of the Allies, but also amongst the various Labour Corps. Some were court-martialled and punished in various ways, i.e. hard labour, penal service, imprisonment or even death.

In September 1917 some British soldiers stationed at the base camp at Etaples, south of Boulogne, caused trouble and rebelled. Word of this spread to some unwilling Chinese and Egyptians, working at Boulogne, who then stopped work unloading supplies and went on the rampage.

Field Marshal Haig ordered this to be quelled and, as a consequence, 27 unarmed strikers were shot dead, 39 wounded and 25 imprisoned. On 10 October 1917, in a serious shooting incident in the Fourth Army area, 5 Chinese labourers were killed and 14 wounded.

The inquiry into this incident came to the conclusion that this was due to the Commanding Officer not appreciating the standard of discipline required to be maintained between his officers and British NCOs as regards the treatment of labourers. On 16 December 1917, a mutiny, as a result of bullying by British NCOs, was reported amongst 21 Company CLC at Fontinettes. The armed guard fired on the mutineers, killing 4 and wounding 9. A Canadian soldier was also killed. The next day, a British infantry platoon forced the Chinese to resume work and, after the ringleaders were jailed, normality was restored on 23 December.

On Christmas Day 1917, labourers of 151 Company CLC conspired to kill their Sergeant Major, a "half-caste", as he had been an extortioner and had forced the men to work too hard. Two hundred men of the Royal Welch Fusiliers rounded up some of the mutineers whilst others had fled to near the HQ of 5 Corps at Locre. On Christmas Day, D. H. Doe who was serving at that time with the 51st Signal Company [Royal Engineers] and based at Bailleul and was hoping to watch a football match. As the Chinese were running loose, armed with improvised weapons, he, with others, was ordered to shoot the Chinese to quell this mutiny. Eight were shot on the pitch and 93 were captured.

In West Outre British Cemetery, Heuvelland, Belgium, there are the graves of 3 members of the CLC killed on Christmas Day, 1917, namely Chang Cheh-te [43804], Chang Hung-an [39540} and Wu En-lu [43913], ail of the 105th Company, CLC, Three members of the CLC were charged with mutiny and striking : on 9 May 1918, for mutiny and striking, was sentenced to two years hard labour. Also, on the 9 May 1918 40749 was charged with the same offences and sentenced to one year's hard labour. On 12 May 1918, 25348 was charged with mutiny, insubordination and disobedience for which he was sentenced to six months hard labour though this sentence was revised and later quashed.

Chinese workers dug trenches. They repaired tanks in Normandy. They assembled shells for artillery. They transported munitions in Dannes. They unloaded supplies and war material in the port of Dunkirk. They ventured farther afield, too. Graves in Basra, in southern Iraq, contain remains of hundreds of Chinese workers who died carrying water for British troops in an offensive against the Ottoman Empire.

Chinese workers were originally not meant to serve closer than 10 miles to the frontline, but this was reduced to one mile as German artillery bombed the Allied lines.

The Labourers' Legacy

China was struggling to control regionals warlords. The fragile republic was in danger of disintegrating. China's leaders needed to look strong and the Great War created an opportunity. If China managed to get into the war, if they got to sit at the negotiating table, it would cement its claim to power.

Europe said it didn't need Chinese soldiers. But they certainly needed workers, reasoned President Yuan's adviser, Liang Shiyi. In 1915, Liang again approached the Russian, the French and the British ambassadors. China would provide tens of thousands of unarmed labourers in return for a chance to sit at the post-war conference. The French and Russians agreed. The British first rejected the offer but reconsidered a year later.

Transportation of Chinese Labour Corps

The first contingent of Chinese labourers (1086 under six British officers and one Medical Officer) left Wei-Hai-Wei on 18 January 1917, on the *Teucer*. The route took them via Yokohama, Singapore, Durban and Cape Town, arriving at Havre on 19 April 1917. However, during transportation there was evidence of defiance of authority from some, as show in the ships' official logs; four of the Chinese labourers were detained for subordination and inciting a mutiny.

"A" Company 1st Battalion prior to embarkation.

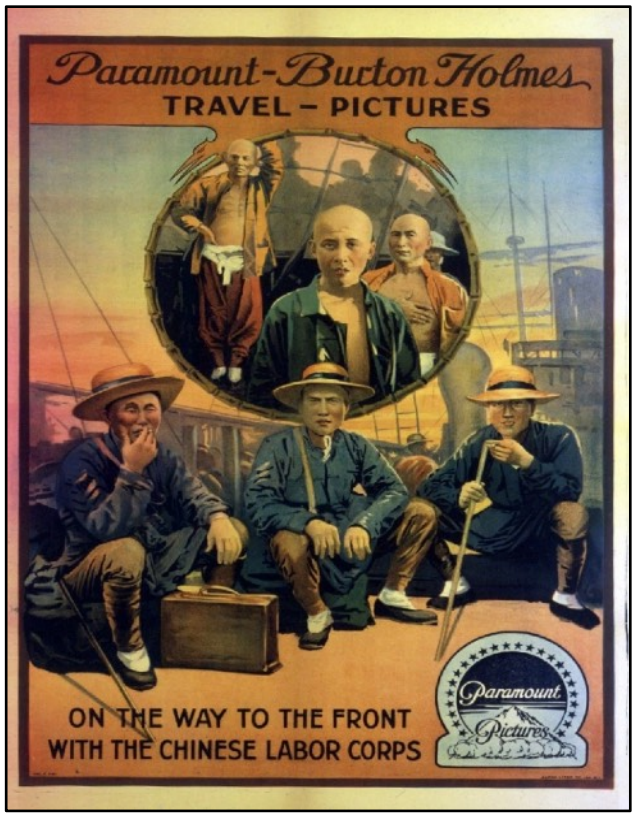
After Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917 – followed shortly after by the sinking of the *Athos,* causing the loss of over 500 of the French-recruited Chinese labourers – the British sought to minimise the risk by reducing the time their own recruits would spend at sea. In March 1917, the Colonial Office approached the Canadian authorities for assistance.

The plan was to transport the labourers from Wei-Hai-Wei to Canada and land at William Head in Vancouver Island, where they would be held at the old quarantine station. The voyagers' conditions were varied – some crossings could be extremely rough and many of the labourers were not used to travelling on water – the official log of the *Empress of Asia* records deaths during the transit, including that of Ching Chin Kuei, who died from an obstruction of the bowel and was buried at sea.

Following authorisation from the quarantine station, the labourer's boarded the train provided by Canadian Pacific Railway Company to Halifax, Nova Scotia. During this land journey, the Canadian government banned all news outlets from reporting on the train convoys that crossed the country on their way to France. Once at Halifax, the Chinese labourers would be shipped to Liverpool or Plymouth in the UK, then from Folkestone on to Noyelles-sur-Mer in France.

Herded like Cattle

By trains and ships, the Chinese made their way to Europe. Hundreds, if not thousands, died along the way. Xu estimated at least 700 perished. Between 400 and 600 workers died on February 17, 1917, alone when a German submarine sank the French passenger ship Athos near Malta. Many more died crossing Russia, according to Li's research.



About 3,000 Chinese workers died in France, on their way to the Western front in Northern France, or on their return to China between 1916 and 1920. It is estimated that 30,000 Chinese died on the Russian front.

To avoid further German submarine attacks, Britain shipped more than 84,000 Chinese labourers through Canada in a campaign kept secret for years in the then British Dominion. "In view of the suspicion that certain Chinese are being used as a medium of communication by enemy agents", Canada banned news outlets from reporting on the train convoys that crossed the country on their way to France.

Six weeks after the Athos sank, the first contingent of Chinese workers arrived in Vancouver on board the RMS Empress of Russia. There, they boarded trains, journeying more than 6,000 kilometres to Montreal, St John or Halifax on Canada's Atlantic coast. "They were herded like so much cattle in cars, forbidden to leave the train and guarded like criminals," the *Halifax Herald* reported in 1920, when transports had ended and Canada's censors allowed coverage.

Working in France

The plan to raise Chinese labour units was initially proposed by the War Office for a target of ten thousand labourers, or about 20 companies, which was set out by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Andrew Bonar Law. The distribution of these Chinese labour companies was first done by DGMR (Director-General Movements and Railways), under the DGT (Director-General of Transportations) Sir Eric Geddes. But the QMG (Quartermaster General) decided that it was impracticable to hand these Chinese over for administration as well as all work under DGT. Therefore 14 of these first 20 CLCs were to work under DGT. Of these, the 1st, 4th and 6th companies were to work under CEPC (Chief Engineer Port Construction) for Port construction, consisting of men of suitable trades or easy to train for this sort of work.

The 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 7th companies worked under CSKP on Transportation and Stores. Then seven CLC. The remaining six companies were distributed to Armies and Line of Communication. A typical CLC consisted of a headquarters and four platoons each under a subaltern. Each platoon consisted of two sections, each under a sergeant. Each section consisted of two subsections, each under a corporal. There were between 470 and 490 Chinese, which included 32 gangers of classes 1, 2 and 3 in each company. By the end of the hostility in 1918, there were about 195 Chinese Labour companies in all (approximately 95,500 Chinese labourers).

As Chinese labourers started to arrive at the Western Front, there were no special arrangements in regard to “skilled” companies. However, a census was made of the trades of everyone passing through the depot, based on an oral examination. There was no regulation with regard to the tradesmen, and no special demands for skilled labour had been received. Around May 1917, the decision to regularise the position of Chinese skilled labourers and tradesmen was taken at Conference at HQ CLC at Noyelles. Special rates of pay were proposed for these skilled labourers and agreed by the War Office by the end of August 1917.

Trench warfare had wiped out hundreds of thousands of lives in Europe in the war’s first two years. Both sides were desperate for manpower. It was an offer the West just could no longer refuse. To maintain the appearance of Chinese neutrality, Liang established companies in China to recruit workers. The largest was Huimin in Tianjin, established in May 1916, only a month before Yuan’s death. The president’s death that year, and the political turmoil that resulted, forced Liang to flee to Hong Kong.

French Lieutenant Colonel Georges Truptil set a goal of recruiting 50,000 Chinese workers. The initial group of 1,698 Chinese recruits left the port of Tianjin for Marseille in southern France, on August 24, 1916. By then, Britain had also decided to recruit Chinese labourers. “I would not even shrink from the word Chinese for the purpose of carrying out the war,” said Winston Churchill, a member of parliament 24 years before he became Prime Minister. “These are not times when people ought in the least to be afraid of prejudices.”

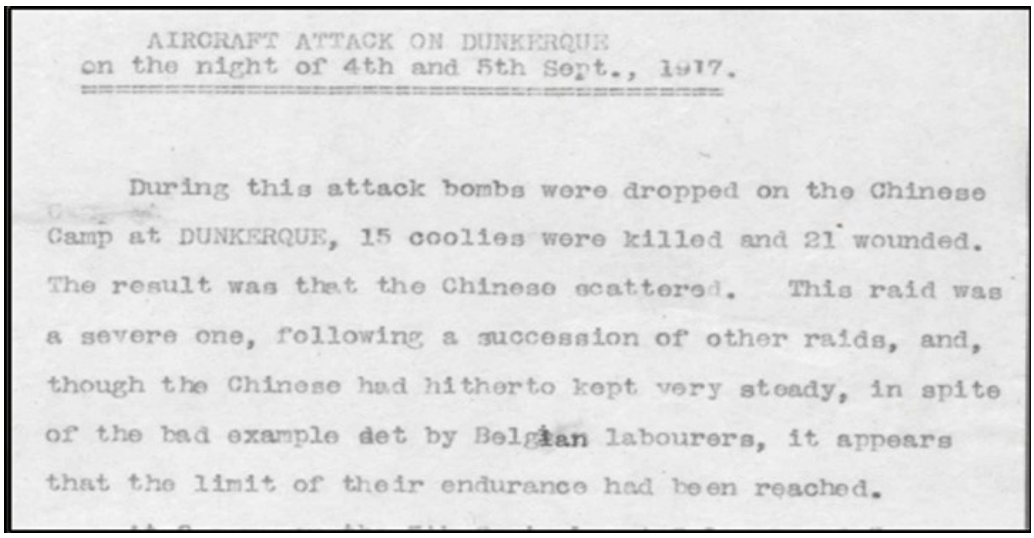
British recruitment began in November 1916 in its concession Wei-hai-Wei in Shandong province, and later in Japanese-occupied Qingdao. Liang travelled to Japan to offer providing Chinese workers to the in exchange for capital and technology. The British ruled out recruiting in Hong Kong almost immediately after the colony’s governor, Francis Henry May, argued against it in telegraphs to London. The local Chinese population was “impregnated with malaria” and not “amenable to discipline”, he wrote to the secretary of the colonies in London. Once in France, 140,000 workers went to ports, mines, farms and munitions factories. They repaired roads, transported supplies and dug trenches near the front lines, risking German artillery shells.

“The village we arrived at had been knocked about a great deal by shell fire, while I saw one or two very exciting air fights,” wrote Chow Chen-fu, an interpreter for the 167th Chinese Labour Corps in France, in a letter to a Shanghai friend. The letter was printed by the *South China Morning Post* in 1918.

The Chinese republic kept a watchful eye on its workers abroad. In 1917, China set up a Bureau of Overseas Chinese Workers to handle workers’ grievances. In one case envoy Li Jun protested that the French government was feeding horse meat to Chinese workers. After another intervention by Beijing, Britain granted compensation for blindness, deafness or “incurable insanity” incurred at work.

By 1919, the *Post* estimated that the workers had taken home £6 million in savings, roughly HK$17.3 billion today. China’s ambassador to France, Hu Weide, expressed hope that workers equipped with much-needed technical knowledge would develop China’s economy when they returned home. “The best ones, who may be able to learn about the management of French factories can become excellent managers in China when they return,” he wrote at the time in a telegram preserved in Chinese government archives.

Chinese labourer Song Xiu-feng with Maurice, son of photographer René Matton, in Proven, Belgium, 1917. Photo: In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres



AIRCRAFT ATTACK ON DUNKERQUE
on the night of 4th and 5th Sept., 1917.

During this attack bombs were dropped on the Chinese Camp at DUNKERQUE, 15 coolies were killed and 21 wounded. The result was that the Chinese scattered. This raid was a severe one, following a succession of other raids, and, though the Chinese had hitherto kept very steady, in spite of the bad example set by Belgian labourers, it appears that the limit of their endurance had been reached.

During the Flanders Offensive in 1917, many Chinese labour companies replaced the British labour companies, who were sent from the Line of Communication from the Southern to the Northern Armies area (which at this time were occupied by the Second and the Fifth Armies). Between 4 and 5 August 1917, Dunkirk suffered enemy air raids which resulted in 12 Chinese labourers being killed and 32 wounded. These air raids caused panic and led to the dislocation of Chinese labour corps, as shown in the Labour Commandant's war diary.

Chinese entertain British troops in France. Dragons ready for the Dragon fight.

With the United States' entry into the war in April 1917, Britain and France needed to transport American troops, not Chinese labourers. China abandoned its neutrality and declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in August, eager to have a seat in post-war negotiations. Russia quit the war as the Tsarist empire crumbled in the world's first Communist revolution in October 1917, stranding hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers in the former empire.

Ten days before Germany's surrender on November 11, 1918, Britain sent back the first batch of 365 Chinese workers, beginning repatriations that ended in September 1920. By the end of the war, the Chinese had already begun to form an established community in France. The republic had workers stay to help rebuild after the fighting. About 3,000 Chinese labourers remained in France and settled down, forming Chinatowns.

Chinese Foreign Minister Lu Zheng-xiang, China's representative at the Versailles conference in 1919.

New Identity

French socialists influenced these future Communist Party leaders as much as the new Chinese identity that emerged among the emigrant workers. More than 1,500 young Chinese students worked in French factories and studied in Chinese schools living among the remaining war labourers. The wartime labourers were the perfect role models for the first generation of China's Communists, Xu says, China gained its promised seat at Versailles, but remained an outsider. Foreign Minister Lu Zhengxiang's (Lou Tseng-Tsiang) delegation was given two seats, three fewer than Japan.

China's main demand, the return of Shandong, the birthplace of Confucius, was ignored. When the Western powers agreed to hand the former Western colony to Japan, street protests in Beijing forced minister Lu to leave the conference in disgrace, making China the only country that participated in the conference that did not sign the peace treaty.

The men who returned to China did not develop the Chinese economy with their newly acquired skills. They returned to a divided country, its economy in ruins, where savings from Europe were quickly spent. After the war, China was to discover the true cost of her reticence to get militarily involved in the conflict. At Versailles they found themselves side-lined by the new world powers, and consequently they refused to sign the peace treaty. The First World War was a global conflict that affected everything it touched, and China, like many other nations, soon found out that her contribution to the great struggle had not been sufficient enough for her to taste the fruits of power and influence that had grown ripe on the battlefields of Europe and beyond.

Kitchen staff and staff of a Chinese hospital.

Chinese workers had to ensure 12 hour workdays, six days a week, with many remaining in France until 1921 to help clear up unexploded bombs from the battlefields At least 2,000 Chinese labourers lost their lives in France - many during the 1918 flu crisis - but unofficial estimates put the number at nearer 20,000.

First class ganger Liu Dien Chen was recommended for a Military Medal for rallying his men when under fire in March 1918, he was eventually awarded the Meritorious Service medal as it was decided that the CLC members were not eligible for the Military Medal. Five Chinese Labour Corp members were awarded the Meritorious Service Medal during WW1.

In March 1919 there were still 80,000 Chinese workers in France and Belgium with orders to clean up the battlefields. This involved digging up the bodies of dead soldiers and reinterring them in Military Cemeteries.

Many Chinese members of the CLC received the British War Medals but this is a subject to which more research is needed. The Meritorious Service Medal for devotion to duty was awarded to Zhao Wende [30828] and Wang Chenjing [30064], both Labourers of the 57"' Company CLC, and to Liu Dianzhen, Class One Ganger of the 108"' Company CLC. Also, to Wang Yushao [15333] Labourer of the 59"' Company CLC [of Da Cheng county in Zhili] for bravery, his citation reading: Near Marcoing [near Cambrai] on 6 June 1919, he observed a fire on a dump of ammunition situated close to a Collecting Station. On his own initiative he rushed to the dump with two buckets of water which he threw on the fire and then seized a burning British 'P' Bomb (apparently the cause of the outbreak) and hurled it to a safe distance from the dump. He then continued to extinguish the burning dump which had spread to the surrounding grass in which rifle grenades and German shells were lying. By his initiative, resource and disregard of personal safety this Labourer averted what might have been a serious explosion.

Yan Deng-feng [91085], Class One Ganger of the 130th Company CLC was also awarded this decoration for: On 23rd May 1919 at Bailleul [near Armentieres] following an explosion, he worked constantly for four hours removing tarpaulins from the stacks of ammunition and drenching them with water. Sgt W. J. Yaxley [553653] British Army, serving with the 60th Company CLC was also awarded this medal. The Chinese Order of Wenhu (The Order of the Striped Tiger) was also awarded to some members, whether serving with or attached to the CLC.

Shorncliffe Military Cemetery

In Shorncliffe Military Cemetery, near Folkestone in Kent, are six graves of labourers of the CLC, all having died in the Shorncliffe Military Hospital in 1917 and 1918. Folkestone area was used as a staging post with the camps located near Sugar Loaf Hill and Caesar's Camp. These gravestones are much larger, of a different material, possibly slate and format to the usual CWGC gravestones. The tops are shaped similar to Dutch house roofs. The wording, however, is similar. Those buried here are Niu Yun-huei [24640], died 2nd July 1917; Chen Te-shan [110916], died 30th August 1917; Liu Ching-yi. [37614] died 18th January 1918; Wang Chin-tien [109761], died 4th April 1918; Chiao Pi-cheng [105994] died 13th April 1918 and Yang Chichun [72367] died 30th April 1918.

It has the grave of a young civilian who was buried alongside those who had fought and died in the War. He was Joseph Leng, who drowned at Audricq on 2 October 1917 whilst visiting his father, Sapper J. Leng. He was only seven years old and on his gravestone his parents have had carved the epitaph 'Suffer little children to come to me.' Also, in this cemetery are five graves containing the remains of men of the CLC who were 'shot at dawn'.

Their gravestones carried the usual epitaphs and were in every way indistinguishable from other CLC gravestones. Wang En-rong [10299] 29"' Company CLC was executed on 26 June 1918, together with Yang Jing-shan [10272] also of the 29"' Company CLC, from Liaocheng county of Shandong province, for murdering a French woman at her estaminet (Coffee house) during a robbery.

The former's gravestone only carries his number and the inscription 'Faithful unto Death' whilst that of the latter bears the inscription 'A Noble Duty Bravely Done.' Zhao Gongyi [Chao Hsing I (Chao Kung-i). (46090), 161st Company CLC, from Jinan county in Shandong, having murdered a fellow-countryman, possibly as a result of gambling, was executed on 9"' August 1918 and Hui Yihe (Hui I He (Hui I-ho) [42476], 112th Company CLC, 62 from Qing county in ZhiJi, having murdered a fellow-countryman was executed on 12* September 1918.

The former's gravestone bears the epitaph 'A noble duty bravely done' whilst the latter's bears the epitaph 'Though dead he still liveth.' Zhang Ruzhi (116174), of the 150th Company CLC, from X-hai13 in Zhili appeared to lead a charmed life after murdering a French prostitute and her three children near Amiens in November 1918. He was arrested in April 1919 but in May escaped and boarded a ship in Marseilles in August for China.

On arrival at Shanghai he was not allowed to land for not having the correct papers and was returned to Marseilles. After landing he disappeared in France, apparently dealt in cocaine, before finally being arrested in February 1920 near Calais and was interrogated. He eventually admitted his guilt before his execution. His last requests were not to have his eyes bandaged and to sing a hymn, both of which were granted.

His gravestone carries the inscription 'A Good Reputation Endures Forever.' The wording of the epitaphs on the gravestones of those executed for such heinous crimes would seem to be ironic in the extreme. On his gravestone his date of death is shown as 14 February 1920, whilst on the CWGC printout of CLC graves, his date of death is given as 10 February 1920.

In the Military Cemeteries at Poperinghe, Belgium, in there are lone graves to members of the CLC. That in the New Military Cemetery is of Yu Eu-peng, (30159], of the 55th Company, CLC, who died on 3181 July 1917. In the Old Military Cemetery is the grave of Wang Chin-chih (44735), of the 10th Company, CLC. On his gravestone is carved 'A Good Reputation endures Forever.' He killed a colleague in their camp at De Klijte, escaped but was caught at Le Havre, tried on 19 April 1919 in Poperinghe and was executed on 8th May 1919.

His execution is reputed to have taken place in the courtyard of the Town Hall at Poperinghe, opposite the cells in its basement which were used to detain soldiers for minor offences and also prior to being shot, but the Town Hall had already reverted to its former civilian use at this time. Word has it that his execution was the last to be held in Poperinghe and the execution post, now on public view in the Courtyard, was used only once, for his execution.

The cemetery was in use from October 1914 and closed to British burials in May 1919. His grave is amongst those saved for officers who had died in early 1915. At St. Etienne-au-Mont cemetery and amongst the graves is that of Cheng Shun Kung, [53497] of the 60* Company CLC, who died on 23rd July 1918 after being convicted of the murder of a fellow countryman. On his grave is carved 'A Good Reputation lives Forever.' The date of his death, as shown at the Public Records Office, is 27th July 1918.

The CWGC, state that their records cannot be amended until such time as they have written authorised confirmation. The CWGC also state that the British Library, Oriental and Indian Office and Army Records, Hayes, hold no records for the CLC. In this cemetery is a large memorial, with inscriptions in Chinese, French and English, stating that it was erected by comrades of the Chinese Labour Corps.

In the cemetery at Abbeville, in which there are the graves of expatriates who served with the CLC. Sgt. E.J. Collins served with the 43rd Company CLC and died on 7"' November 1918. Staff QMS (WO II) George William Bashford was with the RASC before transferring to the Labour Corps attached to the 91s ' Company CLC. He drowned on I8'h November 1919. 2nd Lt. Henry Elderfield of the Northumberland Fusiliers was attached to the 163rd Company CLC and died on 11th November 1918 (Armistice Day).

Sgt. T. F. Murphy of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers transferred to the 135"' Company CLC and died on 26'" March 1920. Cpl R H Smith of the 2nd Bn. Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) transferred to the Base Depot, CLC and died on the 27 November 1918.

Corporal Robert Whittaker of the Royal Welch Fusiliers also transferred to the Base Depot CLC and died on 3rd November 1918. Corporal J. Wilkie from the Durham Light Infantry was another who transferred to the Base Depot CLC and died on 19th September 1919.

There are no Chinese buried in this cemetery. St. Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen, amongst others, holds the graves of 44 members of the CLC and four British attached to the CLC. For the most part, graves in this cemetery are laid head to head. Lt. Charles Atkinson of the 17Ist Company, Labour Corps was attached to the CLC and died on 4th July 193 9. Private W. Brophy of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment transferred to the 43rd Company CLC and died on 10th December 1918. Private A. J. Davis of the Infantry Labour Company, Devonshire Regiment, transferred to the 116th Company CLC and died on 19* July 1918, Sgt. F. C. Legg of the London Regiment (the London Rifles) transferred to the 9lh Company CLC and died on 9°'November 1918.

Amongst the CLC graves are those members who were shot at dawn. You Longxi (Yu Lung-hsi). [4976] was court-martial led and convicted of murdering two people and sentenced to death on 28th December 1918, but committed suicide on 29* January 1919 before his sentence could be carried out. On the same date [28"' December 1918] Wang Fayou (5884) was also sentenced for the same offence as Yu, and was shot on 15th February 1919.

Hei Chi-Ming [97170J and Kung Ching-hsing [44340] died on 21st February 1920, after both were convicted for wounding two French prostitutes and the murder of a British Army sergeant at a brothel near Le Havre.

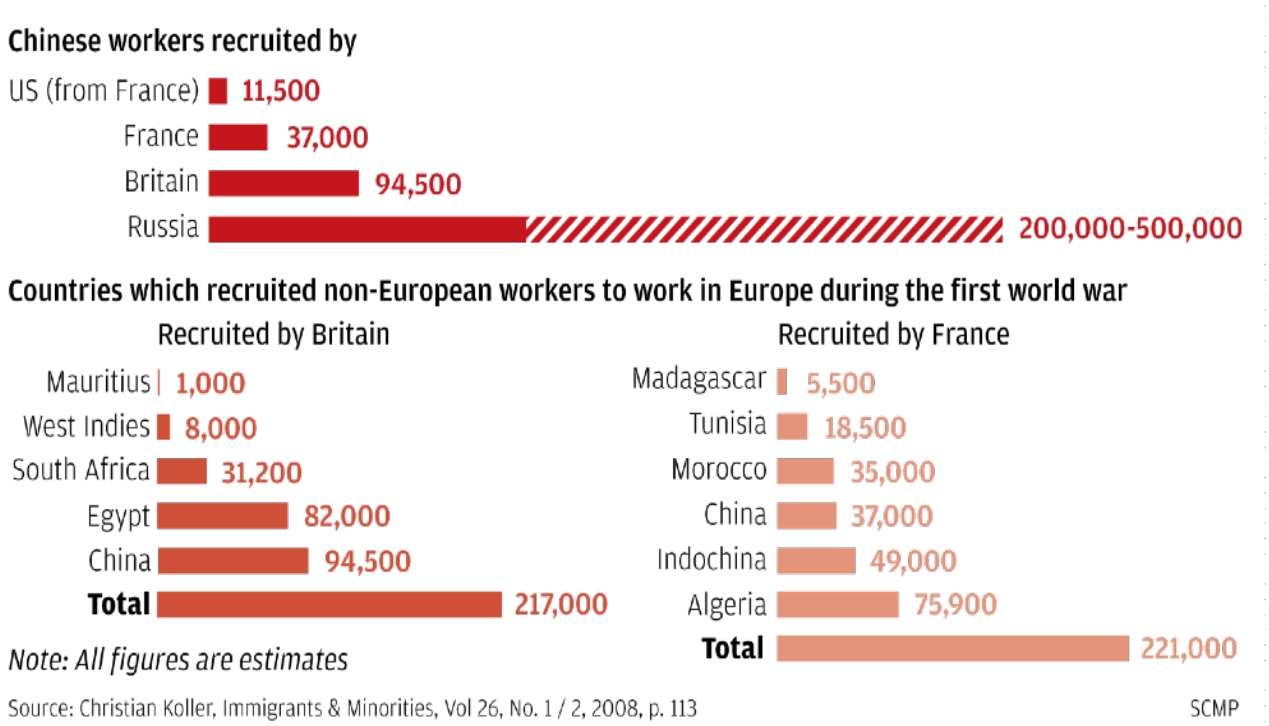
The base depot, prison and hospital of the CLC was at Noyelles-sur-Mer and the cemetery there contains the graves of 838 men of the CLC, with a memorial bearing the names of 41 men whose graves are unknown. The site of this cemetery was selected by the Chinese themselves so that the fengshui was correct.

Whilst many of the CLC in this cemetery had home addresses in Shandong and Zhili provinces [about 98%] there were also about 25 from other provinces all north of the Yangzi River; two were from Fengtian in Manchuria [the old name for Mukden and now Shenyang], seven from Henan, seven from Jiangsu, five specifically from Hebei [the modern name for Zhili], one from Anhui. two from Shenjing [the archaic name for Jilin province in the north-east] and one from Gansu. The latter is unusual, it being a province to the north-west of China. One grave is noteworthy being that of an early recruit whose serial number was 53. Wang Yufong came from Rongcheng in Shandong, a mere 35 miles from Weihai Wei, and he died on the 10" June 1918. Many of those buried here had died of flu from the post-war epidemic.

Bid for UNESCO World Heritage Status

The Noyelles-sur-Mer Chinese Cemetery and Memorial are among 11 sites in the Somme that have applied for UNESCO World Heritage status. Uniquely, this site of remembrance is exclusively Chinese and several architectural and landscaping features, such as Chinese characters, pineapples, the design of the entrance and the types of plants used, highlight this fact. It also differs from other cemeteries because it pays tribute to foreign labourers, not soldiers, who came from far off countries in support of the war effort.

A ceremony is organised each year for the Qingming festival, the Chinese Memorial Day. This exceptional site of remembrance receives a great many visitors throughout the year.




Shandong Province
A Administered by Pakistan; claimed by India
B Administered by India
C Administered by China; claimed by India
D Administered by India; claimed by China
E Taiwan under separate administration
KAZAKHSTAN
RUSSIA
UZBEKISTAN
Tashkent
Bishkek
KYRGYZSTAN
Dushanbe
TAJIKISTAN
AFGHANISTAN
MONGOLIA
Ulaanbaatar
Beijing
NORTH KOREA
P'yongyang
SEA OF JAPAN (EAST SEA)
Seoul
SOUTH KOREA
JAPAN
YELLOW SEA
Islamabad
PAKISTAN
Lahore
CHINA
Delhi
New Delhi
INDIA
NEPAL
Kathmandu
Thimphu
BHUTAN
Nanchang
JIANGXI
EAST CHINA SEA
Tropic of Cancer
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