

## Chinese recruited for war had secret passage through Canada

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YPRES, Belgium — Under pristine, white tombstones in the British military cemeteries dotting the landscape throughout Belgium and northern France, the graves of thousands of Chinese labourers can be found.

Some 140,000 Chinese men were recruited by the Allies during the First World War to fill a critical labour shortage at the Western Front. While their contributions have often been overlooked or even forgotten, there is evidence of their work everywhere in and around Ypres and along the coast of north-west France, not far from the site of the Battle of the Somme.

You just have to know where to look.

The Chinese Labour Corps unloaded cargo ships and trains, chopped down trees for timber, and maintained docks, railways, roads and airfields. Skilled mechanics repaired vehicles and even worked on tanks. Later, after the Armistice, the Chinese stayed behind to clean up the mess. As late as 1919, Chinese labourers remained in France and Belgium to help clear the rubble, bury the dead and clean up the battlefields.

Though the Corps was the largest ethnic minority group to participate in the Great War, their story is often left out of the history books, said Belgian historian Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

"In the West, the labourers were no war heroes. They fought no battles, they had no share in any of the great victories during the war," said Vanhaelemeersch, a Sinologist at University College West-Flanders in Bruges. "Their presence in Europe during the war was, at best, a footnote in the history books on the war."

### Crucial link between China and the West

The Chinese recruits "figured importantly as messengers between Chinese and Western civilizations," wrote Xu Guoqi, author of "Strangers on the Western Front," a new book published this year on the Corps.

"Although most of the Chinese labourers were illiterate farmers with no clear ideas about China or the world when they were selected to go to Europe, they had a part in developing that new national identity and would play an important role in China's internationalization," Xu wrote.

Vanhaelemeersch agreed. "Chinese labourers to Europe during the war was China's first ever entering the international political scene," he said. "Today, the increasing interest in the Corps perfectly fits in the international agenda of the new superpower which China wants to be."

### Secret passage through Canada

Contrary to the recruitment campaigns that exploited Chinese labourers during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the late 19th century, members of the Chinese Labour Corps signed contracts promising daily wages, food, clothing, housing and medical support. The labourers' families also received regular payments.

Such rewards were tempting enough to encourage thousands of men to sign up for three years of work on the front lines of a war they knew very little about. Most of the labourers recruited by the British came from the north-east provinces of Shandong and present-day Hebei. The French also recruited labourers from China's southern provinces.

En route to Europe, more than 80,000 labourers passed through Canada, landing in Vancouver and travelling by train across the country to Halifax. Most Canadians don't know about this for one simple reason: Their passage through Canada was a top secret operation.

Capt. Harry Drummond Livingstone, a 29-year-old doctor with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, served at a recruiting station in Shandong Province. He examined thousands of men; only the strongest were selected to be a member of the Corps. Those who passed the medical examination were given uniforms – a dark blue tunic, dark blue pants, and a straw hat and hatband marked "CLC" – before marching out to the ships bound for Vancouver.

In his diary, Livingstone described the Chinese tradition of setting off firecrackers before a long pilgrimage: "...strings of firecrackers [are] set off, thousands in all, which noise brings safe journey, no storms or submarines."

Between April 1917 and March 1918, more than 84,000 men were shipped from China to British Columbia. At this time, the Canadian government was imposing a head tax on all Chinese emigrants coming to Canada. Fearing members of the Labour Corps might try to "jump train," the men were locked in their train cars and put under armed guard until they reached the east coast. There, they boarded ships headed for the battlefields in France and Belgium.

The journey was a treacherous one. At least 700 labourers died en route. In the fall of 1917, Livingstone left China and accompanied a contingent to the Western Front. While crossing the Pacific, he described

"mountainous seas" in his diary: "On [Nov. 11] we ran into [a] bad gale and boat listed so far over that chairs and tables all slid to side. Dishes broken in dining room and couldn't walk on deck."

### **Chinese legacies in the European countryside**

There are about 2,000 Chinese graves spread out across 17 cemeteries in Belgium and northern France, though some Chinese scholars argue the number of Chinese deaths was as high as 20,000. Most died between 1918 and 1919 from the Spanish Flu; some died from wounds and injuries received during the course of their duties; others lost their lives during German air raids.

From a distance, the graves at the Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery on the outskirts of Ypres all look the same. But look a little more closely and you'll start to notice the differences. The tombstones with rounded tops belong to British soldiers, the squared stones are German and the ones with crosses are French. And the ones with Chinese script? Those belong to the Chinese labourers.

The descendants of Belgian peasants, who continue to live on family farms in the area, can still recall hearing stories of Chinese labourers setting up camp in the neighbourhood.

The field is now chock-full of Brussels sprouts, but on the evening of November 15, 1917, 500 Chinese labourers were camped here. When a labourer came out of his tent to light a cigarette, the flame attracted the attention of a German pilot in an airplane overhead. A bomb was dropped killing 13 Chinese men.

"Although forgotten soon after the war, the labourers remain present in the collective memory of the local population," said Vanhaelemeersch, the Belgian Sinologist. "If you pay attention to the small details of the changing landscape, you can still detect the Chinese presence here."

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