1915

The new Chinese republic was still trying to figure out its place in the global order—including how to deal with encroaching Japanese imperialism—when World War I erupted. Even as the prospects for China's formal entry into the war remained uncertain, in 1915, in a bid to ensure that China's voice would be heard once the conflict was over, senior politicians in Yuan Shikai's government came up with the idea of sending Chinese workers to Europe to support the Allied war effort. Eventually, 140,000 Chinese, most of whom were illiterate peasants, journeyed to the Western Front to aid the war efforts of the British, French, and US governments. Although labourers from many other countries travelled to France during the Great War, China sent by far the largest number of men and suffered the highest number of casualties—a sacrifice that has often been overlooked in historical accounts. The dispatch of workers also represented the first attempt by a Chinese government to engage in labour diplomacy—a practice that would become more prevalent in the Maoist era and of which we can still find traces in China's global engagements today.

An Extraordinary Journey: Chinese Labourers on the Western Front during the Great War

XU Guoqi

There have been many different types of Chinese labourers in Chinese and world history. There are many different kinds of Chinese emigration as well. But the 140,000 Chinese labourers who managed to go to the Western Front during World War I were unique and extraordinary. With their sacrifice and contribution, they not only helped the Allies' war efforts, thus doing their share to tilt the fate of Western civilisation, but also served as messengers between China and the West, contributing to China's renewal and great transformation. South Africans, Indians, Vietnamese, and many other labourers went to France during the Great War to support the British and French. Many went because they were citizens of colonial countries and had to answer the call from their imperial masters, but China—which was not a colony of any country—sent by far the largest number of men, and its labourers worked in Europe the longest.

Labourers in Place of Soldiers

The Great War coincided with a period of tremendous change in China, including the collapse of the Confucian civilisation, the rise of the New Culture Movement, and the undoing of a strong central government. During such a tumultuous period globally and domestically, the Chinese people were determined to transform their country and join the world on an equal footing. The outbreak of the Great War provided just such an opportunity. Hopes of recovering Qingdao, a Chinese territory in Shandong Province that had been under German control since 1898, first compelled the Chinese to try to join the war in 1914 but their effort was blocked by the United Kingdom. However, China's resolve was strengthened the following year, when Japan advanced its Twenty-One Demands aimed at turning China into a dependant state.

The challenge was how to win a place at the eventual peace conference to make sure China's voice would be heard and the country's national interests respected. In 1915, Liang Shiyi, a trusted advisor to President Yuan Shikai and a powerful politician in his own right, developed the 'labourers in place of soldiers' (以工代兵) scheme, which was designed to join hands with the Allied cause even as the official entry of the country into the war remained uncertain.[1] In 1915 and 1916, respectively, France and the United Kingdom reluctantly concluded that Chinese support was essential to win the conflict. Given the huge number of casualties they had suffered and the near bankruptcy of their national coffers, more human resources were crucial.

Through the collaboration between four parties—the Chinese volunteer labourers and the governments of China, the UK, and France—140,000 Chinese, most of whom were illiterate peasants, went to Europe during World War I. Initially, these workers were recruited by the British and French governments to aid their war efforts against the Germans; when the United States joined the war in 1917, the Americans utilised Chinese labour as well. All these governments considered Chinese labourers as critical for the fate of their war effort. While for the British and French authorities the Chinese labourers meant vital help in winning the war, the Chinese authorities saw these labourers as a means to allow China to join the Allied cause and promote the country's entry into the world community as an equal member.

The Chinese decision to send labourers to Europe was unprecedented. Both the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties discouraged Chinese from going abroad and even persecuted those who had. In 1712, with considerable numbers of Chinese already residing abroad, an edict from the Qing court decreed: 'Those who stay overseas permanently are liable to capital punishment and will be extradited from foreign countries by the provincial governors for prompt beheading.'[2] The Qianlong Emperor of the Qing (in power from 1735 to 1795) once called overseas Chinese 'deserters of the Celestial Empire', who would therefore receive no protection from China if they encountered trouble in other countries.[3] In spite of this, many Chinese still went abroad, including those who travelled to the United States and built America's Trans-Pacific railway. Yet the prohibition against emigration remained official policy until 1893, when the Qing government finally abolished it by accepting its diplomat

Xue Fucheng's argument that adopting a friendly policy on emigration would 'have the benefit of bridging the gap between China and the West'.[4]

When China became a republic in 1912, official policy on emigration changed dramatically. The West was no longer dismissed as a society of demons but was painted as an example for China to follow; going abroad became a glorious privilege. As a result, the status of overseas Chinese was enhanced a great deal and, in 1912, Republican China passed a series of laws, including the *Provisional Constitution and Organisation Act* of congress, which legalised representation of overseas Chinese in domestic politics. In 1916, as Chinese labourers started to leave for France, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deliberated over new legislation to protect overseas workers.[5] The new law soon passed and, in 1917, with a huge number of Chinese labourers already in Europe, the government in Beijing established an office called the Bureau of Overseas Chinese Workers (侨工事务局).[6] The 1915 'labourers in place of soldiers' program should be understood in this context of the transformation in Chinese thought and society, in addition to being an expression of China's eagerness to join the war.

Extraordinary Experiences

Although the Chinese workers who travelled to the Western Front of the Great War were part of a grand strategy devised by the country's elite, most of those who undertook the voyage simply wanted to make a living. Most were poor, uneducated peasants from Shandong Province who volunteered to go to Europe to earn money they were promised they would make. However, the Chinese labourers' journey from China to France was extremely challenging. Some groups went to France via the Suez Canal or Cape of Good Hope, but most travelled by way of the Pacific, Canada, and across the Atlantic.[7] About 3,000 Chinese lost their lives either on their way to Europe or in Europe, including several hundred who died *en route* due to German submarine attacks. After landing in Europe, they were often shocked by the appalling living conditions. Many Chinese considered France the centre of so-called Western civilisation, but at that time the civilised West was mired in a terrifying war and it was not in a position to show off its cultural, intellectual, or political triumphs, revealing only its ugliest, most barbarous capacities. Nobody had prepared the Chinese labourers for this kind of culture shock, nor taught them how to adjust to this new life. The food, the language, the

customs, and the management—all of these came as a shock, and there was no time or opportunity for them to ponder, digest, and ask questions, since their labour was urgently needed.

While on the Western Front, the Chinese worked in trenches, factories, and ports. They repaired tanks and roads, dug foundations, worked in arsenals, loaded and unloaded trains and boats, and manned paper factories. Although the French assigned Chinese labourers a variety of tasks, trench-digging occupied most of the time and labour of those working under the British. Trench warfare was of course a key feature of the Great War and, although no records indicate how much the Chinese were involved in trench-digging, it is safe to say they played a critical role in trench warfare. Before they were recruited to France, these workers had rarely ventured far beyond their village borders. Now their daily life was filled with racism, suffering, confusion, misunderstandings, mistreatment, and many other hardships. In addition, the Chinese who worked under the British had to deal with more stress and greater challenges, since at the end of each day they were confined in barbed-wire enclosures, facing boredom after hours of backbreaking work.

The Chinese came to Europe to help Britain and France win the war and, after the war, many would remain to help France with reconstruction. Many Chinese under British supervision stayed in France until 1920, and most of the Chinese under the French stayed until 1922. In fact, the Chinese were the last of the British labour forces to leave France. The Great War lasted about 1,500 days, but the war experience of many Chinese labourers was longer and more horrifying as they stayed behind to clear the battlefields and bury the dead. Anyone would count this work as gruesome, but it was especially hard on the Chinese, who believed that touching the dead was inauspicious. The men suffered nightmares and feared they would be cursed by the dead. The most dangerous task was clearing away unexploded ordnance. Nobody bothered to train the Chinese in how to handle these materials, and we still do not know with certainty how many died as a result. Although it is impossible to arrive at a concrete figure due to a lack of authoritative evidence, it is estimated that around 3,000 Chinese lost their lives in Europe or on their way there due to enemy fire, disease, or injury. To this day, their graves can be found in France and Belgium, among other places.

Chinese sacrifices were not meaningfully recognised after the war. At the Paris Peace Conference, British Secretary for Foreign Affairs Arthur Balfour claimed that China's contribution during the war had involved

neither 'the expenditure of a single shilling nor the loss of a single life', completely disregarding the deaths of Chinese labourers.[8] The contributions of these Chinese workers were soon forgotten not only in Europe, but also by their own country, to the point that Chinese scholar Chen Sanjing described their experience as 'a great tragedy'.[9] Over the years, several historians have questioned the importance of the Chinese experience in the Great War in Europe. Marilyn A. Levine has claimed that Chinese labourers 'did not fulfil the expected foreign policy objective',[10] and Judith Blick has suggested that the whole idea of labourers as soldiers was merely a commercial one and the Chinese had nothing to do with the actual war effort.[11] However, this misses the crucial role the Chinese played in the Allied war effort. As the London *Times* wrote at that time:

> The coming of the Chinese Labour Corps to France relieved our own men from an enormous amount of heavy and miscellaneous work behind the lines, and so helped to release a much larger proportion than otherwise would have been possible for combatant duties.[12]

In other words, 140,000 Chinese labourers freed up at least 140,000 Allied soldiers. More importantly, the Chinese not only contributed to the infrastructure of the war, but also acted as messengers between East and West, thereby taking part in China's renewal and transformation.

Bridging the Gap between East and West

Most of the Chinese workers in France were common villagers who knew little of China or the world affairs when they were selected to go to Europe. Still, these men directly contributed to helping China transform its image at home and globally. Their new transnational roles reshaped China's national identity and internationalisation, which in turn contributed to shaping the emerging global system. From their experience of Europe in a time of war and their work with the American, British, and French militaries, as well as fellow labourers from other countries, they developed a unique perception of China and of world affairs.

In the words of historian James Joll, the Great War marked 'the end of an age and beginning of the new' world order.[13] This observation applies to China as well. With the Great War, China embarked on a journey of internationalisation and national renewal. As Chinese writer Yi Feng

noted in an article published in late 1918: 'The Great War was soon to end, it would end with the collapse of nineteenth-century civilisation. And twentieth-century civilisation started immediately. In other words, the world has entered a new era.'[14] He encouraged his readers to understand the importance of these transformations and take advantage of the changes they brought. 'China will be discarded' in the new era if the Chinese failed to develop a 'great awareness' (大觉悟) and prepare themselves well, he warned.[15] At a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) conference in the spring of 1919, Wang Zhengting, a member of the Chinese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, said in his address to the YMCA secretaries, including the Chinese secretaries who worked with the Chinese labourers in Europe, that present conditions in China demanded above all things a 'fighting spirit'. That included a 'spirit of justice and righteousness, a spirit of principle that will make one fearless of death or the loss of selfish interest and ambition'.[16]

The Chinese labourers in Europe, to a great extent, represented such fighting spirit. If we approach the 'labourers in place of soldiers' idea from the perspective of China's search for a new national identity and national renewal, the journey of these workers has historic importance. Or, to put it differently, it is possible to argue that Chinese labourers not only made important contributions to the Allied war effort, but also contributed to the postwar peace conference and China's subsequent development. After all, thanks to its presence on the Western Front, China was able to participate in the peace conference and voice demands for respect and equality. The workers' labour, sacrifices, and lives provided these diplomats with a critical tool in their battle for recognition and inclusion on the world stage.

Therefore, instead of being a 'tragedy', the journey of these workers succeeded in helping China actively participate in national and world affairs. Although nobody has given them this credit, they were an important part of China's own 'greatest generation'—that is, the generation of those who came of age in the 1910s and 1920s and fundamentally changed China's direction. From the very beginning of the modern era, Chinese elites have linked emigration with China's internationalisation, and nowhere is this point illuminated more clearly than in the case of Chinese labourers during the Great War.

These largely untold stories resonate with historical and contemporary issues related to migration within China and without. Today, Chinese people live all across the world as labourers, immigrants, or students.

As the late Philip A. Kuhn, a prominent China historian, recently wrote: 'Emigration has been inseparable from China's modern history … At least for the period since the 1500s, I suggest that neither Chinese history lacking emigration nor emigration lacking the history of China is a self-sufficient field of study.'[17] By studying the Chinese labourers in Europe and their stories, we can not only recover a neglected chapter in Chinese history but also improve our understanding of how this seemingly obscure episode affected both Chinese and Western societies on which the modern world order is built.