The Chinese Labor Corps during World War I: prelude to political and cultural activism

Dr. Marilyn A. Levine
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Eastern Oregon University
La Grande, Oregon, USA

Chinese Workers in the First World War
International conference May 26-30 2010
Boulogne-sur-mer (France) and Ypres (Belgium)
Chinese Labor Corps

Presentation Overview

I. Pre-WWI - Cultural and Educational Preludes between China and France
   - Culture and elegance
   - Social structure, morals and philosophy
   - Educational experiments in the early 20th century

II. The First World War and the Chinese Labor Corps
   - Yigong daibing - workers instead of soldiers
   - Documentation, numbers, and history
   - CLC logistics from recruitment and embarkation to deployment
   - Social life, education, and strife in the labor camps

III. Post WWI Repatriation and the Legacies of the Chinese Labor Corps
   - Activism, organizing, and political mobilization
   - Formation of Chinese political parties in Europe

IV. Conclusion
   - CLC contributions and legacies
   - Some areas of future research interest
I. Pre-WWI - Cultural and Educational Preludes Between China and France

Voltaire (1694-1778) at 24

Confucius (551 - 479 BCE)
Chinese Labor Corps

Chinese Watercolor - Flowers (c. 1800-25)  
19th Century Fu Vase  
Manchu Ladies (c. 1910-1925)  
1900 Limoge Azalea Pillow Vase  
Claude Monet - Iris 1914-1917  
Paul Poiret (1910, Paris)
Chinese Labor Corps

Education classes held in France

Li Shizeng (1881-1973)
(Li Yu Ying)

Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940)

Usine de la Caséo-Sojaïne (1910-11, 46-48 Rue Denis Papin, Les Valées, Colombes [near Asnières, Seine])

Wu Zihui, ca. 1930s

Wang Jingwei (1883-1944)
II. The First World War and the Chinese Labor Corps
Chinese Labor Corps

Liang Shiyi

Yuan Shikai
Issue of Numbers and Documentation

- Number of participants?
  - 136,000
  - 145,000
  - 175,000 - 200,000
- Number of casualties?
  - 1,600-1,800
  - 20,000
- Other number issues
  - Wages
  - Repatriation
- Some sources
  - Archives in Europe
  - Archives in China
  - Gravesites and local histories
  - Memoirs and monographs
Chinese Labor Battalion Departure

Chinese Labor battalions read for embarkation to France. This detachment started from Qingdao, formerly a German stronghold in China.

CPR Empress of Russia. April 2, 1917 with 1,991 CLC workers from Shandong & Zhili provinces.

Chinese Labor battalions ready for embarkation to France.
Chinese Labor Corps

Roll call at a Chinese Labor Corps camp at Samer, France (c. 1917)
Chinese Labor Corps mechanics repairing tank engines.

Chinese workers on rifles in the small arms shop (Atelier de Mehun-sur-Yevre) in Beauvoir, near Mehun (Cher).

Men from the Chinese Labor Corps make roads on the Western Front and fill trucks with earth.
Chinese Labor Corps

Chinese Labor Corps unloading duckboards from railway cars

Eight Chinese Labor Corps at a railway yard with 2nd Australian Light Railway Operating Company staff (Oct 1917)

CLC workers unloading timber with British noncommissioned officer in Flanders.

Chinese Labor Corp in France celebrating Chinese New Year

Left: Chinese missionary reader conducting meeting at table with Chinese flags. Right: Two Chinese praying for good luck at a joss-house built for them for New Year's (Feb. 11).

YMCA 1918 (France, Belgium)
Chinese Labor Corps

III. Post-War Repatriation and Legacies of the Chinese Labor Corps

The World War I cemetery at Noyelles-sur-Mer in northern France.
Chinese Labor Corps

David Lloyd George, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Georges Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson, Versailles, 1918.

May 4th protests, Shanghai.
Chinese Labor Corps

May 30th protests

Shanghai victorious workers after 1927 insurrection

Striking Canton-Hong Kong seamen and workers, 1925
Chinese Labor Corps

Lyon university officials await government decision at Fort Montluc prison (Lyon Progress, 9/27/1921)

Travel of Chinese to France

The Athos II
Chinese Labor Corps

Zhou Enlai farewell at European branch of Guomindang. To right of Zhou is Wang Jingqi, 1st general secretary of EGMD. Back row from right: no. 2 Yang Kun; no. 3 Ren Zhuoxuan.

Zhang Shenfu ECCO nucleus group in Paris (March, 1921). Lin Qingyang front row center. Back row from left: no. 1 Zhang Shenfu; no. 3 Zhou Enlai, no. 4 Zhao Shiyan.

Sept. 1924 ECCO Meeting. Left, 1st row: no. 1 Nie Rongzhen; no. 4 Zhou Enlai; no. 6 Li Fuchun. 2nd row: no. 1 Liu Puqing; no. 2 Yang Kun; no. 4 Ren Zhuoxuan. 3rd row, third from right: Deng Xiaoping.
Chinese Labor Corps

Zhang Ruoming and Guo Longzhen

Zhao Shiyan

Future Chinese leaders in Paris: Li Fuchun, Lei Weihan, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, Ren Zhuoxuan, Nie Rongzhen

Yang Kun

Zheng Chaolin

Zhou Enlai and Deng Yingchao in Moscow
Chinese Labor Corps

IV. Conclusions and Some Areas for Further Research

Significance of the CLC
- The CLC and the war effort
- Short term defeat - long term victories
- Cultural and educational exchanges
- Political party and leadership development

Some Areas for Further Research
- Resolution of numbers
- CLC history and diplomatic legacies
- CLC cohort and individual biographies
- CLC deployments and spatial biographies
- CLC work conditions and treatment,
- Educational, social, and cultural issues
- Political and organizational activities
- Historiography, stereotypes, and nationalism
- Commemoration of the CLC

British War Medal (silver, 6,390,000) issued for service 8/5/1914 - 11/11/1918 and 1919-1920 for mine removal. Bronze version (110,000) for CLC, Indian Labor Corps, Maltese Labor Corps.