

The Role of Chinese Laborers during WWI and Consequential Effects

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Abstract: On July 28th, 1914, the Austrian Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which became the catalyst for World War I. The war involved a total of 36 countries with 65 million soldiers in total from the two sides of the Allies (France, Britain, Italy, and America, among several others), and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria Hungary, Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria). The war was devastating for both Britain and France and placed both countries on the cusp of running out of human resources. To remedy this issue, in 1916, over 140,000 Chinese laborers arrived in the Western Front to support the Allies under the agreement between the Chinese, British, and French governments. However, despite the laborers' overall contributions, they received little respect from the Allies. They were discriminated against and often referred to as coolies, china men, and chinks. After seeing the ruins of Europe after the war, these laborers began to view the fall of Western civilization as imminent. Hence, once they returned to China, the laborers began to facilitate a shift in the opinions among the people. They instilled in the country the belief that for China to be truly sovereign it needed to maintain Chinese culture and identity, rather than relying on foreign aid and Western powers.

1. Introduction

After the humiliating defeat of China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894, China witnessed an ascendancy of nationalism in its intellectual sphere. As early as 1902, Liang Qichao, one of the most prominent scholars during the Republic of China, wrote to his teacher Kang Youwei, claiming that “Today is the most advanced era of nationalism. Without this spirit, a nation cannot be established.” Liang’s thoughts on nationalism echoed that of the nation: especially after the Chinese Xinhai Revolution of 1911, Civic Nationalism became one of the three parts of China’s governing political ideology, known as Tridemism, with the other two being Governance Rights and Welfare Rights. Concomitantly, to elevate China’s status on the global stage and increase her presence and political power, the nation turned to cosmopolitanism to fulfill this nationalistic ideal. During the inaugural address of Yuan Shikai on Oct 10th, 1913, Yuan stated that: “China will completely abandon all her obsolete notions of shutting down the country, and China will join the international community.” The blending of nationalism with internationalism, then, provided a cultural and intellectual foundation for China to send their laborers to Europe during World War I.

As early as 1914, the Chinese financial minister Liang Shiyi has recommended the government to join the side of the Allies. He believed that Germany would lose in the long term, claiming that “[this was] the only chance for China.” Along with Liang, many Chinese officials had the urge to join the war to increase China’s reputation on the world stage.

In the meantime, the Twenty-One Demands of 1915 proposed by Japan had instigated the Chinese public’s determination to participate in World War I. The Twenty-One Demands requested the Chinese government to concede the Shan Dong provinces, Southern Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia, and China’s largest coal companies to Japan. The fifth part of the demand even obligated the Chinese government to hire Japanese consultants and transferred control of major police departments in China to the Japanese government. After a compromise, the Bei Yang government was forced to follow all clauses except the fifth section. In response to this crisis, financial minister Liang and his partner Yang Gongzuo immediately made a plan for China to join the WWI while maintaining the veil of neutrality by sending laborers instead of soldiers to both France and Britain. This was done under the hope to get assistance from both countries after the war by showing Chinese dedication and support to the Allies’ cause.

2. The Living Condition and Collaboration of the Laborers

Most Chinese laborers under the French administration worked at French military companies and factories for the supply line. The French rule was comparatively loose compared to the British: Chinese laborers enjoyed a holiday every Sunday, had respectable salaries, and the freedom to visit local bars and cafes. Meanwhile, as many French women interacted with these Chinese laborers on their way to work, romantic relationships started to form, and some eventually ended in marriage^[1]. This, however, had stirred up some xenophobic sentiments among the French conservatives; in a social security report from the port of Le Havre, officers pointed out that some of the locals were hostile to Chinese laborers and even gathered together to protest because they worried that: “if the casualties of French army continue to grow, there will be no men in the country. So, what is the meaning of the war? In the end, the Chinese, Arabians, and Spanish will marry our wives and daughters and divide the land which we have been fighting for.”

3. The Education of the Laborers in Europe

While working in Europe, many Chinese laborers began to seek educational opportunities there. In the autumn of 1917, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), founded by the British and French army, cooperated with another association China-France Education Association (CFEA) held educational services for Chinese laborers. The staff in both organizations were mainly priests and students who graduated from universities in Britain or America. Cai Yuanpei, the principal of CFEA, declared that the aim of this school was to combine French science and education with Chinese morality. The Chinese teachers at CFEA devoted themselves to the transformation of those incoming Chinese laborers into “new citizens,” in hopes that they could educate the rest of Chinese people once they returned home.

4. A New Perspective on the West and China

At the same time, the Chinese laborers also placed influence on their teachers, the Chinese social elites. The most prominent example was that of James. Y.C Yen. Before he went to France, he knew almost nothing about the Chinese labor force and the poverty they faced. Yen was impressed with the brilliant-minded laborers in France, claiming that they lacked only education, not talent. In a letter to his friend, he wrote: “Think about it. What will conditions be like when those laborers, who

care for our country and are able to think about state affairs, return home? Back among those Chinese peasants who are illiterate and think only about getting three meals of the day, they will be outstanding, like a crane standing among chickens.” He further stated that: “When I came to France, it was the humble coolie who enlightened me. I learned how great they were, and I gained a true view of China. My mind was made up, that I would devote myself to impoverished illiterate compatriots for the rest of my life.” Meeting the laborers inspired him to push for a plan of universal education in Chinese rural areas by cultivating people with the values of Christ, Confucius, and Grit (the type shown specifically to Chinese laborers in France). He began working towards this goal after he finished his MA degree at Princeton University. In the later years, seeing the change his students brought to China, he too returned, seeking to transform the country along with his laborer friends. ^[2]

5. Conclusion

This article summarizes the role played by Chinese laborers in the WWI and their impact after returning to China. Even though some historians argued that Chinese laborers didn't fully fulfill the expectation from the West or China in WWI, they nevertheless contributed - though perhaps minorly - to the overall victory of the Allies in WWI and the internationalization of China, which illustrates a new starting point of culturally nationalistic understanding of Chinese identity for China to seek her self-determination.

References

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