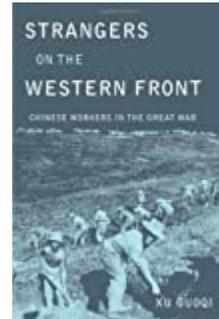




Xu Guoqi. *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 336 S. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04999-4.



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X. Guoqi: Strangers on the Western Front

The history of the First World War on the western front is perhaps considered to have been fully covered and many studies in the history of the First World War are turning their attention to other regions in a hope to uncover new or previously under researched aspects of the war. However, with this publication, Xu Guoqi offers a vital new insight into not only the Western Front, but through his study of Chinese labourers and their recruitment, transportation to Europe and return home, takes on a truly global history of the conflict. Paul Bailey in a recent chapter on Chinese indentured labour during the First World War argued that the memory of this labour deserves more than being just appropriated for public relations campaigns to celebrate ethnic diversity or to promote tourism in contemporary France. It represented a significant turning point in the history of Chinese labour migration, one that was actively supported by the elite in China and portrays Sino-French and Sino-British relations as interactive rather than the commonly held view of China as a passive participant in Western semi-colonialism. Santanu Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Cambridge 2011, p. 48. The experience of these Chinese workers through their contri-

but ion to the war effort not only was a significant factor in fighting the war, it is an important component of Chinese labour history and these 'labourers-as-soldiers' (p. 241) contributed greatly to the China's quest for a new national identity and internationalisation.

The book begins with the literal painting over of the Chinese contribution to the war on the French monument 'The Pantheon' in October 1918. The war had barely even finished and already the Chinese were becoming forgotten. (p. 8) As Xu says he is resurrecting the memory of the 140,000 or so Chinese who through their labour, often under heavy fire on the front lines, played a not insignificant role in allowing France, Britain and America fight the war to a successful conclusion.

The body of this book focuses on the experience of the Chinese labourers on the Western Front which is in itself fascinating and due to the glut of work on trench warfare; the reader can easily picture the Chinese labourers' experiences as they shared much in common with the average French or British soldier. Where the book really brings us into new territory is in the recruitment process, the shipping to Europe and the repatriation of

these men. No other work has looked at these men as individuals and the author brings these men to life through analysis of their letters, diaries and other personal documents. British recruited Chinese had to travel across Canada to reach France and were returned through the same route. The analysis of their transportation highlights the racial lens through which the interaction between three nations, Britain, China and Canada took place. Canada provided most of the Chinese labourers with their first glimpse of the west, more importantly it highlighted Canadian attitudes towards the Chinese. This remarkable event in the history of the First World War remained largely forgotten and Xu's study is an important addition to the historiography of the War in Canada. The transport of Chinese labourers across the continent in sealed trains which they were rarely allowed disembark from was certainly one of the great events that went unnoticed. (p. 278)

The book goes on to look at perceptions of the labourers from five angles, the first three being how the British, French and Americans viewed their allies in the workforce and on the battlefield. The fourth angle looks at how the labourers viewed themselves and the world they found themselves transported in. The final and perhaps most interesting angle looked at is how Chinese intellectuals in China viewed the labourers and the attempts to exploit their experiences for the new nationalist movement.

In bringing the focus back to internal Chinese affairs, Xu analyses the interplay between Chinese students living in France and the labourers from the perspective of the new confrontation between the Wilsonian model of middle-class revolution and the Leninist model of popular proletarian revolution. (p. 197) Chapter nine deals

with the relationship between the labourers and students and looks firstly at how the students saw themselves as teachers to the labourers. It then goes on to look at the reversal of this pattern, with labourers filling the teaching role. The overlap between the labourers's presence in France and the post war work study movement, which attracted many Chinese intellectuals, built up the notion that the revolutionary working class needed to spark China into proletarian revolt were in France. These hired workers were to be the first wave of a new Chinese participation in world affairs and as such they contributed to the creation of a new Chinese national identity. (p. 219) Xu uses a quote from a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) report to argue the significance of the transnational exchange that took place in Europe and how it altered Chinese perceptions of the west. 'The bringing of the Orient into contact with the Western civilisation was one of the most remarkable phases of the world struggle! the white race is being stripped of its false glory and supposed Christian civilisation, and is standing out in a poor light with nothing to recommend it.' (p. 220)

Overall this book is a welcome, well researched and vital addition to the historiography of not only the First World War but the history of labour in China, and it provides an interesting case study of early twentieth century transnational interactions between the new Chinese republic and the European powers. Although never providing actual combatants for the war effort of their eventual Allies, the Chinese labour force filled a vital labour gap in the economies of each Allied power and in turn enabled many more French and British troops to fight on the front lines, often backed up quite closely by labourers who shared the same conditions and were exposed to the same shell fire as their combatant Allies.

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