

Labor Diplomacy on the Western Front: China, the Chinese Labor Corps, and the Global Politics of World War I

Keren He*

Submitted: 23 May 2026 Accepted: 24 July 2026 Publication date: 21 August 2026

DOI: 10.70671/n93r4b90

Abstract: This paper examines the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) during World War I as a critical but often overlooked dimension of both Chinese and global wartime history. Drawing on British, French, and Chinese sources alongside recent scholarship, it argues that China's deployment of more than 140,000 laborers to the Western Front constituted a deliberate strategy of "labor diplomacy," through which the Beiyang government sought international recognition without committing combat troops. While Chinese laborers performed indispensable work under hazardous conditions and within racialized hierarchies, their formally non-colonial status placed them in an ambiguous position within imperial labor systems. Comparison with Indian and African labor forces reveals how this ambiguity exposed deeper contradictions within the Allied wartime order.

The paper further shows that the failure of this labor-for-recognition strategy at the Paris Peace Conference contributed to rising nationalist disillusionment in China and helped shape the May Fourth Movement. By integrating labor history and diplomacy, this study reframes the Chinese Labour Corps not as a marginal footnote but as a revealing case that challenges battlefield-centered narratives of World War I and highlights the global, racialized foundations of modern warfare.

Author keywords: Chinese Labour Corps; World War I; labor diplomacy; imperial labor systems; May Fourth Movement

Introduction

World War I reshaped international politics and redefined the global balance of power, yet China's participation is often treated as peripheral. Between 1916 and 1918, the Chinese government facilitated the deployment of more than 140,000 laborers to Allied war zones in France and Britain. Known collectively as the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC), these men performed essential logistical work on the Western Front, including trench construction, railway repair, munitions handling, and battlefield clearance. Although officially classified as non-combatants, they worked under hazardous conditions within rigid racial hierarchies imposed by Allied authorities. Despite the scale of this contribution, China received little diplomatic reward: at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Germany's former rights in Shandong were transferred to Japan rather than restored to China, provoking nationwide outrage and helping to ignite the May Fourth Movement.

Existing scholarship on the CLC has typically emphasized either its logistical contributions or the harsh conditions its members endured. While historians such as Guoqi Xu and Paul Bailey have deepened understanding of labor organization and worker experience, this body of work often treats the CLC primarily as a labor force rather than as

part of China's broader diplomatic strategy. As a result, the political significance of China's wartime labor deployment remains underexplored.

Drawing on British and French military records, Chinese diplomatic correspondence, and recent scholarship on global labor mobilization, this paper argues that the deployment of the Chinese Labour Corps constituted a deliberate strategy of labor diplomacy, through which the Beiyang government sought to convert wartime participation into international recognition. By contributing labor rather than combat troops, Chinese leaders aimed to demonstrate cooperation with the Allied powers while avoiding the domestic risks of direct military engagement and the financial burdens of raising a modern army.

This strategy emerged from the unstable political environment of early twentieth-century China. Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the Republic faced fragmentation under competing warlord regimes and continued foreign encroachment. Constrained by the legacy of the Boxer Protocol and the loss of territories such as Shandong, Chinese leaders sought opportunities to strengthen the nation's international position and restore sovereignty. The decision to dispatch laborers to Europe reflected both Allied manpower shortages and China's desire for greater diplomatic leverage. For Britain and France, the CLC provided vital manpower; for China, it offered a means to secure a stronger voice in the postwar settlement and to challenge the unequal treaty system.

*Corresponding Author: Keren He. Email: kerenhe2019@gmail.com
Haynes Academy for Advanced Studies, Metairie, Louisiana, USA

The failure of this strategy at Versailles revealed the limits of labor-based participation in a power structure shaped by imperial hierarchy, intensifying nationalist disillusionment and contributing to the May Fourth Movement. By examining the origins, experiences, and legacy of the Chinese Labour Corps, this paper reframes the CLC as a critical yet often overlooked dimension of both Chinese history and the global history of World War I.

Methodology

This study draws on a combination of British, French, and Chinese archival materials, published primary sources, and recent scholarship in global labor and diplomatic history. Key sources include British War Office reports, French Ministry of Defense records, YMCA educational and welfare documents, and collections of letters written by members of the Chinese Labour Corps. These materials provide insight into both the administrative structures that governed the CLC and the lived experiences of the laborers themselves. Chinese diplomatic correspondence, memoranda from the Paris Peace Conference, and contemporary writings by intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu further illuminate the political context in which labor deployment was conceived and debated.

Methodologically, the paper integrates labor history with diplomatic analysis to reinterpret the CLC not simply as a workforce but as an instrument of statecraft. By comparing Chinese laborers with contemporaneous Indian and African labor contingents, the study situates the CLC within broader imperial labor systems and highlights the racialized hierarchies that shaped wartime mobilization. This comparative approach reveals how China's formally non-colonial status produced a distinctive form of labor participation that exposed contradictions within the Allied wartime order. The analysis also draws on historiographical debates surrounding the May Fourth Movement and China's international position after World War I, allowing the paper to connect overseas labor mobilization with domestic political transformation.

Description/Research Findings

Origins and causes of the Chinese labour corps

The deployment of more than 140,000 Chinese laborers to Europe during World War I emerged from the convergence of Allied manpower shortages and China's diplomatic ambitions. The Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) was not simply a wartime expedient but a structured and calculated project shaped by the demands of total war and the Beiyang government's effort to reposition China within the international system.

The Allied manpower crisis

By 1915, escalating casualties on the Western Front had produced an acute labor shortage across the war economy. Battles such as Ypres, the Somme, and Verdun drained

European armies not only of soldiers but also of the civilian workforce required to sustain industrial warfare. As conscription expanded, France and Britain increasingly relied on foreign labor to maintain railways, supply lines, and battlefield infrastructure. France began recruiting colonial laborers from Indochina, Algeria, and West Africa as early as 1916, while Britain expanded its recruitment system by 1917.^{1,2}

Within this broader system of wartime extraction, China emerged as a significant source of non-combat manpower. Although officially neutral until 1917, China possessed a large rural population and limited industrial employment, making it attractive to Allied recruiters.³ This external demand created an opportunity for Chinese leaders to translate labor participation into diplomatic leverage.

China's national motivations

China's participation in the war reflected the Beiyang government's effort to strengthen international recognition and recover lost sovereignty. Politically fragmented and militarily weak, the Republic of China sought to reenter global diplomacy through indirect contribution to the Allied war effort.³ Sending labor rather than troops allowed China to support the Allies while avoiding the financial and political risks of military deployment.⁴

A central objective was the recovery of Shandong, previously under German control and seized by Japan in 1914. Chinese diplomats hoped that wartime cooperation would strengthen China's position at the postwar settlement and help overturn the unequal treaties imposed after the Boxer Protocol.⁵ At the same time, reform-minded officials viewed participation in the war as a means of reshaping China's international image from a semi-colonial state into a more active member of the global order.³

Yet this strategy remained contested. Some regional authorities and intellectual critics questioned whether exporting labor would genuinely enhance sovereignty or instead deepen dependency on foreign powers. The CLC thus reflected elite diplomatic calculation rather than national consensus.

Recruitment mechanisms

Recruitment for the Chinese Labour Corps was shaped by Allied administrative needs and rural socioeconomic conditions in northern China. France initiated early recruitment in 1916 through contracts drawn heavily from Shandong.³ Britain later formalized its system via the Huimin Company, a Chinese intermediary organization based in Tianjin that coordinated labor export under British supervision.²

Most laborers came from impoverished rural regions such as Shandong, Hebei, and Henan, where economic hardship made overseas employment appear as a rare opportunity for survival. Letters from laborers often describe motivations such as debt repayment, land acquisition, or family support.⁶ However, recruitment was not uniformly voluntary. Local brokers sometimes exaggerated wages or minimized risks, exploiting rural vulnerability and village-level power structures.⁷ This complicates portrayals of the

CLC as purely voluntary migration and underscores tensions between state policy and local reality.

Primary sources and documentation

The origins of the CLC are documented through a diverse body of sources, including French recruitment contracts, British War Office records, and Chinese-language correspondence. French documents emphasize administrative control, wages, and repatriation terms, reflecting efforts to regulate foreign labor efficiently.⁷ British records detail transport logistics, camp organization, and the deployment of Chinese workers in hazardous tasks such as munitions handling and battlefield clearance.⁸

In contrast, laborers' letters and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) archival materials reveal lived experiences shaped by uncertainty, economic pressure, and occasional disillusionment.⁹ These accounts foreground motivations and emotions largely absent from official records. Taken together, these sources illuminate the interaction of global warfare, elite diplomacy, and rural socioeconomic conditions that produced the Chinese Labour Corps.

Chinese laborers on the western front

Scale, composition, and labor divisions

Between 1916 and 1918, more than 140,000 Chinese laborers were transported to Europe to support the Allied war effort. Approximately 96,000 served under British command as part of the Chinese Labour Corps, while roughly 40,000 were employed by French military and industrial authorities.³ In comparative terms, the CLC constituted one of the largest foreign labor contingents on the Western Front, rivaling or exceeding colonial labor forces drawn from India, North Africa, and Indochina. This scale rendered the Chinese presence both indispensable and highly visible within Allied wartime logistics.

The laborers were overwhelmingly young rural men from northern China, particularly Shandong, Hebei, and Henan, regions marked by chronic poverty, recurring famine, and limited employment opportunities.⁷ Despite frequent portrayals of the CLC as an undifferentiated mass of "coolie labor," the workforce was internally stratified. While most were assigned to heavy manual work, some possessed skills in carpentry, mechanics, metalwork, or clerical tasks and were deployed accordingly.³ British records indicate that laborers were organized into numbered companies under British officers and noncommissioned officers, underscoring the regimented and quasi-militarized structure of their service despite their official non-combatant status.⁸

Daily work and living conditions

The labor performed by Chinese workers was essential to sustaining industrial warfare. Tasks included unloading ammunition at ports such as Le Havre, repairing railways, digging and reinforcing trenches, clearing unexploded ordnance, and recovering bodies after major battles.³ Although officially classified as non-combatants, many worked within range of artillery fire and aerial bombardment, particularly

during offensives and post-battle clearance operations.⁷ In practice, the boundary between combatant and laborer frequently eroded under the conditions of total war.

Working conditions were severe. Laborers typically worked ten to twelve hours per day in extreme weather with minimal protective equipment. Poor sanitation contributed to outbreaks of disease, while British medical reports documented high rates of respiratory illness, dysentery, and influenza, especially during the 1918 influenza pandemic.⁸ Contemporary accounts describe overcrowded barracks, limited access to clean water, and strict disciplinary regimes imposed by foreign supervisors.¹⁰

Primary sources reveal divergent interpretations of these conditions. British officers' reports often praised the efficiency and endurance of Chinese workers while reinforcing racialized assumptions about their suitability for manual labor.⁸ YMCA records, by contrast, emphasized welfare initiatives, including medical care, literacy instruction, and recreational programming, highlighting institutional efforts to mitigate the physical and psychological toll of wartime labor.⁹

Deaths, disability, and suffering

The human cost of service in the Chinese Labour Corps was substantial. Estimates of mortality range from approximately 3,000 to over 10,000 deaths, reflecting both gaps in wartime record-keeping and differing criteria regarding deaths from disease, industrial accidents, postwar munitions clearance, and repatriation.³ Laborers died from artillery shelling, mine explosions, workplace accidents, and epidemic disease, while many survivors returned to China with permanent disabilities, chronic illness, or psychological trauma.⁷

Despite these sacrifices, Chinese laborers received limited recognition or compensation. Cemeteries in France and Belgium stand as material evidence of their deaths, yet for decades these sites remained marginal within both European and global public memory.³ The absence of formal veteran status further marginalized survivors, reflecting racial hierarchies within imperial systems and the limited capacity of the Chinese state to assert commemorative claims in the postwar international order.

Cultural and social life

Despite harsh conditions, Chinese laborers actively cultivated social and cultural life, complicating portrayals of them as passive victims. YMCA initiatives established literacy classes, evening schools, and libraries, enabling many laborers to acquire basic reading and writing skills.⁹ Chinese-language newspapers such as *The Chinese Labourers' Weekly* circulated among camps, reporting war news and fostering a shared sense of identity among workers dispersed across Europe.¹¹

Interactions with missionaries, military personnel, and local communities exposed laborers to European customs, technologies, and social norms.¹⁰ For many, this was their first sustained contact with the wider world, sharpening awareness of racial hierarchy and global inequality.

Upon returning to China, former laborers carried not only wages but also new skills and political sensibilities,

contributing to evolving discussions of labor, citizenship, and national identity in the postwar period. Taken together, these experiences helped lay a social foundation for emerging political consciousness in postwar China.

Comparative analysis: global labor mobilization

World War I was not only a European conflict but a global war sustained by labor drawn from Asia, Africa, and the colonial world. The Chinese Labour Corps must therefore be situated within a broader system of imperial and semi-imperial labor mobilization. Comparison with Indian and African labor forces reveals a central paradox of the Allied war effort: although all non-European laborers were subjected to racialized exploitation, Chinese workers occupied an intermediate position between colonial subjection and formal sovereignty. This ambiguous status exposed contradictions within the international order the Allies claimed to defend.

Indian labour corps and the Chinese labour corps

The British Empire relied heavily on Indian manpower during World War I, deploying more than one million Indian soldiers and laborers across multiple theaters.¹² Indian laborers were often assigned to tasks closer to combat zones, directly supporting frontline operations and infrastructure.¹³

Recruitment practices differed in important ways. Indian labor recruitment operated through colonial administrative networks and was frequently coercive.¹² Chinese recruitment, by contrast, was organized through contracts negotiated by the Beiyang government and intermediary agencies such as the Huimin Company, allowing participation to be framed as voluntary.³ Yet this distinction was not absolute, as economic pressures and local conditions complicate any clear divide between “voluntary” and coerced labor.

Treatment and compensation further reveal structural differences. Indian laborers generally received lower pay and were subject to stricter discipline, reflecting their status as colonial subjects.¹³ Chinese laborers, though civilians on paper, were nonetheless segregated, closely supervised, and denied political recognition. British reliance on Chinese labor after 1916 reflected both manpower shortages and perceptions of their efficiency and political reliability.³

The divergence extended into postwar memory. Indian laborers were incorporated, albeit selectively, into imperial narratives of sacrifice, while Chinese laborers remained largely absent from British public memory, reflecting their ambiguous political status.

African laborers and French wartime labor systems

France similarly mobilized labor from its African colonies, including units such as the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, treating African manpower as an imperial resource mobilized for metropolitan survival.¹⁴ Like Chinese workers, African laborers faced racial discrimination and harsh discipline.¹⁵

Yet Chinese laborers occupied a distinct position. Unlike African workers, they were not colonial subjects and were officially classified as civilian laborers rather than soldiers, though in practice they experienced similar segregation and

hierarchy.¹⁶ This tension between formal non-colonial status and colonial-style treatment highlights China’s ambiguous position in the early twentieth-century international order.

What the comparison reveals

Placing the Chinese Labour Corps alongside Indian and African labor forces underscores the global foundations of World War I. Victory depended not only on European soldiers but on transnational systems of labor mobilized across imperial and semi-imperial networks.³ These comparisons also reveal the racialized structure of modern warfare, in which non-European laborers were disproportionately assigned to the most dangerous and least recognized forms of service.

Within this system, the Chinese Labour Corps occupies a particularly revealing position. As laborers from a semi-sovereign nation seeking international recognition, their service was intended to convert material contribution into diplomatic leverage. Yet their treatment closely resembled that of colonial workers, and their contributions were largely disregarded at the postwar settlement. This failed “labor-for-recognition” strategy became most visible at Versailles, where imperial power politics ultimately outweighed wartime participation.

By situating the Chinese Labour Corps within this framework, the CLC emerges not as an anomaly but as part of a broader global pattern linking labor, empire, and modern war, while clarifying why the Chinese experience produced distinct diplomatic and nationalist consequences.

Diplomatic consequences and political impact

China’s expectations at the Paris peace conference

China entered the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 with cautious optimism. Although it had not deployed combat troops, the Chinese government argued that its extensive labor contribution constituted meaningful wartime participation. More than 140,000 laborers had sustained Allied logistics under hazardous conditions, and Chinese diplomats believed this sacrifice carried both material and moral weight.³ The Beiyang government therefore expected that such service would strengthen its bargaining position and justify its demand for the restoration of sovereignty over Shandong, previously seized by Germany and later occupied by Japan.⁵

Chinese representatives presented the Chinese Labour Corps as evidence that China had acted as a responsible member of the international community. In memoranda submitted to the conference, they emphasized that Chinese labor had directly supported the Allied war effort and demonstrated China’s commitment to collective security and international order.¹⁷ Underlying these claims was a broader assumption: that material contribution, expressed through labor rather than military force, could be converted into diplomatic recognition in the postwar settlement.

Versailles betrayal

These expectations were ultimately frustrated. At Versailles, the Allied powers transferred Germany’s former

rights in Shandong to Japan rather than restoring them to China.¹⁸ This outcome reflected the deeper logic of wartime diplomacy: preexisting secret agreements and alliance commitments to Japan outweighed China's wartime contribution. Despite repeated protests from Chinese representatives, labor was treated as insufficient grounds for territorial restitution. Conference records and diplomatic correspondence suggest that Britain and France prioritized strategic obligations over China's claims, reducing Chinese labor to a logistical resource rather than a political investment.¹⁸

Chinese petitions explicitly invoked the sacrifices of laborers, arguing that China had "contributed materially to the victory of the Allies" and was therefore entitled to sovereign restoration.¹⁷ These appeals were largely dismissed. Wellington Koo, one of China's chief delegates, recorded his frustration at the indifference of the great powers, noting that China's sacrifices had been "acknowledged in words but denied in substance".¹⁹ The Versailles settlement thus represented not only a diplomatic defeat but also the collapse of China's attempt to translate wartime labor into international recognition.

The May Fourth movement

News of the Shandong decision triggered immediate and widespread outrage in China. On May 4, 1919, thousands of students in Beijing took to the streets, denouncing the Versailles settlement and condemning the government's diplomatic failure. Public discourse quickly linked the injustice at Versailles to the sacrifices of Chinese laborers abroad, with newspapers and pamphlets lamenting that while "laborers shed blood and sweat," the nation gained little in return.²⁰

The May Fourth Movement marked a turning point in modern Chinese nationalism. Intellectuals associated with journals such as *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) interpreted the outcome at Versailles as evidence that moral appeals and passive participation in the international system were insufficient to secure national dignity.²¹ Within this framework, the Chinese Labour Corps came to symbolize exploitation without reward, reinforcing demands for cultural renewal, political reform, and resistance to imperialism.

Returning laborers further contributed to these shifts. Many brought back not only wages but also new ideas encountered in Europe, including concepts of democracy, science, labor organization, and social equality.³ While only a minority became directly involved in political activism, their experiences helped connect global war to domestic reform movements. In this sense, the Chinese Labour Corps, initially conceived as a diplomatic instrument, became an unintended catalyst for political mobilization, linking China's subordinate position in the international order to the rise of mass nationalism and intellectual radicalization in the postwar era.

Discussions and Recommendations for Future Work

Historiographical debate

Why were the Chinese laborers forgotten?

For much of the twentieth century, the Chinese Labour Corps occupied a marginal position in both Western and Chinese historiography. This absence stemmed from three interrelated factors: China's weak international standing after World War I, domestic cultural stigma surrounding overseas labor, and the ideological filtering effects of Cold War politics. Together, these forces rendered the CLC largely invisible within dominant historical narratives.

A central factor was China's diplomatic marginalization at Versailles. Despite its substantial wartime contribution, China emerged politically weakened, reinforcing Western assumptions that it had been peripheral to the war's decisive outcomes.³ Early Eurocentric histories accordingly prioritized combat and strategy, excluding non-European and non-combatant labor from sustained analysis.²² Within this framework, Chinese laborers appeared, if at all, as logistical background rather than historical actors with political significance.

Within China, memory of the CLC was shaped by cultural ambivalence. Many intellectuals associated overseas labor with national humiliation, reinforced by the derogatory "coolie" stereotype that symbolized China's subordination within global imperial hierarchies.²³ This image circulated widely in public discourse, linking migrant labor to backwardness and shame. As a result, Republican-era elites often minimized or omitted the laborers' experiences.

Cold War divisions further constrained scholarly attention. In Western historiography, imperial labor systems remained secondary to military and diplomatic narratives, while in the People's Republic of China, research on overseas labor tied to a non-Communist regime received limited support prior to the reform era.³ Consequently, the Chinese Labour Corps remained largely absent from both global World War I scholarship and mainstream accounts of modern Chinese history.

Rediscovery in recent scholarship

This historiographical silence began to shift in the late twentieth century. Expanded access to British and French military archives has enabled historians to reconstruct recruitment systems, transport networks, and mortality patterns, integrating the Chinese Labour Corps more firmly into studies of imperial wartime labor.²⁴ At the same time, oral histories collected from descendants of CLC workers, particularly in Shandong, challenged earlier portrayals of laborers as passive or voiceless.²⁵

Chinese scholarship developed along a parallel trajectory. From the 1990s onward, historians increasingly incorporated the CLC into efforts to globalize Chinese history and reinterpret China's early twentieth-century transformation. This work situates laborers within transnational networks of migration and imperial labor systems, emphasizing their exposure to industrial modernity and circulating political

ideas.³ Recent studies thus present them not only as victims of exploitation but also as intermediaries linking rural China to global modernity.

Current scholarly debates

Despite renewed attention, several debates remain unresolved. One concerns the impact of returning laborers on Chinese modernization. Some scholars argue that exposure to European labor regimes fostered new ideas about discipline and political consciousness, while others emphasize limits imposed by low literacy and uneven reintegration.²⁶

A second debate concerns mortality. Estimates of Chinese Labour Corps deaths range from approximately 3,000 to more than 10,000, reflecting inconsistencies in wartime documentation and classification.³ This uncertainty underscores the broader under-documentation of non-European labor in wartime archives.

Finally, historians continue to debate the legal and moral status of the CLC. Although officially non-combatants, Chinese laborers worked under fire and suffered casualties comparable to auxiliary units.²⁷ Reconsidering their status as quasi-combatants would challenge rigid distinctions between civilian labor and military participation in World War I historiography.

Legacy of the Chinese labour corps

Influence on China

The legacy of the Chinese Labour Corps did not end with the armistice of 1918. For many laborers who returned to China between 1919 and the early 1920s, their experiences in Europe reshaped their understanding of work, discipline, and modern production. Exposure to industrial labor systems, mechanized tools, and regimented schedules introduced forms of organization largely unfamiliar in much of rural China.³ While most returnees resumed agricultural or manual labor, some applied acquired skills in construction, railway maintenance, dock work, and emerging factory industries, contributing, albeit unevenly, to local economic transformation.⁷

More significant than technical skills was the circulation of ideas. Contact with Western notions of labor rights, collective organization, and social equality, often mediated through YMCA educational initiatives, broadened laborers' political horizons.⁹ Although only a minority engaged directly in activism, their experiences circulated through families, villages, and urban networks, fostering a wider receptivity to labor consciousness, nationalism, and anti-imperialism.²⁶ In this sense, the CLC functioned as a conduit linking China's wartime participation abroad to evolving domestic struggles over dignity, reform, and national renewal.

Legacy in Europe

In Europe, the material presence of the Chinese Labour Corps remains visible, though long underrecognized. Hundreds of Chinese laborers are buried in cemeteries across northern France and Belgium, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.²⁸ These sites stand as

enduring testimony to their contribution and sacrifice, even as they remained marginal within public memory for much of the twentieth century.

In recent decades, recognition has expanded. In Britain and France, museums, scholarly initiatives, and commemorative events have increasingly incorporated the CLC into broader World War I narratives.²⁹ The centenary commemorations between 2014 and 2018 further encouraged public acknowledgment, including official ceremonies involving Chinese and European representatives.²⁷ Yet this recognition remains uneven: Chinese laborers are still often commemorated in segregated or specialized contexts rather than fully integrated into national war narratives, revealing the persistent limits of inclusion within European memory cultures.

Memory and global history

The memory of the Chinese Labour Corps carries implications beyond commemoration; it reshapes how World War I is understood as a global event. The CLC demonstrates that the war was sustained not only by soldiers in combat but also by vast transnational systems of labor that built, repaired, and maintained the infrastructure of industrial warfare. Their experience challenges nation-centered and battlefield-focused narratives by foregrounding the racialized and hierarchical structures that underpinned wartime labor systems.²²

Restoring the CLC to historical memory thus reflects a broader historiographical shift toward global and labor-centered approaches to modern war. Chinese laborers did not fight as soldiers, yet their work made sustained warfare possible. Their history expands conventional definitions of participation and sacrifice, while underscoring the central role of marginalized laboring populations in shaping global historical outcomes.³

Recommendations for future work

Future research on the Chinese Labour Corps would benefit from deeper engagement with regional archives in Shandong and Hebei, where recruitment networks were concentrated. These local records could shed light on village-level motivations, recruitment pressures, and the socioeconomic backgrounds of laborers. Comparative studies between the CLC and other non-European labor contingents, such as Vietnamese, Egyptian, or Caribbean workers, would further clarify how race, empire, and labor intersected across the global wartime labor system. Additional work is also needed to trace the postwar trajectories of returning laborers, whose experiences abroad contributed to emerging labor activism and social reform movements in Republican China. Finally, digital humanities approaches, including mapping recruitment patterns or analyzing surviving letters through text-mining techniques, could open new avenues for understanding the scale, diversity, and cultural impact of the CLC. Together, these directions would deepen scholarly understanding of how labor shaped China's international position and the broader global dynamics of World War I.

Conclusion

The Chinese Labour Corps demonstrates that labor was both a crucial component of industrial warfare and China's principal means of participating in World War I. Through the deployment of more than 140,000 laborers to the Western Front, China contributed materially to the Allied war effort while seeking to translate that contribution into diplomatic recognition. Yet the failure of the Versailles settlement to restore Shandong revealed the limits of this "labor-for-recognition" strategy and exposed the unequal power structures that continued to shape the international order. The resulting disappointment contributed to the rise of modern Chinese nationalism and helped fuel movements for political and social reform, most notably the May Fourth Movement.

The history of the Chinese Labour Corps also challenges traditional interpretations of World War I. Rather than viewing the conflict solely through the actions of European states and military forces, this study highlights the global labor networks that sustained modern warfare. By restoring Chinese laborers to the historical narrative, the Chinese Labour Corps emerges as an important example of how non-European actors influenced both wartime outcomes and postwar political developments.

The legacy of this wartime labor diplomacy continues to resonate in contemporary relations between China and Western nations. The experience reinforced a lasting Chinese belief that international contributions do not always result in equal political recognition, a perception that continues to shape Chinese views of global governance and international status. At the same time, growing recognition of the Chinese Labour Corps in Britain, France, and other countries reflects broader efforts to acknowledge the global and multicultural dimensions of modern history. The story of the Chinese Labour Corps therefore remains relevant not only as a historical case study but also as a lens through which to understand continuing debates about recognition, equality, and China's place in the international order.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the teachers and mentors at Haynes Academy for Advanced Studies whose guidance made this research possible. I am especially grateful to Cyril Lagvanec, whose feedback strengthened both the analytical framework and the clarity of the manuscript. I also appreciate the support of my family and classmates, who encouraged my interest in global history and provided thoughtful conversations throughout the writing process. Any remaining errors are my own.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest (COI) Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplemental Materials

No supplemental materials.

References

- [1] Marder AJ. *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*. London: Oxford University Press; 1965;2.
- [2] Rondeau R. Les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*. 1982;29(4):562–583.
- [3] Xu G. *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2011.
- [4] Xu G. The Chinese and the great war. *China Quart*. 1993;133:110–140.
- [5] Chiang WY. *China and the Shandong Question*. New York: Columbia University Press; 1965.
- [6] Li H, editor. *Letters from the Chinese Labour Corps*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju; 2008.
- [7] Bailey P. The Chinese Labour Corps in France, 1917–1921. *J Asian Stud*. 2012;71(4):941–962.
- [8] British War Office. *Report on the Chinese Labour Corps, 1919*. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office; 1920.
- [9] Young Men's Christian Association. *Reports on Educational and Welfare Work among Chinese Labourers in France*. Paris: Young Men's Christian Association; 1918.
- [10] The Chinese Labour Corps. Peking. Beijing: Government Printing Office; 1919.
- [11] The Chinese Labourers' Weekly. Various issues, 1918. Available from: Imperial War Museums Chinese Labour Corps Collection.
- [12] Omissi D. *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18*. London: Macmillan; 1999.
- [13] Das S. *India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2018.
- [14] Lunn J. *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; 1999.
- [15] Stovall T. Race and the making of French wartime labor policy. *French Hist Stud*. 1998;21(2):251–274.
- [16] French Ministry of Defense. *Rapports sur la main-d'œuvre étrangère*. Paris: Ministère de la Guerre; 1917–1918.
- [17] Chinese Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. *Memo-randa and Petitions*. Paris: Chinese Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference; 1919.
- [18] MacMillan M. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House; 2001.
- [19] Koo WC. *The Wellington Koo Memoirs. Vol. II: Paris Peace Conference Diaries, 1919*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; 1981.
- [20] Chow TT. *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 1960.
- [21] Chen D. Editorial. New Youth (Xin Qingnian); 1919. Available from: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=699597>
- [22] Winter J. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995.
- [23] Chang CH. Coolies and the national image. *Mod China*. 1998;24(3):305–329.

- [24] Imperial War Museums. *Chinese Labour Corps Archival Files, War Office Series*. London: Imperial War Museums; 2026. Accessed July 1, 2026.
- [25] Shandong Provincial Gazetteer Editorial Committee. *Overseas Labor Records*. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House; 2002.
- [26] MacKinnon SR. Nation, and modernity in Republican China. *J Asian Stud*. 2003;62(4):1039–1062.
- [27] James G. *The Chinese Labour Corps 1916–1921*. London: Military History Press; 2014.
- [28] Commonwealth War Graves Commission. *Chinese Labour Corps Cemeteries in France and Belgium. Archival records*. Maidenhead, UK: Commonwealth War Graves Commission; 2026. Accessed July 1, 2026.
- [29] Imperial War Museums. *The Chinese Labour Corps and the First World War. Exhibition Materials*. London: Imperial War Museums; 2026b. Accessed July 1, 2026.

About the Author



Keren He is a 17-year-old student at Haynes Academy for Advanced Studies in Metairie, Louisiana. A first-generation Asian American, she studies how marginalized communities shape broader narratives of justice, citizenship, and national identity. Her writing has been recognized by the *Scholastic Art & Writing Awards* with one Gold Key, four Silver Keys, and five Honorable Mentions. Her poetry has appeared in *Teen Ink*, *Skipping Stones Magazine*, the *Scholastic Art & Writing*

Awards, and the *High School Poets Journal*. She is the author of *Echoes of New Orleans: Poetic Reflections on Culture and Heritage* (2025). Her research focuses on overlooked histories in American and global contexts, and she believes historical inquiry can illuminate hidden dimensions of democracy and deepen our understanding of equality and human dignity.