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# China on the Western Front

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**Chair: Alan Philps**

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### Alan Philps

Good afternoon, welcome to Chatham House. My name is Alan Philps, I am editor of *The World Today*. The magazine is there on, if you haven't got a copy you can take one on first come, first serve basis. You are also welcome to subscribe if you'd like to. A few little bits of housekeeping. Firstly can you switch your mobile phones off or at least put them on silent and if you have any comments, they can be sent to the hashtag, #CHevents.

Okay, we have an hour, a strict hour, so I'll get going. Today we have with us Helen Fitzwilliam, to my right, who wrote, produced and directed the short film we're about to see. Helen started as a news reporter with the BBC and since then has moved on to making critically acclaimed documentaries for National Geographic, PBS and Channel 4. These documentaries include the Emmy Award-winning *Illicit*, about the dark side of globalization and more recently, *Secrets of the Vatican*.

On my left is Professor Paul Bailey, Professor of Modern Chinese History at the University of Durham. He is the academic expert in the UK on this topic. His forthcoming book, out in November, I think the title says it all, is *Chinese Overseas Labor in World War I France: Migrant Workers, Globalisation and the Sino-French Connection*. So Paul will be able to put the events in the context of the time, their effect on Chinese politics and we can also look at Sino-French relations to this day.

So to begin with, Helen will briefly introduce the film and then we'll show it and then Paul will speak and we can have some questions and answers. Helen?

### Helen Fitzwilliam

Well, I became obsessed by this subject as I was living in Washington and one of our neighbours turned out to be a translator for Nixon, during the Nixon-Mao talks, so I was riveted by this and I'm still trying to make a documentary on that topic. But while we were talking he said, 'Well, what about the story of the Chinese in the First World War?', and I said, 'What story of the Chinese in the First World War?' I'd never even heard of them, how on earth did they become involved?

So I started trying to find out more about it and became more and more intrigued that this story didn't seem to be known over here or in China. So then I pitched the story and Alan, very kindly, at Chatham House and *The World Today* decided to commission it because he too thought it was a forgotten story that should be told. It was interesting trying, we didn't have enough money, sadly, to go all the way to China, which I would have loved to do, but obviously I spoke, the film is supposed to complement the magazine article which has far more facts and information. Film tends to be far more emotional and what I wanted to find out was really the Chinese angle and to find out why there were no memorials to the Chinese workers, 140,000 of them who had come all the way from China and many of whom, at least 2,000 we know of, had lost their lives in Flanders in France. Quite a few hundred died in submarine attacks, actually coming from China to northern France.

So once you go to Flanders and visit all of the cemeteries, all these extra stories come out and so I just wanted to explore that story and I hope you like the film.

#### Alan Philps

Very good, okay. Let's move to the front row so we don't get in your way. So let's look at the film.

#### FILM

[0:05:30 – 0:15:00]

#### Helen Fitzwilliam

Can I just very quickly thank my team, I could never have done it without my wonderful cameraman, William, without Nekane who edited it and without Faye who is my researcher. So they're just as... they really deserve the credit as well.

#### Alan Philps

Very well deserved. I was trying to persuade Helen to make it longer but she said, 'Short is better and the attention must never wander during a film.' It would have been nice to go to China as well, but it is what it is. Paul, would you like to speak on the significance of the Chinese workers in history.

#### Paul Bailey

Yes, first of all can I thank you and Chatham House for inviting me. I am delighted to be on this platform with Helen, responding and talking about Chinese labourers after this marvellous film. Like Helen, when I first started researching Chinese workers in World War I and it was back in the early 1980s, there was no one, either in China or in Europe that knew anything about this story or was interested in it. As Dominic then even says in the film, in China itself in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, during Mao's day, the First World War was, I mean a classical Lennunist view. It was a clash between greedy and avaricious imperialisms.

The Chinese workers themselves were simply seen as passive victims. It sort of helped to substantiate their story of an exploited China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. So in the discourse, in the descriptions of these Chinese workers they were simply described as 'cannon fodder'. Horribly exploited, cruelly treated victims of nasty, greedy imperialist powers and as late as 2000, you know, well after Mao's death, when I started to do some serious research on this subject, I went to the two ports from where the Chinese workers embarked for Europe.

One is Weihaiwei, both these ports were in Shandong Province which is where most of the Chinese workers came from. It was about, in total, about 137,000 workers. 37,000 recruited by France and about 96,000 recruited by Britain. Most of them embarked from Weihaiwei in the north of Shandong Province, northern China and Qingdao, which is the

former German territory which Japan had occupied in the first weeks of the war, as Britain's ally.

So I thought, well these two places would be fantastic places to do research in 2000. I went to Weihaiwei, I went to the archives office, the Archives Bureau and I met all the people there. They were all very friendly and helpful and I said, 'You know, I'm doing research on the Chinese workers,' and I got a lot of blank looks and then the director said, 'Well, let me show you an exhibition we're organizing on the history of Weihaiwei.'

I thought, well, fantastic, I'll find some photographs, I'll find some artefacts, I'll find some information about the Chinese workers. So he took me to this exhibition organized by the Archives Bureau, it took up a full room, and looked at all these photos of Weihaiwei, nice pictures of Weihaiwei in local history. There was not a single reference to Chinese workers who had embarked, thousands of them, from Weihaiwei in 1917-1918.

So I asked the curator of the exhibition, I said, 'Well don't you have any information on the Chinese workers from World War I?' He looked rather sheepish, said, 'Come in,' so he took me to a little cupboard at the back of the hall. He opened this cupboard, which obviously hadn't seen daylight, there were cobwebs everywhere, dust everywhere and he took out two photographs which had been put on a background there, of Chinese workers. That was the only thing in the Archives Bureau and it wasn't on show.

Then I went down to Qingdao, a little bit disappointed, not too hopeful and I visited the local History Museum in Qingdao and again, there was virtually nothing on the Chinese workers. There was one photograph of the Chinese workers embarking for Europe and the caption simply said, these are the sort of poor, sad, exploited victims tricked and deceived by those nefarious western imperialist powers to serve as cannon fodder. That was the description that kept coming up, they are 'cannon fodder' for the greedy imperialist powers.

So this was late in 2000 but I mean, since then, there's been a dramatic change because, I was talking to Helen earlier on. The Chinese television, English language, international television channel, CCTV broadcast a six part documentary in 2010 on the Chinese workers in World War I and the line there is very, very different from what I had experienced in 2000 because in this documentary the Chinese workers are now perceived as heroes, are now perceived as active contributors to world peace and harmony. And as the opening episode says, all these Chinese workers and I quote, if I can remember correctly, 'Standing shoulder to shoulder with their British and French counterparts in resisting military aggression militarism in the cause of world peace'.

It's no accident, I think, that we've seen this change because it fits in very nicely with the current Chinese agenda, Chinese government agenda on demonstrating China's positive global interactions, not only now, to calm or placate fears of a rising China. The idea is that China's rise is a peaceful one and it was able to build on a legacy, a history, a tradition of China's positive interaction with the world.

So the World War I Chinese workers now have been transformed from the exploited, passive coolies, very derogatory term, to what I would call trans-national agents. Active

contributors to world peace. So in a sense they've been appropriated. On the French side, again, it was very interesting that for a long time, the story of Chinese workers in France was completely ignored and I think there's a large reason for that that until fairly recently, until what, the last 10-15 years, most studies of World War I have been very Eurocentric, have been very Western-centric.

It's being seen as a European war and the focus has been on the European participants, but it's only now, I mean relatively recently that we're becoming more and more aware of the huge contribution and participation of the extra-European world, the non-European world, literally the thousands and thousands of colonial labour from Britain's colonies, South Africa, the Caribbean, India, from France's colonies, Vietnam, there were over 50,000 Vietnamese workers and soldiers actually, conscripted by France, as colonies in North Africa, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, French West Africa.

So within that context, you know, that there are now works, now studies of World War I that have enlarged the context, enlarged the vision and that we're beginning to see that the participation and how World War I impacted on non-European peoples and their contribution and participation in the war.

I think there's also a more prosaic reason, I think, why there has been increasing interest. I was talking to Alan about this earlier. I mean that is in a sense to boost tourism, to put it bluntly because it's not only Chinese workers that is now being publicized, the presence of Chinese workers in World War I, it's the presence of Chinese students at the same time, more or less the same time.

In Helen's film it was mentioned that the Chinese workers employed by France, they had five year contracts. The Chinese workers under the British employ had three year contracts. So those Chinese workers recruited by Britain had all been repatriated by 1919-1920, all of them. Over 3,000, as Helen's film showed, stayed on in France after the expiry of their contracts in 1922. Some inter-married with French women and as we saw, Gerald Chang and others, you know, are the descendents living in France.

So Chinese students, Chinese work study students also began to arrive in France in 1919, so their presence coincides with the presence of Chinese workers. Many of these students who were called 'work study students', the aim was that they would come to France, they'd get jobs in French factories, to finance their studies in France. It was organized by Chinese intellectuals who were very pro-French, very Francophile and who believed that France was the civilized, the principal civilized country in the world and that Chinese students could learn a lot.

Many of these Chinese students, these work study students became future leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, including Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping and many others. In other words their experience in France was one where they first became converted to Marxism. People like Zhou Enlai set up branches, associations of the Chinese Communist Party, which was founded in China in 1921.

So I think the French government buttoned on to the fact, you know, this is a very useful tourist thing. So I mean they promote, they promote the towns, for example, where

Chinese students lived, [Montages], which is just south of Paris where many of these work study students were based. If you read the web page, you can Google [Montages] local mayor welcoming tourists and there is more and more Chinese tourists coming because this against the story, they know nothing about.

I'll just finish soon Alan, the other interesting reason why there has been an increased interest in France is that again, just as in the case with China, as I was mentioning, it fits in in China, it fits in with this wider agenda of promoting China's globalization and positive interaction with the world. So in France again, in the last 10 or 15 years, there has been, especially, you know, there has been a sort of agenda amongst some intellectuals, amongst some government ministers to promote or to emphasize or to highlight the history of immigration in France's history and the contribution of immigrants to France's national history.

This culminated in the opening of a museum in Paris in 2007, the Museum of the History of Immigration which was meant to be a place that glorifies and valorises immigrants and immigration as an integral part of French history. As you can imagine, this has been quite a controversial subject, as usual in France, you know, it sparks this debate between the right and the left, you know, the right who -

### Alan Philips

Carry on.

### Paul Bailey

Okay, the right to insist, well you know, France is sort of still anchored to this idea of homogenous French identity, 'La vraie France, la France profonde,' and those terrible leftists who were talking about multiculturalism and immigration and sort of a mix of cultures. So it's become embroiled in a sort of political battle but in this museum there is a little section on the Chinese workers, very scanty actually, it just has a couple of photographs and a copy of the contract, but it's a start.

So, you know, again, this is why I think this has captured the interest in China and France is it's linked to these wider political agendas.