

THE CHINESE LABOUR CORPS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR LABOURERS BURIED IN FRANCE

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This article complements the piece by Keith Stevens (RAS Journal No. 29), about Chinese Labour Corps members buried in England during or just after the First World War (1914-18).¹

By 1916 there was a shortage of manpower in Britain. Conscription was introduced into the armed services and more men were recruited from various parts of the British Empire. These included Chinese who actually mostly came from Shan Tung (Shandong), but some were recruited from Honan (Hunan) Province. Together with British missionary and sinologue officers many labourers were shipped from Weihaiwei (now called Weihai). This was British Territory and served as a naval base from 1898 until the Union Flag was lowered in 1930.²

Serving under British military discipline, in the region of 100,000 Chinese were shipped to France to dig trenches and construct fortifications for the allies. About 2,000 died from illness, wounds or injuries sustained during or just after the war. Some were blown up by mines as they cleared battlefields after hostilities had ceased. Others succumbed to the influenza epidemic that swept Europe in 1919. A handful were shot dead in a mutiny near Boulogne. Those that did not return to China lie far from their native soil, in such places as Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension, Albert French National Cemetery, Arques-La-Bataille British Cemetery, Asco Communal Cemetery and Alette British Cemetery, in France. The largest and most decorative is the Noyelles-sur-Mer Cemetery which has a portico built in Chinese style.

One September morning in 1995 my son, Barry, and I drove from Brussels to Foncquevillers, a village situated in the fertile, undulating French countryside between the Arras-Doullens and the Arras-Amiens roads. There are a total of 645 graves in this military cemetery which is bounded by a brick wall and a hornbeam hedge. It is planted with catalpa and other trees. Many of the graves here are seldom or never visited by outsiders. In this well cared for tranquil spot there are two graves of Chinese Labour Corps labourers, one of a French civilian

and four belong to German prisoners. The remainder are Allied servicemen 's graves.³ The headstones, including those of the Chinese Labour Corps members, are of the usual Portland Stone with the Commonwealth War Grave standard segmental curve on the top (see Plates 1 and 2). This distinguishes them from graves for civilians which are curved but with with a piece notched out at each top corner. Stones for Royal Air Force graves are 'winged', with curved tops sweeping upwards slightly at each side.⁴ Few if any of the Chinese who served in Europe in the First World War, one assumes, were Christians. There are no crosses on their gravestones.

Of the two Chinese graves in this cemetery one is unnamed (see Plate 1), although there is an army number. This is not unusual. When Chinese labourers were first recruited, pigtails, which could still be found in China at the time, were cut off. Thumbprints were then taken and numbered wristlets were riveted on.⁵ The inscription on the first gravestone reads, in Chinese and English, 'Faithful unto death'. The second headstone (see Plate 2) is in memory of Wong Fuk-hing with the proverb, 'A good reputation endures forever'.⁶ Wong came from Shan Tung Province, Yeung Sun county. A Chinese person's native place is important enough to be inscribed on his or her headstone. Traditionally, Chinese like to be buried on their native soil.

Not far from Foncquevillers Military Cemetery is an old farm house which, in 1916, stood near the front line of the First Battle of the Somme, the largest land battle Britain has ever fought.⁷ Some 57,470 British soldiers were killed on July 1, 1916, the first day of this action. The cellar at the time, linked by a tunnel to the trenches which crisscrossed the area, served as a battlefield operating theatre. On March 19, 1916, two British soldiers were shot at dawn, close by, for desertion. Although my son and I visited this old house owned by Avril Williams, which now serves as a guest house and English tea rooms, she was unfortunately not at home. Her daughter showed us around.

The chief reason that Avril Williams came here, from England, was so she might visit and tend the graves of those who fought and died: 'So we might continue to live the way we do'.⁸ On the headstone of Private George Palmer's grave, who was killed in 1917, a request from his mother is inscribed.

'Will some kind hand in a foreign land place a flower on my son's grave.'

Avril Williams has answered that call countless times. She looks upon the departed, including of course the two Chinese, as members of her extended family. It is important they all have visitors.

NOTES

¹ Keith Stevens, 'British Chinese Labour Corps' Labourers Buried in England', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 29, 1989 (1991), p. 390 and Plates 24 and 25

² Michael Summerskill, *China on the Western Front, Britain's Work Force in the First World War*, published by Summerskill (1982), *passim*

³ The Register at Fonquevillers Military Cemetery

⁴ S M Bard, *Report on Survey and Study of old Service Graves at Stanley Military Cemetery*, Antiquities and Monuments Office (Hong Kong, c. 1990), p.10, and S M Bard, *Annex to Board Paper Antiquities Advisory Board/21/91, Study of Military Graves and Monuments Hong Kong Cemetery* (Hong Kong, 1991), p. 17

⁵ In large Chinese families children are still sometimes known by numbers eg 'Number Four Sister'

British soldiers in World War Two each wore two identity discs on a cord around their necks. On these plastic discs were stamped their army number and their name. If a soldier was killed one disc was buried with the body and the other was sent back to base for record purposes.

⁶ Four proverbs were used. The other two were, 'A noble duty bravely done', and 'Though dead he still liveth'. All four have a hint of a Christian message.

⁷ Tim Sebastian, 'Haunted by the Ghosts of Heroes', *South China Morning Post* (1 July 1995), Features p.3

⁸ *Ibid*

PLATES

Plate I Although an army number is inscribed, this grave of a Chinese labourer in Fonquevillers Cemetery is unnamed. This is not uncommon.

Plate II The inscription on this grave shows the name of the labourer and his native place in China.



Plate I



Plate II