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Xu Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011. 336 pp. Photos, appendices, notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-04999-4.

Review by Gloria S. Tseng, Hope College.

The centrality of the First World War in twentieth-century European history is well-established in historiography and continues to draw scholarly attention. The four years of trench warfare put an end to the “long nineteenth century” and ushered in a new era and world order, and historians have long recognized the importance of the home front and of industrial organization in determining the outcome of this large-scale, industrialized military conflict. In *Strangers on the Western Front*, Xu Guoqi makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on the First World War by offering the first full-length monograph in English since Michael Summerskill’s *China on the Western Front* on the approximately 140,000 Chinese men who labored in support of the Allied war effort in Europe.[1] It does so in two important ways: first, by giving voice to the numerous Chinese laborers who collectively made a substantial contribution to the Allied victory but have been all but overlooked, and, second, by casting the experiences of these laborers in the larger context of China’s quest for a recognized position on the world stage in the early twentieth century.

Strangers on the Western Front is the most comprehensive scholarly treatment to date of the employment of indentured Chinese laborers in the Great War. Xu goes beyond the scope of Summerskill’s study by including those employed under the French contract in addition to those under the British contract, as well as those “loaned” by the French to the American Expeditionary Force after the entry of the U.S. into the war. Moreover, Xu discusses the crucial part played by Canada in transporting the laborers across the North American continent, an important link in the logistics of getting the recruited workers from China to France, also absent in the earlier work. More importantly, Xu has incorporated an impressive array of English, French and Chinese sources, including archives in the United Kingdom, France, Canada, the United States, China and Taiwan. The scope of the research, as well as the subject matter, is international.

Xu argues in *Strangers on the Western Front* that the employment of Chinese laborers in the war effort of the Allied nations began as a Chinese initiative. It was a calculated move on the part of China’s political leaders and social elites to win a place for China in the postwar world. Furthermore, the men—the majority of whom were peasants from rural villages of Shandong—who took part in this grand experiment represented China’s first large-scale encounter with Western civilization on Western soil, and the impact of this encounter reverberated in the new way in which they came to see themselves and the world on the one hand, and in the new respect and concern China’s elites came to have for Chinese laborers, on the other. In short, China’s involvement in the First World War through its 140,000 laborers was an important step in its internationalization.

The narrative of *Strangers on the Western Front* is organized into ten chapters, along with an introductory and a concluding chapter. Chapter one persuasively establishes the active involvement of the governments of China, Great Britain, and France in the recruitment of Chinese laborers, the national interests that motivated the three governments, and the negotiations undertaken by China with

the other two governments. Since China was officially neutral during the first three years of the conflict, and the British and French contracts governing the Chinese men recruited by these governments were signed with individual Chinese laborers and private Chinese recruiting agencies, respectively, this chapter is foundational to Xu's argument. Xu effectively shows that the European war sparked intense debate in China at the national level, and that Chinese government officials were aware of and discreetly supported the recruitment schemes, even though the Chinese government was careful to maintain the appearance of neutrality. China's main goal was to regain formerly German-held territory in the province of Shandong, which Japan had seized following the outbreak of the war in Europe.

Chapters two and three describe the process of recruitment and the sea and land journeys of the Chinese workers before their arrival in France. The role played by Canada in providing railway transport is detailed in chapter three. Chapters four to eight provide an intimate and sympathetic depiction of the Chinese men's experiences—providing crucial support to the Allied armies behind the lines and in French factories, and performing the grim task of cleaning up battlefields in the aftermath of the war. In these chapters, Xu's painstaking research shines through his narrative of the men's prison-like conditions on the Canadian railway, their curiosity about their new and strange environment in France, their relations with French citizens with whom they came into contact, and the frustrations and incidences of injustice that abounded on all sides—being subjected to military discipline under both the British and the French command and working within the range of enemy fire even though the British and the French contracts specifically stated that they were “not to be employed in military operations” (p. 251), and that they were “to be engaged only in industries and agriculture” (p. 246); being “loaned” to the Americans by the French government, a situation for which the French contract did not make provision, not to mention the many breaches of the French contract by the American military (pp. 157-163). A main source of these frustrations was the fact that the Allied forces simply did not have enough reliable interpreters and qualified officers to manage the Chinese laborers in their charge. Racial attitudes of the day also added to the friction and injustice. Xu gives several examples of riots and strikes suppressed by British officers opening fire, resulting in the deaths of and injuries to Chinese laborers (pp. 113-115).

Against this backdrop of backbreaking labor, miscommunication, and mismanagement, Xu does not neglect to point out exceptions of fair-mindedness, kindness, and even altruistic service. Gestures of kindness on the part of the Canadian medical captain Harry Livingstone won the gratitude of many a Chinese en route to France (pp. 56-60). Under competent officers who appreciated their value, Chinese laborers performed satisfactorily and even exceeded expectations (pp. 87-93). And the actions of a group of Canadian ladies from Halifax in offering the only welcome the men ever received on their way back to China stood out as a rare bright spot in an otherwise depressing tale of unrecognized wartime contribution and hasty repatriation bordering on maltreatment (pp. 77-79). Overall, Xu compares the British authorities unfavorably with the French. The French contract provided more specific guarantees to each laborer. On the other hand, the Chinese laborers under the British military command lived in enclosed camps surrounded by barbed wire and could not leave camp even after work hours, and overall British attitudes and management style were more overbearing. Two remarkable exceptions to this pattern were medical care and burials. In Noyelles, France, in addition to setting up “a beautiful cemetery,” the British also established the General Hospital for the Chinese Laborers, “with modern x-ray machines and operation rooms, and staffed with high-grade Chinese-speaking physicians” (p. 118).

No history of the Chinese laborers on the Western front is complete without mention of the Young Men's Christian Association. Chapter eight discusses the indispensable work of this Protestant organization, which “made the experience of the Chinese workers in Europe less miserable and more fruitful” (p. 175). After overcoming initial suspicion and resistance on the part of the British and the French authorities, YMCA secretaries interpreted, wrote and read letters for the illiterate, taught literacy classes, offered Bible classes and Sunday services, and organized sports and entertainment programs through more than eighty centers serving more than 100 of the 194 companies of the

approximately 100,000 Chinese workers under the British (p. 178), and about thirty-eight centers serving more than 70 percent of the approximately 40,000 Chinese workers under the French (p. 180). This work was extended among the approximately 10,000 Chinese workers loaned to the Americans as well (p. 181).

The chapter on the YMCA segues into the second half of Xu's argument, developed in chapters nine and ten. The YMCA staff working with the Chinese laborers consisted of missionaries on furlough, church ministers, and Chinese university students abroad or directly from China. In recruiting Chinese university students to serve Chinese laborers in Europe, the YMCA brought Chinese elites and Chinese workers together in an unprecedented way. Through their experiences in Europe and their interactions with the Chinese YMCA secretaries, many workers developed a new awareness of the world and China's place in it; they came to possess patriotic sentiments and began to think of themselves as new citizens who had a role to play in China's future. The students in turn were transformed by their interactions with the laborers. Among the best known of the Chinese YMCA secretaries was Yan Yangchu, a graduate of Yale College. The literacy program that he developed for Chinese laborers in France became the basis of a mass education movement that he launched across China in the 1920s (pp. 210-212). Xu argues that working with Chinese laborers in Europe led Chinese elites such as Yan to see the potential of Chinese workers as new citizens who would lay the foundation of a new China.

Xu's argument is thought-provoking. On the one hand, it brings China into the historiography on the First World War, for which his earlier work *China and the Great War* paves the way.^[2] On the other hand, it redresses the prevailing emphasis on warlordism in the scholarship on early twentieth-century China.^[3] Xu argues that China played an important role in shaping the outcome of the First World War; that Chinese political leaders and social elites of the 1910s and 1920s actively sought to reshape the postwar order in a way that was advantageous to the new republic; and that during these decades of turmoil, China made significant strides in the long road to taking part in the international order. This argument runs through both *China and the Great War* and *Strangers on the Western Front*.

Whereas the earlier work focuses on politicians and diplomats, *Strangers on the Western Front* explores the impact of the war on the laborers who experienced it firsthand and on the elites who witnessed and shared in the laborers' experiences in some way. Xu names leading figures of the period Li Shizeng, Wu Zihui, and Cai Yuanpei, alongside the YMCA's secretaries such as Yan Yangchu, as examples of Chinese elites who were transformed by their close encounters with their laboring compatriots. Yet, there is reason to suspect that the early advocates of the "laborers-as-soldiers" scheme were not bedfellows of the YMCA secretaries or even sympathetic to the YMCA's Christian orientation. Li and Wu were well-known anarchists and vehemently secular, and the YMCA was motivated by a desire to spread Christian influence in China through its acts of service. While both the anarchists and the YMCA secretaries had a strong interest in the Chinese laborers, they were motivated by very different ideologies, and chapters nine and ten of *Strangers on the Western Front* do not address this sufficiently. It is unclear how these two currents—the anarchist and the Christian—came together for the Chinese in Europe and China, if they ever did. Nonetheless, Xu touches on an intriguing aspect of the cultural impact of the European War on early Republican China, which deserves further research and analysis. It could perhaps be the subject of another book.

NOTES

[1] Michael Summerskill, *China on the Western Front: Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War* (Michael Summerskill, 1982). For scholarship in Chinese, see Chen Sanjing, *Huagong yu Ou zhan* [Chinese laborers and the European War] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1986).

[2] Xu Guoqi, *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[3] For examples, see Edward L. Dreyer, *China at War 1901-1949* (London: Longman, 1995) and Edward A. McCord, *Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1993).

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