

# Online Confucius Institute at The Open University

## Peng Wenlan: The Chinese Labour Corps of WW1

### December 8, 2023



### Edited Transcript

#### Kan Qian

Good afternoon, and good evening to those who are joining from China.

It's my great pleasure to introduce Peng Wenlan. She's an independent documentary filmmaker, based in London specialising in China, with a particular focus on history, modern history and social issues. She began her TV career at China Central Television, first presenting and producing educational programmes. In the early 80s. I was a student in China and used to follow her 'English on Sunday' programme and I believe some of you in the audience may have done so as well and probably know about her. She subsequently launched China Central TV's first ever current affairs series 'Focus', which led to the now flagship programme *Jiao Dian Fang Tan* (焦点访谈). Since returning to the UK, Wenlan has worked for the BBC and the independent sector and now she runs her own film company. Her films have also won many awards, including a *Gold Camera Award* in the history and biography category at the 1998 *USA Film and Video Festival*. She's also the founding member of [The Meridian Society](#), a London-based charitable organisation committed to the promotion of Chinese culture. She led a three-year project on the Chinese Labour Corps on behalf of *The Meridian Society*. The oral history, film, named 'Forgotten Faces of the Great War' was one of the outcomes of the project. So, we're just delighted today that Wenlan has agreed to give us a talk on this very underreported topic. So over to you Wenlan.

#### Peng Wenlan

Thank you very much Qian. Hello, everybody, wonderful to be here with you.

I'll just explain what's going to happen today, I'm going to show you very shortly a PowerPoint presentation going through the historical background behind the Chinese Labour Corps. And at certain points, I'll show you a couple of video clips from the oral history film that Qian mentioned just now.

Today's talk is, *The Chinese Labour Corps of World War One, and China's Efforts to Regain Territorial Integrity*. Everybody in China knows about China's '[century of humiliation](#)' and this is a saying, a quote,

that is used all the time by everybody who knows anything about Chinese history, and particularly modern Chinese history. Very briefly, the century of humiliation refers to the 100 years from 1840 to about 1945 or so, when the country underwent several incursions by foreign imperial powers. So, we start off in 1840, with the [First Opium War](#); 1856 the [Second Opium War](#); 1884 the [Sino-French War](#); 1894 [First Sino-Japanese war](#); and 1899, [The Boxer Uprising](#).

These are actually only the main incursions, there were many, many more lesser invasions, but these are the primary ones. Invariably, China would lose every single one of these battles and invariably, each war would end with an unequal treaty. The treaty would oblige Chinese to cede extra territorial rights, in other words, to allow foreign delegations to set themselves up wherever they wanted, to open up certain treaty ports, to pay vast indemnities and so on and so forth. As I say, these were called the '[Unequal Treaties](#)', or *bu ping deng tiao yue* (不平等条约). This went on, obviously, for a hundred years, and during this time, as each foreign power came into China, they grabbed a slice of the country - the Chinese refer to this as being a China being 'carved up like a melon', *gua fen zhongguo* (瓜分中国). There you see Queen Victoria on the left, and the German Kaiser, the Russian Tsar, you've got France there, Japan on the right, and right at the back the hapless Qing Emperor. This is what China might have looked like during those times and you can see with all these colours here, vast swathes of the country are taken over by various imperial powers: all the pink areas, Tibet, there around the Yangtze River, these are all the British concessions, and so on, so forth, but I would like to point this part to you, on the far right-hand side of the coast, I don't know whether you can see my cursor, but on the right hand side of the coastline, sort of in the middle bit, you see Qingdao, and I want to bring this to your attention. Here it is in a much larger picture, and this is the province of [Shandong](#). Shandong at the time, was occupied by the Germans, and you can see why Germany felt that this was a particularly good area to take up, you can see that it's essentially diamond-shaped, and half of that diamond is taken up by coastline. So, clearly, in terms of merchant ships, or naval ships, it was a very accessible area. That is the province that's going to come into question in this topic today.

As you can imagine, as China's was being carved up like a melon, the people, the general populace, were very obsessed with this situation. They realised that the [Qing Dynasty](#), the Qing Emperor is totally incompetent, the government is corrupt and just unable to get things under control. So, inevitably, you get uprisings around the country and finally, this culminates in the 1911 [Xinhai Revolution](#) and that leads to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. In the next year, you have the establishment of the Republic of China. However, while a lot of people looked forward to the establishment of this new republic, seeing it as heralding a time of democracy, of good governance, nonetheless, at the same time, you had these warlords who had essentially been taking up parts of the country during the Qing Dynasty, and indeed before the Qing Dynasty, and they were certainly not going to be happy just to give up all their territory, and so you had a period between 1916 and 1928, when all the warlords were ganging up against, or merging to form greater factions, or taking over other smaller warlords, and it was a time of total chaos.

At this time, we have the eruption of the [Great War](#) in Europe. Now, when the Great War started, people back in China considered it as something that was nothing to do with them whatsoever: it was called 'The European War'. However, there were a number of people who actually saw an opportunity here, and they felt - certain people within the government felt - that if they sided with the Western allies against Germany, then possibly if the Western allies won the war, then China would surely be rewarded, and of course, they were hoping very much that with Germany's loss, then the province of Shandong would be returned to China, so you have three offers of help from China.

The first one is 50,000 soldiers to [Jiaozhou Bay](#), and this is the bay close to, next to, Shandong Province, which they would defend against the Germans. This was pooh-poohed by the British legation in Peking, because they felt that China was certainly not in a position to defend themselves never mind, defend the country against a strong German navy since China had up till then lost all its various wars against the West. Also, there was a feeling that because China was, at that time a neutral country, it

would have been an illegal act for China to be involved. The next offer that came from China was to send soldiers and labourers to the Western Front. Now, the only trouble with this, of course, was soldiers being, obviously a representation of the government, and China still being a neutral country, that was therefore not possible. So finally, China said, Okay, well, how about sending 300,000 labourers to Europe? Now, in the meantime, of course, the war was being waged in Europe - and you must remember that when war first erupted in France, people thought that it would end by Christmas of that first year, no one had any idea that it would continue for so many years, and that such a great loss of life would take place. It really wasn't until you had the [Battle of the Somme](#) in July 1916, when Britain lost 60,000 soldiers on the very first day, that then somebody in British government woke up to the fact that we really do need help.

Now, prior to this, the French had actually said to China, yes, we do want help - because China was offering these labourers to both France as well as Britain - and so France said, yes, definitely, and they started recruiting. Also, as they recruited, in order to get the labourers over to France as quickly as possible, they would send transport ships to take masses of labourers down across Southeast Asia, around Africa, and then up the Suez Canal, across the Mediterranean, up to ports like Marseille, and then by train up to Northern France and Flanders. That was, in fact the quickest way. But in the meantime, one of the ships that was carrying these Chinese labourers was sunk by a German torpedo in the Mediterranean, and on board, all five-hundred-odd labourers plus, of course, French officers were killed.

Now, when Britain came to know about this, they thought, well, we can't afford to be losing these labourers. If we're going to actually recruit them, then we have to make sure that they do actually survive the entire journey. So, they decided to do something else and I'll show you in a minute what actually happened. So, it was because of the Battle of the Somme and also, the very fact that because the ship - the transport ship - was torpedoed in the Mediterranean, China now had a pretext to actually declare war on Germany. In other words, it would be possible for them to actually enter the war. So, in 1916, the first batch of French recruits go; 1916 Battle of the Somme; 1917, the first batch of British recruits; and in February 1917 you have the sinking of that transport ship that I mentioned.

Now, when it comes to the recruitment of laborers, by that time, Hong Kong was a British colony and so the British thought, well, of course, we'll get all our recruits from over there. What they didn't realise, of course, was that Hong Kong is a very warm country, the people are slightly smaller made than, say, northern Chinese, and if any of you have seen black and white archive footage of conditions at the front, you will remember how the soldiers lived in the trenches. These were dark, grimy, damp, unhygienic areas and very, very cold in the winter. Northern Europe, rather like Britain really, was a very wet area and so people coming from Hong Kong would not be able to survive such conditions. So, at the time, someone in the British War Department said, well, actually, there's another place that we can recruit from, and that is from [Weihai](#). And I'll come to Weihai in a second, but here on this map, you can see all the parts marked in yellow, mostly along coastal areas, are the provinces where the labourers were recruited from, but they came largely from this part from [Qingdao](#) and the port of Weihai. And although Qingdao was under German control, and The Port of Weihaiwei, as it was known then, had actually been leased by the British because the British expatriates who were working and living in China wanted a place for their summer retreat and Weihaiwei was considered a really nice little place and so that's where they established themselves. Because of this lease that they had got, they were able to recruit from this area.

So, how did they get over to Europe? As I've explained, you had the French going along this route, the blue colour here and right up the Suez across the Mediterranean. Some of them also, after the sinking of that transport ship, went round Africa, and then up to the Mediterranean, across the Mediterranean from there. The British, when they realised they had to ensure the safe passage of all these labourers, decided to go a completely different route. If you look at the red lines here, they departed from Qingdao or Weihai, right across the Pacific, up to Canada, and from Vancouver, the men would be transported

by train to Halifax and from Halifax they would catch the ship over to England, and the ports that they landed up in, were Devonport near Plymouth, and Liverpool. From Liverpool and Devonport, they would then continue their journey across the land to Folkstone and then they boarded the ferry across to Boulogne.

What were the kinds of people that they recruited? Well, anyone who knows Shandong at all, will also know that the men of Shandong pride themselves as being *Shandong da han* (山东大汉), which means literally 'Shandong big boys', 'big fellows'. And they are, as you can see, from this photo, big and burly, really strong people. Most of them were, in fact, peasant farmers - so illiterate people - but clearly able to withstand the very cold, harsh winters of Northern France, because Shandong also has cold, harsh winters. And because they were peasant farmers, they were certainly very strong and burly, and after they arrived and started proving themselves, the War Office in Britain said that these men were 'inured to hardship and almost indifferent to the weather', so they were the perfect choice. So, the recruitment starts and as you can see, because they were largely illiterate men, many of them, most of them, in fact, had to have a thumbprint taken, and here you can see an ID document with this man's thumb prints.

Now this very arduous trip took three months. And it was a difficult passage for them, because many of the men had never been on the sea before and so many of them were seasick. They couldn't adapt to the food that was given to them, and also, the food lacked nutrition and so quite a lot of people actually died on the way to Canada, as well as finally England and then France. But once they did arrive - there they are the Chinese labourers on the British Western Front, and I do like this picture very much indeed, because it reminds me rather of the [Terracotta Warriors](#) in [Xi'an](#). Here you see rows and rows of them, and all very young men.

So, what kind of working conditions did they have? Well, first of all, here's the contract, which actually stipulates all the various, amounts of money that they got. Now, it's interesting to note that the French recruits were treated quite differently from the British recruits. The French decided to pay the Chinese in France, but the British decided to pay the lion's share of the wages to the labourers' families back in China, and to only give the labourers in France or in Flanders sort of pocket money only. This was because they discovered from the French recruits, that a lot of these labourers, not having much to do at nighttime, would gamble their money away through playing cards or chess or whatever it might be, so it was felt that it was wiser to send the money back to China. Be that as it may, unfortunately, many of the families did not know about this arrangement, and so didn't collect the money. A lot of the families lived in extremely remote areas of China and it would have taken days for them to walk all the way to the closest recruitment station to collect the money and of course, they had to farm the land. So not realising how much money was actually in question, and although it was a pittance the labourers were earning as compared with soldiers and other labourers on the front, nonetheless, for the Chinese back home, it was a lot.

So, next I'm going to show you the kind of people who were involved right and this is a clip from the oral history film. This is the kind of work that they did once they got there.

### **Wang Changjie**

The reason why the British and French recruited people from this region is because men from these parts are well-known as fine male specimens, more hard-working and capable than most Chinese.

### **Xu Qiping**

He was really good at martial arts. He was a brawny fellow and very tall. He was considered one of the strongest in [Zhoucun](#). Whenever there was a martial arts contest in town, no one

could ever beat him. He was always champion. His nickname was 'The Flying Legs' and he could down anyone just like that.

### **British man 1**

They did a whole variety of operational works from dockworkers unloading guns, building roads, mending railway lines, and digging trenches, but also quite a lot of the photographs that grandpa took, were of them pulling armaments apart and, where the armaments couldn't be disentangled, then they would take them out onto the beaches and blow them up, so that some of the work was quite dangerous.

### **British man 2**

The first job they did was to dig trenches for the British army to retreat into. And the Chinese labourers knew how to dig a trench, but they didn't know how to fortify, so the British officers decided the best thing to do was to get a squad of British soldiers to fortify a trench and the Chinese would watch. So, the Chinese watched the British soldiers do this and my grandfather said that Mr. Wong, the interpreter went over to discuss it with the Chinese and they had a long confab and he came back and he said, the Chinese would like to be set a task. In other words, they didn't want to have a time, they wanted to be ... say how many yards, how many hundreds of yards of trench could they fortify? And my grandfather said much to the astonishment of the British officers, they had done it by early afternoon and were back in their camp drinking tea. And that's because my grandfather said they did everything quicker.

### **Chinese man 3**

They also carried shells and transported them. The shells were quite big. Usually, one man would carry a single shell on his shoulder, but there was one chap who was particularly strong. He used a pole with two baskets and put one shell in one basket and two in the second. That way, he could earn extra money.

### **Han Qizhong**

He didn't fight. He didn't suffer in any way. He was a chef.

### **Peng Wenlan**

But did he know how to cook before?

### **Han Qizhong**

Nah! Back here, he didn't know how to cook. But when he finally came home, he found a job cooking for others and he'd tell them, I learnt to cook overseas.

### **Wang Changjie**

The labourers were used to eating a lot at night. After work, they'd still have plenty of time on their hands, but the British managed the meals in such a way that the portions for the evening were smaller. It wasn't that they deliberately tried to starve you, but they'd give out slices of bread and butter with ham. That was the evening meal, but it was a good deal less in quantity, so more often than not, the labourers were still hungry. And if they weren't full, they'd create a rumpus. They'd think the British were treating them unfairly. The contracts stipulated that they'd have their fill, but they felt, how can we be full if we're given so little to eat? In the end, the problem was solved by the British giving them a food allowance. They could decide what they wanted to eat. It was from that time on that the Chinese labourers were able to cook for themselves.

### **British interviewee 2**

In one incident, a French farmer complained bitterly to the British officers that his duck pond had been raided and all his ducks were gone and he accused the Chinese labourers of doing it. The British officers played it down because what happened was the rations hadn't come through. My grandfather said that he'd heard in other labour corps if the rations didn't come through they stopped work because the Chinese used their initiative to get hold of food so they could carry on working, which is exactly what the British officers wanted. And my grandfather said they got one of the ducks. So, I'm afraid the French farmer didn't get any satisfaction at all.

### **Peng Wenlan**

Right so you can see that the Chinese labourers were quite ingenious in the way they survived and lived their daily lives, whether that was being extra efficient, so that they could knock off work early and enjoy the rest of the day, or to raid local farmers' duck ponds. But as you can see, they were manning the docks, building railroads, carrying railway sleepers - and these are enormously heavy, but you have just two men carrying them. A lot of them were also skilled labourers, so here you see them actually in a workshop helping with repairs, tank repairs they were particularly good at. And also here you see them carrying shells, and also, as one of the descendants mentioned just before, pulling armaments, and this was a highly dangerous job because of course, a lot of shells had landed but were unexploded and so the men had to deal with them, and there were dangers and fatalities as a result. So, when [Douglas Haig](#) finds how efficient this army is, he says, 'By Jove, I wish I had a whole army of those chaps properly trained'. However, as you know, from the food episode, there were things that the men could not adapt to, and of course being uneducated, not speaking English, there were many culture clashes so let's watch this:

### **Wang Changjie**

There were many cultural problems such as linguistic differences. For example, in English, you have the word 'go', meaning 'to make your way somewhere'. You often hear that on the football pitch. But the English is very similar in sound to the Chinese word for 'dog'. When the British gave them tasks to do, they'd often shout, 'Go!' - meaning 'let's set off for work'. But when the labourers heard the word, 'go', they thought, 'you're calling me a dog!?' That really made them angry; they were a fiery lot because many of them were very young. So, when they heard themselves being called 'dogs', it obviously created tension. Hmm, interesting, isn't it?

### **Peng Wenlan**

How did they live? Well, when they moved from place to place - and they often had to do this. from week to week - they would live in temporary accommodation, such as these tents, but also in barracks as well, once they actually settled in a certain place. But unlike the French recruits, who lived side by side with the French soldiers, the British recruits were kept very separate from their British counterparts. I'm showing you this particular slide here because this was taken on [Chinese New Year's Day](#). I forgot to mention that in the contract. It stipulated at the very beginning that the men had to work 365 days a year, 10 hour days without respite. That means they were working every single day, and it was not until there was a clamour from the Chinese labourers, that they then got their festive holidays. So that was Chinese New Year and then later on [Mid-Autumn Festival](#), and one other, I think the [Dragon Boat Festival](#), but essentially, they had to work every single day. They were happy insofar as it meant that they would be able to earn money every day, but, of course, working that consistently, obviously took a toll on them.

The reason for showing you this is, of course, to show how on Chinese New Year's Day, they would celebrate, and I don't know whether you can make out or not, but here you have an entire parade of

labourers coming down. They're all in various costumes, doing their usual sort of folk dance, and [lion dance](#), and so on, so forth. Here, in the front half this first photograph, you see all the British officers watching because there was no entertainment at that time during the war. And so, when the Chinese came out with their New Year parade, it was a time that the British officers could also rest and relax and be entertained. But the other reason for showing you this is really more symbolic. You see here, this road and the fence that's up there, that clearly shows you the divide between 'us' and 'them' doesn't it? So, the reason for them being separated was because the Controller of Labour said, 'it caused a loss of prestige, and much decreased efficiency'. So, they work consistently.

And then finally, the war comes to an end in 1918, when [armistice](#) is declared, and the Germans and the Austro- Hungarians are defeated. This is followed shortly in January 1919, by the [Paris Peace Conference](#). Now, when the peace conference started, China thought, well, this is our chance now, to bring up our request to get Shandong back under Chinese control. However, unbeknownst to many parties, there had been secret pacts between Japan and Britain that had been brokered at the outbreak of war, when, if you remember, I mentioned that the Chinese had offered to send troops to Jiaozhou Bay to defend it against the Germans, and the British said, no, we don't want to, thank you very much. Instead, what happened then, was that Japan came on board and said, well, we'll defend Jiaozhou Bay - and remember that Japan is actually geographically very close to Shandong Province - and so the British were then totally engrossed in the war at the front, and they really couldn't be bothered about Jiaozhou Bay,, they had to focus all their attention on the front. And so, in a sense, Japan just found their way into Jiaozhou Bay, to defend the whole area from the Germans. As a result of that, secret pacts were signed between Japan and Britain which would allow Japan to take over certain territories and certain rights in Shandong Province. Also, you have in 1915, way back after the first Sino-Japanese war. The outcome of that was [The Twent-One Demands](#) signed by both Japan, the victors, and China the losers. In that treaty, once again, Japan declared that China had to cede all rights in Shandong Province to them.

You also have in 1918, the Sino-Japanese military alliance. Now what is this all about? Going back to the early 1900s, China has just established itself as a republic, but if you can just imagine, economically, it was on the verge of bankruptcy. I have mentioned that the government was corrupt and incompetent. After all those wars, all those incursions by foreign powers, and the paying of indemnities China was absolutely bankrupt. So it had to survive somehow and, of course, with the outbreak of World War One, the Great War, no one in the West could possibly help China. And so, the only country that they could turn to, unfortunately was Japan. Now, this was highly unfortunate. I should also mention that the reason that China was so keen to get Shandong Province back under Chinese control, as opposed to all the other areas which had been taken over by Britain or France, or any of the other countries, America, etc., etc. The reason that they were particularly keen to regain control of Jiaozhou is specifically because it is right next to Japan and of all the foreign powers that China feared most of all in the entire world it was Japan. But because of these various pacts that had been signed, many of them without China's knowledge, obviously, this was not going to happen.

So, here are the negotiating powers, the chief negotiating powers. You have on the left, the US, Britain in the middle, and France on the right. Now [Woodrow Wilson](#) was actually sympathetic to the Chinese cause to begin with, and he said, yes, yes, yes, of course, we should give them back control of Shandong Province, but [Lloyd George](#) was very vehemently against it, and [Clemenceau](#) also was in favour of Britain. The reason for that? [Arthur Balfour](#) who the Foreign Minister at the time said, 'China's participation in the war had involved neither the expenditure of a single shilling nor the loss of a single life'. Now, I don't know where Arthur Balfour was during the outbreak of the war and when things were happening at the front, because if he'd been there, he would have noticed there were altogether 140,000 Chinese labourers, about almost 100,000 recruited by Britain, and 40,000, recruited by France. To say that they had expended neither a single shilling nor expended a single life when at least two thousand labourers died - very possibly four thousand or more, because, of course, not all fatalities

have been recorded, for various reasons. I don't know, either he was blind or ignorant, but this was what he said, and the British government decided that because of this, China would not be rewarded. Now, of course, in the meantime, news gets back to China, the foreign powers the Western Allies are not going to give Shandong back to China. The British legation actually begins to get quite scared because they can hear, they know, that there's a lot of murmuring, a lot of discontent, a lot of what would be considered as the seeds of uprising in China. So, the legation says, the Shandong question is causing intense excitement throughout China, and disclosure of our secret compact with Japan of February the 16th 1917 is inviting severe criticism. Unless German rights in Shandong are restored to China, Chinese confidence in western justice will be destroyed and a League of Nations resting on such a foundation will be as meaningless as all the declarations about China's integrity have been in the past. So, clearly the British legation realised what the problem was, but back in Britain, no one heeded what it said. So, as I say, word gets back to China., the students of Peking University take to the streets, they are followed by various other student bodies, and then they are supported by workers around the country, and you have in May 1919 this entire demonstration - or series of demonstrations - started off on May the 4th and it is now regarded as one of the pivotal points in modern Chinese history. This is the [May Fourth Movement](#). Here we are in Peking, and these are students taking to the streets. This is the [Treaty of Versailles](#), and this is the article that relates to Shandong where all rights, all German rights in Shandong have been handed over to Japan unequivocally ,without question, China has absolutely no say. While armistice is declared in 1918 and the war effectively ends and the soldiers are all sent back, the labourers, the Chinese labourers, actually stayed on till 1920 - and in certain cases 1921 .By this time Shandong province had already been ceded to Japan and, of course, you can imagine that China is in even greater chaos than before.

### **Chinese woman 1**

I was only 11. Our house was occupied by Japanese soldiers. The medal was kept in a drawer just like this. My mother-in-law put it in my pocket. We used to wear loose waistcoats, mine had a pocket and the medal was inside. My mother brought it out when the troops left. That's the only time I ever saw it.

### **Chinese man 1**

He became a teacher when he came home and taught for four or five years until the Japanese came. Then the school had to close down and there was no money to buy food. So, he went to a church school in Zhoucun, which was also under Japanese occupation. He taught Classical Chinese there right up until the Japanese left. Then he came back.

### **Chinese woman 2**

When the Japs came, my brother joined the Communists. The rest of my family moved to Linzi to stay with relatives for eight years. When we finally got back, everything was gone and our courtyard was completely overgrown. The house, everything, had been burned by the Japs.

### **British man 1**

When the peace talks occurred in Versailles, China had a place at the table but the Allies paid no attention to China, did not give it anything of what it wanted, and in a political and diplomatic sense, the work and the sacrifice of the workers was for nothing.

## **Peng Wenlan**

Okay, so I'll stop it there because we're running out of time, but essentially, a lot of these labourers went back home and when they tried to return to their villages, they would discover that many of the



villages had been razed to the ground by the Japanese, their families had been dispersed across the country. Many of these labourers were unable to reunite with their families and the interview that I stopped just now, the elderly lady says that her grandson had joined the Communists because there was nothing for else for them to do: they had no home, they had no land to till anymore. So, all they could do was to actually be actively engaged in the war, and many of them turned to communism then. So, you have there - June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles is signed - and you can imagine that with all the unrest and disillusionment with this rather ineffective new government, you had a lot of left-wing thinkers and writers, students, thinking about forming a new party, a new way of life, a new direction. And so, you have, in July 1921, the founding of the Communist Party of China. From '27 to '50, you have a civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. In September 1931, you have a full scale invasion of Japan into Manchuria in the North-East, and that culminates in '37 to '45, the second Sino-Japanese war, which comes to an end only in 1945 when you have the incidents of [Pearl Harbour](#) and then the US retaliating by dropping bombs in [Nagasaki and Hiroshima](#). [Kang Youwei](#).

A very well-known and respected scholar in China says, 'There is no such thing as an army of righteousness, which will come to the assistance of weak nations'. In other words, at the end of the day, you really have to defend yourself, you cannot depend on others. Then to top it all - now, this is interesting - shortly after the war broke out in France, people thought, as I said, that it would come to an early end, and before he knew it, two French artists had been commissioned, I think, as early as 1915, or 16, to start a painting that would show the victory of the Western Allies. This was obviously very early on, but they started painting it and it was a [huge painting](#) that would take up an entire round building. And to their credit, they did actually paint in the Chinese labourers as well. But then, when the Americans entered the war, by this time, the painting had been finished and they thought, Oh, dear, well, we have to put the Americans in somewhere, and they were thinking, well, where should we paint them? There was no room and so they then painted out the Chinese labourers and put the Americans in. And now I believe that the only Chinese labourer - , I don't know if he is a Chinese labourer or not - is this figure, this one sole figure on the right hand side. And so there we have it. That is the very tragic story of China's efforts to regain control of Shandong Province. Thank you.

### **Kan Qian**

Thank you, thank you so much Wenlan for this fascinating talk. It is part of history a lot of people are not aware of. I totally agree that it's disgraceful that the Chinese Labour Corps was painted out of the painting, and their efforts were not really acknowledged properly until your project.

I'm going to open this up to questions. And whilst we wait for people to come up with questions, can I just take the advantage of being the Chair to ask one. What I'm really interested in is what has been the impact of this project you did? What has been happening since? Any other activities to do with Chinese Labour Corps? Could you say a few words about that?

### **Peng Wenlan**

Yes, of course. Thank you. Well, I should mention that this project - it was a three-year project, which was undertaken by The Meridian Society - and we decided, in 2014, when everyone around Britain was saying, we must commemorate the centenary of World War One, we were thinking, well, what can we do? And so I started just Googling and looking at my Chinese history, and then I came across this story and I was absolutely fascinated by it, because I'm really interested in in this '100 years of humiliation,' and I thought I knew modern Chinese history pretty well but I didn't know about the Chinese Labour Corps. So, when I discovered this, I said, I think we should come up with a project to tell their story, and so we applied to the [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) for a grant, which we were successful in getting, and which enabled us to hold a three-year project. The first thing that we did was to make this oral

history film, and I went to China to interview descendants, because of course, there were no survivors by then. In the process of doing that a number of British descendants got in touch with me so I said, yes, absolutely, we must include them to get a balanced view. So, after this film was finished in 2017, we launched it at the [School of Oriental and African Studies](#) in London, on the actual centenary of the first batch of British recruits landing in Boulogne. From there, we took this film around different parts of the country, and it's now been shown thirty to forty times and we're still being asked to show it. We give talks such as the one that I've given just now, we've held exhibitions as well of memorabilia at Devonport, Plymouth, and Liverpool and Folkstone. These are three places where the Chinese labourers had to either land or move on to the next place. There are a number of graves by the way, there are about 20 graves of labourers who are buried in these three places. Sadly, they didn't even get to the front. And sadly, also, I suspect that their families didn't even know that they hadn't ever got to the front. We've also held workshops in community centres and schools, just to so that young people can also get to know about the story. We've held a number of commemorations as well during those years and also in subsequent years: we've been going to the [Cenotaph](#) with the support of the [Western Front Association](#), who always commemorate [Armistice Day](#) on the anniversary of Armistice Day itself. This is quite different from [Remembrance Sunday](#), but it is equally solemn. So, we've been continuing with that.

### **Kan Qian**

Wenlan, one of the questions is when can they see the whole film? I don't think it's on your website is it? On The Meridian website? Is it on YouTube?

### **Peng Wenlan**

It should be on YouTube, and I think in fact, Qian, I think the OU have it.

### **Kan Qian**

Oh yeah, we have it - I totally forgot! We will send everyone a [link to the to the whole film](#) actually, yeah, we've got it. Thank you!

### **Peng Wenlan**

And also you should be able to get it if you go on to our website, which is [The Meridian Society](#). If you go to a page called '[Special projects](#)', and then on to the [CLC](#), you should be able to see a lot of the background research that we did, and on that you have the film divided up into chapters. So, the entire film - our short version is 56 minutes long - but we have a much longer version which we just chopped up into sections, into chapters for easy reference, so you can watch it on our website as well.

### **Kan Qian**

Okay, okay. We will put the link to the whole film on our website as well under this event.

**End of transcript**