

# CHINESE A valued labour force in the Great War



Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection

The Pas-de-Calais is home to nine Chinese cemeteries, including those in Alette, Saint-Etienne-au-Mont and Rumingham, where the compatriots of this Chinese labourer (or 'coolie') are laid to rest.

For more than a half a century André Coilliot has been collecting "souvenirs" of all shapes and sizes from the two world wars, including vehicles, uniforms, books etc. Although he has sold the majority of his "wartime treasure" to Avril Williams, an Englishwoman who has opened a museum near her tea-room in Auchonvillers in the Somme, this former railway worker from Beaurains remains one of the major figures with regard to "local history during the two conflicts", and is an acknowledged expert on the "dark days of May 1940 in Arras" and on "Beaurains under fire from 1914 to 1917". He is also intrigued by the presence of Chinese workers in our département during the Great War.

"I noticed some tombstones with ideograms on them in the cemetery in Alette and asked myself why they were there?" This question has long gone unanswered, as the fortunes of Chinese labourers in our region have been barely researched – hardly at all, in fact. Things are starting to change, however: there was even a 3-day international

conference on the subject in 2008, which took place in the Chinese city of Weihai, in the province of Shandong (in the northeast of the country), where the majority of the 95,000 Chinese who worked for the British army from 1917 to 1920 were recruited. 44,000 workers also made this long journey to work for the French army (the bay of Canton was a French enclave at the time). André Coilliot takes out his "Chinese" file and pulls out a photocopy of a map indicating the numerous camps – and cemeteries – of the Chinese Labour Corps: Arques, Audruicq, Berguette, Boulogne, Calais, Dannes-Camiers, Érin, Étaples, Hardelot, Houdain, Moule, Rumingham, Saint-Omer, Seninghem, Tournehem, Wimereux etc – and there are still some missing. The camp in Bouvigny-Boyeffles has been rediscovered and researched by Serge Thomas and his pupils in the school in Sains-en-Gohelle. To their amazement, the school was inundated with stories. Hundreds of Chinese were indeed based in Gohelle, in the Ternois region. "In Érin they repaired tanks", recalls André Coilliot. There was a huge factory, and the tank museum in Bovington, in England, has some photographs of Chinese workers (51st, 69th and 90th companies) from the Tank Central Workshops located

in the Ternoise valley, in Érin and then in Teneur.

## Clearing the trenches

From 1916 onwards the British and French suffered terrible losses and so turned to China (which declared war on Germany on 14 August 1917) for a vital labour force which they put to use mainly in ports. It appears that the French were the first to "formalise a contract" for 50,000 workers, which saw Marseille receive a Chinese contingent in July 1916. Following negotiations with Peking, the British recruited an initial group of a thousand "strong peasants capable of withstanding the differences in climate" from Weihai in November 1916, and the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) was officially established on 21 February 1917. Over a thirteen-month period, some 84,000 Chinese embarked on some extraordinary journeys via South Africa, the Suez and Panama canals, Jamaica and New York! The main route was across the Pacific: arriving by ship on Vancouver Island (on the west coast of Canada), they would then make the long journey by train to Halifax, Nova Scotia, continue by boat to Liverpool or Plymouth, cross the Channel from Folkestone to Boulogne-sur-Mer, before ending their journey by train to Noyelles-sur-Mer and the headquarters of the Chinese Labour Corps. The Chinese in the CLC didn't wear a uniform, and were split – at a distance of at least ten miles from the front – in companies of five hundred men, each with its own British major or captain, and an interpreter. Their lives consisted of two meals a day, ten hours of work a day, seven days a week, rest on the days of festivals in the Chinese calendar, and a modest daily wage, part of which was sent back to China.

Although they occasionally worked in kitchens and laundries, these workers were mainly responsible for loading and unloading ships in ports, repairing roads and railway lines, building aerodromes etc. At the end of the war, the Chinese filled in trenches and bomb craters, searched for unexploded shells, cleared mines, salvaged barbed wire, and "recovered" the mutilated bodies of victims before burying them in graves that they had already dug, in so doing playing their part in the creation of military cemeteries. During their "free time", the Chinese workers had a reputation as master craftsmen in the trenches, creating beautiful objects made from bullets, grenades and shells. "The Chinese who helped the French were happier than their compatriots who helped the British: there was



less racism", suggests André Coilliot. "In February 1919, over five thousand Chinese from the colonial workforce helped to clean up the region around Arras, in places such as Boisieux, Boiry-Saint-Martin, Bucquoy, Berles, Bienvillers, Foncquevillers, Douchy-lès-Ayette, Ransart, Basseux and Rivière. Unfortunately, due to the lack of surveillance, acts of pillage took place in the temporary camps."

## The first Chinatown

In total, around two thousand Chinese workers died in France, victims of illness, bombardments and explosions while they were "clearing" the trenches, a few executions and above all Spanish flu. Between 1918 and 1923 the Chinese military authorities gradually sent their workers back to their homeland. Between two and three thousand remained in France, taking to

their heels as they were being transported to the port of Marseille, and creating the first Chinese district in the Ilot Chalon near the Gare de Lyon railway station in Paris. The district has since disappeared, although a plaque was unveiled on Rue Maurice-Denis on 28 November 1988 "in homage to all those Chinese citizens – both workers and volunteers – who died for France." Did some of them stay in the Pas-de-Calais? According to André Coilliot, "I recall one Chinese worker getting married in a village in the south of the Artois region and that he had a son!"



Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection

A German soldier with Chinese prisoners.