

Centenary (China)

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Summary

Modern Chinese collective remembrance of the First World War is composed of three main pillars – the injustices of imperialism, humiliation due to the sell-out of Chinese rights, and the popular resistance movement in China. In recent years, Chinese academics have sought a more nuanced understanding of the conflict and its implications, exploring themes such as the diplomatic efforts and achievements of the Chinese government. Even so, the mainstream memory of the First World War remains centred around these three dominant narratives. Under such circumstances, activities regarding the centenary of the First World War in China have been focused on the May Fourth Movement. The main contribution that China made to the war, the Chinese Labour Corps, has also aroused widespread interest in China. Thus peace and patriotism are the two main messages in Chinese remembrance of the First World War.

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Introduction

The [Shandong Question](#) is the core of China's relationship with the First World War. Following the outbreak of war in 1914, [Japan](#) invaded German Shandong and in 1915 presented the so-called "[Twenty-One Demands](#)" to [China](#), seizing former German rights in the province, including the colony of [Qingdao](#), control over the Shandong Railway, and mining rights along the line. One of China's motives in joining the First World War was precisely to recover these

rights in Shandong that had been usurped by Japan. As a belligerent nation, China's main contribution to the war is considered to be the provision of 140,000 men who served in the Chinese Labour Corps of the allied armies, even though the Labour Corps was formed before China declared war on Germany. These men mostly came from Shandong Province. At the end of the war, the pleas of the Chinese delegation to the [Paris Peace Conference](#) were ignored which led to the [May Fourth Movement](#) in China. That movement, in turn, became a driving force in the propagation of Marxism in the country. The Shandong Question was finally resolved at the [Washington Conference](#).¹ Due to these historical factors, Shandong has become the main area for First World War remembrance activities in China.

Initially, at the conclusion of the First World War, the Chinese commemorated the conflict in a positive spirit. In March 1919, the [government](#) started constructing a memorial arch in Central Park, Peking (now Zhongshan Park in Beijing) known as the "Memorial Arch for the Victory of the Allies and International Justice" (*Xieyue Gongli Zhansheng Jinianfang*, renamed "Arch for the Defence of Peace", *Baowei Heping Paifang* after 1949).² This arch was converted from a former symbol of humiliation into a [nationalist](#) statement. The original memorial arch was raised in honour of [Klemens Freiherr von Kettler \(1853-1900\)](#), the German minister to China who was killed by Chinese troops during the 1900 Boxer Uprising. It was built under European pressure as part of the Boxer Protocol, not long after China had been invaded by an eight-nation intervention force. The original Kettler arch was destroyed in November 1918.³ The reinvented arch was subsequently completed in July 1920.⁴ But by then, the Chinese had already lost their erstwhile euphoria as citizens of a victor nation and their hopes for a better world had been dashed due to the failure of the Paris Peace Conference to protect Chinese interests, especially in Shandong. Angered by this fresh humiliation, attitudes concerning the Great War changed rapidly. Under the revolutionary discourse system since Marxism-Leninism was introduced into China in the early 20th century, the conflict was seen as an imperialist war, whilst the May Fourth Movement was a rebellion by the Chinese people against [imperialism](#) and warlordism. As such, Chinese [commemoration](#) of the conflict has shifted to commemorating the May Fourth Movement since the Paris Peace Conference. Apart from being a popular protest movement, the May Fourth Movement also involved an ideological-cultural renaissance known as the New Culture Movement. As time progressed and rhetorical contexts evolved, the significance of this movement became the subject of continuous re-interpretation, and the [memory](#) of the First World War has been slowly diluted.⁵

In the revolutionary discourse of the Chinese Communist Party, the May Fourth Movement signified the start of the New Democratic Revolution, led by the proletariat, the class from

which the party was born and which the party represents. The movement was thus regarded as the prelude to the birth of the party itself and held in high esteem. For the commemoration of the May Fourth Movement, in addition to the annual celebrations, in terms of memorial spaces, a relief representing the movement was incorporated into the People's Heroes Memorial on Tian'anmen Square, erected in 1958. In 2002 the Beijing New Culture Movement Museum was opened in Beijing University's "Red Block", which is regarded as the "ground zero" of the May Fourth Movement. On top of this, numerous streets, plazas, and prizes named after the May Fourth Movement exist across the country. The widespread commemoration of the First World War in the West is thus paralleled by the widespread commemoration in China of the May Fourth Movement.

The May Fourth Movement is one focus for Chinese commemoration of the First World War, the Chinese Labour Corps another. Since the year 2000, the history of the Labour Corps has been the subject of national attention. Prior to that point, the Chinese Labour Corps had been incorporated into the Western commemoration of the war thanks to the efforts of the Chinese diaspora overseas. In 2004, a "First World War Chinese Labour Corps Memorial Forest" (*Huagong Ouzhan Jinianlin*) was erected in Zibo, Shandong by descendants of Chinese labourers. In 2007, a publisher subordinate to the State Council News Office published an academic book on the subject.⁶ The author highlighted the contribution made by the labourers to the world and to the internationalisation of China. This was an important signal of official recognition of the history of the Labour Corps. The following year, the first international academic conference on the First World War Chinese Labour Corps was held at Weihai, Shandong, a former British colony where many labourers were recruited by the British authorities. In 2009, the documentary *The Chinese Labour Corps* (*Huagong Juntuan*) was shown on Chinese Central Television. The [film](#) achieved a high viewership rate of 0.35 percent and led to a much greater awareness of what might otherwise have remained a largely forgotten war in China. In many ways, it shaped a shift in character of the commemoration. It should also be mentioned that the Belgian In Flanders Fields Museum held the first Chinese Labour Corps exhibition in Europe in 2010. This museum is presently the home of the largest collection of Chinese-decorated shell cases and has become an important window into understanding the contribution of Chinese labourers even for the Chinese. The museum is regularly visited by many Chinese official and citizens' organisations.

Compared to the hustle and bustle of First World War centenary commemorative activities in the West, Chinese commemorations are few and far in between. With the weakening of revolutionary discourse, Chinese academics have been able to analyse and critique the conflict (and the involvement of the Peking Republican government in it) in an objective and

rational way.⁷ This has led to an improved understanding of China's involvement in the war. A quick tally shows that no fewer than fifty books on the First World War were published in China between 2014 and 2019. Around half of these were translations of foreign works, such as Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*.⁸ *The Cambridge History of the First World War* is also in the process of being translated. These monographs cover topics including the origins of the war, the strategies and [weapons](#) used, and the fate of individuals caught up in it. However, the mainstream view that it was an imperialist war has not been altered. This serves to bolster China's assertion that it follows the path of a peaceful ascent rather than imperialistic dominance.⁹ Chinese activities at the centenary of the war have been focused on the Chinese Labour Corps. In what follows, I will provide some examples.

Commemorative Spaces

The Qingdao First World War Heritage Museum (*Qingdao Yizhan Yizhi Bowuguan*) was opened in December 2018 in the Qingdao Heritage Park. The [museum](#) is located at the foothills of Qingdao Mountain, known during the German [occupation](#) as Bismarck Mountain, which was a major military [fortress](#) at the time. Military installations, including gun emplacements, remain intact. During the German-Japanese War of 1914, Bismarck Mountain became the site of a major battle which ended with Japanese occupation of the area. This is now the only major remaining First World War battlefield in Asia. The museum is built in the shape of a dove spreading its wings, symbolising peace. Its main theme is the May Fourth slogan "Return Qingdao to us!" The museum is divided into three parts – Qingdao under German occupation, the German-Japanese War, and the torturous road to the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Qingdao, representing the colonial, wartime, and post-war phases. Despite its name, the museum focuses on the May Fourth Movement, as well as the Labour Corps, largely due to the fact that Qingdao became a recruitment base for the British authorities.¹⁰

The Memorial Museum for the Chinese Labourers in the First World War (*Yizhan Huagong Jinianguan*) is situated near the pier in Weihai, Shandong, where many labourers embarked for Europe. It was opened in July 2020. The cross at the entrance represents how China was at the crossroads of its development during the First World War. The theme of the museum is captured by the slogan "Labour is Sacred" (*Laogong Shensheng*). That phrase was derived from a speech by Beijing University Chancellor [Cai Yuanpei \(1868-1940\)](#) in November 1918 at the victory celebrations on Tian'anmen Square. The slogan was later adopted by the Chinese Communist Party and the [labour](#) in it is understood to carry strong proletarian properties. The museum's exhibits cover the whole process from the recruitment and training of the labourers to their journey to Europe, their work on the front, and post-war problems. Two

sections of the exhibition involve events related to the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, namely the work-study movement in [France](#) and the May Fourth Movement. Yet the museum does not explain the relation between these events and the Chinese Labour Corps in great depth, nor does it say much about the war beyond the topic of the labourers. It is a confirmation of the contribution made by the labourers to China becoming a victor nation, the country being internationalised, and the role the war played in promoting world peace, or what was generally called the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, advocated for by China. This interpretation is not only inclusive of the latest academic points of view, but also makes reference to the present-day aims of the Chinese authorities.

The Weifang First World War Chinese Labourer Statue is located in Weifang, Shandong, which was one of the main origins of the labourers. In July 2018, an artist from Weifang donated a statue of a Chinese labourer to the city. The local government held an extravagant donation ceremony, and highly praised the labourers for their determined sacrificial spirit. The statue of the labourer holds an iron spade, has a bare upper torso, and gazes into the distance. It is a symbol of the role played by the Chinese labourers on the [Western Front](#) and the strength and perseverance of the working class. On the base of the statue is written: “In memory of the sacrifice for national sovereignty and world peace made by the 140,000 Chinese

labourers despatched urgently to Europe, at the centenary of the First World War.”¹¹ In addition, during the centenary commemorations in Europe, overseas Chinese and Chinese diplomatic institutions have joined hands with local [governments](#) and organisations to build statues or [memorials](#) to Chinese labourers at Lyon railway station, Saint-Quentin and Arras in France, and Poperinge in [Belgium](#) – places where the labourers passed through or were employed.

Commemorative Events and Academic Conferences

The Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the May Fourth Movement (*Jinian Wusi Yundong 100 Zhounian Dahui*) was held on 30 April 2019 at the People’s Hall in Beijing. It was attended by Chinese leaders including Xi Jinping and demonstrated continued emphasis by the Chinese government on the importance of the May Fourth Movement. In his speech, Xi Jinping defined the movement as patriotic and social-revolutionary, encouraging intellectual enlightenment and cultural renewal. He appealed to the [youth](#) to continue the mission of Chinese national renaissance by upholding the May Fourth spirit, centred on patriotism.¹²

In July 2014, the Capital Normal University and the Chinese Society of Modern World History held an international symposium on the “Centenary of the Outbreak of the First World War” (*Di Yi Ci Shijie Dazhan Baofa Yibai Zhounian Guoji Xueshu Yantao Hui*). In December of that year, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences held an academic conference on First World

War, China, and Shanghai (*Di Yi Ci Shijie Dazhan, Zhongguo, Shanghai*). In September 2018, the Weihai City Museum, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and Nankai University in Tianjin jointly held the First World War Chinese Labourers Academic Conference (*Yizhan Huagong Guoji Xueshu Yantao Hui*). In October of that year, Shanghai University and CASS jointly held the International Academic Conference on First World War and China from the Perspective of Global History (*Quanqiu Shi Shiyu Xia De Yizhan Yu Zhongguo Guoji Xueshu Yantao Hui*). Barely a month later, Renmin University in Beijing held the First World War and China Academic Conference (*Di Yi Ci Shijie Dazhan Yu Zhongguo Xueshu Yantao Hui*). Some topics of these conferences have enriched or changed Chinese perceptions of the First World War and China's relation to the global conflict, especially the impact and significance of the conflict on China from a positive perspective.

Meanwhile, conferences have been held to commemorate the May Fourth Movement. On 27-28 April 2019, the Chinese Academy of History hosted the International Academic Conference in Commemoration of the Centenary of the May Fourth Movement (*Jinian Wusi Yundong Yibai Zhounian*). Not long before, on 19 April, the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo held a "collective study session" on the "Historical Significance and Epochal Value of the May Fourth Movement". On that occasion, Xi Jinping emphasised on the necessity of strengthening research on the May Fourth Movement and the May Fourth spirit.¹³ In [Taiwan](#), on 2-4 May 2019, Academia Sinica held its International Conference to Mark the Centennial Anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. There are considerable differences in interpretation on either side of the straits regarding the movement. Scholars in mainland China emphasise the patriotic aspects of the May Fourth Movement, those on Taiwan its liberalist, individualist character.

China's Involvement in the Commemoration of the Great War Abroad

On the occasion of the International Day of Peace on 21 September 2018, a Sino-French Peace Forum was held at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. It was hosted by the Society of the Friends of Wu Jianmin, an association honouring the Chinese ambassador who passed away in his post in 2016. The forum was attended by Joseph Zimet, head of the French [government's](#) First World War Commemoration Committee, ex-French Premier Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, amongst others. It aimed at commemorating the Chinese labourers in addition to exploring the course of future global peace.¹⁴ The Chinese labourers also proved an important point of departure for China's "First World War Centenary Diplomacy." Chinese embassies worldwide had long promoted the recognition of these "volunteer" workers. On 12 November 2018, the Chinese

embassy in France and the authorities of thirteen Parisian *arrondissements* co-organised a memorial service for the centenary of the Chinese Labour Corps. Ji Bingxuan, deputy chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress, who had been attending the Peace Forum and a First World War centenary ceremony, participated in this memorial service, using it as an opportunity to spread the message regarding China's road to development and peaceful diplomacy.¹⁵

Documentaries and Exhibitions

Documentaries

In August 2016, the documentary *Tricks on the Dead: The Story of the Chinese Labour Corps in WWI* (*Qianlong Zhi Shang: Yizhan Zhong De Huagong Juntuan*) was shown on Chinese Central Television. The program had been commissioned by Chinese Central Television but was a joint Sino-Canadian production directed by Jordan Paterson. It premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival in September 2015 and met with a positive reception. Compared to the 2009 documentary, this new production aimed at portraying the story of the labourers from a micro-historical point of view. It had four episodes, examining such ambitious themes as the Labour Corps' recruitment, their despatch overseas, the work they undertook in Europe, and the national honour they achieved. All this was presented through the eyes of the labourers, capturing their testimony, examining their experiences, and charting their psychological evolution. The program also highlighted the immense contribution the labour force had made to the Entente and China.

Exhibitions on the May Fourth Movement

In 2019, the Beijing New Culture Movement Museum held the Exhibition to Commemorate the Centenary of the May Fourth Movement. It conveyed the full picture of the movement from five angles – the movement itself, the expansion of the movement, the mass arrest of students, the high tide of the movement, and the refusal to sign the [Versailles Peace Treaty](#).¹⁶ In [Hong Kong](#), several cultural and youth associations jointly held the Visual Exhibition Commemorating the May Fourth Movement and the 70th Anniversary of the Establishment of the People's Republic of China. This exhibition especially emphasised the influence and spread of the movement to Hong Kong, showcasing the historical linkages between Hongkongers and the nation, and the patriotic historical tradition on the island.¹⁷ Around the same time, the site of the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai hosted "The Great Awakening – An Exhibition of Historical Materials Related to the May Fourth and New Culture Movements and the Founding of the Communist Party of

China”.¹⁸ However, these exhibitions did not touch on the First World War or Chinese participation in it in any deep fashion.

Exhibitions on the First World War and the Chinese Labour Corps

In 2014, as the centenary began, the Shandong Provincial Government Overseas Chinese Office held a large exhibition of images entitled “First World War Chinese Labourers in Europe”. In 2018, as the centenary drew to a close, another visual exhibition entitled “Remembering History, Treasuring Peace” was held by the same body. Both exhibitions toured Shandong and Fujian Provinces and [Britain](#), France, and Belgium. They demonstrated the contributions and sacrifices made by the Chinese labourers to the Allies, and expressed Chinese hopes for and pursuit of peace. Parallel to this, the Qingdao Municipal Government held a “First World War and China” exhibition covering the German-Japanese War, the Shandong Question, and the May Fourth Movement, with themes similar to the First World War Heritage Museum.¹⁹ Between June 2018 and January 2019 the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence held the “Great War at its Centenary” exhibition, which devoted the most attention of all exhibitions in China to the war itself. It depicted the background to the outbreak of war, the course of the conflict, and its effect on China. It encouraged visitors to “reflect on the heavy price paid for war, and appreciate the value of world peace.”²⁰

Conclusion

In summary, the major themes of Chinese commemoration of the First World War are patriotism and peace. The latter at least is congruent with the core value of global commemorative activities regarding the conflict. The commemoration of the First World War also provided the Chinese government with a chance to reiterate its pursuit of peaceful development. Patriotism, the second major theme of commemorative activity, reflected the history of China’s long struggle to achieve status as a world power. This was closely aligned with current political considerations. In contrast to official commemorative events, academic analysis of China’s relationship with World War I is diverse in nature, with considerable debate over China’s decision to enter the war and the role it played in China’s internationalisation. Time will tell whether this historical conflict will re-enter Chinese historical narratives in a different way in the future.

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Notes

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- [Exhibition on the Centenary of the May Fourth Movement at the Beijing New Culture Movement Museum \(12371.cn\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
- [\(In Chinese\) Ji Bingxuan, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, attends a memorial event for Chinese workers during the First World War Centenary, 2018 \(Xinhuanet\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Jinping, Xi \(In Chinese\): Speech at the Conference commemorating the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement \(Xinhuanet\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The Great War at its Centenary Appeals for World Peace, 2018 \(Takungpao\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Xi Jinping presided over the 14th collective study and speech of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee \(In Chinese\) \(gov.cn\) \(Video\)](#)

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