

# The Chinese Go West in WWI

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The Chinese government declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 1917 which is a surprising fact when you consider that China wasn't in the First World War. Well this is where the corrections begin because both the British and French armies were taking such heavy losses, as were the enemy, that they needed help. Help initially in reparations to railway tracks, roadways and supply chains which later led to a situation where the Chinese labourers were making crucial repairs to British tanks. This was the birth and origin of the Chinese Labour Corps, the CLC a division and extension of the British Army.

The Chinese and British have had a tumultuous relationship in the past, more recently with the Opium Wars of the 1840's resulting in the gradual formation of Hong Kong as a British colony and its subsequent return to the PRC in 1997. But there has been a Sino-British alliance during both World Wars.

Among the many things remembered about World War I (1914-18) is its significance as the first mechanized military conflict in history that harnessed the industrialized power of European nations and pitted men against mechanized machines. Before World War I, battles were fought between formations of soldiers firing relatively short-range and inaccurate muskets, and supported by relatively small-calibre, muzzle-loaded field cannons. In contrast, World War I, the first major war of the 20th century, saw the widespread use of terrifying weapons of unprecedented mass destruction, such as machine guns, long-range heavy artillery, aerial bombers and, in particular, a weapon that has come to be known as the "tank." This seemingly nonchalantly named weapon, after the water container that the early designs resembled, was a thin disguise of the purpose of a revolutionary weapon created by the British in secret to hasten victory in an unaffordable war of attrition.

It is a little known fact that the early British tanks, produced in the thousands during the war, were cared for by the skillful hands of the Chinese Labour Corps. Who would have thought that there existed in World War I such an improbable connection between Chinese men and British war machines? Here we look at how the CLC came to lay hands on the steel tracks of tanks. The objective is not to provide an impassioned overview of historical events, but an account laden with historically accurate "ground details" that will give as close as possible an eye-witness account of

a human drama told through a fictional member of the CLC named Wang Fu. We look at the life of the CLC in month-by-month details within the timeframe of one year from mid-November 1916 to mid-November 1917, up until shortly before the Cambrai campaign that decisively demonstrated the tactical capability and potentials of the new weapon – the tank – in battle

Given the passage of time and other constraints for the authors, it is practically impossible to source primary information from veterans of the CLC or the British military of World War I. Secondary research references for are expectedly scarce as well, given the fact that the CLC is considered a minor player in the Great War, and often merited no more than a few sentences or a footnote in many history books. Michael Summerskill's *China on the Western Front* is a notable exception; as far as it is known, it is one of the first scholarly books devoted to the CLC topic and it contains the detailed information that has helped in structuring the narrative of the story. Equally, *War History of the Sixth Tank Battalion*, nominally attributed to Lord Somers, who was one of the battalion's former commanders, provided useful historical information on the long-disbanded tank unit.

On the morning of 16 November 1916, as New Yorkers were browsing the *New York Times* for news about the conflict in Europe, they came upon a short article:

LONDON, Nov. 15.—*The official London Gazette announces that Lieut. Col. B. C. Fairfax of the Liverpool regiment has been appointed to the command of the Chinese Labor Corps. This is the first announcement of the organization of such a corps in the British Army.*

This was probably the first time that the English-speaking world outside military and diplomatic circles had heard about the Chinese Labour Corps.

About four months earlier, at the end of the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916, a staggering 57,470 British soldiers laid dead or wounded on a muddy battlefield named after the nearby river. The Battle of the Somme, which eventually extended into a military campaign of 12 major battles, cost the British Army some 400,000 casualties. Because of the casualty rate, the British military were caught in the Catch-22 situation of organizing manpower from a depleting source: more men to fight at the front meant fewer hands at the rear to move supplies and perform other logistical tasks that were critical to the war effort. British war planners needed a

non-British manpower source to free sufficient British men to serve in the trenches and the frontline.

In early September, Sir John Jordan, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to China, proposed to the War Office a creative solution: recruiting “10,000 coolies” from northern China’s “hardier population,” who were considered to be “best suited for cold climate and least for extreme heat.” The War Office took up the suggestion, and on 8 October 1916 appointed Thomas Johnstone Bourne, an official in the Ministry of Munitions who possessed extensive experience as a railway engineer in China - as the “War Office representative for the purpose of recruiting labour in North China for the British Expeditionary Force in China.” With this appointment, recruitment of manpower for the CLC began in earnest at the British leased territory of Wei-hai-Wei in northern China’s Shantung province. By the time recruitment ceased in February 1918, the actual number of Chinese recruited had reached a staggering 96,000 men, almost ten times Jordan’s suggested number.

At Wei-hai-Wei, Bourne set up a recruitment depot with an English administrative staff of four officers, a surgeon and a stenographer, and a Chinese administrative staff of 10 clerks and 10 assistants with a security staff of 10 Chinese and 10 Sikh guards. The recruitment staff were supported by a recruiting agent, Forbes and Co which had been contracted to supply Chinese indentured labourers to South Africa’s gold mines back in 1904. Even though it was a type of “recruitment” operation the term carried different implications in the British military in terms of responsibilities and obligations to the welfare of the men and their families. The War Office advised Bourne not to use the word "recruitment" and, choosing the term “enrollment” to render it legally a business arrangement bound only by a contract.

Just three months after Bourne’s appointment as the recruitment chief, 1,088 enrolled labourers set sail from Wei-hai-Wei. But the number was a disappointment; a mere one thousand labourers in three months wasn’t much more effective than administering a couple of aspirin to a soldier with a severe hemorrhage and bleeding out.

The underperforming recruitment was due to two reasons: the first was the relative inaccessibility of Wei-hai-Wei, which was far away from the railways, the only means of economical mass transportation for potential recruits; the second was active obstruction by local Chinese authorities who were rightly weary of foreigners exploiting the local population. The Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two British recruiting agents operating outside the British leased territory, and they only

backed off after the Chinese Foreign Ministry intervened, probably under British pressure.

The solution to the recruitment problems was found by John Thomas Pratt, British Consul General at the Shandong provincial capital of Tsinan, who realized that the British would have virtually a free rein in recruitment within areas in which the Shantung Railway ran. These were areas formerly controlled by the Germans, which had been seized by the Japanese, a close ally of the British at the outbreak of World War I. The areas, which extended from the provincial capital of Tsinan to the port-city of Tsingtao, had a bigger population than the leased territory of Wei-hai-Wei, which therefore presented a more fertile source for recruitment. As a bonus, there were a number of Chinese-speaking missionaries living and practicing in areas along the railway route, who could be employed as recruiters. In addition, the port facilities at Tsingtao enabled the docking of large ocean liners alongside the wharves and thereby speeding up the loading of passengers and cargo. The decision was therefore made to move the headquarters to Tsingtao and keep Wei-hai-Wei as a secondary base. The two ports operating together would help accelerate the process of shipping large number of Chinese labourers to where they were needed

Pratt was appointed the person in charge of the Tsingtao recruitment facilities at Tsingtao, which was actually based in the town of Tsangkou, located about 15 km north of the port of Tsingtao. From the late 19th century to the outbreak of World War I, Tsangkou had been developed by the Germans into a thriving commercial town with a post office, shops, hotels, restaurants and a silk industry that took advantage of its own sea and rail freight facilities. Upon the outbreak of World War I, the town and other parts of Tsingtao were seized by the Japanese with support of the British.

Pratt and his staff found an abandoned German silk factory complex close to the port. The large and sturdy brick factory buildings were perfect for adaptation into a recruitment depot where thousands of potential recruits could be received and medically examined, and the selected ones quartered, fed, clothed and equipped before being taken by train to the port of Tsingtao for shipping out. From January to February 1917, Tsingtao Depot at Tsangkou operated as a feeder facility where recruited labourers were ferried by steamships to Wei-hai-Wei for shipping out. A month later Tsingtao Depot became an independent and the main recruitment centre with Carnabé Eckford and Co. as the local recruiting agent. Almost exactly one year later, the Tsingtao Depot at Tsangkou would recruit the last batch of nearly 2,000 labourers and ship them out to the battlefields in France on 2 March 1918.

To relive the year of a CLC volunteer, we've purposely chosen a character by the name of Wang Fu because there is an existing real life connection. One of the actual dead CLC members was named Wang Hang Fu, so inscribed and commemorated on his tombstone in France. Wang Fu, not an uncommon name is therefore loosely translated from Mandarin as 'Wang the Rich' something that his parents hoped he would aspire to. Wealth and success. Longevity is of course but a prayer in combat.

Our Wang Fu was a native of a small rural township of just under a thousand people in the county of Yang-hsin in Shantung province. Born in 1892, his ancestors had been living in the same town for as long as his family could remember. Wang's background was not dissimilar to that of many of his comrades in the CLC. He came from a large farming family of ten consisting of parents, grandparents, three brothers and a young sister. He attended a missionary school funded by the local merchants' guild at Huei-min a walled town located about 15 km southwest of Yang-hsin. He reached the equivalent of today's primary school education before his semi-literate parents deemed it sufficient, and put him to work on the family farm.

Wang's family was marginally better off than most, as they owned their farmland as well as a small orchard, where pear trees were grown. Pears were a specialty in the area and an important cash crop that helped in cushioning the heavy taxation levied by the local warlord government. The income earner for the family came from the production of vinegar from the pears they harvested. Vinegar was, and still is an important ingredient in Shantung cooking. It is said that this regional culinary tradition stemmed from discovering that a dash of citric vinegar would significantly improve the taste of agricultural produce. Evolving from a secret ancestral recipe handed down from father to son through generations, the pear vinegar of the Wang family had developed a local reputation and sold well locally.

As Wang grew up, he dreamed of going to a big city to earn enough money to propose marriage to a girl from Huei-min. The Wang family had come to know about the girl through her father, a respected school teacher who regularly visited the Wang family farm to buy vinegar. As typical in a traditional society steeped in the Confucian tradition in which dating was an unknown concept, Wang did not know the girl's name and had not even had the chance to speak with her. However, they did smile at each other on occasions that she followed her father to Huei-min's market square, where Wang and his elder brother came on a seasonal basis to sell their harvest of pears. Wang was mesmerized by her untypically large bright eyes and he dreamed

of proposing marriage to her some day. It was only through daydreaming and fantasizing about love and marriage that Wang found solace and hope in his tedious, rural life of labour.

*By late January 1917*, Wang had heard about the recruitment for labourers at Wei-hai-Wei and Tsingtao. Seeing one of the many advertisement posters put up by recruiters and chatting to traders at the market square, Wang recognized an opportunity to perhaps realize some of his dreams and ambitions. In a country where Confucian family culture ran deep, Wang had to first seek approval from his parents before he could sign up, and he did so with the excuse that there would be more income for the family. In mid-February 1917, soon after his 23rd birthday, Wang packed some spare clothing, a small amount of preserved foodstuff and a little money, and went on foot to the market town where he could pay for a ride on traders' caravans to catch a train at the nearest city. Wang had a choice to make. Should he go to Wei-hai-Wei or Tsingtao? Since the coastal cities of Wei-hai-Wei and Tsingtao were, respectively, about 400 km and 350 km from Wang's inland hometown Yang-hsin, he decided on Tsingtao partly due to its closer distance and partly because he had always wanted to visit a big city, which Tsingtao was and Wei-hai-Wei wasn't. As it turned out, he got to visit two big cities, as the nearest train station was at the provincial capital of Tsinan, about 100 km away from home. Geography was never his forte at school.

In mid-February, almost two weeks after Wang left home, he finally arrived by train at Tsangkou. The typical journey of CLC recruits who made their way to Tsangkou was similar to the reconstructed version of Wang's journey, and it was described in the memoir of Sir Alwyne Ogden, a member of the British Consular Service in China, who was assigned as one of the administrators for the CLC recruitment operation:

*. . . coolies came . . . from all over North China, and especially China New Year; they would come back from working in the fields of Manchuria for their annual holidays and very often when they saw our advertisements and heard of the prospects they would come in perhaps 100 miles or more to our recruitment office.*

At the beginning of the train journey, Wang, who had never travelled beyond his native county, was worried about finding the recruitment centre. As the train headed towards its destination and more passengers came on board, he realized that his worries were unnecessary, as many of the passengers were obviously heading the

same way as he was. Arriving at the Tsangkou train station, Wang and other passengers got off, and were immediately ushered by several of the depot's Chinese guards to a designated place on the train platform then herded like cattle towards the recruitment depot at the abandoned German silk factory complex that had been adapted as the recruitment depot.

By this time, hungry and tired he was hardly aware of his physical discomfort as he was too apprehensive about the uncertainty of what was to become, and in awe by the sights and sound surrounding him. He and others were herded by stick-carrying security guards to one of the impressively large brick buildings in the recruitment depot. They were ordered to remove their outer clothes, which were confiscated and dumped in a pile, and then to stand in line. Unexpectedly a uniformed Englishman approached and doused them with disinfectant. Off guard Wang was caught by the spray and inhaled some of the liquid vapour and fell over in a fit of coughing. Poor Wang's misfortune had the unintended benefit for the people around him, who's previously tense and unsmiling faces gave way to jeers and laughter.

After spending more hours in a slow-moving queue Wang and a dozen of his fellow countrymen were directed into a room and lined up before an Englishman and the depot's medical officers who examined them individually from head to toe. What Wang did not know was that he and other potential recruits were being medically screened for contagious diseases, in particular trachoma, tuberculosis and venereal diseases as well as potential medical conditions such as poor dental health. Wang who grew up with enough to eat in a better-than-average farming family was bigger and taller than most of the labour recruits around him so he had a full set of healthy teeth. He passed the examination with ease.

Wang knew that he had passed the medical examination when the contract appeared. Printed on a single sheet of paper in English on one side and Chinese on the other it read as follows;

*By the terms of this Contract dated the \_\_\_ day of \_\_\_ 19\_\_\_, I, the undersigned coolie recruited by the British Emigration Bureau, declare myself to be a willing labourer under the following conditions, which conditions have been explained and made clear to me by the British Emigration Bureau . . . .*

The nature of the employment was stated as ***“work on railways, roads, etc., and in factories, mines, dockyards, fields, forests, etc.,” but “not to be employed in military operations.”*** The contract also listed the daily rate of pay for various classes of labourers, the lowliest of whom would receive a daily pay of 1 French franc equivalent to \$10 Chinese silver dollars or £1.7 British pounds and sixpence when they were abroad in Europe. The highest class would be interpreters and administrative clerks, who would receive up to FF5 francs a day. Most of these English speaking Chinese came from such big cities as Shanghai and Tientsin where they had studied and learned English in Missionary schools and universities. Many were also Christians and members of the YMCA. For Wang even the lowest pay rate seemed an enormously attractive amount and he quietly congratulated himself for having made the right decision to come to Tsingtao.

Also stated in the contract was the duration of the employment which was three years but the employer had the liberty to ***“terminate contract at any time after one year on giving six months’ notice or at any time for misconduct or inefficiency on the part of the labourer.”***

As Wang read the contract, he learned that he would have to ***“work ten hours daily” for “seven days work a week, but due consideration will be given to Chinese Festivals.”*** Wang thought so far this wasn’t unreasonable considering he had worked longer hours back home. As he quickly read on he found that there were strict conditions under which he would earn his pay:

***“No daily pay abroad during sickness, but food given. Monthly pay in China continues up to six weeks’ sickness. After six weeks’ sickness no monthly pay in China. No daily pay abroad for time lost owing to misconduct. In cases of offences involving loss of pay for 28 days or more, deductions of monthly pay in China will be made.”***

Wang somewhat perplexed wondered what the “monthly pay in China” meant? He wanted to cry out with joy when it was explained farther down in the contract that it was a monthly allotment paid in Chinese silver dollars to his family in China. The amount of which matched his daily pay rate abroad. Wang made a quick calculation and smiled at the thought that if he was paid a French Franc a day in Europe his family would receive \$10 dollars a month in China. At this point images of the dream bride from Huei-min flashed through Wang’s mind. There were even more attractive additional benefits: ***“free passages to and from China under all circumstances,” and “free food, clothing, housing, fuel, light and medical***

*attendance.*” Wang could hardly believe it when the contract stated that his family would receive \$10 on passing his medical examination and he would receive a further \$10 when he set sail to France. The happy thoughts that went through Wang’s mind made him oblivious to the ominous part of the contract, which stated:

***“Compensation to Family in case of Accident:  
Death or total disablement . . . 150 dollars  
Partial Disablement . . . up to 75 dollars”***

The Chinese clerk started yelling impatiently at Wang to complete the contract which he did so by declaring his name, age and home address. The clerk then filled in the information and sealed it with the authority of the British Emigration Bureau. Wang then needed to place his thumb-prints on the contract next to the words ***“Willing Labourer’s thumb prints”*** at the end of the paper. Wang found the last procedure insulting and somewhat demeaning. He knew more than well how to sign the contract with an ink brush as an educated person instead of with his two thumbs like an illiterate criminal. Before long he was ushered to a corner of the building where an aluminum bracelet stamped with a five-digit identification serial number was cuffed to his left wrist which gave Wang the impression that he was definitely being treated like a convict. He now had a new identity as an official member of the CLC, a collective identity that people would remember and write about a hundred years later. Thumbed and sealed !

### **Wang Fu’s Journey to the West Travelling East**

In the next two weeks until early March, Wang and his compatriots were fed, quartered and kitted out in preparation for their journey to the West which filled Wang with both excitement and trepidation. British sergeants and corporals in the camp with the help of Chinese guards drilled the labour recruits with discipline with a particular emphasis on combining the maintenance of personal hygiene with tidiness in their quarters. They quickly adapted to the daily military routines, organizing themselves in groups and learning to follow orders promptly, quickly and with precision. They washed themselves regularly at bathing sheds and shaved their heads. Some of the men were still wearing the Manchu long queue. They were invariably older farmers from the more remote inland villages. A quick snip of the barber’s scissors by order of the British administrators brought their hairstyle to the required style. There were no complaints and no one seemed to mind losing his “pigtail,” since it was no longer a

mandatory requirement in the post-revolution Chinese Republic and those who wore it simply did so out of habit or ignorance.

Wang was issued with two sets of blue cotton summer suits that resembled the working clothes of a typical Shantung farmer but in a smarter cut reminiscent of an army uniform. He also received additional clothing for cold weather which included a pair of woolen drawers, a cardigan, a waistcoat, a flannel shirt, a brown canvas raincoat and a Shantung-style felt hat with folding earflaps. His favourite item of clothing was an exceptional pair of well-made Chinese style slip-ons worn as canvas shoes with cotton padding. Weeks later when he began working in France Wang would be clad in standard British Army attire including leather boots and puttees, not as comfortable as the Chinese shoes but far more suitable for working in the cold wet battered landscape of France.

On a bright sunny day on 12 March 1917 Wang and hundreds of his comrades, lined up smartly in a military formations of four men abreast all carrying a small amount of personal possessions in their individual reddish-brown canvas rucksacks. They were marched down to the train station by a few British administrators and a larger number of Chinese guards. Wang and the men boarded not passenger coaches but cargo and cattle carriages - bound for the docklands of Tsingtao. With minds filled with anticipation and apprehension the discomfort of the transportation wasn't an issue. Arriving at the dockyard everyone hurried down the train and organized into formations amidst the aggressive yells of burly British sergeants and the terrifying faces of lanky Sikh guards. They were led to a large warehouse by the wharves used as the embarkation building, which the British named the "Going Away Shed." They stood in formation as their identities were checked for the last time. The men then received their embarkation payment as promised in their contracts as well as a further spray of disinfectant. Remembering his embarrassing moment at the recruitment depot Wang shut his eyes and held his breath to avoid a reoccurrence of the previous 'shower'.

As the disinfectant was drying off their uniforms it was time for them to board the ship. The warehouse doors were pulled open wide and as Wang's vision adapted to the bright daylight the awesome sight of a colossal ship the biggest he had ever seen came into focus. Many people in the formations reacted in the same way and responded with an audible sound of astonishment. As the men slowly moved along the wharves to board the ship everyone's eyes were locked on this magnificent vessel, which unbeknown to them, was the *Empress of Russia of the Canadian Pacific Line*.

At 570 feet long and a gross tonnage of 16,810 tons it had an impressive presence especially at close range. Together with her sister ship the *Empress of Asia* the two empresses would ferry troops of the CLC in the thousands from northern China to France through Canada until the end of the war and then back to China after the war with some of the same troops.

Wang and 1990 of his fellow CLC members were not passengers and were “stowed” as live cargo on the ship being packed more tightly than would normally be allowed for regular passengers. However, the men adapted to the crowded living environment well. A surprising number of people managed to bring along musical instruments which were somehow allowed especially the two-string “Chinese violin” known as the *er-hu*. The music fostered camaraderie among the men and it not only made life tolerable but sometimes enjoyable during the otherwise boring and lengthy voyage. Quarrels were surprisingly few and when they happened they were quickly settled without attracting the attention of the British officers and NCOs as the issue was often over winnings at gambling despite army regulations against gaming for money. More serious quarrels occurred with some of the ship’s Cantonese seamen due to cultural and language differences.

The ship took a much longer indirect route to avoid the menace of German submarines via the Pacific and arrived three weeks later on 2 April 1917 at William Head on Vancouver Island. From there the men went by rail in closed carriages under armed Railway Service Guards a euphemistically named military unit specially formed for the purpose. Such security was partly to maintain the secrecy of the operation and mostly out of xenophobia that the Chinese labourers might be tempted to jump train to remain in Canada. It was a two week journey crossing the vast landmass of Canada to Halifax on the east coast where the men disembarked from the trains camped for another two weeks before boarding troopships and government-requisitioned passenger ships on the last leg of journey across the Atlantic to their final destination in Europe.

In early June 1917 after an exhaustive journey Wang and his comrades finally arrived in France docking at the military port facility at Boulogne-sur-Mer. They went through the now familiar routine of disembarkation from the ship and re-boarding onto another train. Travelling 60 km south to Noyelles-sur-Mer the base depot of the CLC, everyone offloaded their equipment and supplies and prepared to move into their camp. They were divided into companies of about 500 men and each company was assigned to a segregated camp site and quartered in groups of 40 men in Nissen huts

resembling half-barrel shaped shelters made of a steel skeleton frame covered with corrugated steel sheets. No time was wasted on the newly arrived men and they were quickly assigned work for which they had been contracted. Mainly loading and unloading materials and supplies at the railheads.

Two months went by quickly, and during the daily parade on a cool early August morning, the company major, who spoke Chinese badly (but this was shrewdly never mentioned), asked all men with skills and experience with metal work to step forward. Sensing the opportunity for promotion and a pay rise, almost half of the 500 men in his company stepped forward. Wang was one of them but he was an honest man and not an opportunist. He had proven experience in repairing farm tools, something he had learned from helping a blacksmith neighbor. The men who stepped forward were ordered to report at the workshop hut where they were individually questioned and given simple trade tests to verify their claims of expertise and those who passed had their names and serial numbers on their bracelets recorded. In all 50 passed and Wang was one of them.

The following morning the successful Chinese labourers were called out at the parade and ordered to pack up and be ready to leave. Twenty-four hours later on 8 August 1917 Wang and his band of brothers joined up with 150 selected men from other companies at the train station and together with four British officers, 12 British NCOs and several Chinese interpreters boarded a train heading westwards towards the town of Erin about 50 km away. The men on the train were now members of the 51st Company of the Chinese Labour Corps and were bound for the Central Workshops of the Tank Corps.

By this time the British military was critically short of skilled workers and all branches of the service were fighting for technical personnel – the *Royal Flying Corps*, the *Royal Naval Air Service*, the *Royal Navy* and the *British Land Army* for their tanks a particularly labour-intensive maintenance nightmare. The manpower shortage became so acute that tank crews were required to spend time not on training but on time consuming technical tasks ordinarily allocated to qualified technicians and mechanics. Tasks such as maintenance and repair on their vehicles with manufacturing and modification to critical spare parts used in the field. Then someone had the bright idea of using the CLC to relieve the manpower pressure in servicing the tanks. However the general attitude of the British military establishment towards the CLC was condescending at best regarding the men as mere “coolies,” fit only for menial labour. But desperate situations called for desperate measures and

racism was put aside to allow the CLC men to prove their worth in tank repair workshops. The ultimate aim of the war of course was to end it with victory.

*The 51st CLC Company* arrived at the town of Erin on 8 August at half strength although a further 270 more men arrived on 26 August to boost the company to full strength. The Erin compound covered 10 hectares of land in a shallow valley between the Ternoise River in the north and the main railway in the south. As Wang and his mates marched towards the camp they gained a vista of the entire complex from the higher ground outside the perimeter fencing. The camp complex consisted of three types of buildings, primarily the ubiquitous Nissen huts. There were 55 such huts that housed the CLC men and other military ranks and this cluster of huts sat in between a common mess hall for other ranks and the officers' compound. Officers' quarters consisted of 22 Armstrong huts – these were wood-frame and canvas covered collapsible shelters of an elegant design favoured by snobbish British officers for use in the field and at semi-permanent camps.

When Wang first saw the Nissen huts the neat layout of the huts arranged end-to-end in parallel rows reminded him of the Chinese sausages his mother made and laid out to dry in the crisp autumn air every year. He shook the thought out of his head as he began to miss home. A short distance away from the closely packed rows of Nissen huts was a fenced off area, a flat open ground guarded by armed sentries surrounded with prominent no-smoking signs on the perimeter fencing. This was the tank park and testing ground where damaged tanks awaited repair. Along one end of the tank park were long rows of sheds descriptively referred to as the Tank Stables. Nearby were a cluster of 11 large buildings similar to contemporary aircraft hangers. These were Type B hangers borrowed from the *Royal Flying Corps*. They were constructed of heavy duty canvas over a light steel frame with each hanger covering a footprint of about 400 square meters. The hangars housed the different specialized workshop units, including the Tank Repair Section, the Engine Shop and the Camouflage Section which was basically a paint shop.

*The Tank Corps' Central Workshops* compound was a busy place where hundreds of tanks passed through every month either in a factory-fresh condition shipped from the factories in England or more commonly battle ravaged and recovered from the enemy frontlines. *Harold Aylmer Littledale*, a Canadian enlisted in the British Army as a tank driver in the E Battalion of the Tank Corps gave a vivid description of the place in an article published in the December 1918 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*:

*“. . . Central Workshops was a tank hospital, for it was there that tanks which had been damaged in action went for overhauling and repair, and there at any time one could see tanks with great wounds in their sides, and, searching among the heap of cartridges on the floor [inside a tank], find some button or shred of clothing which told only too clearly what had happened. Later we were to see much of Central Works, for it was here, too, that all new tanks arriving from England were first tested before being turned over to the men who were to take them into battle; and it was upon flat cars moved into this siding [a low-speed auxiliary railway track] that we were to drive our tanks, and so move to within striking distance of the fighting line.”*

Wang, helped by his experience working with metal farming implements was assigned with 23 others to the Track Riveting Shop under the Tank Repair Section. They were organized in four teams of six men. They underwent a rudimentary and brief training session with a British army technician. Afterwards each team was assigned to one of the four gap riveting machines in the shop. To compensate for the frugal training each skillful team member paired with a less skilled partner to expedite the learning process. The work involved was not complicated but mind numbingly repetitive, involving punching rivets bigger than a man's thumb through hardened steel plates. These were the track plates that when linked together formed the continuous caterpillar track that enabled a tank to crawl across muddy terrain.

The fragility of the tracks was the Achilles' heel of these important but primitive tanks that appeared in World War I. Tank tracks typically lasted no more than 30 km before they started to fall apart and needed re-servicing. To service the tracks they had to be dismantled from the tank and disassembled into the 90 plates that made up a track. On each plate were eight rivets that were equally spaced and arranged in two rows - these rivets then had to be removed and replaced with new ones. Wang didn't mind the repetitiveness of the work because the monotony allowed him time to daydream about better things such as his sweetheart - the girl back home in Huei-min. The team handled about 40 track plates a day within the contractual 10-hour work time, a rate that impressed most British officers in the Tank Corps. By now Wang was considered a skilled labourer and had been promoted to Riveter and the leader of his team. While Wang won his promotion by impressing his supervising officer with his technical competence he also had to win the approval of others in the CLC which he managed to do so with a mature attitude. Wang was now entitled to a daily pay of two francs, twice the amount he received when he first arrived in France. His family

back home was now entitled to collect 20 Chinese silver dollars a month which gave him immense pride. The day he received his pay increase Wang thought of the Chinese saying, “a glorious homecoming in splendid clothing” and wished at this time that he was on his homeward journey.

What was Wang’s first impression of the British tanks? His first encounter with the tanks was when he arrived at Erin where there was a long row of them sitting on flatbed railcars on a railway siding. He didn’t know what to make of them and his first impression was that of some kind of large boats. He sat and pondered the question “Why were these boats brought here?” Indeed, the tanks he was looking at were lozenge-shaped and vaguely resembled boats. They were 30-ton machines about 10 m long and 2.5 m high with a protruding boat-like bow at the front. This feature enabled the vehicle to cross wide trenches and break out of craters and obstacles similar to a boat breaking waves. The tank’s boat analogy actually went deeper than just the appearance, as the concept of the tank was originally conceived by a committee formed by senior people at the *British Admiralty* who envisaged armadas of land battleships roaming invincibly across battlefields. It was therefore no surprise that the clever people at the Admiralty led by no one other than the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, *Winston Churchill* who personally christened their creation the “landship.” However, the descriptive name was soon thought to be too revealing so the codename “water carriers” was proposed. However the Secretary of the Landship Committee, Lieutenant-Colonel *Albert Gerald Stern* a former banker turned military officer who took a leadership role in the development and production of British tanks in World War I did not fancy the idea of going down in history as the Secretary of the W.C. Committee:

*It was suggested, for secrecy’s sake, to change the title of the Landships Committee. Mr. d’Eyncourt Chairman of the Landships Committee agreed that it was very desirable to retain secrecy by all means, and proposed to refer to the vessel as a “Water Carrier.” In Government offices, committees and departments are always known by their initials. For this reason I, as Secretary, considered the proposed title totally unsuitable.*

So the name was promptly changed to “water tank” to maintain the cloak of secrecy and finally to “tank” a suitably anonymous moniker that stuck because of its simplicity. The production models of the heavy British tanks of World War I from the prototype Mark I to the last of the series, the Mark VII were very similar in appearance. Wang would eventually see most of the different models and they all

looked the same to him. Tank-spotting wasn't really something that appealed to Wang during his few hours off. He saw enough of them at work.

Although Wang and his team were contracted to work at least 10 hours/day and 7 days/week, in reality the workshop personnel worked eight-hour shifts. It was the prerogative of the supervising British officer to sometimes let the teams off early on Sundays when they had done sufficient work. The officer, a Scot and a second-lieutenant older than those of a similar rank spoke passable Mandarin from his time as a Presbyterian missionary in northern China. Many junior officers in the CLC were of an age too old for active service but they were recruited not for their physical ability to engage in combat but for their language skills better known as "old China hands" – typically former missionaries. Wang and his mates affectionately nicknamed the Scot *Lao-bah* meaning "old dad," because of his kind nature and fatherly appearance and a handlebar moustache. One day, an army photographer came into Wang's riveting shop and instantly everyone crowded around and gawked at the large camera. Father *Lao-bah* carefully shooed everyone back to work while the photographer took several pictures.

This account of the army photographer is fictional but the photographs described are real and survive in the archive collection at The Tank Museum at Bovington in England. They show men of the 51st CLC Company working in the track riveting shop. However it wasn't actually taken at Erin but at the later facilities at Teneur because the Central Workshops facilities were relocated to there on 29 March 1918. A fitting visual image of the Wang Fu story can be seen in one of these photographs (illustrated below) which shows a senior member of the CLC member who appears to be wearing the double-chevron insignia of a corporal on the left sleeve of his uniform and staring into the camera – he could very well be the fictional Wang Fu.



A photograph of CLC members in the tank track riveting workshop at Teneur; it is a fitting visual image of the Wang Fu story. (Courtesy of The Tank Museum, Bovington)

### **End of Year One in the Life of Wang Fu**

The Central Workshops at Erin would eventually be served by three companies of the CLC. The 69th Company arrived on 15 September followed by the 90th Company a month later. Unknown to the CLC men the surge of manpower needed at the Central Workshops was in preparation for a new military campaign known as the Battle of Cambrai. The battle plans were approved on 20 October and the attack would commence exactly a month later on 20 November 1917. This assertive battle was one in which the tanks would prove their worth and become established as an indispensable machine of war. The number of tanks being readied for this epic battle would eventually amount to 476, the largest number of tanks deployed in battle in the Great War. By mid-October the camp was a flurry of activity in the run up to the launch of the Battle of Cambrai.

It was on 24 October that the Tank Corps HQ issued orders to the Central Workshops to produce two types of tank related equipment critical to the Battle of Cambrai – 110 tank-towed sledges and 400 tank-mounted fascines. The sledges were designed to be loaded with equipment and supplies and towed three in a row by a tank. The

fascine was a huge bundle of brushwood carried atop a tank to be released into a deep trench to form an improvised bridge that could allow the tank to cross. Producing the 110 sledges consumed a huge 70 tons of timber logs. Producing the 400 fascines took up 400 tons of brushwood. The brushwood for the fascines was cut from the Crécy Forest by other units of the CLC who tied them into 21 500 bundles before loading them onto 220 trucks that then carried them to the Central Workshops. Wang and his fellow CLC men unloaded the brushwood bundles and combined a number of them to form a fascine about 3 m long and 1.5 m tall. Each fascine weighted well over a ton and required at least 20 men to push and roll it along. As time was pressing the CLC men worked non-stop in eight hour shifts moving and loading the fascines continuously. On one occasion they even managed to load 144 fascines onto rail trucks within a span of just 24 hours. It was a feat that brought pride and a smile to the normally stern face of the camp commander.

In addition to the sledges and fascines there was also an order to repair and overhaul 127 broken and damaged tanks salvaged from the muddy battlefields of a previous campaign known as the Third Battle of Ypres which had been the last major tank operation on 9 October. This desperate measure was brought on by the lag in the production schedule of new Mark IV tanks. As such salvaged tanks would have to make up the numbers needed for the coming Cambrai operation. Wang and the skilled labourers were sent back to their workshops even before the fascines business was over and it was left to their less skilled compatriots to finish up. The workshops operated day and night in rotations to cope with the mammoth task of repairing the salvaged tanks. On 8 November, about two weeks after the work orders were issued, the CLC completed all the tasks assigned to them. The sledges, the fascines and the tanks were loaded on flatbed carriages and transported to an assembly position to await their fate at the epic battle that would commit the entire force of the British Tank Corps in a single operation. Back at the Central Workshops the CLC men and British officers were at last able to breathe a sigh of relief as camp life returned to its regular pace.

It was a typical chilly morning in early November 1917 about a week before the start of the Battle of Cambrai, when Wang and other members of the CLC watched a massive armada of Mark IV tanks load onto an equally massive fleet of flatbed carriages. By this time it had almost been a year since Wang left home and began his epic journey from China to France. Given what he had gone through Wang as most others felt it had been so much longer. Huddled in his army issued greatcoat, Wang was not thinking about the fate of the men and machines in the battle ahead. Instead

he was dreaming about the end of his contract, when he would "gloriously return home in splendid clothes" as the Chinese saying goes and marry the girl from Huei-min.

*‘Indirect tactics, efficiently applied are inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth, unending as the flow of rivers and streams; like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew; like the four seasons, they pass away to return once more’*

## **The Art of War by Sun Tzu c 500 – 320 B.C.**

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**WORD COUNT 7,926**