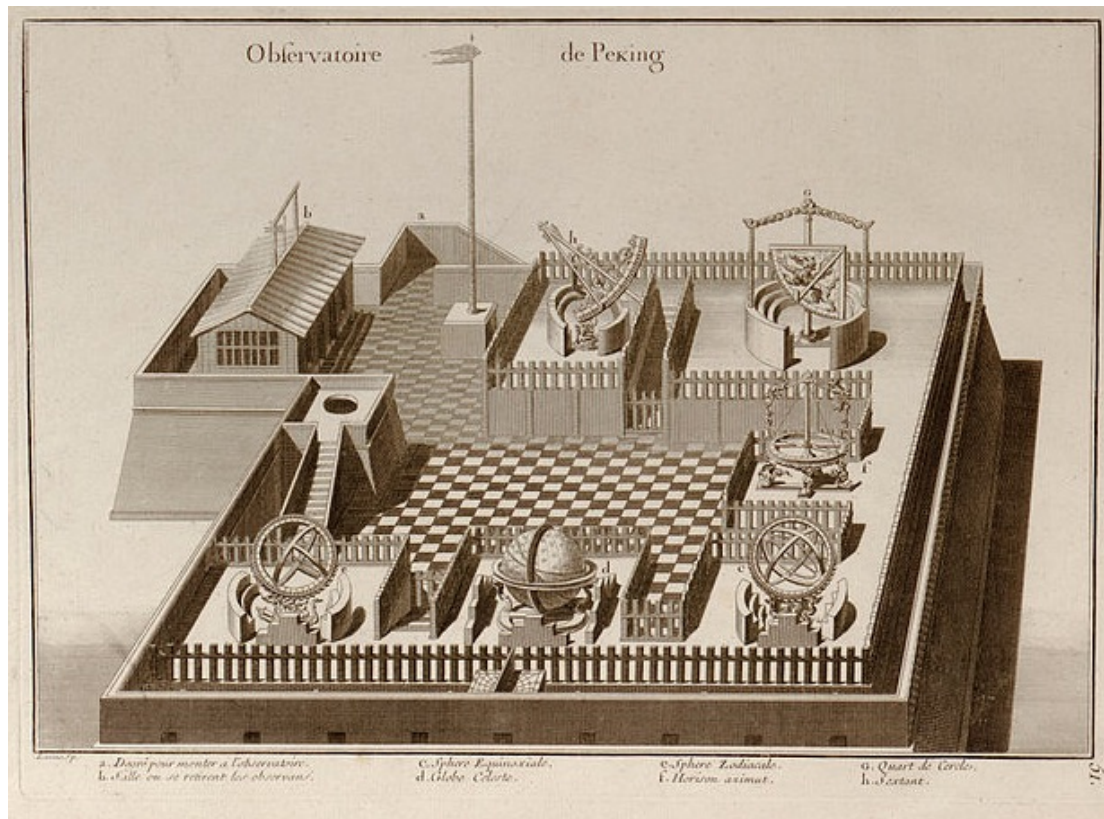


China and the first world war

"Strange meeting" - A corner of a foreign field that is forever China

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FEW European visitors to Beijing visit its ancient astronomical observatory, perched on a grey stone tower amid smoggy snarls of traffic. Yet the instruments on the observatory's roof offer a rare physical link to one of China's least-known historical adventures: its ill-fated involvement in the first world war.

China sent **140,000 labourers** to the mud and barbed wire of the Western Front. They dug trenches, toiled in docks and railway yards or worked in arms factories for the allies. After years of near-silence, the labourers' part in the war is finally attracting attention, both in China and Europe. A first big exhibition will open on April 24th in Ypres, a Belgian town, and site of one of the war's bloodiest battles.

The young Chinese republic—founded three years before the outbreak of war—gained little from its status as an ally. **The 1919 Treaty of Versailles handed over control of Germany's colonial possessions in China to Japan.** One of China's few tangible rewards was the return of the Qing-dynasty **astronomical instruments**, which had been taken by German troops from Beijing after the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and installed in a park in Potsdam. China's humbling at Versailles had dramatic effects back home, triggering student protests that morphed into a modernising movement which contributed to the growth of the Communist Party.

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Nearly 100,000 Chinese labourers served near the front lines in Flanders, together with a few hundred Chinese students recruited as interpreters. Most were volunteers, poor farmers from coastal provinces attracted by high pay and contracts promising (falsely) that they would be kept away from the fighting. Neutrals until China declared war on Germany in 1917, they became part of a nominally civilian “Chinese Labour Corps”, but in fact endured military discipline under British officers.

The Chinese lived in camps behind the front lines but death found them anyway. Two thousand are buried in Belgium and northern France, killed in bombardments and air raids or by disease. Their gravestones, neatly incised with Chinese names, can still be seen in the immaculate war cemeteries that dot the Flemish landscape.

The story ended bitterly for survivors, too. The Chinese were blamed for many crimes in the lawless months after the Armistice. Hundreds died in the influenza that swept post-war Europe. The last were shipped home in 1920, kicked out by Belgium’s government.

A handful of decorated shell cases, finely engraved with dragons, flowers and inscriptions, are almost the only artefacts they left behind. One of several displayed at the “In Flanders Fields” museum in Ypres bears a lovingly carved poem. It is about homesickness.

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Grave of a member of the Chinese Labour Corps at Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Poperinge