



**Black and white photograph of a Chinese man carrying a load of items strapped to his back.**

Online Collections Database, Online Collections Database, 2008.106.1.109, [www.theworldwar.org/research/database](http://www.theworldwar.org/research/database). National WWI Museum and Memorial. Online.

## **China in WWI — Labor, Imperialism, and the Road to the May Fourth Movement**

Recommended Grade Levels: 7-12

Course/Content Area(s): World history

Authored by: Jane Keen, National WWI Museum and Memorial Teacher Advisor

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>LESSON OVERVIEW:</b>     | <p>In this lesson, students explore China’s largely overlooked but deeply influential role in World War I. Although China was prevented by Japan from sending combat troops, it contributed more than 140,000 laborers to the Allied war effort—performing essential work such as building roads, repairing railways, unloading supplies, and helping rebuild Europe after the Armistice.</p> <p>Despite their sacrifices, China’s contributions were undervalued at the Paris Peace Conference, where Western powers awarded the Shandong Peninsula to Japan instead of returning it to China. Students will investigate how this decision led to national outrage, the May Fourth Movement, and ultimately contributed to the rise of communism in China. By examining cause-and-effect relationships, students will see how global events shaped China’s political transformation in the early 20th century.</p> |
| <b>OBJECTIVES:</b>          | <p><i>Students will:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the role of the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC) in WWI</li> <li>• Explain why China joined WWI and how participation was linked to resisting imperialism</li> <li>• Analyze why the Treaty of Versailles was viewed as a betrayal by China</li> <li>• Explain how the May Fourth Movement and the rise of communism were shaped by WWI events</li> <li>• Use primary sources and museum artifacts to evaluate China’s global position in 1919</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>STANDARDS ALIGNMENT:</b> | <p><b>National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) National Curriculum Standards:</b></p> <p><b>NCSS Standard II:</b> Time, Continuity, and Change – Understand historical context and patterns of change.</p> <p><b>NCSS Standard VI:</b> Power, Authority, and Governance – Examine the origins and purposes of political systems.</p> <p><b>NCSS Standard IX:</b> Global Connections - Analyze the costs and benefits of increased global connections, and evaluate of the tensions between national interests and global priorities.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>TIME NEEDED:</b>         | 1 class period                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>INTERDISCIPLINARY:</b>   | Global studies, historical thinking skills                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>PRIOR KNOWLEDGE:</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic understanding of WWI</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts of imperialism and communism</li> <li>• Treaty of Versailles as a turning point</li> <li>• Basic understanding of modern government systems</li> </ul> |
| <b>MATERIALS NEEDED:</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">China in WWI Slides</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Cause and Effect Chart</a></li> </ul>                                                                |

# LESSON

## INTRODUCTION/HOOK:

1. Project a museum photo of Chinese Labour Corps workers (slides 2 & 3)
2. Ask VTS-style questions:
  - a. What's going on in this picture?
  - b. What do you see that makes you say that?
  - c. What more can we find?
3. Students will likely notice labor tools, clothing, age, conditions. This opens the door to deeper historical inquiry.

## DIRECTIONS:

### 1. Mini-Lecture: Why Couldn't China Send Soldiers? (8–10 minutes, slides 4-10)

Key points (teacher may read aloud):

- Japan refused to let China send combat troops to Europe because they wanted to establish Japan as the dominant Asian force.
- China still wanted a seat at the post-war negotiating table and hoped to protect itself from future imperialism.
- Without combat troops, China sent workers—mostly peasants—from Shandong, Hebei, and other rural regions.
- Include precise figures:
  - 94,500 Chinese workers recruited by Britain
  - 37,000 recruited by France
  - Up to 500,000 sent to the Russian Eastern Front
- Chinese workers became the largest and longest-serving non-European contingent in WWI. Their roles included:
  - building and repairing docks, roads, railways, airfields
  - unloading ships (stevedores), operating cranes
  - maintaining supply depots
  - trench repair and battlefield cleanup
  - burial work after battles
- Many worked 10–12-hour shifts, often under dangerous conditions.
- Nearly 2,000 CLC workers died, many from influenza.

### 2. China's Strategy: Fight with Labor, Not Weapons (5 minutes, slide 11)

Explain in simple terms:

- China hoped that contributing labor would earn global respect and help overturn imperialist treaties.

- China's main demands for the postwar treaty:
  - Regain Shandong, birthplace of Confucius that Japan had taken control of
  - Renegotiate unequal treaties forced on China by Western powers and Japan
  - This set the stage for what came next

### **3. Event Analysis Activity: Shandong Betrayal (10 minutes, slides 12-14, access to cause and effect chart for students)**

Key points:

- Western delegates unfamiliar with the Twenty-One Demands
- Versailles award of Shandong to Japan, not China
- China given 2 seats at the conference vs. Japan's 5
- Britain's desire to protect its holdings in Hong Kong, commercial concessions, and prevent nationalist movements in India
- U.S. and Britain prioritized alliance stability over fairness to China

Student questions:

- How did the decision about Shandong contradict China's expectations?
- Why might Western nations have their own motives for ignoring China?
- How would Chinese students have reacted to this?

Students complete a simple cause & effect chart:

- Cause: China contributes massively to the Allied war effort.
- Effect: China expects fair treatment at Versailles.
- Actual Outcome: Land granted to Japan; China refuses to sign treaty.
- Long-term Impact: Student protests, political radicalization.

### **4. The May Fourth Movement (10 minutes, Slides 15-16)**

Teacher narrative:

Outrage over the Shandong decision sparked the May Fourth Movement (May 4, 1919). Students, workers, and intellectuals protested foreign domination and government weakness. It led to demands for:

- modernization
- science and democracy
- national independence

Many historians, including Xu Guoqi and Bruce Elleman, argue that the Shandong betrayal was a turning point that pushed China toward socialism and eventually communism.

Include Elleman's interpretation:

- "If the Shandong controversy had not happened, China might never have become Communist."
- Students discuss: Do you agree? Why or why not?

### **5. Synthesis: China's WWI Experience (5 minutes, Slide 17)**

Student partners answer: How did China hope WWI would protect it from imperialism, and why did that effort fail?

Encourage them to reference:

- Japanese interference
- unequal treaties
- lack of military leverage
- Western bias favoring Japan
- overlooked contributions of the CLC
- Paris Peace Conference structure

### **POST-ASSESSMENT:**

#### **Exit Ticket Prompt (Slide 18):**

"In one or two sentences, explain how the experiences of Chinese laborers in WWI shaped China's political future."

### **MODIFICATIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS**

#### **For Students with Reading or Processing Challenges:**

- Provide a simplified reading version with reduced lexile and fewer historical terms.
- Offer an audio version of the text or text-to-speech support.
- Chunk the text into small segments with guiding questions after each section.
- Use a vocabulary sheet with visuals for key terms (e.g., "Shandong," "Versailles Treaty," "Chinese Labour Corps," "sovereignty," "imperialism").
- Graphic organizer support, such as:
  - Cause-and-effect chart (WWI events → Rise of communism)
  - Timeline organizer
  - T-chart: "China's Contributions vs. China's Treatment at Versailles"

#### **For English Language Learners (ELLs):**

- Provide sentence starters for discussion and writing.
- Display visuals such as maps, propaganda posters, and soldier photographs to support context.
- Allow bilingual dictionaries or translation tools during reading and writing.

- Offer an option to present the speech with visual aids or shorter written responses if language output is difficult.

**Instructional Support:**

- Pre-teach background knowledge using a short video, map walk, or quick overview slides.
- Provide note-taking scaffolds (guided notes with blanks).
- Allow use of translation tools for multilingual learners.
- Provide teacher-recorded lecture summaries or a 5–7 sentence “big idea” overview.
- Check for understanding more frequently using whiteboards, thumbs-up checks, or quick pair-share.

**Extensions:**

- Artifact analysis (CLC tools, clothing, recruitment posters).
- Debate: “Should China have been treated as an equal power at Versailles?”
- Map study of shifting boundaries in Asia.
- Reading diary excerpts of Chinese workers in Europe.