

Forgotten Voices from The First World War: The Chinese Labour Corps

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The one hundredth anniversary of the Great War is prompting a renewed effort at both the popular and academic levels to ensure that the different units and countries involved are not forgotten. While not supplying combat troops, China entered the First World War on the side of the Allies, furnishing much-needed labourers, 140,000 by conservative estimates and possibly more, who played an essential role on the Western Front and other theatres, taking responsibility for a wide range of tasks. Among others, unloading military supplies and handling ammunitions, building barracks and other military facilities, digging trenches, and even agriculture and forest management.

While their essential contribution was recognized in British documents, both Paris and London saw them as a temporary expedient, to be ended as soon as the war was over. Furthermore, their deployment gave rise to all sorts of culture and language clashes, in addition to the dangers of travelling to Europe and surviving in close proximity to the battle field. However, beyond these travails, the Chinese Labour Corps left a significant legacy, with members seeing the world, experiencing other nations, and often becoming literate. More widely, despite being on the winning side, China's failure to secure any gains at Versailles prompted the May 4th Movement and can be seen as a key juncture in the long and winding road from empire to nation-state. It is an important reminder of the global nature of the Great War, whose impact extended far from the battle field to all corners of the world.

The one hundredth anniversary of the Great War has prompted renewed interest in the conflict and a major drive by myriad institutions and individuals to inform the public and assure that the sacrifices made one century ago are never forgotten. While the main theatres of the war were in Europe, there are reasons why it is called the First World War, since its nature and scope were truly global. This includes Asia, which may have seen limited combat operations (other than in South-Western Asia, part of the Middle East) but where a number of countries made key contributions to the Allied cause. They include Japan, whose navy helped secure the Pacific, while her troops took over German territories, and took part in the conquest of Tsingtao; China, which contributed much-needed workers; and India, whose soldiers helped stabilize the Western Front in late 1914 and later played a key role in a wide range of theaters, including Gallipoli, East Africa, and Mesopotamia.

While such contributions were recognized by contemporary media and are well documented, with the passage of time there is little public awareness of them. The first centenary of the war is, however, prompting many public and private organizations in countries like Japan,¹

India, and China², and among communities from those nations, to make renewed efforts to make sure that their contribution is duly recognized, both at home and abroad, and in particular among their war-time Allies. This is an aspect of the renewed geopolitical competition in the Asia-Pacific region, which also features countries vying to stress their past roles in world conflicts.

China at the outset of the War: Nation Building, Limited Sovereignty, and Collective Security

The outbreak of the Great War caught China in the midst of a giant yet incomplete transformation from Empire to Republic, an exercise in nation building that would take decades to complete and see myriad wars and turmoil amid fragmentation and widespread human suffering.³ The Revolutionary Party (同盟会), renamed Guomindang (国民党) in 1919, had been forced in 1916 to cede the presidency to Yuan Shikai, and warlords ruled much of the country, with significant foreign influence. In 1916 Duan Qirui, a graduate of the Beiyang Military Academy who had furthered his studies in Germany, became prime minister following Yuan's death. One of the dossiers on his table was whether to join the Great War. One of the factors at play was the possibility of recovering the German concessions in Shandong Province, and more generally of improving China's international standing, something which, among others, leading intellectual Liang Qichao hoped for.⁴ Pressure also came from the United States, at that time moving towards joining the war, and from the Japanese, who had decided on a policy of loans to China and other financial incentives in exchange for recognition of their position in northern regions which Tokyo considered a sphere of influence necessary to protect its Korean colony and shield it from Russian ambitions, following its failed bid to impose the "twenty one demands" on China in 1915.⁵ These wide-ranging demands were tantamount to turning China into a Japanese protectorate. Among others, Tokyo demanded freedom of movement and the right to purchase land and carry out business for Japanese nationals in South Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia, a promise "not to cede or lease to any other Power any harbour or bay on or any island along the coast of China", and the appointment of Japanese advisors.⁶ In March 1917 Duan convinced Parliament to break diplomatic relations with Germany, and, after a struggle over who had the constitutional power to issue it, a declaration of war by the cabinet followed in August.⁷

Thus, although her own nation-building process was far from complete, Chinese leaders decided to join a conflict which, while global in nature, had its origin and main focus thousands of miles away. Ideally, being on the winning side would help China consolidate and increase her national stature, but as we shall see later, things would turn out quite differently. What was clear in 1916 was that whereas China had little, if any, expeditionary military capability to offer to the Allies, it had something they desperately needed: manpower. The concept was simple: import Chinese labour, thus freeing British and French young men for combat duties. Although the Chinese and Japanese governments concluded a military agreement whereby Tokyo would provide "aid, advisers and instructors to develop the Chinese War Participation Army to support the Allied cause," no troops were deployed to Europe, and Japanese aid simply served the purpose of reinforcing Duan's troops concentrated in North China.⁸ Germany, on the other hand, provided financial support to Sun Yat-sen's alternative government in Guangzhou, in the hope of pushing China back into

neutrality.⁹ As was the rule in those years, factional interests frequently took precedence over the exercise of national power.

The Chinese Labour Corps: China's major contribution to the war effort

Logistics is often forgotten, or at least rarely granted a degree of attention commensurate with its true importance, in many military histories. In the case of the Western Front in the Great War the distances involved were not huge, in particular if compared to some theatres in the Second World War, but the industrial nature of the fighting, the dual demands of artillery and fortification, and the sheer number of troops involved, meant a strong and growing demand for labour behind the trenches. Although some machinery and vehicles were available, building and repairing railways and roads, moving supplies, mail, troops, and the injured, laying down and maintaining telephone lines, plus constructing all sorts of military facilities, were tasks mainly undertaken with a mixture of human and animal labour. Many labour units were created. The Royal Engineers, for example, set up eleven labour battalions, and in January 1917 the British Labour Corps was born. By the time of the armistice, it had grown to almost 400,000. Staffed by officers not medically fit for front-line duties (often returned wounded), it regularly operated within range of enemy fire, and some of its units were employed as emergency infantry during the spring 1918 German offensives.

The Allies quickly realized that their manpower pool was simply not large enough to feed this ever-growing need for construction and logistics labour. At first arrangements were often ad hoc, but the scale of the fighting, the inadequacy of some earlier approaches, and the realization that this would be no short conflict, soon gave way to a more systematic approach. France was the first to tap into China's huge labour force. Great Britain followed, with both countries already in negotiations with China in the summer of 1916.¹⁰ According to the Official History: '...although some labour units were raised and eventually labourers from various parts of the Empire and China were brought to France, the numbers were never at any period sufficient for the demands of a great army operating in a friendly country'. Despite this, it is clear that Chinese workers played a crucial role in sustaining the Allied armies in the field. Precise numbers are not available, with some sources mentioning that in August 1918, 96,000 were enrolled in the British Labour Corps, with a further thirty thousand working for France,¹¹ but Chinese sources stress that the specific number is disputable and that 140,000 in total for both France and Britain is a conservative estimate.¹² Guoqi Xu notes the "sizable discrepancy among the figures provided by different sources" and provides a range from several authors.¹³ Among others, he mentions the Dictionary of the First World War by Stephen Pope and Elizabeth-Anne Wheale, eds. (320,000)¹⁴, Arthur Philip Jones (150,000 Chinese workers in France, Mesopotamia, and Russia)¹⁵, Chen Sanjing (between 175,000 and 200,000 adding those recruited by France and Great Britain)¹⁶, and CLC interpreter Gu Xinqing (175,000 again as a joint figure)¹⁷. He also quotes a US War Department telegram (97,000 recruited by London, 40,000 plus 1,500 specialists by Paris)¹⁸. We could add that, although Paris was first to tap China's vast labour pool, there were precedents in Great Britain for the employment of Chinese at times of war to free military and naval personnel from other duties. This includes the Napoleonic Wars, during which 'Chinese men who worked in merchant ships were then used by the Royal Navy in support

roles to provide cover for the British men who were away fighting, such as ships' porters'.¹⁹ London also used colonial workers in the Indian, Egyptian, and South African Native Labour Corps.

The Individual Experience of Chinese Workers: Tasks, Dangers, and Opportunities

Even before China had formally declared war, a processing plan was set up in Shandong Province, with the purpose of screening and hiring labourers. Located near the Royal Navy's base at Weihaiwei, it was followed by a second facility in the port of Qingdao. Recruitment was not difficult, given the region's poverty and instability and the high wages offered. These consisted of twenty Chinese dollars as a starting bonus, food and clothing, and ten dollars per month partly payable to their families. The medical examination was focused on tuberculosis, trachoma (a viral disease of the eye, then prevalent in Shandong), and venereal diseases.²⁰ Some 100,000 were selected, issued a serial number in a dog tag around their wrists,²¹ and sprayed prior to embarkation. Many still donned a queue and were urged to cut it.

Travel to Europe was not without its dangers. Already in 1916 a ship carrying Chinese workers to France²² had been sunk by a German submarine in the Mediterranean, with the loss of 543,²³ prompting the use of an alternative trans-Pacific route across Canada by train.²⁴ Once in the Old Continent, although their contracts said they would not be deployed in or near the front, they often found themselves under enemy fire or dealing with other dangers, such as unexploded ammunitions.²⁵ Illness was an additional hazard (including the Spanish Flu from 1918), together with the harsh climate and unfamiliar food, despite which in December 2018 "Colonel Wetherall said that the Chinese suffered very little from ill-health; out of a total strength of some 93,000 Chinese in France, there were only about 1,500 in hospital."²⁶ In addition to those lost at sea, more than 2,000 died. Their tombs can be found in France, Flanders, and England, some in special cemeteries.

Members of the Chinese Labour Corps were distributed in 500-strong companies, under British officers and Chinese foremen. The language barrier was a significant problem, for example when an American soldier said "let's go," which sounds like "GOU" in Chinese (meaning "dog") it nearly caused a rebellion among Chinese labourers.²⁷ Many translators were hired, while efforts were conducted to recruit Chinese-speaking British officers. The latter's number was small, not only because there were not that many Britons resident in China who had mastered the language but because most of those able and willing to serve sought to join a combat unit. British officers never saw their Chinese Labour Corps counterparts as true equals.²⁸

A typical schedule was ten working hours per day, seven days per week.²⁹ Although under military discipline and severe restrictions on their movement, to a certain extent resulting in segregation, authorities made efforts to accommodate some of their customs. An example was the free days they got during Chinese festivals.³⁰ An effort was made to facilitate postal communication with their families, despite censorship and the fact that many were illiterate. The resulting letters (up to fifty thousand per month) are a very useful source to learn about their roles, thoughts, and living conditions. The YMCA played a key role in their welfare,

organizing recreational activities and literacy classes. Hong Kong- and US-educated James Yen created a 1,000-character vocabulary and the *Chinese Workers' Weekly*, also writing many letters for illiterate labourers.³¹ As a result of various literacy drives, it is estimated that some two thirds of the members of the Chinese Labour Corps returned being able to read and write, albeit to a limited extent, whereas originally more than eighty percent were illiterate.³² Classes were so popular that they ran out of materials.³³

Their work was varied and ranged from unloading military supplies and handling ammunition to building barracks, digging trenches, and constructing fortifications. It even extended to agriculture and forest management.³⁴ The minutes of a meeting on "Chinese Labour in France," held on January 18, 1918 at 10 Downing Street with the prime minister in the chair (and following a War Cabinet meeting on the same subject the day before), reveal that at first labour tended to be allocated to the different services from a central pool, but this gave way to the view that it was better to second at least a minimum to each department, so that, among others, the members of the Corps could specialize and achieve greater proficiency at a given kind of work, and their supervisors become more familiar with them. That was the position defended by Sir Eric Geddes, who explained that it was the system employed with the first seven thousand Chinese workers brought to France by the British Department of Transportation. General Travers Clarke supported the "desirability of keeping the same men at the same job," adding that "it was done now at a considerable extent." He spoke in favour of retaining a central pool, which, while compatible with the described specialization, allowed a measure of flexibility. Eric Geddes said that labour was "nobody's child" and defended the permanent allocation of "a minimum number of men" to departments, so that "they could put in their interpreters and N.C.O.s and control would increase rather than diminish." Sir Joseph Maclay and Sir Guy Granet concurred in these views of Eric Geddes.³⁵



Handling ammunition by the CLC



Building roads by CLC, to sustain industrial warfare on Western Front

While labouring long hours in uncomfortable and often hazardous jobs, their stay in Europe was for many their first opportunity to experience life not only outside China but beyond their village or province. As often happens, contact with a different reality prompted more than a few to question their country's place in the world and to wonder how it could be changed. Contact with fellow citizens and with nationals from other Allied nations may have helped the members of the Chinese Labour Corps to develop a sense of national identity and of their country's place in the world.³⁶ It should also be emphasized that, while originally intended to carry out unskilled tasks, members of the Chinese Labour Corps often ended up being responsible for much more complex tasks, even tank maintenance, overcoming the extensive prejudice that saw them as hard working but incapable of performing technologically-demanding jobs.³⁷

The British Government View: A Commodity? Yet a Valuable One

A look at British official documents reveals a dual view of the Chinese Labour Corps. On the one hand, its members often appear as little more than objects. They are referred to in terse terms, as if one was talking about a piece of equipment. On the other, the vital nature of their contribution to the war effort often appears openly, without any attempt to disguise it. This is clear even in the immediate post-war period, once the hostilities were over but the

need for labour remained high. For example, the minutes of the December 4, 1918 meeting of the War Cabinet included an item devoted to the “Repatriation of Chinese coolies.” Faced with a proposal from the Ministry of Shipping to repatriate a number of workers, taking advantage of available space in two passenger ships, “the Adjutant-General said that he had taken this matter up with G.H.Q. in France, who were averse from the idea of repatriating Chinese coolies at the present time. There was a great deal of work to be done, e.g., handling cargo at the ports, upkeep of roads, filling up the shell-holes, and rolling up the barbed wire, for which civilian labour would have to be engaged if the Chinese were withdrawn.”³⁸ At the meeting, the British prime minister pointed out that while there was a shortage of labour in France, “the amount of work requiring this class of labour must have greatly diminished since the cessation of hostilities,” and it was decided to arrange the repatriation of five thousand Chinese workers, with a further five thousand to follow.³⁹ Thus, while essential, and openly recognized as such in official documents, the decision was made that Chinese workers, viewed as a temporary asset, were to be returned to their native country as soon as possible.

Direct Hiring and the End of the Comprador System: a Precedent for General Stilwell’s Training Drive?

At the same January 18, 1918 meeting referred to earlier, Colonel MacLaren Brown said that during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, with which he was familiar, “the recruiting and control of the Chinese was kept in the hands of the Compradors. The Railway Company dealt only with and through the Compradors.” While conceding that in that case “the Chinese understood the system and it worked well”, Colonel Brown explained that “in the case of the Chinese in Northern France they have been recruited on a different basis and under special conditions,” a reference to the system of individual contracts outlined earlier.⁴⁰

We can thus see how the Great War led to a change in the way Chinese labour was employed, dispensing with middlemen. During the Second World War, a similar change would take place to some extent in the military sphere. When training Chinese soldiers at Ramgarh (British India) from 1942, in an attempt to develop a number of modern, capable divisions, US General Joseph Stilwell accepted the recruits sent by the government of the Republic of China but insisted that they be paid individually, in a bid to prevent corruption by officers pocketing their men’s pay.⁴¹

Considering, and Rejecting, the Use of Chinese Troops

France did not just initiate the recruitment of Chinese workers. It also endeavoured to secure the deployment in the Western Front of Chinese troops,⁴² although the move was ultimately rejected by London and never took place. Even before the Chinese declaration of war, General Ferdinand Foch had argued for the need to get China to raise “pioneer battalions,” between 1,200 and 1,500 strong. In an August 11, 1917 secret report, he pointed out that, “given the population of China, the number of battalions which can be raised is theoretically limitless.” Foch asked Paris to press China to dispatch between seventy and eighty battalions. Such units, mostly officered by the Chinese themselves, would have undertaken construction and logistical work near and at the front, making it unnecessary to individually hire further Chinese workers.⁴³ France did not manage to persuade the United Kingdom, with the War Cabinet noting at its February 4, 1918 that “the

Supreme War Council do not accept Joint Note No. 11 of the Permanent Military Representatives on the subject of Chinese battalions.”⁴⁴ Logistics did not seem to be the reason behind British opposition despite the shortage of Allied shipping and the unsuitability of Chinese vessels for oceanic voyages described in the same missive.⁴⁵

While not the focus of the paper, it should also be mentioned that a small number of Canadian citizens of Chinese origin volunteered and managed to be accepted for service, despite the refusal to enrol them in, for example, British Columbia. While sources estimate them at, at most, three hundred, ‘Those of Chinese origin who are known to have volunteered included Frederick Lee and Wee Hong Louie (enlisted in Kamloops), William Thomas Louie (Calgary), Tung On Hong (Sudbury), and Victor Fong (Quebec).’⁴⁶



The Ultimate Impact of China’s Contribution to the War Effort: Logistics, Frustration and Revolution

CLC recruits in Weihaiwei doing physical training before leaving for Europe (image)

As explained, life was not easy for the members of the Chinese Labour Corps, and a number made the ultimate sacrifice. On the positive side, however, they could acquire some savings, widen their horizons, and some gained a measure of literacy. Many went back home with the desire and ability to play a more meaningful role in the future of their country. The presence of Chinese in France did not end with the Great War, and included some key figures in Chinese communism who took part in the Work-Study Program, including Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai. Deng lived in France from 1920 to 1925, where he became active in politics for the first time and joined the Chinese Communist Party.⁴⁷ Zhou was in the country from 1920 to 1924, playing a leading role among Chinese work-study students.⁴⁸

At the international level, the outcome of the First World War was frustrating for China. Despite being on the winning side and a participant in the Versailles Peace negotiations, China was unable to secure any significant gains. Japan, a more powerful and cohesive state which had entered the war earlier, pre-empted Chinese moves and succeeded Germany in securing rights in China and a number of Pacific Ocean islands. The 62-strong Chinese delegation was attacked following revelations of Japan’s confidential agreements with France, Great Britain and Italy, on the one hand, and Duan Qirui on the other. US President Wilson, originally sympathetic to China, agreed on April 30, 1919 with French PM Georges Clemenceau and British PM David Lloyd George to the transfer of all German rights in Shandong Province to Japan. This “flagrant denial of the new Wilsonian principles of open diplomacy and self-determination,” inflamed Chinese public opinion and prompted many protests.⁴⁹ Enraged, Chinese students in Paris surrounded the hotel where the Chinese delegation was staying in order to prevent it from signing the Peace Treaty as decided by the government in Beijing, which sent a telegram to that effect.⁵⁰ Mass demonstrations in Beijing on 4 May would give a name to a movement which sought to renew China and raise her to the position of equal among international powers. One of its immediate consequences was the emergence of a new standard for the written language, based on the modern Beijing dialect, which would replace classical Chinese.⁵¹ It would also lead to the creation of

the Chinese Communist Party.

China's intervention in the First World War, while contributing to the Allied victory, failed to secure for Beijing any significant geopolitical gains. Indeed, by boosting Japan and weakening the British Empire, it could even be argued that the war facilitated the later clash between the two Asian giants. In its wake, London put an end to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, sided with the United States, and started work on a new naval base in Singapore, designed to provide a measure of deterrence. The Great War, however, transformed the lives of many Chinese, both members of the Labour Corps and students and intellectuals at home, and helped reinforce the conviction that the country needed to become stronger and renew itself in order to be treated as an equal in the international sphere.⁵² It was yet another reminder, following less than a generation after the First Sino-Japanese War, that unlike Japan, China had not yet transformed itself into a modern nation state and gained a measure of recognition as an equal by the leading Western powers of the time.

Geopolitics, Public Diplomacy, and Soft Power: Competing Narratives.

The importance of commemorating the First World War and of highlighting their national contribution to the allied victory has not gone unnoticed in Beijing, New Delhi, or Tokyo. The fact that these three major Asian powers, competitors and often party to border disputes on land or at sea, fought on the same side in the Great War is a two-edged sword. It could have led to coordinated efforts and even have provided, in the case of China and Japan, a counter to other historical episodes, very much alive in popular memory, which act as major obstacles to a lasting peace. However, this does not seem to have been the case. China tends to see the Great War mainly in terms of having capped Japan's successful move from colonialism target to colonial power, with Tokyo not just replacing Berlin in China and the Pacific, but decisively moving towards a paramount position in much of China.

Efforts at remembrance are also being made in the United Kingdom, where "The National Campaign for a Permanent Memorial to the Chinese Labour Corps of the First World War" was launched in August 2014⁵³, while initiatives in China include a documentary series by CCTV, introduced with a reminder that "An estimated 145,000 Chinese workers stood shoulder to shoulder with British and French soldiers during the conflict from 1914 to 1918. More than 20,000 of them were killed."⁵⁴ A challenge as we commemorate the centenary of the Great War is to ensure it includes greater awareness of the contributions of the Chinese Labour Corps.

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Notes:

Archival Materials

NA National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, UK.

SHAT Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Service historique de la défense, Château de Vincennes, Avenue de Paris, 94306 Vincennes cedex

USNA US National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration, 700

Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20408-0001, USA

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⁴ Sheridan 1983, 308.

⁵ These demands alarmed Western powers bent on keeping the balance of power in China. They also prompted a rift between the Kuomintang, radically opposed to the Yuan Shikai regime, and those organizations stressing unity in the face of Japanese expansionism. For the latter see Yong 1987, 100. Yao Na 姚娜. September, 2011.

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⁷ Spence 1990, 289-290. Li Zhancai 李战才. October 3, 2011.

⁸ Sheridan 1983, 304.

- ⁹ Anthony B. Chan, *Arming the Chinese: The Western Armaments Trade in Warlord China, 1920-28*, (Vancouver-Toronto: UBC Press, 2010), p. 18.
- ¹⁰ Huang Yinghu 黄应虎. December, 2011.
- ¹¹ The Long, Long Trail. Undated.
- ¹² Xu Guoqi 徐国琦. 2007, 56-60.
- ¹³ Xu Guoqi 徐国琦. 2007, 56.
- ¹⁴ Pope et al. 1995.
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- ²² They had been hired by the French and thus did not belong to the Chinese Labour Corps, which was a British organization.
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³³ Xu 2011 A, 191-192.

³⁴ CAB 24/39, NA.

³⁵ CAB 24/39, NA.

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³⁸ CAB 23/8, NA.

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⁴¹ "The U.S. Army insisted that the soldiers at Ramgarh be paid individually and by public roll call. The Chinese constantly agitated that the soldiers' pay be turned over in a lump sum to the commanding officer of the units involved. This was the traditional channel of theft in the Chinese Army, and the U.S. Army refused." Stilwell 1948, 213.

⁴² Xu 2011 B, 185.

⁴³ 16N2450, GQG, 6498, SHAT.

⁴⁴ CAB/23/5, NA.

⁴⁵ CAB/24/31, NA.

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⁴⁷ Nora Wang, "Deng Xiaoping: The Years in France", *The China Quarterly*, Volume 92, 1982, pp. 698-705.

⁴⁸ Paul Bailey, "The Chinese Work—Study Movement in France", *The China Quarterly*, Volume 115, 1988, pp. 441-461, p. 442.

⁴⁹ Schwartz 1983, 407.

⁵⁰ A copy of the telegram from the delegation reporting on the failure to secure German rights in Shandong is available in National Palace Museum 2011, 134-135. On the other hand, China signed the Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Austria (Treaty of Saint-Germain-

en-Layle) and the Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Hungary (Treaty of Trianon) National Palace Museum 2011, 136-139.

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⁵² Deng Xiaojun 王健. February 15, 2009. Wang Jian 王健. 2014, 33-36.

⁵³ The National Campaign, undated.

⁵⁴ CCTV 2009.

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