

"Bert Hardy's Chinatown: May 1942"

an illustrated lecture

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Gregory Lee

IETT, Université de Lyon (Jean Moulin)

The photographs of Chinatown by Bert Hardy were taken in May 1942 during the Second World War and were commissioned as part of a photographic essay on wartime Liverpool Chinatown by the illustrated news magazine *Picture Post*. However, they were not published.

The men depicted are just a few of the 10,000 Chinese seamen who manned the Merchant Navy ships, for Britain during the war, mainly Blue Funnel, Ben Line, and Shell. Chinese citizens also served as cooks and laundrymen for the Royal Navy during the war and even right up until the 1990s.¹ The pictures show them in lodging houses, their poor living conditions, while they wait for the next ship.

¹Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Liverpool: The Bluecoat Press, 1990) 162:
"Approximately 5,000 Chinese seamen were employed on British-registered ships, most of them by...Blue Funnel, Ben Line and Shell....[a number] doubled after the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, early in 1942...."

This was not the first time the Chinese served the British war effort. It is little known but the First World War trenches were dug not by British Tommies but by 20,000 or so Chinese men who were enrolled in the British Army Chinese Labour Corps. The Chinese government had supplied these men hoping in return after the war to win back the territories in China that were colonized by foreign powers. The strategy didn't work. After the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 - the allied powers handed over the former German territories to Japan, an ally of France and Britain in the First World War.

In Liverpool's Anfield cemetery in an almost forgotten corner is to be found the Chinese sector, in which three white tombstones over the graves of three Chinese bear witness to the history the Chinese who died while serving in the British Army's Chinese Labour Corps.

Most of the men in the Labour Corps during the Great War came from the northern province of Shandong while 山东 during the Second World War the sailors were mostly from the seaport of Shanghai 上海. The Chinese seamen had no choice but to serve on the transatlantic supply routes. They were stranded. They could not return to China where the war was raging against the Japanese occupation. The British and American governments even passed laws obliging the Chinese seamen to serve in the merchant navies.² They were paid far less than British sailors. And at one point the Shanghai seamen protested.

Like Indian seamen, the Chinese also had to resort to strikes to

² See Gregory B. Lee, *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers*, London: C. Hurst & Co. and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.

secure wage increases that were awarded to Europeans without a struggle. The Chinese, however, were in a far stronger position than the Indians because soon after Japan's entry into the war the ports from which Chinese had been recruited -- Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai -- were closed and it was no longer possible to send dissidents home.³

While Tony Lane saw the Chinese as being in a strong bargaining position during the war, their act of defiance was not to be forgotten by the British authorities and the Blue Funnel shipping company. After the war ended, as was revealed just about five years ago, thousands of Chinese men who had settled in Liverpool legally many married to Liverpool girls and with children were deported in 1946 and 1947.⁴ The Home Office and the Holt shipping company had not forgiven the demands for fair pay made by these seamen during the war. Their landing papers were revoked, they were rounded up at night, and put into cargo ships roughly converted with bunk beds and sent back to a China in turmoil to an uncertain fate. Their Liverpool properties were appropriated by the council, and their families remained silent for over half a century through fear of reprisals, and simply because the 1950s and 1960s were marked by anti-Chinese and anti-Communist Cold War sentiments

Due to the efforts of Yvonne Foley- the daughter of one of these sailor-fathers - there is now a monument at Liverpool's Pierhead acknowledging the contribution that was made by the men and the wrong that was done to them.

³ Lane, p. 162.

⁴ See Gregory Lee (presenter), Julian May (producer) *Liverbirds and Laundrymen- Europe's Earliest Chinatown* *Liver Birds and Laundrymen: Europe's Earliest Chinatown*; BBC Radio 3 Sunday Feature. 45 minutes. Broadcast Sunday 14 March 2005, 21.30-22.15; retransmitted 5 August 2005
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/feature2/pip/t584s/>

Quite possibly some of the men depicted in the Hardy photographs fell victim to these furtive deportations after the war.

From the 1960s onwards the nature of Liverpool Chinatown changed. The new immigrants who make up the majority in Liverpool today came from Hong Kong and the Canton region. Whole families came and the mixed marriage, bi-cultural Chinatown gave way to new Chinatown community. Today new younger immigrants seeking work have come from north-east China, and there are also many students from China and Chinese-speaking communities such as Malaysia.

The planned European Chinatown Museum would permanently display the Bert Hardy photographs together with other family photographs and records to collected from members of the community.⁵

Gregory Lee

IETT, Université de Lyon (Jean Moulin)

⁵ <http://www.chinatownmuseum.org>