Unexpected Encounters: Chinese and Arab Laborers in the American Expeditionary Forces in WWI France
By Dr Wen Shuang

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Venue : Asia Research Institute Seminar Room
Tower Block Level 10, 469A Bukit Timah Road
National University of Singapore @ BTC

CHAIRPERSON

Prof Kenneth Dean, Asia Research Institute, and Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

In 1917, about ten thousand Chinese contracted laborers and three thousand Arab laborers encountered each other in the construction fields of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France during World War One. These two groups of peoples, from two far ends of the “Eastern” world, met each other in the “West” at the request of the United States when it was in shortage of labor. However, although they were both known as sturdy and valuable workers, they did not get along with each other. As most of them were unlettered peasants, they were not familiar with each other’s cultural customs and languages. The Chinese did not like the skin color of North African laborers, who in return were not fans of the Chinese men’s queues. Due to such cultural unfamiliarity and sometimes financial grievances as well, they often got into fights, to the point that the American field officers had to separate these two groups and re-assign them to different projects. American field officers constantly referred them as “colonial workers,” even if Chinese and Arab laborers were not colonial subjects of the United States. This is in contrast with the term “immigrant workers” when American officers used to refer to non-French European laborers in the AEF. In this talk, I show how this neglected episode of unexpected encounters between Chinese and Arab laborers can shed light on cross-racial interactions among laborers and American attitudes towards peoples of color in the throes of the Great War. Furthermore, without the peculiar circumstances, these Chinese and Arab men probably would never had a chance to interact with each other. Therefore, their stories can also reveal how life trajectories of ordinary peoples were intricately weaved together by the spatiotemporal mediations of world powers of the time and a major world historical event.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wen Shuang is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. She holds an MA degree in Chinese-English Simultaneous Interpreting and Translation from Beijing Foreign Studies University, an MA degree in Middle East Studies from the American University in Cairo, and most recently a PhD in History from Georgetown University. Prior to pursuing her academic training, she worked as a broadcast journalist in Hong Kong.

REGISTRATION

Admission is free. We would greatly appreciate if you RSVP to Ms Tay Minghua via email: minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg.