

6 Semi-Colonialism and Cultural Interaction: Chinese Indentured Labor in World War One France and the Sino-French Connection

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Introduction

During World War One, beginning in 1916, nearly 140,000 Chinese laborers (mainly from the northern province of Shandong) were recruited by the British and French governments to make up for labor shortages in France, as well as to release British dockworkers in France for military duty. Although the French government looked principally to its formal colonies and protectorates for labor manpower during the war (recruiting 78,566 Algerians; 48,955 Vietnamese; and 35,506 Moroccans, for example), it imported nearly 37,000 Chinese workers. Those recruited by Britain constituted a larger proportion of its overseas labor force used in France; organized into 195 'labor battalions' and designated the Chinese Labor Corps, Chinese workers totalled 96,000 (compared to 48,000 Indians and 21,000 South African blacks) (Cross 1980: 615-616; 1983: 35-36; Summerskill 1982: 163; Horne 1985: 59). During their sojourn in France, these Chinese workers were involved in a wide variety of war-related work such as unloading goods and raw materials (e.g. coal) in the coastal docks, transportation, armaments and munitions production, machinery and equipment maintenance, road and aerodrome construction and even burial of the war dead.

In addition to sanctioning the British and French recruitment of Chinese labor in 1916-1918, the Chinese government in Beijing itself formally declared war on Germany in August 1917 (the only concrete consequence of which was the sequestration of German property and shipping in China). Together, these two acts earned China the right to attend the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of the war. China's participation in the conference, in effect, symbolized for the first time during the modern era the western powers' acquiescence in China's membership of the international community following a century of re-

peated humiliations at the hands of western powers (and latterly Japan) determined to enhance their economic, commercial and territorial privileges in the country. In many ways by the early twentieth century China had become – in the later words of Mao Zedong – a ‘semi-colony’, the ‘victim’ of an informal imperialism by means of which the privileges held by foreigners and their governments in China impinged upon the country’s sovereignty and limited its freedom of action. Such a ‘colonial’ status was ironically demonstrated during the French recruitment of Chinese labor in 1916-1917; Chinese workers were categorised *together* with workers from the French colonies and placed under the administrative supervision of the *Service d’organisation des travailleurs coloniaux* (Colonial Labor Service).

Chinese hopes in 1919 for a new era of international relations in which China would be treated as an equal ultimately foundered on the rocks of *realpolitik*, as the Versailles Peace Treaty neither compelled Japan to return to China the leasehold territory of Jiaozhou (Shandong province) that it had seized from Germany in 1914, nor amended in any substantial way the ‘unequal treaty system’ in China. China’s only gains from its contribution to the allied cause in World War One were the postponement of Boxer Indemnity payments for five years, and a slight increase allowed in import tariff levels. Decisions taken by the big powers at Versailles thus seemed to confirm China’s status as the helpless (and hapless) victim of western and Japanese imperialism (further demonstrated by the fact that the anti-Chinese legislation so prevalent in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand before World War One continued unabated after 1918). Not surprisingly, the story of Chinese indentured labor in World War One France has slipped into a historical black hole – in the West because of the conventionally Eurocentric approach often adopted by western historians of World War One, and in China because it represents simply another shameful and humiliating episode in the western exploitation of China during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries and therefore does not merit any in-depth study.

This chapter will argue that the history of Chinese indentured labor in World War One France should be placed within significantly larger contexts. Not only was it an important episode in the *longer* history of Chinese worker migration that began in the mid-nineteenth century with the illegal ‘coolie trade’ carried out in China’s treaty ports, but it also illuminates in very interesting ways Sino-French mutual perceptions and cultural interaction during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Such interaction, and the fact that Chinese politicians and intellectuals were *active participants* in the recruitment (and that they invested the project with their *own* political, social and cultural agenda) impels us to view China as a more autonomous actor on the world

stage at this time than has hitherto been assumed in the general histories of modern China. Finally, the chapter suggests that the specifically *political* use made by the Chinese government in 1916-1918 of Chinese overseas workers intriguingly anticipates the attitude and practices of the new Chinese Communist regime after 1949, especially in its relations with Africa.

Chinese support for the recruitment

Active Chinese support and participation clearly distinguishes the French recruitment of Chinese workers during World War One from the unregulated and illegal 'coolie trade' of the nineteenth century, when up to 500,000 Chinese were recruited principally to work on sugar plantations in South America and the Caribbean (intriguingly, a note from the French Foreign Ministry in 1863 suggested recruiting Chinese men and their families from central Chinese provinces to cultivate cotton and cereals in France's African colonies).¹ Both the French and British recruitment of Chinese workers in 1916-1917 were based on regulations first drawn up by the Qing government in 1866 (and originally rejected by the British and French governments) that imposed a time limit on the indenture, insisted on transparency of contracts (texts to be openly published in the Chinese press and to specify clearly duration, wage rates and number of working hours), guaranteed free medical assistance and free passage home after the expiry of the contract, and provided for the stationing of Chinese official inspectors both at the embarkation ports in China and in France to oversee the Chinese workers' welfare.

Two main Chinese constituencies were involved in the support for the recruitment of Chinese labor in World War One France. The first included government and official elites, who responded enthusiastically to the French request for Chinese labor in late 1915 in order to enhance China's standing at a future peace conference. In fact, President Yuan Shikai – in order to forestall the Japanese takeover of Germany's concession area in Shandong province (Japan had declared war on Germany in 1914 as Britain's ally) – had proposed (without success) China's military participation in the war on the side of the entente powers as soon as war had begun (Chi 1970: 20,72; Lo 1976: 2,559-561). On two further occasions, in 1915 and 1917, the Chinese government proposed sending troops to the Dardanelles and the Western Front respectively (La Fargue 1937: 83-84; Chi 1970: 129-130). Significantly, while the British and American governments were not especially keen on the proposals (mainly for logistical and financial reasons, but also because of a lack of confidence in the potential usefulness of Chinese military

participation) both the French government and military *were*. Joint proposals drawn up by the French and Chinese governments in the spring of 1918 (before the definitive shelving of any such plan for Chinese military participation in March) would have provided for the financing of a Chinese expeditionary force comprising 43 battalions (1,543 officers and 44,900 troops) and additional special units such as ‘police contingents’, ‘sanitation brigades’ and ‘communications teams’.²

A second, and perhaps more intriguing, Chinese constituency in favor of the recruitment was a group of Francophile intellectuals and educators who cultivated extensive links with both Chinese political figures and French official and intellectual circles. Since the early years of the twentieth century, in fact, this Chinese Francophile ‘lobby’ had been energetically promoting Sino-French cultural relations and the importance of Chinese overseas study in France. The most prominent member of this group was Li Shizeng (1881-1973), son of a Qing court official and who himself had gone to France in 1902 as an ‘embassy student’. While there he enrolled in the Ecole Pratique d’Agriculture in Montargis (just outside Paris) and later, in 1905, studied chemistry and biology at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. Other members of this Francophile lobby included anti-Qing revolutionaries and future prominent figures of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) in the 1920s – Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), Wu Zhihui (1864-1953) and Zhang Jingjiang (1877-1950) – all of whom were in France at the same time as Li. Li Shizeng became a fervent admirer of French culture (which included French anarchism) and often contrasted the ‘worthy’ ideals of the French secular republic, which he described as representing ‘freedom’, ‘creativity’ and ‘pacifism’, with the apparently more ‘brutal’ German ideals of ‘autocracy, utilitarianism and militarism’. While in Paris Li built up a wide network of contacts with French politicians and intellectuals, as well as helping to publish a Chinese-language anarchist journal, *Xin shiji* (New Century). Li also opened a night school for the Chinese workers he had recruited after 1908 for employment in the beancurd factory he had established in Garenne-Colombes outside Paris. For Li, France was a republic *par excellence*, free of what he perceived as the ‘baneful’ influences of monarchy and religion – and thus an ideal environment in which to work and study. In 1912, on his return to China, he founded the Association for Frugal Study in France (*liufa jianxuehui*), which helped send nearly 100 Chinese students to France before the outbreak of World War One. In the same year Cai Yuanpei, who had become the first minister of education in the new Chinese Republic, asserted that the French revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood were *comparable* to such Confucian values of *ren* (sense of compassion, humaneness) (Cai n.d.).

The Sino-French connection and mutual perceptions

The French intellectuals and politicians with whom Li came into contact were equally admiring of China; their inclination to *link* the traditions of French and Chinese cultures represented, in effect, a unique aspect of general western attitudes towards China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course, in many ways French diplomats and officials at home and in China shared the same assumptions of western superiority and the imperative of the western 'civilizing mission' as their British, American or German counterparts. However, what set French attitudes apart was the assumption that France was the one European country that could act as an effective *mediator* between China and the West. This was not only because France perceived itself as more sensitive to, and appreciative of, Chinese culture but also because it was assumed in many ways that *French and Chinese cultures* had much in common. Subscribers to these views included socialist politicians such as Marius Moutet and Edouard Heriot, scholar-politicians such as Paul Painlevé and prominent academics such as the historian Alphonse Aulard.³

What gave urgency to the French insistence that France's role in China was uniquely different from that of other western powers was an increasing fear that China was inexorably falling under the sway of Anglo-Saxon cultural influence, a consequence of Britain's predominant economic presence in China. In their effort to counter such an influence, French officials, politicians, intellectuals and scholars sought to emphasize a *complementarity* between French and Chinese cultures. Thus in its respect for learning, secularism, *joie de vivre* and aversion to war, French culture was seen to complement the humanist values of Confucius. Even the central role of the family in Chinese society found an echo in the Frenchman's respect for family life. As the president of the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association (*Association amicale franco-chinoise*),⁴ Georges Dubail (a former minister to China) noted in 1907:

The Chinese and French are profound and wise philosophers; they are equally good family men (*bons pères de famille*), prudent businessmen and faithful associates.⁵

The idea that the French and Chinese characters were alike in their proclivity for hard work, down-to-earth wisdom and practice of family virtues was reiterated in 1911 by another president of the Association, Georges Ducrocq:

Of all the foreigners who are in China, there are few more capable of adapting to China's way of life than the Frenchman. Like

us, the Chinese take a delight in family life; like us, they have an appetite for work and a moralistic turn of mind, a practical wisdom for daily life... that you will find in Confucius as in La Fontaine.⁶

For Ducrocq, *only France* could play the intermediary role between the West and China precisely because of the cultural affinity the two countries shared. It would be hard to imagine a British diplomat or scholar (or an American, for that matter) of the time describing Sino-British relations (or Sino-American relations) in quite the same way.

Li Shizeng and others of the Francophile 'lobby' not surprisingly welcomed the prospect of France's recruitment of Chinese labor in 1916 as part of their larger cultural and social agenda. Li confidently predicted that enormous benefits would accrue to China, as Chinese laborers in France would form the vanguard of an educated workforce contributing to the diffusion of industrial skills and reform of society on their return.⁷ While in France, Li claimed, Chinese workers would become truly 'civilized', divesting themselves of their 'backward' and 'unseemly' habits and customs. At the opening meeting of the Sino-French Education Association (*Huafa jiaoyuhui*) that Li had helped create in 1916 with the help of prominent French intellectuals such as Alphonse Aulard to promote the expansion of Sino-French cultural relations, the affinities between Chinese and French cultures were again highlighted. Aulard himself, echoing Cai Yuanpei's earlier observation, declared that the humanist philosophy of Confucius *anticipated* the ideals of the French Revolution.⁸ Two years later, a French military official in China on a government mission to explore ways of enhancing French cultural influence in the country, confidently proclaimed:

The Chinese is a philosopher, poet and artist, and it is for this reason one says that he is the Frenchman of the Far East.⁹

The Chinese worker experience in World War One France

Significantly, however, *actual* French attitudes towards the indentured Chinese workers during World War One, especially among officials and employers, undermined (and belied) the grandiose Gallic rhetoric of Sino-French cultural affinity. Mention has already been made of the fact that Chinese workers were rather unceremoniously lumped together with workers from France's colonies and placed under the administrative control of the Colonial Labor Service. In the eyes of French official authorities (as well as their British counterparts), Chinese workers were often perceived and described in condescending terms as

either 'childlike' or 'malleable'. More intriguingly, there was always an underlying fear of a 'loss of face' on the part of French authorities vis-à-vis the Chinese workers, a concern that revealed more about French feelings of insecurity than anything else. Instructions from the Colonial Labor Service to potential French employers of Chinese workers in September 1916 perfectly illustrated this French obsession with 'face':¹⁰

The Chinese have considerable self-pride (*amour-propre*), and it is therefore appropriate to treat them with kindness, and give them a reward, however, minimal, every time they try to do something well. An act of brutality will bring the opposite of what is intended, since anyone giving in to anger will lose all credibility in their eyes... It is imperative that employers, foremen, etc., realize that in the view of the Chinese, to give in to an external manifestation of anger is proof of an inability to control oneself and thus (in the eyes of the Chinese) to remain a barbarian.¹¹

Furthermore, because indentured Chinese workers did not, in fact, behave in ways expected of them (i.e., to be 'docile', 'passive', 'hardworking'), by 1918 French employers had become increasingly hostile to the idea of employing them. Chinese workers often protested against breaches of their contracts, the dangerous nature of their work, and the harsh treatment they at times received. In some cases Chinese workers, such as those at a munitions plant in St. Louis de Rhône (near Arles) simply walked off the job when refused overtime pay and headed for the port of Marseille. At dockyards such as Saint-Nazaire French employers continually criticized Chinese workers as 'lazy troublemakers' who refused to unload coal because they considered such a task unsafe (and not part of their contract). In some cases, disputes between Chinese workers and French soldiers (as happened in Rouen in March 1918) could lead to violence.¹² Dissatisfaction with the 'unruly' Chinese workers had reached such a fever pitch by 1918 that the Ministry of War was referring to them as 'undesirables'. At the end of the war meetings held by representatives of the Ministry of War, Ministry of Justice and local army commands actually discussed complaints sent in from local communities (especially from the Somme region and the Pas de Calais) about the Chinese workers in their midst. Such complaints referred to crimes 'of all sorts' and suggested that in certain villages local people no longer 'felt safe' and were contemplating quitting their village unless the Chinese workers were withdrawn.¹³

Conclusion

The story of Chinese indentured labor in World War One France ended in disappointment and recrimination. As mentioned, the Versailles Peace Treaty ultimately confirmed China's status as a minor player on the world stage and continued acceptance of sovereignty-undermining foreign privilege in the country itself. Furthermore, the ambitious plans of the Chinese Francophile lobby (of which Chinese indentured labor in France would have constituted an element) to strengthen and expand Sino-French cultural relations never came to fruition. The hostility towards Chinese workers by French employers and local communities exposed the hypocrisy of French rhetoric concerning a 'special relationship' between China and France (there is an interesting parallel here with the sorry plight of Chinese immigrants in the United States set against the context of an American discourse that highlighted a 'special relationship' between the US and China based on the former's genuine desire to 'help' and 'assist' the latter) (Hunt 1983).

Yet three little-known events in the wake of World War One indicate that though China may indeed have been a 'semi-colony' during the first decades of the twentieth century, Sino-French interaction at this time (what I call the 'Sino-French connection') could proceed in *two directions*. In September 1919, while Chinese Foreign Minister Lu Chengxiang (1871-1949) was in France attending the Versailles Peace Conference, he met French President Raymond Poincaré; as a gesture of support for an impoverished France and to demonstrate China's civilized commitment to education, Lu donated 50,000 francs on behalf of the Chinese government to help restore educational facilities in war-shattered Verdun.¹⁴ This was not the only assistance China provided France; two years later, at the height of the postwar economic depression in France, the Chinese government sent food relief in the shape of 400 tons of eggs.¹⁵ In 1920, when Paul Painlevé visited China to confer on President Xu Shichang an honorary D.Litt. degree from the University of Paris, he was in turn offered 100,000 francs as a Chinese contribution to the newly created *Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises* in Paris (and thereby hoping to enhance interest in Chinese culture in France). Finally, post-1949 Chinese historiography may have consigned the story of Chinese indentured labor in World War One France to the dustbin because it was seen to represent simply another example of China's exploitation by the western powers, but in one fascinating respect the approach adopted by the Chinese Republican government during World War One in its support for the sending of Chinese workers to France has parallels with the foreign policy of the post-1949 Maoist state. Chinese government officials in their discussions with French and British authorities in 1916 made a point of describing Chi-

na's planned labor contribution to the war as an important symbol of the country's commitment to world peace – hence earning it the right to be treated as an equal on the international stage once the war ended.¹⁶ This specifically *political* use of Chinese labor overseas that the Chinese government made at this time anticipated post-1949 China's use of overseas labor. Thus when the People's Republic signed an agreement with Tanzania in the late 1960s to help finance and build the Tanzam Railroad with the aid of 15,000 Chinese technicians and workers it was deliberately using this dramatic gesture of international aid as a symbol of China's *political* commitment to the non-aligned world (and to Afro-Asian solidarity in particular). Such a parallel alone indicates that the virtually forgotten story of Chinese indentured labor in World War One France deserves to be revisited with a fresh perspective.

Notes

- 1 Note from Foreign Ministry to Ministry of Marine and Colonies (1863). Fonds ministériels/généralités: Carton 130, Dossier 1125. *Centre d'archives d'outre-mer* (Aix-en-Provence, France).
- 2 Fonds Clemenceau, 6N 130: Rapports des attachés militaires. *Archives de la service historique de l'armée de terre* (Chateau de Vincennes, Paris).
- 3 I have argued elsewhere that this modern French approach towards China drew on a long tradition of cultural and intellectual relativism that dated from the sixteenth century. See P. Bailey, 'Voltaire and Confucius: French Attitudes Towards China in the Early Twentieth Century', *History of European Ideas* 14.6 (November 1992): 819–821.
- 4 Founded in 1907, the Association was one of a number of scholarly or semi-official organizations established at this time to promote Franco-Chinese cultural relations.
- 5 *Bulletin de l'association amicale franco-chinoise* 1.1 (July 1917): 17–18.
- 6 *Bulletin de l'association amicale franco-chinoise* 3.3 (July 1911).
- 7 *Lü'Ou jiaoyu yundong* (The Educational Movement in Europe) (Tours: n.p., 1916): 82–83. For another article Li wrote on the same theme in 1917, see *Li Shizeng xiansheng wenji* (Collected Writings of Li Shizeng) (Taipei: Zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1980), 1: 220–225.
- 8 The text of Aulard's speech (translated into Chinese) is in *Fufa qingong jianxue yundong shiliao* (Historical Materials on the Diligent Work and Frugal Study Movement in France) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1979–1981), 1: 202–203.
- 9 *Archives du ministère des affaires étrangères* (Paris), E-28-1/6.
- 10 Since western observations of the Chinese character often focused (and still do) on the significant role of 'face' in Chinese personal interactions, this French obsession with 'face' ironically provides another example of 'cultural affinity' between the two countries (although not an example that contemporary French observers would necessarily have thought of).
- 11 Fonds Clemenceau, 6N 149: Mission de recrutement des ouvriers chinois. *Archives du service historique de l'armée de terre*.
- 12 *Archives nationales* (Paris): F14 1131: Main-d'oeuvre exotique.
- 13 7N 2289: Affaires britanniques/travailleurs chinois. *Archives du service historique de l'armée de terre*.

- 14 *La politique de Pékin* (7 September, 1919).
 15 *La politique de Pékin* (11 June, 1922).
 16 The last few lines of a song dedicated to the Chinese workers in France and written by a member of the Chinese official delegation at Versailles in 1919 also underlined this point:
 We, the children of sacred China, whose fate lies in heaven,
 esteem the farmer and favor the artisan, but never resort to force.
 Marching, marching ever marching.
 All within the four seas are brothers.
 We are an army of workers devoting ourselves to labor
 in order to build peace for you, humanity.
La politique de Pékin (February 22, 1920).

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