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## **The Sino-French Connection and World War One**

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### Abstract

*This article examines the recruitment by Britain and France of almost 140,000 Chinese labourers to work in France during World War One and considers its implications. This topic has received much less attention than the recruitment of smaller numbers from other non-European, mostly colonial, sources. The article explores the reasons for this and the image of France among Chinese intellectuals at the time, taking the example of the Francophile Li Shizeng. The claims of French intellectuals that a close cultural affinity existed between China and France are also examined in the context of this influx of Chinese labourers.*

During World War One nearly 140,000 Chinese labourers (mainly from the northern province of Shandong) were recruited by the British and French governments to perform a variety of war-related work — in transportation, munitions production, and equipment maintenance and repair — to solve the labour shortage in France as well as to replace British dockworkers in France so that they could be transferred to combat duties. Such Chinese workers constituted an important element of the huge numbers of non-Western labour mobilised by Britain and France in World War One, most of which was drawn from their colonies. Thus, for example, Britain recruited 48,000 Indians and 21,000 black South Africans, while France recruited nearly 79,000 Algerians, 50,000 Vietnamese, and over 35,000 Moroccans (Cross, 1980, 1983; Summerskill, 1982; Horne, 1985). At the same time, Tsarist Russia between 1915 and 1917 recruited up to 100,000 Chinese workers—most of whom, again, came from Shandong—to work on the Murmansk railroad in northern

Russia, in the oil fields at Baku and in the coal mines of the Donets Basin in southern Russia (Li Yongchang, 1987: 225; He Ping, 1995: 97-98).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to sanctioning the British and French recruitment of Chinese labour 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, symbolised *for the first time in the modern era* the Western powers' recognition of China's membership of the international community following a century of repeated 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 China had become by the early twentieth century—in the later words of Mao Zedong—a 'semi-colony' (*ban zhimindi* 半殖民地), the 'victim' of an informal imperialism by means of which the privileges held by foreigners and their governments in China impinged on the country's sovereignty and limited its freedom of action. Such a 'colonial' status was ironically demonstrated during the French recruitment of Chinese labour in 1916-1917; Chinese workers were categorised *together* with workers from the French colonies in North Africa and Indochina and placed under the administrative supervision of the Colonial Labour Service (*Service d'organisation des travailleurs coloniaux*).

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 concrete 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

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<sup>1</sup> The large numbers of Shandong natives amongst those recruited in the Russian Far East was not surprising, given the fact that since the end of the nineteenth century thousands of adult men from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei had seasonally migrated to Manchuria (leaving in the spring and returning at Chinese New Year) as contract labourers. On the nature and impact of this annual migration movement (a key strategy to ensure family economic survival back home), see Gottschang & Lary (2000).

import tariff levels. Decisions taken by the big powers at Versailles thus seemed to confirm China's subaltern status as the helpless (and hapless) victim of Western and Japanese imperialism—further demonstrated by the fact that the anti-Chinese immigrant legislation so prevalent in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand before World War One continued unchecked after 1918 (Pan, 1999: 234-9, 261-6, 286-8). Not surprisingly, despite the grandiose statement made several years after Versailles by T.Z.Tyau (a legal adviser to the Chinese delegation at the League of Nations Assembly) that the 'honourable' role played by Chinese workers in World War One had prompted so much gratitude from the public and governments of Britain and France that 'the world may be almost said to be lying at the Chinese labourer's feet' (Tyau, 1922: 225-6), the story of Chinese contract labour in World War One France has slipped into a historical black hole. In the West such a situation can be explained by the conventionally Eurocentric approach (at least until recently) often adopted by historians of World War One,<sup>2</sup> and in China because the recruitment of Chinese labour in World War One represented simply a minor and shameful episode in the longer history of Western exploitation of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and therefore did not merit any in-depth study. The episode has also been completely overshadowed in post-1949 Chinese scholarship by the greater attention paid to Chinese work-study *students* in France during the immediate post-WW1 period, especially as future Communist party leaders such as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping were among their number; such a phenomenon also characterizes French-language scholarship to a certain extent.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the role played by Chinese workers during World War One is accorded only the briefest of mentions in classic English-language accounts of the May Fourth movement (generally perceived as marking the beginnings of a mass nationalism in China stimulated by anger

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in two recent works (Horne, 1991; Horne, 1997) on the mobilisation of labour and society during World War One, there is virtually no reference at all to Chinese labourers (or indeed to any overseas workers recruited from British and French colonies in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia).

<sup>3</sup> A new study (Wang, 2002) of Chinese work-study students in France, for example, makes no reference to Chinese workers already in the country. The neglect of Chinese contract labour in French-language scholarship contrasts curiously with rich research that has been carried out on the role played by black workers and military conscripts from French West Africa during World War One. See, for example, Michel (1982). On the Chinese work-study movement, see Bailey, P. (1988: 441-461).

with the decisions taken by the big powers at Versailles) and the origins of the Chinese labour movement (Chow, 1960: 37-40; Chesneaux, 1969: 138-40), or in more recent general histories of modern China (Spence, 1999: 286-287).<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, however, an interest has been shown in the Chinese workers amongst French *official* circles in recent years, as part of a larger agenda celebrating the contemporary Chinese ethnic community in France. Thus in November 1988, at a ceremony attended by the French Minister of Transport and Communications representing President Mitterand, a plaque was officially unveiled in Paris (near the Gare de Lyon) to commemorate the contribution of Chinese workers to the allied war effort in 1914-1918.<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (National centre of the history of immigration) was opened to celebrate the importance of immigration in France's modern history; it included information (albeit rather scanty) on the Chinese workers in World War One France. Academic interest in the subject has also begun to emerge, demonstrated by the holding of an international conference in May 2010 jointly organised by the University of Boulogne and Flanders Field Museum in Ypres. In China, too, the episode has recently been given a more positive spin because it accords with an increasing focus on China's *global* interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chinese workers are now portrayed as active contributors to 'democracy' in the struggle against militarist aggression during World War One; their contribution was recently celebrated by a six-part documentary on the Chinese international English-language television channel, CCTV. Also, whereas an exhibition organised in 2000 by the archives office of Weihai (one of the ports from which Chinese workers embarked for Europe) on the local history of the region did not contain any information at all about World War One Chinese workers, eight years later in 2008 the Weihai archives office hosted an international conference on the British-recruited Chinese workers in World War One (Zhang, 2009).

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<sup>4</sup> Spence bases his account entirely on Summerskill (1982), a non-scholarly and rather superficial work based just on a few English-language sources.

<sup>5</sup> The plaque notes that some of these workers settled permanently in France and established 'in the neighbourhood of the Gare de Lyon the first Chinese community in France'. This is not strictly true. The first Chinese migrants to France (mostly hawkers and peddlers by trade) arrived at the turn of the century, travelling to Europe via the Trans-Siberian railroad. Many of them were Zhejiang natives selling carved green soapstone (from the province's Qingtian county) or artificial flowers.

The episode, however (quite apart from its significance in the wider history of Chinese labour migration), illuminates in very interesting and intriguing 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 that have drawn the picture of a *passive* victim of Western imperialism. Such participation clearly distinguished the World War One recruitment of Chinese labour from the unregulated and illegal ‘coolie’ trade of the nineteenth century, during which approximately 500,000 Chinese were recruited to work on sugar plantations in Peru, Cuba and British Guiana (Northrup, 1995: 25, 37-38, 61; Pan, 1999: 98-99, 248-250, 254).<sup>6</sup> The trade was illegal because the ruling Qing dynasty had officially proscribed emigration in 1712 (reflecting a traditional fear that migrants were potential troublemakers who might participate in rebellion or engage in piracy along China’s coastal regions). Yet between 1847 and 1873 (when the trade was formally ended) Chinese indentured labourers were recruited (often forcibly or through deception) by foreign agencies in the treaty ports (not subject to Chinese jurisdiction because of extraterritoriality) and their Chinese collaborators. The appalling conditions and treatment suffered by these labourers finally convinced the dynasty that strict official supervision of recruitment practices and conditions had to be implemented.<sup>7</sup> As early as 1866 (in response to the British and French demand in 1860 that the right of Chinese subjects to emigrate be recognized by the Qing dynasty), the Qing

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<sup>6</sup> In 1854 Chinese indentured labourers were also recruited for the French Caribbean colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe (*Centre*, 126: 1097) Interestingly, a note from the French Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Marine and Colonies in 1863 suggested that Chinese (and their families) from central Chinese provinces might also be recruited to cultivate cotton and cereals in France’s *African* colonies (*Centre*, 130: 1125).

<sup>7</sup> It should be pointed out that ‘coolies’ were not mere passive victims of the trade. In 1857 the *Anais*, a ship carrying Chinese indentured labourers to Cuba was discovered wrecked off the Chinese southeastern coast near Macao. Apparently, the ‘coolies’ had mutinied, killing all officers and seamen on board, and had tried to steer the ship back to the Guangdong coast. After running aground near Macao, the ‘coolies’ all dispersed and returned to their homes (*Centre*, 126: 1097).

government actually drafted regulations on the recruitment of Chinese indentured labour; these regulations would have limited the term of indenture to five years and guaranteed free passage home after expiry of the contract (Yen, 1985: 32-71, 102-111). Although the British and French governments refused to recognize the validity of these regulations at the time, they served as the basis for both the British recruitment of Chinese labour to work in the gold mines of the Transvaal in South Africa in 1904-1906 (Richardson, 1982; Li Anshan, 2000: 108-116, 121-123) and, especially, the British and French recruitment of Chinese workers for war-related work in France in 1916-1918, by which time it was accepted by British and French recruiters that, firstly, the text of the contract had to be published in the Chinese press (thus guaranteeing transparency) and had to specify duration, wage rates and the number of working hours; secondly, contract labourers had the right to receive free medical assistance and paid passage home after their contracts had expired; and, thirdly, Chinese inspectors were to be present at Chinese embarkation ports and in France to oversee the labourers' welfare.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, also, although during the nineteenth century Chinese indentured workers ('coolies') had been contemptuously referred to as *zhuzai* 猪仔 ('swine', 'pigs') in official Chinese documents, by the early twentieth century they were referred to as *huagong* 华工 (Chinese workers).

Two main Chinese constituencies were involved in the support for the recruitment of Chinese labour in World War One France. The first included government and official elites in Beijing, who responded enthusiastically to the initial French request for Chinese labour in 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 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 the war had begun. On two further occasions, in 1915 and 1917, the Chinese government in Beijing proposed sending troops to the Dardanelles and the Western Front respectively (La

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<sup>8</sup> For the recruitment of Chinese labour in both South Africa and France contract arrangements also provided for the implementation of an 'allotment' system, whereby a portion of the labourers' wages could be used for the support of families back home.

Fargue, 1937: 83-84; Chi, 1970: 20, 72, 129-130; Lo, 1976: 559-561). It is interesting to note, however, that although the British and United States' governments were not especially keen on the proposals (mainly for logistical and financial reasons, but also because of a general lack of confidence in the fighting potential of Chinese soldiers), the French government and military command decidedly *were* enthusiastic about the prospect; 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 1918) 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' (*Archives*, 6N 130). For Chinese government officials, China's potential military and labour contribution to the war were seen as important symbols of the country's commitment to world peace, hence earning the right to be *treated as an international equal*. The specifically *political* use that the Chinese government made at this time of Chinese labour overseas intriguingly anticipates the approach of the new communist government after 1949, when, for example, the People's Republic agreed in the late 1960s to finance and help build—with the aid of 15,000 Chinese workers and technicians—the TanZam (Tanzania-Zambia) Railroad. As far as Beijing was concerned, this dramatic gesture of international aid was meant to be a symbol of China's political commitment to the non-aligned world (and Afro-Asian solidarity in particular).<sup>9</sup> Just as in 1916-1918, therefore, the Chinese worker was to symbolise China's active commitment to interaction with the rest of the world.

More significantly, however, a second Chinese constituency comprised 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

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<sup>9</sup> Work began on the railroad in 1968 and was completed by the mid-1970s. At a banquet in Beijing for Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, in 1974, premier Zhou Enlai addressed the question as to why China had been so generous in its aid: 'China is a socialist country', he declared, 'and it is our bounden internationalist duty to sympathise with and support the revolutionary struggles of the people of other countries' (Bailey, M., 1975)

member of this group was Li Shizeng (1881-1973), the son of a Qing court official who had gone to France in 1902 as an ‘embassy student’. While there he enrolled at 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 activists and future prominent figures of the Guomindang in the 1920s — Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), Wu Zihui (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 and often contrasted the ‘worthy’ ideals of the French secular republic, which he identified as ‘freedom’, ‘creativity’ and ‘pacifism’, with the apparently more ‘brutal’ German ideals of ‘autocracy’, ‘utilitarianism’ and ‘militarism’. Li was especially attracted to the utopian thought of Charles Fourier (1772-1837) (Zeldin, 1969), which he described as the philosophy of a ‘mutual assistance society’ (*xieshe zhuyi* 协社主义) that replaced individual or group dominance and competition with harmony (*Lü’Ou zazhi*, 1916: 8; 1916: 9; 1917: 10; 1917: 12), and, in particular, the ideas of the French geographer and anarchist, Elisée Reclus (1830-1905).<sup>10</sup> Li translated Reclus’ six-volume work, *L’Homme et la Terre* (Man and Earth) into Chinese and many of Reclus’ ideas found an echo in Li’s own preoccupations and concerns. Reclus’ faith, for example, in the power of science and education to dissolve all social prejudice and his stress on gradual and evolutionary change in the creation of a new society inspired Li’s promotion of worker education and the ideal of work-study, which for Li would contribute to the elimination of all distinctions between intellectual and worker and the emergence of a radically new society. Li was equally influenced by Reclus’ vision of a society that comprised self-sufficient but mutually supporting associations that would ultimately lead to the ‘federative republic of the entire world’ (Fleming, 1979: 70-71).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The influence of Elisée Reclus on Li Shizeng is generally overlooked in earlier studies of Chinese anarchism such as Scalapino & Yu (1961) or Bernal (1976), and is mentioned only fleetingly in more recent studies (Dirlik, 1991: 25, 81, 94).

<sup>11</sup> Writing in 1960, Li was to note that the greatest ‘truth’ (*daoli* 道理) he had discovered while in France was the principle of ‘federation’ (*lianhe* 联合), a principle he thought France embodied in its championing of the European Economic Community on the one hand, and its desire to form an economic association with Francophone African states on the other (Li Shizeng, 1961: 105-108).



While in Paris Li built up a wide network of contacts with French politicians and intellectuals (including Paul Reclus, the nephew of Elisée Reclus), as well as helping to publish a Chinese-language anarchist journal *Xin shiji* 新世纪 (New Century). Between June 1907 and May 1910, 121 issues of the journal were published. In addition to attacking the backwardness and corruption of the Qing monarchy and condemning traditional institutions such as the family (even proposing that marriage be abolished) (Li Shizeng, 1909), the journal published articles on Western anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin (Li himself translated Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*). In contrast to the other Chinese anarchist group that emerged at this time in Tokyo, however, Li Shizeng and other members of the Francophile 'lobby' did *not* advocate a return to an idealised rural past uncorrupted by modern life but instead, like Reclus and Kropotkin, extolled the benefits of science and education. Li also opened a night school for the Chinese workers he had recruited from his native district of Gaoyang in Zhili (Hebei) after 1908 to work in the beancurd factory he had opened in Garenne-Colombes near Paris as part of his project to encourage European consumption of beancurd (Li Shizeng, 1912).<sup>12</sup> In Li's view, 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* 留法俭学会), which helped send nearly 100 Chinese students to France before the outbreak of World War One (Bailey, P., 1990). 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 as *ren* 仁 (translated as 'benevolence' or 'humaneness') (Cai Yuanpei, n.d.).

The French intellectuals and politicians with whom Li Shizeng and other members of the Francophile lobby 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

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<sup>12</sup> In this pamphlet Li maintained that beancurd could help alleviate diabetes and cure arthritis. Excerpts from the pamphlet were distributed two years earlier at the Universal Exhibition in Bruxelles.

assumptions of Western superiority and the imperative of the Western 'civilising mission' as their British, American or German counterparts. However, there were two strands in French thinking that set it apart. Firstly, it was assumed France's relations with China were fundamentally different from those of other Western countries because they were not underpinned by greed or blatant self-interest but rather by an altruistic and disinterested concern both to provide enlightenment and *to interact with other cultures*. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, France was portrayed as the one European country that could act as an *effective mediator* between China and the West, not only because France was more sensitive to, and appreciative of, Chinese culture but also because in many ways *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. This modern French approach towards China drew on a long tradition of cultural and intellectual relativism in France that dated from the sixteenth century; one extraordinary example of this was the thought of Regis-Evariste Huc (1814-1860), a Lazarist missionary in China whose book *L'Empire Chinois* (The Chinese Empire) *integrated* current French concerns with Chinese historical experience, with the result that cross-cultural comparisons in the book often flattered the Chinese, as much as the French, side. Thus, in referring to utopian socialist ideas then currently being discussed in France, Huc argued that such ideas had first been aired in China centuries before; furthermore, he wryly noted, whereas contemporary French socialists merely debated the merits of welfare policies for the poor, such policies (e.g. the fixing of prices, provision of state agricultural loans at low interest, and redistribution of the land tax burden in favour of the less well-off) had been implemented centuries before in China by the eleventh century statesman Wang Anshi (1021-1086) as part of his programme of economic reform (Bailey, P., 1992).

What gave urgency to the French insistence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 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 influence, French officials, politicians, intellectuals and scholars sought to emphasise 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. Thus as the president of the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association (*Association amicale franco-chinoise*), 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 (*Bulletin*, 1907: 17-18).

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 (*Bulletin*, 1911).

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 (or an American for that matter) diplomat or scholar of the time describing Sino-British (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 labour in 1916 as part of their larger cultural and social agenda. He confidently predicted that enormous benefits would accrue to China, as Chinese labourers in France would form the vanguard of an educated workforce contributing to the diffusion of industrial skills and the reform of society on their return. While in France, Li claimed, Chinese workers would become truly 'civilised', divesting themselves of their 'backward' and 'unseemly' habits and customs (Li Shizeng 1916). He also helped establish the Sino-French Education Association (*Huafa jiaoyuhui* 华法教育会) in 1916 with prominent French intellectuals such as Alphonse Aulard

as an umbrella organisation to promote both an expansion of Sino-French cultural relations and part-time education in France for the soon-to-be arriving Chinese workers. At the opening meeting of the Association (co-chaired by Aulard and Cai Yuanpei), the affinities between Chinese and French cultures were again highlighted; Aulard, for example, echoed Cai Yuanpei's earlier observation in 1912 by remarking that the humanist philosophy of Confucius *anticipated* the ideals of the French Revolution.<sup>13</sup> Li was still referring to the mutual admiration France and China had for each other's culture nearly a decade later. In a journal article published in 1925, Li declared that Voltaire's praise of China in the eighteenth century as a humanist paradise *par excellence* had been reciprocated by early twentieth century Chinese revolutionaries who had derived inspiration from the thought of Montesquieu and Rousseau (Li Shizeng, 1925). On the other hand, Louis Grillet, a military official in charge of a French government mission to China in 1918 seeking to enhance France's cultural influence in the country, confidently proclaimed:

The Chinese is a philosopher, poet and artist, and it is for this reason one can say that he is the Frenchman of the Far East (*Archives du Ministère*, E-28-1/6).

Significantly, however, *actual* French attitudes towards the Chinese workers during World War One, especially amongst officials and employers, undermined and belied the grandiose Gallic rhetoric of Sino-French cultural affinity so prevalent amongst politicians, diplomats, scholars and businessmen. Mention has already been made of the fact that Chinese workers recruited by the French government were rather unceremoniously lumped together with conscripted workers from France's colonies and placed under the administrative supervision of the Colonial Labour Service. In the eyes of French official authorities (as well as their British counterparts) Chinese workers were often referred to condescendingly as either 'childlike' or 'malleable'. Paradoxically, however, French authorities often exhibited an underlying fear of a 'loss of face' when dealing with Chinese workers, a concern that revealed more about French feelings of insecurity than anything else. Instructions from

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<sup>13</sup> The text of Aulard's speech (translated into Chinese) is in *Fufa* (1979-1981, 1: 202-203).

the Colonial Labour Service to potential French employers of Chinese workers in September 1916 perfectly illustrated this French obsession with 'face':

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 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, realise 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 (*Archives du Service*, 6N 149).

Since Western observations of the Chinese 'character' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often focused (and still do) on the significant role of 'face' in Chinese personal interactions, this French concern with 'face' ironically provided another example of 'cultural affinity' between the two countries (although not an example that French observers at the time would necessarily have thought of).

Furthermore, because 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 sometimes 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 St. Nazaire French employers continually criticised 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 (*Archives Nationales*, F14 1131). Dissatisfaction with the 'unruly' Chinese workers had reached such a fever pitch by 1918 that the Ministry of War was describing 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 (*Archives du Service*: 7N 2289).

The story of Chinese contract labour in World War One France ended in disappointment and recrimination. The Versailles Peace Treaty ultimately confirmed China's status as a minor player on the world stage, which still had to accept sovereignty-undermining foreign privileges in its own country. The hostility towards Chinese workers by French employers and local communities, moreover, exposed the hypocrisy of French rhetoric that boasted of a 'special relationship' between China and France (there is an interesting parallel here with the sorry plight of Chinese immigrants in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set against the context of an American discourse that also boasted of a 'special relationship' between the US and China based on the former's 'genuine' desire to 'help' and 'assist' the latter).

Furthermore, the ambitious plans of the Chinese Francophile lobby (of which Chinese contract labour in France would have constituted an element) to strengthen and expand Sino-French cultural relations never came to fruition. In a 1922 article, for example, Li Shizeng made an impassioned plea for the increase of French cultural and educational influence in China, insisting that in its breadth of scholarship (referring to the scientific accomplishments of Descartes, Lavoisier, Lamarck and Pasteur) and genius (referring to the thought of Rousseau, Voltaire, Fourier and Reclus as the pioneers of 'humanist' philosophy) France was the most appropriate model for China to emulate. Furthermore, just as Cai Yuanpei had done ten years earlier, Li compared the Confucian notions of *ren* 仁, *yi* 义 (righteousness), and *shu* 恕 (forbearance) with the French republican ideals of fraternity, liberty and equality (Li Shizeng, 1980, 1: 231-236). In particular, Li suggested, as did Cai Yuanpei in the same year, (Cai Yuanpei, 1980: 145-148) that China adopt the French university district system as a means to ensure the independence and autonomy of education. Under this, the country would be divided into education districts in which university authorities would administer primary and secondary schools, while a higher level educational council at the centre would curtail the power of the Education Minister. At the same time, Li

insisted that an expansion of French cultural influence would effectively prevent Anglo-Saxon culture from swamping China (if English achieved a monopoly, Li warned, China would be cut off from other countries). Such an assumption clearly motivated the efforts of French officials, educators and publishers themselves at this time to enhance French cultural influence in China. In 1918, for example, the *Comité fédéral des oeuvres sino-françaises* (Federal Committee of Sino-French Scholarly Endeavours) was founded in Beijing to campaign for the introduction of French-language instruction in all higher and secondary schools in China and promote the sale of cheap French books to compete with English publications (*La Politique de Pékin*, 1918, nos. 31, 32, 43, 44; Bouchot, 1921: 296-304). The secretary of the Committee in 1918 echoed the observation of French commentators earlier on in the century when he argued that whereas increasing Anglo-Saxon influence *threatened* China's cultural independence, French culture did not present such a threat because it was more humanistic and liberal, and less impelled by a desire to dominate others (*La Politique de Pékin*, 1918, no 45: 705-708).

The hopes of Li Shizeng and Cai Yuanpei were never fulfilled. A brief and ultimately abortive attempt was made in 1927 to implement the French educational model with the establishment of a University Council (大学院) as the first step in the creation of a university district system. Such an initiative, however, soon fell victim to an increasingly strident nationalism amongst Guomindang ideologues that insisted education had to be controlled and directed by the party through a highly centralised Education Ministry (Linden, 1968: 773-776). At a time also when the nationalist revolution of the 1920s was aimed as much against foreign imperialism (including that of France) as it was against indigenous militarists, talk of forming close cultural ties with an imperialist power seemed inappropriate, if not treasonous.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, however, two little-known events in the wake of World War One, provide further food for thought and suggest an intriguing alternative way of viewing Sino-Western relations during this period. In September 1919, while Chinese Foreign Minister Lu Chengxiang (1871-1949) was in France

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, it was to be the Chinese Communist party, which Li Shizeng and Cai Yuanpei so implacably opposed, that supported the forging of close educational and cultural links with a foreign country deemed worthy of emulation. That, however, was at a very different time (the 1950s) and involved quite a different country—the Soviet Union.

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 'civilised' commitment to education, Lu donated 50,000 francs on behalf of the Chinese government to help restore school facilities in war-shattered Verdun (*La Politique de Pékin*, 1919). One year later, in 1920, when Paul Painlevé visited China to confer on President Xu Shichang an honorary D.Litt.degree on behalf of the University of Paris, he was in turn offered 100,000 francs as a Chinese contribution to the newly created Higher Institute of Chinese Studies (*Institut des hautes études chinoises*) in Paris (with the clear aim of enhancing interest in Chinese culture in France). Even though China may indeed have been a 'semi-colony' during the first decades of the twentieth century, aspects of what I call the 'Sino-French connection' at this time indicate that interaction could proceed *in two directions*.

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