



**HAL**  
open science

# Civilising mission, transcultural flows and national subjectivity reading the historical experience of the Institut franco-chinois de Lyon (1921-1946) from a postcolonial perspective

Florent Villard

## ► To cite this version:

Florent Villard. Civilising mission, transcultural flows and national subjectivity reading the historical experience of the Institut franco-chinois de Lyon (1921-1946) from a postcolonial perspective. *Postcolonial Studies*, 2019, 22 (3), pp.384-398. 10.1080/13688790.2019.1643967 . hal-02278476

**HAL Id: hal-02278476**

**<https://univ-rennes.hal.science/hal-02278476>**

Submitted on 23 Mar 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Florent Villard**

**‘Civilising Mission, Transcultural Flows and National Subjectivity:**

**Reading the Historical Experience of the *Institut franco-chinois de Lyon* (1921–1946)**

**from a Postcolonial Perspective’**

feinanfei@gmail.com

Accepted manuscript

**Civilising Mission, Transcultural Flows and National Subjectivity: Reading the Historical Experience of the *Institut franco-chinois de Lyon* (1921–1946) from a Postcolonial Perspective**

**Florent Villard**

**Chinese and Transcultural Studies, ARENES-CNRS (Sciences-Po Rennes) and IETT (Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3)**

**Abstract**

Reading from a postcolonial perspective the historical experience of a French educational establishment for Chinese youth in the 1920s – the Institut franco-chinois de Lyon – this article highlights the coincidence between the inscription of China in global modernity and the spread of a Chinese national imaginary. It questions the discursive connection between the Western colonial project of a ‘civilising mission’, applied here to the scientific education of a new Chinese elite and, in this context, the shaping of a peculiar Chinese national subject. This article understands this institution as a utopian synecdoche of China, being dressed simultaneously in the clothes of Chinese-ness and those of (Western) modernity. In this training school, where students endeavoured to become intellectuals and scientists fashioned by the methods, values and epistemologies of the French academic realm, in this place where students became familiar with ‘modern’ leisure and sports like football, tennis, cinema, snooker and so on, between those walls where students had to learn how to behave as ‘civilised/westernised’ modern men and women, China as a cultural, ethnic and national identity referent was, paradoxically, constantly mentioned in the discourse of both the students and the initiators of this educational institution. The experience of this institute appears to be a relevant case study for shedding light on the intimate relationship between the feeling of nationality and the desire to become modern.

**Keywords:** China, France, colonial humanism, national imaginary, ethnic subject, geopolitics of knowledge, Orientalism, Chinese-ness, the Study-Work movement

The Institut franco-chinois de Lyon (Lyon Sino-French Institute, hereafter the Institute or IFCL) was a specialised establishment and a constituent part of the University of Lyon. Its purpose was to integrate and mentor Chinese students in the French university system. It was a project imagined, after the failure of the Chinese Study-Work movement in France, by important intellectual figures of the Chinese New Culture Movement, including Cai Yuanpei, Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui. Launched in 1912, the primary goal of the Chinese Study-Work movement had been to give some Chinese students the opportunity to have a Western/modern education by working in French factories while saving money for their studies. It was interrupted by the economic crisis in France following the First World War. Then, those intellectuals mentioned above, imagined something radically different. Their idea was to create an educational institution in France entirely dedicated to students previously selected in China. The project was to be undertaken in collaboration with both the French and Chinese authorities and was to be financed by the sizeable indemnity that France had received from China for the attack on its embassy in Beijing during the Boxer rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

The late-Qing popular uprising targeting Western, and Japanese, colonial powers in China was brutally crushed by the coalition of the Eight Nation Alliance in 1901. It is relevant to note here that the Boxer Protocol Indemnity imposed on China by Western colonial powers was also partly dedicated to the education of young Chinese intellectuals in the United States. This ‘Boxer Indemnity Scholarship’ was embedded in the same colonial project of civilising the Chinese as the one at the IFCL. Representing China as backward, inferior and trapped by its traditions, colonial powers would use the tool of education to shape modernised/Westernised Chinese scientific and intellectual elites consistent with their economic and political interests.<sup>2</sup>

Founded in 1921, the Institute hosted 473 students during its 25 years of existence. The students studied in almost all the academic disciplines: the social sciences, literature, law, philosophy, medicine, physical science, pharmacology and so on. At least a quarter of them returned to China with a doctorate. After their studies in France, many had outstanding careers as writers, artists, scientists, university professors and politicians, and thus made a considerable contribution to the development of modern Chinese society and its intellectual and epistemological landscape.<sup>3</sup> The Institute left behind an impressive collection of archives

and documents, which are now the property of the University of Lyon (Jean Moulin) and are kept in Lyon's municipal library.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of the IFCL has often been described as an authentic Sino–French cultural exchange by the actors within and the later commentators on the project.<sup>5</sup> While this history is certainly transcultural, bringing about exchanges of ideas, texts, languages, methodologies and customs, we would miss a crucial point by interpreting it within a utopian discourse of fruitful cultural dialogue between two autonomous and homogeneous cultures. This is so not only because this abstract idea of intercultural exchange is too often sustained by a de-socialised and de-historicised idea of culture but also because, when we carefully listen to the discourse of the actors on the French side, there is no hint of a cultural exchange between two groups, but rather a conscious project of cognitive and intellectual colonialism, or what was called in France the *mission civilisatrice* (civilising mission). Recognising that the Chinese initiators of this intellectual experience deeply interiorised a Eurocentrist and historicist narrating of progress and civilisation inherited from the European Enlightenment, philosophy confirmed the epistemological hegemony of the West over the Chinese intellectual world at that time.<sup>6</sup>

The present article suggests an interpretation of the transcultural experience of this Chinese school in France as a set of practices, discourses and institutions – what Foucault termed a *dispositif* or apparatus – contributing to the fabrication of subjectivities, in this case the construction of ‘Chinese modern subjects’.<sup>7</sup> While this notion of apparatus helps to point out the structural power relations that contributed to moulding the cultural identity of these students, it is also pivotal to take into account the capacity of empowerment of the subjects themselves in this specific context. This article tries to shed light on how the students of the Institute have been identified, and have identified themselves, simultaneously as ‘Chinese’ and ‘modern’.

The main goal of this school was to train a future Chinese scientific elite that would dedicate itself to the modernisation of China. However, reading the testimonies and archives about this experience allows us to highlight another function of this institution of knowledge – to contribute to the emergence, or reinforcement, of a sentiment of nationality among the students. There is nothing new in mentioning that cultural nationalism praising particularism

is often stronger within diaspora and exiled communities than in the native country. In Lyon, the distance from the homeland, the remoteness of the students from, and alterity of, the French cultural environment probably helped to intensify the construction of a national consciousness. Moreover, not only local French newspapers but also academics and politicians connected with the Institute constantly asserted the putative Chinese-ness of the students. Finally, entrusted with the task of leading the modernisation of China, the students were also convinced and conscious Chinese patriots.

### **A Western School of Modernity**

Looking at the discourse of the intellectuals and professors, both French and Chinese, who played a leading role in this educational proposal, it is obvious that this institution had been imagined as a school of modernity for Chinese youth. Modernity is here the name for the epistemologically, culturally and ideologically dominant norms and values in the broader context of French/Western society during the 1920s. First professor of Chinese at Lyon University, and one of the founding fathers of the Institute, Maurice Courant, was explicit when describing the main goal of the IFCL:

The Lyon Sino-French institute of St Irénée Castle is dedicated to training an elite of technicians and academics capable of leading the development of China – in the industrial, commercial and artistic fields as well as in the scientific and pedagogic ones – in the direction required by the present situation.

The aim was to educate Chinese youth in all the fields of modern life to guide the future development of China ‘in the direction required by present situation’. This last phrase could be translated as follows: ‘in the direction wished by the West’. Courant adds that the students were coming to Lyon to ‘supplement their traditional culture and search in the West for the technical dimension of modern life’.<sup>8</sup> Since, in the collective imaginary of this period, the ‘modern’ was congruent with the ‘Western’, the European or the French, the real concrete goal of the Institute was to acculturate the students: learning French academic and scientific culture, seizing ‘moral ideas’ and ‘republican values’, adopting the everyday life practices of the so-called modern/French civilisation (leisure, sports, hygienic habits and the like). The

quotation below from an article entitled ‘Lyon, Carrefour des races: Les Chinois de Saint-Irénée’ (Lyon, Crossroad of the Races: The Chinese of Saint Irene) in *L’Est Républicain* of 1 October 1930 unveiled the modernity of students’ material life, which is confirmed by the archives of the Institute, especially in photos of the students and their living conditions:

At St Irénée castle, the students’ comfortable lives are like those at Oxford or Harvard College. Electricity, running water, bathrooms, tennis, basketball and European cuisine, contribute to create the necessary pleasure that should go along with studying. Nice rooms with two beds, decorated with the careful attention which characterises Oriental people, are occupied by two students from the same classroom and having common affinities.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the sociocultural background of the students, it is obvious that they were confronted with new practices, a new material everyday life, and new imaginaries during their sojourn in France. However, one of our tasks here is to highlight the ideological function of the ‘modern’ substantive when it comes to being a property of the West and a legitimating discourse of European imperialism. Citing Oxford and Harvard as models of advanced colleges, this discourse broadens the scope of modernity, subsuming the colonial Western world as a whole. The discursive practices of the Institute and its residents are deeply embedded in this Orientalist binary epistemology that locates academic, material, moral and political modernity in France while Others (Chinese, Oriental) are seen as situated in a backward, pre-modern and particular position.<sup>10</sup>

In this paradigm, manifest or latent discourse stressing cultural difference and essential identity is always associated with the historicist discourse of modernity: ‘Nice rooms with two beds, decorated with the careful attention which characterises Oriental people, are occupied by two students from the same classroom and having common affinities’. The mention of the ‘Oriental’ is discreet while meaningful, thoroughness (*la minutie*) being a specific characteristic of the Chinese/Oriental subject. In the following pages, I will try to demonstrate that, in this manufacture of modern subjectivities, the students were constantly hailed as ‘Chinese’ subjects being sent back to an ethnicity solidified by racialism, nationalism and culturalism.

While the modern/Western apparatus will have to, as Maurice Courant said, ‘permeate their being’ (*faire partie de leur être même*) and mould new subjects, however, the students’ primordial identity hasn’t disappeared. The discourse of ‘becoming modern and staying Chinese’ is perfectly illustrated by the paragraph below, from the same 1 October 1930 *L’Est Républicain* article, about a student painting exhibition in that year: ‘The artists praised newness and their works are modern with a “something” [*je ne sais quoi*] that suggests, in spite of all, an atavistic respect for past traditions’. The ‘something’ (*je ne sais quoi*) represents what Rey Chow has called the ‘ethnic supplement’ sticking to the skin of those apparently unable to escape their putative Chinese-ness.<sup>11</sup>

As Nora Wang puts it in her work on Chinese student emigration in France, the French government did not have any specific ‘Chinese policy’ during the 1920s. However, some French politicians, intellectuals, industrialists and business people were interested in China for both commercial and ideological reasons. One of the main objectives on the French side in this educational partnership with China was to train Chinese executives who would be familiar with French industry and technology and become potential buyers of French products.<sup>12</sup> The goal of the Institute was not purely philanthropic and selfless; it was articulated with the interests of French economic and political expansion. Courant insisted on the fact that those ‘friendships’ created by the Institute would help ‘us’ to ‘spread French ideas and French goods’: ‘Today, someone is asking for lightning: let’s make sure that the new firebox lit on the banks of the Pacific will soon bring us back light and warmth’.<sup>13</sup> This discourse, which articulates the republican universalism of the civilising mission and a concern with the prosperity and strength of the nation is typical of the ‘French imperial nation-state’ doctrine that has affirmed a coherent and systematic imperialist policy since the Third Republic.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the views of Jules Harmand, a diplomat and empire administrator in Indochina, are a perfect theorisation of this colonial policy based on ‘association’, ‘mutual help’ and ‘development’. As Harmand put it, the ‘conqueror’ had to defend its economic and political interests but without forgetting its moral responsibility over the ‘conquered’.<sup>15</sup> In this perspective, the colonised were not only a pure object but also a subject capable of transforming themselves to become modern human beings through education by the coloniser. While China in the 1920s was not a French colony, unlike Indochina, this discourse of ‘colonial humanism’ is nevertheless ubiquitous in the archives of

the IFCL.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned in the journal of the Institute in 1928, the school was ‘the peaceful citadel where we invent the new men of China’.<sup>17</sup>

In the perspective of Maurice Courant and other French initiators of the Institute, the journey of the Chinese students from China to France was not only a geographical or cultural displacement; it also had a temporal dimension: from past to present, from the ‘traditional world’ to the ‘modern world’. This Eurocentrist colonial discourse was intimately linked to a well-known nineteenth-century Hegelian representation of history as linear, progressive and universal. As Walter Mignolo stipulates in his *Local Histories/Global Designs*, if ‘Space was dominant in the imaginary of the previous stage of colonial expansion (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), from the nineteenth century, Time reordered universal history and became the “essence” of modernity’. The anthropologist adds that the linear time of universal history became, furthermore, entrenched within the very idea of the civilising mission: ‘to be civilized was to be modern, and to be modern meant to be in the present’.<sup>18</sup>

While there were divergent perspectives and financial tensions between the French and Chinese sides involved in the Institute, the leading Chinese figures of the Study-Work movement in France did not contest this Eurocentric historicism. The French colonial humanism promoting republicanism, scientism and universal values was perfectly consistent with the May Fourth cultural and intellectual imaginaries, at least with the progressivist and Occidentalists intellectuals involved in the Study-Work program.<sup>19</sup> Let us recall here the equivalence made between modernity, Europe and France by the leading figure of the May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu, in his famous 1915 article, ‘France and Modern Civilization’: ‘Modern civilization is exclusively European or Western civilization. It is European civilization that has been transplanted to America and is all the rage in Asia. All European people have made contributions to the European civilization, but its leaders have been the French’.<sup>20</sup>

In the same vein, the foreword of the ‘Rules of the Association of Frugal Studies in France’, established by Li Shizeng and Cai Yuanpei in Beijing in 1912, assumed clearly this European discourse of modernity: ‘Studying in the West is a necessity to reform society, respect education and introduce world civilisation to the country’.<sup>21</sup> In this global imaginary, the ‘West’ isn’t a civilisation or a culture among others; this place is situated at the centre of the

game, establishing the norms and the hegemonic values of modernity: 'It is an ambiguous and ubiquitous presence of a certain global domination whose subject can hardly be identifiable. What is at issue here is "the West" insofar as peoples in the so-called non-West have to refer to and rely on it so as to construct their own cultural and historical identity'.<sup>22</sup> As Naoki Sakai puts it, 'the West' is a category that designates a dominant, hegemonic geopolitical but also epistemological position in a globalised modernity. In this perspective, the Others, non-Westerners, can't but refer to this centre to define themselves from the position of a negative rhetoric. While this theoretical articulation of 'the West and the rest' remains questionable and should be adjusted for diverse socio-historical contexts, it is enlightening when interpreting the experience of IFCL students. The simultaneity of the inscription of China in a (global) modernity – defined by Rebecca Karl as 'a global material and representational structure, whose tendential unities are underpinned by the expansion of capitalism in its imperialist forms' – and the emergence of a discourse of national identity find an interesting illustration within the micro-society of the IFCL.<sup>23</sup> If the Institute was conceived as a school of modernity, I also hypothesise that it functioned as a device that contributed to shaping a 'Chinese subject', hardening the feeling of Chinese-ness among the students, and homogenising practices and discourses considered Chinese.

### **Patriots, Native Guides and Ethnic Subjects**

This discursive link between the meta-narrative of Eurocentrist modernity and the inscription of the students in a dedicated ethnic identity is also confirmed by a close reading of the scientific production of the Institute's residents. A previous work on the paratexts of the students' PhD dissertations helps to foreground an interesting articulation between national subjectivity, Orientalist discourse and the colonial distribution of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Reading these texts from the theoretical and historical perspective of the colonial geopolitics of knowledge, I have tried to shed light on the ambivalences of the geo-historical position of these young Chinese scholars who were immersed in the 'Western' culture of scholarship while basing their research on China.

The structural asymmetry in the distribution of modern scientific knowledge between the dominant (colonial) cultures of scholarship in Europe – locus of academic production – and 'the rest of the world' – that is to say, colonised, semi-colonised or marginalised countries

reduced to an object of study – has been well documented and studied: ‘The map of scholarly production between 1850 and 1945 traced by Wallerstein had scholarship located in Europe and the rest of the World was either the scene of interesting human achievements to study and understand, but frozen in time and antimodern, or of cultures where the civilizing mission had precisely the mission to civilize’.<sup>25</sup> In the context of Sinological studies, the French philosopher Anne Cheng has underscored what she calls a paradox: after having been deeply appreciated in France during the Enlightenment century, ‘Chinese thought’ was excluded from the field of philosophy with the increasing Sinophobia of the nineteenth century. The paradox was that while China was disappearing as a ‘knowing subject’ – as a producer of ideas and knowledge – China as an object of study, that is to say Sinology, or the Science of China, emerged as an official discipline in the French academic world.<sup>26</sup>

The focus here is on the epistemological positions of the Institute’s students seeing themselves as in the position of universal and objective ‘knowing subjects’ and, at the same time, defining themselves, and being reduced to, Chinese ethnic subjects, intimately linked with China, their object of study. Absent, veiled or marginalised in some theses, Chinese-ness was claimed or valorised in some other works as an ethnic, cultural or political identity. Being patriots, ‘native guides’ or ‘authentic’ representatives of a traditional culture, the students often remained in the local, particular position of the Oriental facing the universal West. Among the 136 listed theses, 41 explicitly deal with a subject related to China. Even if, at first glance, it might seem obvious that ‘Chinese’ students should work on Chinese topics, I wish to question this commonsense position, especially the overdetermined Chinese-ness of the students. Even if the large percentage of China-centered topics is the result of the Institute’s policies and PhD directors, this unquestioned certainty of ontological Chinese ethnicity is also inscribed in the words of the students themselves.

Reading closely the thesis of Tcheng Tse-sio entitled ‘*Les relations de Lyon avec la Chine: Etude d’histoire et de géographie économiques*’ (Relations between China and Lyon: a study of history and economic geography), it becomes clear that the author is in fact partly narrating his own story in this dissertation. He mentions ‘those students selected by Chinese universities’ to attend the IFCL and later ‘holding important intellectual and economic positions when returning in China’.<sup>27</sup> However, maintaining an objective and neutral position, Tcheng never explicitly includes himself as a subject of his work.

In the same vein, Woo Tsou-sing, one of the few women PhD students of the Institute, wrote her thesis on the well-known Han Dynasty woman historian Ban Zhao, composer of the famous 'lessons for women'. Dealing with modern Chinese women's conditions in the last part of her dissertation, she explicitly mentions her own situation: 'Many young girls and women are going to Europe and the States to study; they struggle with all their strength to be as progressive as men, to be free and to have the same rights as men...' Woo finishes her thesis with the inclusive 'we' of the Chinese woman: 'We must not give up our fight for a more active, freer, and more comprehensive life'.<sup>28</sup>

Integrated within the French academy, Tcheng and Woo put themselves in the position of the objective, neutral 'knowing subject'. But, at the same time, Tcheng as a Chinese student studying abroad, and Wu as a Chinese woman student fighting for women's emancipation, merge with their own object of study, echoing Rey Chow's statement that 'minorities are allowed the right to speak only on the implicit expectation that they will speak in the documentary mode, "reflecting" the group from which they come'.<sup>29</sup> In most of the dissertations involving China, while being within a culture of scholarship claiming a universal, objective and transcendental knowing subject, the students can't but speak from the inside of an ethnic/national Chinese community. They are often put in the position of 'native guides of the country' – as coined by the student Yu Tchen-p'ong in the introduction to his thesis 'The Mortgage in Chinese Common Law' – as having the function of driving information and data from the local field to the European academic field.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Yuan Chaucer, working on the intellectual history of the Warring States period, writes from the enunciative position of the 'contemporary Chinese': 'Let's mention briefly our own attitude, as contemporary Chinese, before the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius'.<sup>31</sup> The linguistic subject is never the 'we' of the putative neutral and objective scientific subject. The merging with their object of study goes even further in the liminal assertion of Hsu Sung-Nien's dissertation on the great Tang dynasty poet Li Bai:

In France, sinologists, essayists, novelists and journalists have studied Li Bai's poetry and talked about him, but, for various reasons, his real personality remains unknown. Some writers would have avoided making mistakes about him if they had had a better knowledge of the Chinese literary writing and of Chinese private life. [...] How can

they, for example, feel a poem written in our language without having experienced for some years in our own privacy [...] Those who have an imperfect knowledge of Chinese writing, those who having probably lived apart from the Chinese, will inevitably spoil the poet's work.<sup>32</sup>

Here the author is claiming his proximity and intimacy with his object of study, the poet Li Bai. He underscores a native knowledge, internal, intuitive, non-open to 'sinologists, essayists, novelists and journalists' and 'people who stand apart from the Chinese'. The distinction made between 'us and them' would not have been possible without postulating the permanence of an 'us': Hsu Sung-nien presupposes a continuity between the student and the author of the studied texts, based here on a transhistorical and essentialised cultural identity revealed in the expression 'Chinese private life'. This knowledge of the native is also emphasised by Hoang Tsen-yue in his thesis, a comparative study of Laozi, Kongzi and Mozi.<sup>33</sup> In the preface to this dissertation, the French philosopher Edmond Goblot – attached to the IFCL and PhD director of some students – develops a classical Orientalist opposition between France and Europe as the location of modern science and the Others – here China – as fixed traditional cultures lacking scientific knowledge. In a paternalist stance, Goblot found very moving the attachment of the student to his national philosophy and his wish to introduce it in Europe. The French professor developed an argument about the added value for the academic institution in France of having a 'Chinese' studying and introducing Chinese philosophy in Europe:

You told me that my hypothesis conforms to Lao Tseu's thinking; it's difficult for me to believe it. It's almost impossible for a European from the twentieth century, who would use guesses, to catch up an extreme-oriental philosopher from fifth or sixth century B.C. But you, Chinese, should be able to confirm, condemn or rectify this hypothesis by the study of the texts and, if necessary, through philological study.<sup>34</sup>

Goblot adds that, in this dissertation, he was looking for something attainable only through the mentality and characters of the Chinese 'race' ('Chinese body and soul'), something he

would not be able to find in the work of a Sinologist: 'You, as Chinese body and soul, can bring something unique to our knowledge of China'. With Goblot's words 'you, Chinese', we are confronted with a textbook case of the Althusserian view of ideology as interpellation: through the hailing of ideology, individuals are constantly created as subjects. However, if the subject recognises himself as a Chinese subject when being hailed, that is because in a specific social-historical situation he has already been identified, and identifies himself, as a Chinese subject and not someone else.<sup>35</sup> What Goblot and others were saying is that through the very specific ethnic Chinese reading of the texts, 'we', Europeans, have a chance to discover the mystery of the Chinese soul. Here, the added value of the students is precisely their supposed authentic ethnicity and nativist position. While having noted the necessity for the students to learn Western scientific methods, Professor Courant insisted on their contribution to the knowledge of China with what he called their 'native qualities'. As he put it: 'Discovering Chinese civilisation with the work of the Chinese, this is the most natural way, isn't it ?'<sup>36</sup>

This localised, contingent, embedded position of the students is also very well expressed in affirmations of national consciousness. Behind the 'native guide' there is often a fervent patriot. Since national salvation was a crucial argument in the choice of dissertation topic, many theses take an instrumental or applied approach, dealing as they did with key practical contemporary Chinese topics. As Tchang Lam puts it in his work on public instruction in China, he must conduct research to find 'appropriate cures' for all the 'administrative failures' of China's education system.<sup>37</sup> In the same vein, James Woo, among many others, mentions that 'for a Chinese' his research has an obvious 'practical dimension'.<sup>38</sup> Li Tsi Gziou writes explicitly in his applied research on the 'Passive Defence of Civil Populations against the Aero-Chemical War in China' following Japan's aerial bombardment of Shanghai in 1933:

We must foresee a great war between the two great yellow people...  
The old Occident being the cradle of modern culture, which has been so successful to our immoral and unscrupulous neighbours, we elaborated this modest work on defence measures against the aero-chemical risk inspired by the great European masters on the eve of the awakening of China.<sup>39</sup>

These patriotic interventions articulate the idea, which dates back to the Self-Strengthening Movement of the mid-nineteenth century, of using European science and knowledge as a way of resolving China's socio-political difficulties. In many cases, the ambiguity between the requirements of academic knowledge – being a neutral knowing subject – and students' subjective, embedded political position as 'Chinese' is directly stated in some texts. Henri T.T. Tchai, who undertook research on the sensitive question of the unequal treaty system, while emphasising the necessity of objectivity and impartiality recognises the difficulty of the task for him as a Chinese patriot:

We want to let people know how difficult it has been during this research to silence the inner voice of patriotism which keeps protesting indignantly against these unjust treaties imposed on our miserable country.<sup>40</sup>

Addressing his readers, Tchai reveals how deeply the feeling of nationality has been interiorised by the students and how difficult it has been to constrain the so-called 'inner voice of patriotism.'

### **Becoming 'Chinese' in Lyon: Discourse and Practices**

Nationalist ideology in China, embodying the will to invent a political nation-state, goes back to the eve of the twentieth century as a consequence of, and an answer to, Western imperialism. The spread of ethno-racial theories helped intellectuals and politicians to imagine an organic and natural Chinese identity and to popularise a sentiment of nationality among educated urban Chinese citizens. In 1919, contesting the decisions of the Treaty of Versailles, a modern patriotism suddenly erupted in metropolitan China in the demonstrations of the May Fourth movement. Nevertheless, at that time, nationalism and the spreading ethnic/racial categories of identity did not signify that China had already been constituted as, or represented a homogenous cultural and linguistic national space. In the period of the foundation of the Institute, the historical reality was of a multiplicity of languages and cultural practices among the Chinese population. Before joining the Institute, the students followed a common training pathway in specific preparatory schools located in large cities

like Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu, but the geographical origins, the social backgrounds, the languages and the cultural practices of the students were extremely diverse. In his ‘scattered memories of Lyon’, the former student Cui Zaiyang insisted on this cultural heterogeneity within the student community: ‘We were coming from different provinces, speaking different languages and having different customs’.<sup>41</sup>

Our last point focuses on the everyday practices of the students, and more precisely the way in which those practices were part of a discourse of national culture. In Benedict Anderson’s famous thesis on the national, community was ‘imagined’ also because ‘even the smallest nation will never know their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them...’<sup>42</sup> But to the contrary here, limited to within the walls of the St Irénée castle, the IFCL had a ‘real’ and concrete community of human dimension. In this compressed time/space one could witness, at a molecular scale, practices, institutional rituals and discourses that helped to reinforce the awareness of belonging to a unique community. Reading the IFCL archives enables us to confirm the deployment of an imaginary of national culture. The learning of Mandarin, the promotion of ‘Chinese’ art and culture through exhibitions, the development of a Sinological library – including an important collection of literary works from the imperial epoch – and the annual celebration of the national day contributed to cultivating, or initiating, a shared cultural identity among the students. While the students held different political positions, the IFCL leaders emphasised ideological neutrality and subsumed those different tendencies under the meta-political nationalist discourse of modernisation, or saving the motherland with science. Finally, while cultural and linguistic practices appear to have been diverse, due to the geographical origins of the students, testimonies reveal a homogenisation of practices and discourses among them. In this regard, Zheng Yanfen’s narration of his first days at the Institute in 1926 is particularly relevant:

It could seem funny, but I learned the national language in France with my comrade of the Institute. I remember that before leaving for France, while I was in Shanghai for my passport, I always shopped in a store on Sichuan Street because the shopkeeper spoke Cantonese. Since I didn’t speak the national language, it was the only way for me to communicate without constraints. . . .After arriving in Lyon, students of the Institute, especially those from Sun-yat-sen University, set up a welcoming ceremony for us. I had to say a few

words. While I was intimidated, I forced myself to say some words in the national language, but, after a few sentences I had no other solution than speaking in Cantonese and letting a comrade do the translation. This event make me realise something of utmost importance: as long as I didn't speak the national language, I wouldn't be able to assume my duties. From that time on, I've been determined to learn it.<sup>43</sup>

This text reminds us that the difference between the vernacular local idiom and the national language was, and still is in many parts of China and Taiwan, a historical reality. In the 1920s in China, Zheng Yanfen, who needed a translator to communicate with his compatriots, experienced linguistic discontinuity, and cultural difference, within the so-called national community. This linguistic heterogeneity and the role played by IFCL in the process of homogenisation is also at stake in the memories of Danielle Li, daughter of Li Shuhua, a student in the Institute between 1923 and 1926: 'Arriving in Lyon, my father only spoke Hakka; he learned official Chinese with his Hunanese comrade in the Institute'. Thanks to his first Chinese teacher, Li Shuhua spoke Mandarin with a Hunanese accent, reminding us of the partial and relative dimension of this cultural and linguistic homogenisation.<sup>44</sup>

While contesting the mythical discourse of an organic Chinese cultural community by pointing out differences between students, the testimonies simultaneously state an apparent erasure of those differences in the IFCL context. The place worked as a laboratory where everyday life practices tended to be standardised and unified. However, if Li Shuhua, Zheng Yanfen and many others were, in a sense, becoming Chinese in Lyon, it was not only because their new customs would be objectively the same as those of the other students (they were using a common idiom); it was also because they had made theirs a discourse of national culture, which allowed them to identify those practices as being part of a specific national culture. Preceding the narration of his difficulties in communication with his comrades, the very first lines of Zheng Yanfen's testimony attest to this representation of a nationalised everyday life: 'At the Institute, there are only Chinese students, we're all living together, everybody speaks a Chinese language, eats Chinese food, and lives the Chinese way of life'.<sup>45</sup> Feminist writer Su Xuelin is even more explicit in her autobiography: 'When we arrived in France, this civilised and progressive country, we were immersed into a Chinese sea.

Speaking Chinese, hearing Chinese, eating Chinese; our rooms looked Chinese; all everyday life customs were becoming Chinese, as if we were still living in China'.<sup>46</sup>

Zheng and Su subsume a set of practices, people, things, languages and the like within a unique national category: 'Chinese'. However, the issue here is not the real or putative origin of those phenomena. A historical inquiry to reveal the authentic Chinese-ness of those practices would be meaningless. The link made between ethnicity or nationality and a specific cultural practice is, for the most part, contingent and arbitrary. We always witness different cultural practices *within* an ethnic/national population and, at the same time, common cultural practices that overcome ethnic/national boundaries. As shown by the archives, the students had numerous other common everyday life practices that were not included within the imaginary of Chinese-ness: for instance, playing tennis or pool, going to the movies or wearing suits and so on. Unlike eating fried noodles and speaking Mandarin, those customs hadn't been caught up in the discourse of national culture. When Su Xuelin uses the expression *zhongshihua*, or 'Sinicisation,' she is not only describing a homogenisation of social practices in the everyday life of the Institute; she is also revealing that a set of common *chosen* practices are being caught up within a discourse that emphasises national culture. The very special context of the Institute enables us to highlight discourses and practices of national recognition and identification.

To conclude, we must understand this experience in a broader historical context. From the end of the nineteenth century on, Chinese nationalist discourse appeared simultaneously with a new global consciousness.<sup>47</sup> Chinese nationalism must not be only read as an oppositional and anti-colonial ideology targeting Western imperialism. National consciousness constitutes in itself a fundamental property of the modern subject shaped in the context of global modernity, led by Western powers. As I tried to show at the micro-level of this educational experience, the nation-state building project led by May Fourth intellectuals was totally harmonious with the French colonial discourse of modernisation – the 'civilising mission' – addressed to Chinese students at the IFCL.<sup>48</sup>

In the 1920s context, Chinese nationalism was unable to escape the epistemological and historiographical framework imposed by Western colonial hegemony. However, the argument can be deepened, with Gregory Lee, who demonstrates without ambiguity that 'China' as a concept and an imagined cultural/national community was initially created by and in the

West.<sup>49</sup> From the Late Qing period on, 'Chinese' intellectuals, writers and politicians interiorised this imagined 'China' in order to invent a modern nation-state. The IFCL epitomises the subjective effect of this co-production among those young becoming-Chinese scholars. Theorising the complicity between Eurocentric universalism and the recognition of particularity, Sakai Naoki has pointed out that the cultural and national identities of the peripheries constructed themselves within their confrontation with the West as the normative figure of modernity: 'It is precisely the demand to "become like a Westerner!" or to "acquire the standards of the West", that makes one aware of those historical and cultural traces that have accumulated within the body that make it impossible, try as one might, to comply with the demand'.<sup>50</sup>

This coincidence between the inscription of China in global modernity and the spread of a national imaginary is perfectly illustrated in the experience of the IFCL, a utopian synecdoche of China being dressed simultaneously in the clothes of Chinese-ness and in those of modernity. In this institution, where students endeavoured to become intellectuals and scientists fashioned by the methods, values and epistemologies of the French academic realm, in this place where students become familiar with 'modern' leisure and sports like football, tennis, cinema and snooker, between those walls where students had to learn how to behave as 'civilised/Westernised' modern men and women, China as a cultural, ethnic and national identity referent was paradoxically constantly mentioned in the discourse of both the students and the initiators of this educational institution. The experience of the IFCL appears to be a relevant case study for shedding light on the intimate relationship between the feeling of nationality and the desire to become modern.

1 Hongling Liang, 'La colonialité intellectuelle dans l'histoire de la Chine moderne: de la "Bourse scolaire de l'indemnité des Boxers" à l'Institut franco-chinois de Lyon' [Coloniality in the History of Modern China: From the 'Scholarly Fund of the Boxer Indemnity' to the Franco-Chinese Institute of Lyon], *Transtext(e)s-Transcultures: Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 9, 2014, <https://transtexts.revues.org/515>, accessed 4 July 2017.

2 See also on this topic James L. Hevia, 'Leaving a Brand on China: Missionary Discourse in the Way of the Boxer Movement', in Tani E. Barlow (ed.), *Formation of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 113–141.

3 Among the many well-known students of the Institute, we can mention Pan Yuliang, the female pioneer of Western-style painting, who astounded the early twentieth-century Chinese audience with her controversial nudes; Zheng Dazhang, a PhD student of Marie Curie and the initiator of radium research in Mainland China; Zhang Xi, a pioneer of oceanography studies in mainland China; Su Xuelin, one of the first female authors of modern Chinese literature, a former professor at Chenggong University in Tainan; Dai Wangshu, a famous poet and the cultural pioneer of modernism in mainland China; Yang Kun, one of the founding fathers of ethnological studies in China; and Chen Shiwen, perhaps less well-known, a painter, calligrapher, and former Head of the Department of Arts of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

4 The archives include the following documents: 1) selected students' files, including letters between the students and the administration of the Institute, registration forms, and diplomas; 2) PhD dissertations and theses in all disciplines: law, science, literature, history, medicine, pharmacology and ethnology; 3) administrative records of the Institute regarding the students' lives and studies; 4) the journal of the Institute (*Annales de l'Institut franco chinois*); 5) the last part of the archives comprises a huge quantity of library materials representing the former library of the Institute. The Institute's library kept a very important collection, comprising approximately 30,000 thousand books and more than 400 periodicals. See Valentina De Monte, 'Les collections de l'ancien IFCL: quels services pour quels usagers? Un état des lieux pour de nouvelles perspectives' [The Collections of the Former IFCL: What Services for What Users? A Study of the Places for New Perspectives], *Transtext(e)s-Transcultures: Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, Volume 9, 2014 URL: <https://transtexts.revues.org/515>, accessed 9 May 2017.

5 Sanjing Chen, 'Une tentative réussie de collaboration franco-chinoise en matière d'éducation : l'Institut franco-chinois de Lyon' [A Tentative Review of Franco-Chinese Collaboration on the Matter of Education], in *Ouvrages en langue chinoise de l'Institut franco-chinois de Lyon 1921–1946* [Works in the Chinese Language of the Franco-Chinese Institute of Lyon, 1921–1946], in Jean-Louis Bouilly (ed.), Lyon, Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, 1995, pp. XXV ; Lucien Bianco, 'Article Li Shizeng', in *Dictionnaire du mouvement ouvrier international (5), La Chine*. [Dictionary of the International Workers Movement, 5, China], Jean Maitron (ed.), Paris: Editions ouvrières, 1985, pp. 343–346.

6 Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure and the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 1–73.

7 Foucault defined the 'dispositif' as follows: 'What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements', Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', in *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, p. 194.

8 Maurice Courant, 'L'Association Universitaire Franco-Chinoise: origine, buts et résultats' [The Sino-French University Association: origin, aims, achievements], *Annales franco-chinoises*, 1, 1927, p. 2–6.

9 Author unknown, 'Lyon, Carrefour des races: Les Chinois de Saint-Irénée' [Lyon, Crossroads of Races: the Chinese of Saint Irénée], *L'Est Républicain*, 1 October 1930.

- 10 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 2003 (1978); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- 11 Rey Chow (ed.), *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 2.
- 12 Nora Wang, *Emigration et politique: Les Etudiants-ouvriers chinois en France (1919–1925)* [Emigration and Politics: The Chinese Student Workers in France (1919–1925)], Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2002, p. 51.
- 13 Maurice Courant, ‘Le futur institut franco-chinois de Lyon: suite et fin’ [The Future Sino-French Institute of Lyon: Final Instalment], *Bulletin des soies et des soieries*, 1921, pp. 4–5.
- 14 Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 26. Concerning the genealogy of the notion of ‘civilizing mission’, we may also mention the classical work of Alice Conklin, *Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. However, Wilder astutely points out that Conklin’s thesis, which highlights the gap between republican values and colonial practices, tends to save a pure ‘French national-republican ideal while denouncing its colonial violation’ as a contingent and external anomaly. See Wilder, pp.6–7.
- 15 Jules Harmand, *Domination et colonisation* [Domination and Colonisation], Paris: Flammarion, 1910, p. 159.
- 16 Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, p. 50.
- 17 Author unknown, ‘Nouvelles de l’Institut’ [News of the Institute], *Annales franco-chinoises*, 7, 1928, p. 25.
- 18 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 283.
- 19 Shih, *The Lure and the Modern*, p. 53.
- 20 Duxiu Chen, ‘Falaxiren yu jinshi wenming’ [French People and Modern Civilisation] (1915), in *Wusi qianhou dongxi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenxian* [Selected Essays in the Debate on Eastern and Western Cultures during the May Fourth Period], Song Chen (ed.), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989, p. 36; Stephen C. Angle and Marina Svensson (eds), *The Chinese Human Rights Reader: Documents and Commentary 1900–2000*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001.
- 21 Shizeng Li and Yuanpei Cai, ‘Liufa jianxue jianzhang’ [Rules of the Association of Frugal Studies in France], in ‘Lü’ou jiaoyu yundong’ [The Educational Movement in Europe], Tours: Lü’ou zazhishe, 1916, p. 50.
- 22 Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On ‘Japan’ and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 61.
- 23 Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 4.
- 24 Florent Villard, ‘Lieu d’énonciation, différence culturelle et conscience nationale: La Chine comme objet d’étude dans les thèses des étudiants de l’Institut franco-chinois de Lyon (1921–1946)’ [Locus of Enunciation, Cultural Differences, and National Consciousness: China as an Object of Study in Students’ Theses of the Lyon Sino-French Institute], in *Langues, littératures et cultures franco-chinoises du XXIe siècle*, Taipei: Tamkang University Press, pp. 29–51.
- 25 Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, p. 304.
- 26 Anne Cheng, ‘Les tribulations de la , “philosophie chinoise” en Chine’ [The Tribulations of ‘Chinese Philosophy’ in China], in *La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui* [Thought in China Today], Anne Cheng (ed.), Paris: Gallimard, 2007, p. 160.
- 27 Tcheng Tse-sio, *Les relations de Lyon avec la Chine: Etude d’histoire et de géographie économique* [The Relations of Lyon with China: Study of History and Economic Geography], Paris: Librairie L. Rodstein, 1933, p. 159.

- 28 Woo Tsou-sing, 'La Dame Tshao: la société chinoise au temps des Han' [Lady Tshao (Pan Tchao): Chinese Society during the Han], PhD Dissertation, Lyon University, p. 128.
- 29 Chow, *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies*, p. 16.
- 30 Yu Tchen-p'ong, *L'hypothèque dans le droit coutumier chinois* [The Mortgage in Customary Chinese Law], Lyon: Bosc Frères M. & L. Riou, 1940, p. 2.
- 31 Yuan Chaucer, *La philosophie morale et politique de Mencius* [The Moral and Political Philosophy of Mencius], Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927, p. 16.
- 32 Hsu Sung-nien, *Li Thai-po: son temps, sa vie et son oeuvre* [Li Thai-po: His Times, Life, and Works], Lyon: Bosc Frères M. & L. Riou, 1935, p. 4.
- 33 Hoang Tsen-yue, *Etude comparative sur les philosophies de Lao Tseu, Khong Tseu, Mo Tseu* [Comparative Study of the Philosophies of Lao Tseu, Khong Tseu, Mo Tseu], Lyon: Imprimerie A. Rey, 1925.
- 34 Hoang, *Etude comparative*, p. XI.
- 35 Louis Althusser, *Positions (1964–1975)*, Paris: Les Editions sociales, 1976, p. 113.
- 36 Courant, 'Le futur institut franco-chinois', p. 19.
- 37Tchang Lam, *Etude sur l'organisation et le fonctionnement du service de l'instruction Publique dans la Chine modern* [Study on the Organisation and Functioning of the Service of Public Instruction in Modern China], Lyon: Bosc Frères M. & L. Riou, 1939, p. 127.
- 38 Woo, 'La Dame Tshao', p. 1.
- 39Li Tsi Gziou, *La défense passive des populations civiles contre la guerre aérochimique en Chine* [The Passive Defence of Civilian Populations against the Aero-Chemical War in China], Lyon: Bosc Frères M. & L. Riou, 1933, p. 12.
- 40 Henri T.T. Tchai, *Essai historique et analytique sur la situation internationale de la Chine, conséquences des traités sino-étrangers* [Historical and Analytical Essay on China's International Situation], Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1927, p. 12.
- 41 Cui Zaiyang, 'Li'ang ling yi' [Scattered Memories of Lyon], in *Qingong jianxue yundong: Zhongguo xiandaishi shiliao xuanji* [Diligent Work, Frugal Study Movement: Selected Texts on China's Modern History], Sanjing Chen (ed.), Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju yinxing, 1981, pp. 447–450.
- 42 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London/New York: Verso, 1991, p.6.
- 43 Zheng Yan-fen, 'Huiyi jiudu zhongfa daxue, yonghuai Wu xiaozhang Zhi Lao' [In Memory of My Studies at the Sino-French Institute, Unforgettable Director Wu/Professor Zhi], in Chen (ed.), *Qingong jianxue yundong: Zhongguo xiandaishi shiliao xuanji* [Diligent Work, Frugal Study Movement], pp. 415–422. Appointed Minister of Justice in Taiwan in the 1960s, Zheng spent six years in France and completed a PhD in statistics.
- 44 Danielle Li, *L'Eurasienne: une femme entre Chine et France* (Récit d'une vie, témoignage recueilli par C. Lefebvre) [The Eurasian Woman: a Woman between China and France (Tale of a Life, compiled by C. Lefebvre)], Saint-Etienne: Starter, 2008, p. 12.
- 45 Zheng, 'Huiyi jiudu zhongfa daxue...', p. 417.
- 46 Su, p. 48.
- 47 Karl, *Staging the World*, pp. 3–26.
- 48 The work of Marius Meinhof about 'colonial temporality' reminds us that 'national modernization is, however, a product of a history of colonialism that continues to be structured by the coloniality of knowledge and subjectivity', in 'Colonial Temporality and Chinese National Modernization Discourses', *InterDisciplines*, 1, 2017, p. 72.
- 49 Gregory Lee, *China Imagined: From Western Fantasy to Spectacular Power*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2018, p. 3.
- 50 Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, p. 11.