



Chinese Migrants and Internationalism

Forgotten histories, 1917–1945

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Chinese Migrants and Internationalism

The transnational and diasporic dimensions of early Chinese migrant politics opened in the late nineteenth century when Chinese radical groups bent on overthrowing the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) vied with one another to win Chinese overseas to their modernising projects, and immigrants who had suffered discrimination welcomed their proposals. The radicals' concentration on Chinese communities abroad as outposts of Chinese politics and culture strengthened the stereotype of Chinese as clannish, unassimilable, xenophobic and deeply introverted. This book argues that such a view has its roots less in historical truth than in political and ideological prejudice and obscures a rich vein of internationalist practice in Chinese migrant or diasporic history, which the study aims to restore to visibility. In some cases, internationalist alliances sprang from the spontaneous perception by Chinese and other non-Chinese migrants or local workers of shared problems and common solutions in everyday life and work. At other times, they emerged from under the umbrella of transnationalism, when Chinese nationalist and anti-imperialist activists overseas received support for their campaigns from local internationalists; or the alliances were the product of nurturing by Chinese or non-Chinese political organisers, including anarchists, communists and members of internationalist cultural movements such as Esperantism.

Based on sources in a dozen languages, and telling hitherto largely unknown or forgotten stories of Chinese migrant experience in Russia, Germany, Cuba, Spain, Australia, and the world Esperanto movement, this study will appeal to students and scholars of Chinese history, labour studies and ethnic/migration studies.

Gregor Benton is Professor of Chinese History at Cardiff University.

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Gregor Benton

**For dad,
Arthur Henry Benton, 1915–1984,
worker, International Brigader, friend of China,
in proud and loving memory**

Preface

This book provides a remarkable reminder of lost episodes in Chinese diasporic history. It challenges the stereotype of the inward-looking, clannish Chinese abroad who were only concerned to survive among their compatriots and have as little to do with foreigners as possible. Gregor Benton does this by focusing on the era of labour and socio-revolutionary internationalism and gives examples of the Chinese workers in plantations, dockyards, and factories actively responding to such causes. He shows that many of them were willing to participate in cross-cultural labour activities with local and other non-native workers when they were treated more or less equally and not actively discriminated against. He thus provides a major corrective to the widely accepted norm of the passive Chinese labourer intent only making enough money for him to send home to his family.

The introduction to the book sets out the history of an idea that has gone out of fashion – internationalism. It traces the background of a forceful ideal that captured the imagination of generations of people who had recently been freed from feudal bonds and dreary peasant chores. Today, we take citizens' rights so much for granted that it is hard to capture the excitement when people were first awakened to the realisation that everyone is human and pride in one's nation did not preclude sympathy with the fate of other nations. Indeed, there is a danger that that ideal has been so diluted by neo-nationalisms, on the one hand, and the relentless spread of globalised markets, on the other, that more people will lose faith in its possibilities. Professor Benton provides a lucid account of the ideal's penetration around the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He outlines how, with the ideal taken along two opposite directions, one seeking revolution from below and the other affirming the right of existing elites to lead fundamental reforms, the ideal was diluted, if not distorted, by decades of deadly class warfare.

How small groups of migrant Chinese responded to the theory and practice of this internationalism is a story that has never been appreciated. The author takes us through six examples of what these Chinese tried to do to fit themselves into the different environments where the ideal had won broader appeal among their workmates. The first two highlight the Chinese experience of the mighty struggles in Russia during the Revolution and in Germany prior to the Nazi victory.

The third is the long story of Chinese exploitation and displacement in Cuba that climaxed in Chinese support, first for Julio Antonio Mella in the 1920s and then for Fidel Castro's overthrow of the corrupt Fulgionio Baptista regime. These, together with the account of European Chinese in support of the Spanish Civil War in 1936–39, are the least known in overseas Chinese history.

In addition, the survey of the radical activities of Chinese seamen in European ports tells us of the great potential for internationalism among seafarers. It is enlightening to learn how easily many Chinese in this profession identified with so many transoceanic causes. Not least, the chapter on Australia is an eye-opener. It takes us away from the stark image of an exclusive and racist white Australia to recall the valiant, if perhaps futile under the circumstances, efforts by sections of the Australian labour movement to highlight the fates of workingmen everywhere. The details in the picture of white and coloured comrades failing to realise their ideals are hardly uplifting but, nevertheless, they bring freshness to a subject that has been poorly understood. Taken together with similar stories in Europe, a new view of migrant Chinese is brought into focus. Although the Chinese never played a significant role because their numbers were small, the corrective to our understanding of the Chinese capacity to look beyond ethnic and community concerns warns us against accepting stereotypes and is, therefore, most welcome.

The seventh example is not limited to Chinese working people or to those who travel abroad, but is nevertheless intriguing. Through examining the appeal of Esperanto among some Chinese intellectuals, the book has recaptured a different level of internationalism that still has echoes in some circles in China today. The way Esperanto fascinated many Chinese should not perhaps be surprising. Aspects of the borderless ideals in both Confucianism and Buddhism had penetrated deep into the minds of the Chinese literati and, from time to time, these have enabled some Chinese to challenge the view that Chinese civilisation already had everything worth having. Residual curiosity about worlds unknown, or difficult to know because of language barriers, has always been there. Even when the literati were most certain that Chinese civilisation was superior and could easily be defended, the ideal of the potential oneness of 'all under heaven (*tianxia*)' was present. While Chinese peasants and workers were thought to care about little beyond their local and family customs and practices, literati often prided themselves on having a benign concern for humanity that sometimes led them to want to offer their values to those who were less fortunate. When the generation of intellectuals discovered that a common 'universal' language would enable the educated everywhere to communicate with one another and even allow moral and cultural values to escape the limitations of narrow national pride, some of them were drawn to the attractive idea that there could be a level playing field for open competition among different civilisations.

The author collaborated with Gotelind Müller in the chapter describing Chinese interest in Esperanto, and they have opened up another line of enquiry that deserves attention. They point to the keen cerebral interest in the world of ideas and international communication that some Chinese shared with their counterparts elsewhere. Although this phenomenon is less surprising than that of Chinese

peasants and workers going international when working abroad, it takes us beyond what we know of past literati outlooks. It points to an earlier elite tradition of fraternal imaginations and encourages us to examine the way Chinese scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs are now traversing the globe in search of new formulas and standards of best practice and civilisational competence. Modern national borders are relatively new phenomena to them. They have not yet been so accustomed to hard boundaries that the adventurous among the educated young today could not break out into new kinds of internationalism in the future. Whether this will happen or not, this book points to some aspects of modern history that have been transformative in ways that have been little known. If we should become better prepared to explore similar new lines of enquiry, we owe a debt to this illuminating book.

Wang Gungwu
East Asian Institute
Singapore
12 November 2006

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Many people helped me with this work in many ways. Steve Smith provided materials on the Russian Revolution, encouraged me to turn what was a short essay into a book, and made constructive comments on the manuscript. Barry Carr helped with materials on Cuba's communist movement and the Chinese role. Drew Cottle sent me copies of his own and others' work on Chinese seafarers in the Australian labour movement. Deng Lilan 邓丽兰 helped with references to the Chinese transnational movement in Britain and in China. In East Berlin, I was privileged to meet Roland Felber, shortly before his untimely death in 2001 and not long after the failure (due to colleagues' solidarity) of a campaign by West German academics to get him sacked. A dedicated and scrupulous scholar used to working under extremely difficult circumstances, he talked with me at length about his work on Chinese intellectuals in Germany in the early twentieth century. Ed Krebs, an old comrade, suggested sources on Chinese anarchism, as did Gotelind Müller. Gotelind provided the material for the chapter on Esperanto, which is based on selections from her monumental *China, Kropotkin und der Anarchismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001). For it, I translated the parts of her book that deal with Esperanto, reshaped them to fit this volume, and supplemented them with other references and with material from Gotelind's other writings. Ulrich Lins provided important information on the history of Esperanto, including in East Asia. Len Tsou 邹宁远 and Nancy Tsou 倪慧如 sent me their marvellous, elegiac book on Chinese in the Spanish Civil War. Tony Lane gave me additional materials and comments on the seafarers' movement. The book was conceived and completed in the School of History and Archaeology at Cardiff University, where I enjoyed the support of colleagues. The publication of the manuscript was handled with courtesy and efficiency by Helen Baker, Stephanie Rogers, Heather Hynd, Hayley Norton, and Andrew R. Davidson. To all these people, my grateful thanks. Shen Yuanfang 沈元芳, a contemporary Chinese internationalist, encouraged me throughout with support and advice. To her, my love and thanks.

When this book was near its end, Yuanfang and I had the good luck to make the acquaintance of Pedro Eng Herrera 吴帝胄 and Mauro García Triana, two veterans of the Cuban Revolution. Both men have played important roles in Chinese Cuban affairs – Pedro Eng as a leader of the Chinese Cuban community starting

in the 1950s, Mauro García as Cuba's Ambassador to China in the 1960s. In their retirement, they began collaborating on a multivolume, multifaceted history of the Chinese Cuban community. There are now plans to produce an English-language compendium of this work, much of it as yet unpublished, even in Spanish. They allowed us to read their manuscripts, books, and materials, escorted us around the community's historic sites in Havana, and talked with us for hours about the revolution and the Chinese Cuban role in it. In his home, behind a Che Guevara mural on the front dividing wall, which he has inscribed with Chinese characters, Pedro showed us his wonderfully evocative paintings on Chinese Cuban themes.

This book is a byproduct of research done in the course of completing two other projects: a comparative study on Chinese economy and society in Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia, begun in 2000 as part of the Transnational Communities programme run by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC award no. L214252046, done jointly with Edmund Terence Gomez); and a study (begun in 1999 and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, AHRC) on the history of Chinese settlements in western Europe. My main purpose in visiting the libraries and archives listed below was to gather materials for these two studies, but I also took the opportunity, wherever possible, to search out documents and studies on Chinese internationalism. The research that helped produce this spin-off was done at the libraries of the London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies; the archives sections of Bethnal Green Public Library, Liverpool Public Library and Cardiff Central Library; the Public Records Office and the British Library; the Tower Hamlets Local History Archive; the National Archives of Singapore; the Hong Kong Public Records Office; the archives and oral history section of the National Library of Australia; the Chinese section of the Mitchell Library in the New South Wales State Library; the Latrobe Collection of the Victoria State Library; the Chinese Museums at Bendigo and Melbourne; the library archive of the Northern Territory State Library in Darwin; the Northern Territory Archive Service in Darwin; the City of Vancouver Archive; the Chinatown Collection of the San Francisco Public Library; the Chinese-American Archive at the Ethnic Studies Library, University of California Berkeley; the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester; the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University; the Working Class Movement Library at Salford; the Institute for Social History and the Gemeentearchief, both in Amsterdam; the Centre de Recherches sur la Chine Moderne et Contemporaine, the EHESS Centre Chine and the Bibliothèque Inter-universitaire des Langues Orientales, all in Paris; the documentation centre of the Fundação Oriente in Lisbon; the Arbeitsstelle Politik Chinas und Ostasiens at the Freie Universität Berlin; the Institut für Asienkunde in Hamburg; the Asien Bibliotek at Stockholm University; the Oost-Aziatische Bibliotheek at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; the Institute Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels; the Archives Comité Sino-Belge; Beijing Library and Shanghai Library; and the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana. To the staff of all these libraries and archives, my sincere thanks.

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1 Introduction

As part of the upsurge in ethnic and migration studies in the 1990s, two -isms became popular, one new in its present applications, the other already well entrenched. *Transnationalism* became familiar in business studies in the third quarter of the twentieth century as a rough synonym of multinationalism (by then a dirty word for some) and the transcending of borders. More recently, social and political scientists and others have appropriated the term to signal the trampling of borders and the practice of diaspora. Today, transnational perspectives feature widely in studies on Chinese international migration. *Cosmopolitanism* is also new as a vogue word, but it dates back to the *philosophes* and, in English, to the nineteenth century. In his recent book, Carsten Holbraad defines cosmopolitanism as the proclamation of a worldwide but atomistic society of individuals.¹ Chinese migrants are increasingly portrayed in new writing as ‘the very paradigm’ of the global citizen.² Somewhat out of fashion has gone *internationalism*, the ideology of the bonding of nations, states, and groups, the subject of this book.³

Recent scholarship has identified the internationalist framework in which Chinese nationalist discourse was founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,⁴ but Chinese are otherwise portrayed at best as objects and beneficiaries of others’ internationalism and rarely, if ever, as its instigators. This portrayal has strengthened the stereotype of Chinese as clannish, unassimilable, xenophobic, and deeply introverted. However, it has its roots less in historical truth than in political and ideological prejudice, and obscures a rich vein of internationalist practice in Chinese migrant or diasporic history that this book restores to visibility.

Studies on transnationalism follow two main paths, one of which leads potentially to an internationalist outcome and the other not. The first approach focuses on the heightened mobility of ideas, things, and people in the global age. Its themes include ethnic hybridity, pluralism, creolised culture, and ‘decentred’ identifications of the sort that unsettle fixed social categories and disrupt boundaries – including internationalism, an ultimate disruptor. This sort of writing celebrates the complexity and creativity of migrants’ and minorities’ ‘belonging’ and promotes their rights in nation-states whose borders come under ever-growing strain in a shrinking world. Other studies describe transnationalism more conservatively and

2 Introduction

less glamorously, as deterritorialised or diasporic nationalism – ‘long-distance nationalism’, in an unsympathetic gloss.⁵ Their focus is on the networks and associations said to mobilise political, economic, and social resources across frontiers by mustering ethnic loyalties, the opposite of internationalism.

In highlighting both the protean nature of identity and the mobilising of resources by intra-ethnic networks, transnational studies create a paradox, for, whereas the first approach undermines cultural essentialism and determinism, the other reinforces the idea of ‘primordial’ ties.⁶ Transnationalism seems, in some settings, to subvert states and ethnic collectives and to verge on internationalism and cosmopolitanism and, in others, to narrow horizons and hinder internationalism and cosmopolitanism, by downplaying ethnic interaction and promoting the idea of migrants as sojourners tied to their places of origin. In cultural studies, the emphasis is on the dazzling hybridities and dizzying transitions. Social science and political studies, on the other hand, tend to promote transnationalism in its straitening sense, as a system of networks and political structures, and to obstruct the idea of a shared humanity.⁷

Despite its contemporary neglect in ethnic and migration studies, internationalism was long prominent among the beliefs and identifications forged in the global crucible. Envisaged for nearly two centuries as an unbounded worldwide society of collectives, it stands halfway between cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. It elevates the latter, by substituting humankind for kind; and the former, by transcending the associated atomism.

Of the many types of internationalism, labour and social-revolutionary internationalism form the core matter of this study. Barry Carr points out that the two are conceptually distinct. The former is not necessarily rooted in a universalistic, emancipatory view of history.⁸ Trade union internationalism, as Marcel van der Linden argues, ‘does not arise automatically from workers’ interests but needs to be achieved time and again’.⁹ However, Carr allows that the two often merge, one subsuming the other.¹⁰ Unlike transnationalism, which bonds co-ethnics or compatriots across frontiers, labour and social-revolutionary internationalism unites workers and socialists across political and ethnic barriers. The idea of a supranational workers’ solidarity emerged in the 1830s and was enshrined in the constitutions of the First, Second, and Third Internationals and of various anarchist and syndicalist organisations.

The transnational and diasporic dimensions of early Chinese sojourner politics are well known. Starting in the late nineteenth century, Chinese radical groups bent on overthrowing the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) vied with one another to win Chinese overseas to their modernising projects, and immigrants who had suffered discrimination welcomed their proposals. Studies on this relationship are plentiful.¹¹

However, some writers caution against indiscriminate use of the diasporic perspective, which casts into shadow the local embedment of Chinese overseas. Voicing the doubts of many, Wang Gungwu 王廣武 asks whether one term is enough to ‘capture the richness and variety of the hundreds of Chinese communities’ and worries, with good reason, about the implications of the idea of a single Chinese

diaspora in Southeast Asia, where it threatens to endanger vulnerable Chinese minorities by portraying them potentially as a transnational Fifth Column. Instead, he argues that different communities should be studied in their distinct environments and seek national histories with their non-Chinese fellow citizens. Beyond that, they should identify with a common human past. This seamless humanity of which they can assert membership, beyond place of ancestry and settlement, is a cosmopolitan ideal. It is associated with today's educational and professional elites, beneficiaries of a benign globalism and stakeholders in 'a common experience on the road to modern civilization'.¹²

The subjects of the present study also sought to transcend political borders and national difference, but in anticipation of a workers' internationalism and as part of a class war for universal emancipation. This universalism was rooted in the idea not of a common past but of a common cause, to be realised through the momentous solidarities of the first half of the twentieth century. In some cases, internationalist alliances sprang from the apparently spontaneous perception by Chinese and other migrants or local workers of shared problems and common solutions in everyday life and work. At other times, they emerged from under the umbrella of transnationalism, when Chinese nationalist and anti-imperialist activists overseas received support from local internationalists; or the alliances were the product of nurturing by Chinese or non-Chinese political organisers, including anarchists, communists, and members of internationalist cultural movements such as Esperantism.

The book's focus is on the participation of Chinese abroad in transethnic politics, as workers or students and revolutionaries, with less attention to their ethnic identity. Ethnic and Chinese homeland issues inevitably surfaced during internationalist episodes of this sort, even in countries where Chinese were to the fore in local revolutionary movements. In Russia in the early 1920s, Chinese Red Army volunteers aspired to apply the principles of the Bolshevik revolution to China's plight. In Cuba, ethnic and immigrant Chinese leftists eventually reverted for a time to a China focus, even though the Chinese were credited by their fellow-revolutionaries with a legendary reputation for constancy and courage in the fight for Cuban liberation. The Chinese Esperantists in Tokyo and Paris saw Esperanto as a path not just to international understanding but to modernising Chinese script and speech. In many places, migrants' politicisation on class topics heightened their awareness of homeland matters. At worst, ethnic tensions between Chinese and local people split the nascent workers' movement.

The study looks mainly at workers and students, with occasional references to small traders. People do not usually consider students as migrants, on the grounds that their residence abroad is (in theory) short term, and their attachment to homeland politics is more marked than that of other overseas groups. There is a strong argument for differentiating between Chinese students' engagement with political internationalism and Chinese workers' labour activism. However, there was never a wall between Chinatown and the student activists, who sought to broaden their political base by drawing in workers and petty entrepreneurs. This was especially true of students influenced by communists, who urged their intellectual supporters