

The Face of Marianne:**The Myth and Reality of French Influence in Shanghai – 1900-1912**

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Abstract: The French Concession was modern, aesthetically attractive, and exciting. It was the most desirable part of Shanghai to take up residence – for foreigners and Chinese, alike. As a result, the city was nicknamed the “Paris of the East.” Yet, by 1900 France had irrevocably lost the battles for economic, political and cultural dominance.

There are two aspects to this story: (1) creating the “Paris of the East” myth and (2) realities of concession-era Shanghai. The research focus is to discover how Shanghai got and maintained the image of a French metropolis, while actual influence did not warrant this reputation. Key areas that contributed to the appearance of French cultural dominance will be examined against the realities of power throughout Shanghai.

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After six years as an open port, the establishing concession rights, in 1848, precipitated the rapid growth of both the economy and population of the foreign settlements in Shanghai. In International law, a concession is a territory within a country that is administered by another entity than the state which holds sovereignty over it. This is usually a colonizing power. The French Concession at Shanghai was formally part of the French colonial empire, directly administered by a consul, and initially under the direction of the Governor-General of Indochina. Administration was later transferred to the office of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, with the ambassador in Beijing and the Minister in Paris providing direction. The amalgamation of the British and American concessions into the new International Settlement in 1863 left France with the only national concession in the city.

Outwardly, the French Concession flourished. It was modern and aesthetically attractive, requiring territorial enlargement on several occasions. The French Concession was the most desirable part of the city to take up residence – for the French, other foreign nationals and Chinese alike. The city of Shanghai came to be nicknamed the Paris of the East. Yet, this understanding was largely superficial; by 1900 France had irrevocably lost the battles for economic, political and cultural dominance. In the period 1900 to 1912, modernisation and development continued in the French Concession, business justified the overseas possession and the civilising mission was conducted in earnest from the Jesuit Centre at Xujiahui.

Reflection on the origin of the French identity of Shanghai helps explain how the city achieved and preserved its image as the Paris of the East, despite the realities of influence in the region. The early development of the French Concession, alongside the International Settlement and Chinese administered communities will elaborate the myth of French influence and provide evidence to the realities of Shanghai from 1900-1912. As China moved toward the Xinhai

Revolution of 1911 and the establishment of the Chinese Republic the next year, the realities of French influence over the city of Shanghai became more apparent. While the above nickname would persist until the end of the concession-era, it was not indicative of the power balance. Economy and infrastructure, institutions, and lifestyle and cultural presence illuminate the conditions of power in the Shanghai theatre and expose the myth of Shanghai's French identity.

Shanghai, was to become infamous as the Whore of the Orient, but how was it that the city of Shanghai was also nicknamed the Paris of the East? What were the concrete and superficial aspects of this understanding of the culture and power in the city? Did Great Power competition over the economy, politics and cultural ascendancy have an impact on this conception of the city? Was the fact that the Chinese were more drawn to British influence and the English language significant in modifying the image of Shanghai as French? As China moved toward revolution were evidences of French culture and power more or less distinct, and how might a 'French-image' have impacted revolutionary activities?

This study will be conducted in two major veins: French involvement in the Concession and throughout the Shanghai region – to understand the perceived relationship between French culture and power in Shanghai; and an examination of the practical power structure in Shanghai – to create a comprehensive perspective on the nature of French influence in the Paris of the East. This ultimately provides a framework to identify the origin and persistence of the idea that Shanghai was a 'French' city; and to reveal the power situation for both foreigners and Chinese.

Manifestations of French Shanghai

The investigation of the manifestations of French influence will be guided by the key question – how was this reputation acquired and maintained? That is to say, where did the notion of the Paris of the East originate and what factors contributed to the development of this identity?

The above mentioned areas of economy and infrastructure, institutions, and lifestyle and cultural manifestations, will be approached to demonstrate the presence of a French image in Shanghai.

Economy and Infrastructure: The port concessions were designed to dominate the regional economy, as a form of economic imperialism in lieu of full-colonisation.¹ The Chinese scholar Zheng Guanying was aware of this threat and warned his countrymen, “being swallowed up by troops is a disaster men perceive easily, [but] conquest by commerce envelops the nation invisibly.”² Less populated than the International Settlement, the French worked hard to maintain their influence in Shanghai and China. While French presence included a cultural policy, much of the influence was gained and maintained through economic means. A testament to this primacy is that the vibrant economy in Shanghai was responsible for three-fifths of French economic involvement in China.

French pride in their economic presence is illustrated in the journals of the day, “aussi notre colonie de Changhaï devient-elle chaque jour plus prospère et prend-elle un essor marqué par une floraison d’entreprises qui font le plus grand honneur à nos compatriotes.”³ French financial institutions and business practices were installed, as confidence was held that eventually the ‘backward’ Chinese merchants would emulate their system. In this effort, the French were in direct competition with the other colonial powers, who were working from the same premise.

Initially, these foreign communities pursued common aims by organising a council of ratepayers in 1854 – responsible for roads, street-lights, the police force and infrastructure.⁴ In response to re-organisation talks, the *Conseil Municipal* of the French Concession was created in

¹ Rhoades Murphey, “The Treaty Ports and China’s Modernization” *The Chinese City between Two Worlds*. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, eds. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, pp. 17-18.

² Zheng Guanying, *Shengshi weiyuan*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1895, p. 681.

³ *Bulletin de la Société de géographie commerciale de Paris*, Tome 24, Paris: Société de géographie commerciale, 1902, p. 48.

⁴ Frances Wood, *No dogs and not many Chinese : treaty port life in China 1843-1943*. London: John Murray, 1998, p. 59.

1862, with all decisions subject to the approval or veto of the consul. The re-organisation negotiations resulted in the creation of the International Settlement in 1863 by the amalgamation of the British and American concessions; the French declined to join, fearing domination by the English-speaking majority. On the difference in the administration of the two bodies Marie-Claire Bergère writes, “si le statut de la concession internationale se rapproche de celui d’un port franc, la concession française ressemble plutôt a une enclave coloniale, gérée sous l’autorité du gouvernement de Paris.”⁵ This is significant in the early establishment of French identity for Shanghai, as French interest was not diluted in an international context.

The French Concession represented the best of French technology.⁶ The Concession had electric street-lights while most towns in France were still using gas; the *Conseil Municipal* launched and managed an electric company, police force and sanitation services; roads, professional buildings and houses echoed French style and techniques;⁷ French engineers and city planners maintained the continental feel of the surroundings; the French Concession was well-appointed with gardens to enhance the familiarity of the environment for French nationals.

Institutions: French identity was further manifest by the institutions established in Shanghai, including the political administration, the chamber of commerce, the Université Aurore and other schools. Despite British dominance, the International Settlement was nonetheless an amalgam of ideas and identities, whereas the French Concession provided for a concerted French identity, resulting in the appearance of a dominant French presence, only rivalled by Chinese interest, though within the sphere of foreign concern, Chinese imperatives were inconsequential. The

⁵ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*. Paris: Fayard, 2002, p. 131.

⁶ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*. Paris: Fayard, 2002, p. 103.

⁷ Guy Brossollet, *Les Français de Shanghai, 1849-1949*. Paris: Belin, 1999, p. 21.

decision to leave ultimate power in the hands of the consul-general, allowed for a decisiveness of action that was not possible from the other administrations.

As the Concession had an origin and purpose based largely on economic factors, the Chamber of Commerce played a critical role in the character of identity. Through its collective power it became a body of French influence, imposing a measurable linguistic and cultural impact on the Chinese business class. The establishment of educational institutions was another manifestation of French identity in Shanghai. The first French Jesuit school opened at Xujiahui in 1850. By 1886 the *École Municipale* had been established to teach French and Chinese students, extending the reach of French culture in the city. The opening of l'Université Aurore was seen as a means of exerting influence and representing French identity. In a series of articles in issues of *Revue politique et parlementaire* in 1903, debate raged over whether church involvement in the school would be detrimental to the spread of French language and culture.⁸ In the same journal support for the creation of a Faculty of Medicine at the university was expressed and hailed as a means of establishing French identity. The Law school, added in 1911, taught French philosophy, ideology and legal method, and had a great influence in shaping Chinese public policy in later years. Thanks to the Université Aurore, Shanghai was most French city in China.⁹

Lifestyle and Culture: Some contemporary French observers felt a responsibility to instil European values in the local community. “Il est certain qu’il est préférable d’avoir les Chinois sur les concessions sous le contrôle des Européens...plutôt que de les avoir au dehors, comme c’est le cas pour les faubourgs.”¹⁰ The assimilationist nature of French presence was central to creating the Paris of the East, as the Francisation of indigenous people broadened French impact on Shanghai.

⁸ *Revue politique et parlementaire : questions politiques, sociales et législatives*. Tomes 35-38, Paris: Armand Colin, 1903.

⁹ Jacques Weber, *La France en Chine (1843-1943)*. Nantes : Ouest Éditions, 1997, p. 117.

¹⁰ E. Bard, *Les Chinois chez eux*. Paris: A. Colin, 1899, p. 263-264.

Ironically, the Chinese had an equal measure of self-assuredness in the superiority of their culture. “(Le Chinois) se croit, sans manifester ouvertement son opinion, plus capable que les Européens, sur qui il a certainement l’avantage de l’incessante résistance, et il attend l’avenir, persuade que ce dernier lui appartiendra”¹¹ The conclusion of French observers was that the Chinese, in part due to exposure to French ideals, had experienced something of an awakening to the issues of the world, and were ready to modernise their systems.

French officials began to recognize their changing position in China, through influence over the reform movement.¹² The leading French newspaper in Shanghai, *L’Echo de Chine*, endorsed a forceful French patriotism with contempt for Chinese nationalism. Embarrassing both its clerical patrons and the administration, but promoting a stronger French stance in line with the new power structure of the city.

The cultural penetration of French identity took many forms including theatre, books, cinema, recreation and nightlife.¹³ The desire to import a French lifestyle went as far as journal articles on maintaining a typical French garden in the challenging Shanghai climate.¹⁴ The legendary French recreation and nightlife attracted members of all communities to the Cercle Sportif français and performances by the Société dramatique.¹⁵ More significant to the conveying of the Paris of the East reputation was the nightlife. The permissiveness of vice within French controlled territory created the ‘city of lights’ feel so well known and appreciated by travellers to the French capital.

¹¹ Charles Simond, *La Vraie Chine*. Paris: Plon, 1898, p. 2.

¹² the *Bulletin de l’école française* published Sun Zhongshan’s pledge to respect the foreign treaties of nations that did not get involved in the revolution. See Appendix IV.

¹³ Jacques Weber, *La France en Chine (1843-1943)*. Nantes : Ouest Éditions, 1997, p. 103.

¹⁴ *La Quinzaine Coloniale*, Paris: [s.n.], 1904, p. 457.

¹⁵ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, pp. 106-107.

Beyond Treaty Port trading rights, France had negotiated for the practice of Christianity in China, repealing a Chinese imperial edict from 1724. For the French, overseas involvements were never solely about trade. The French administered a Religious Protectorate over all Catholics in China, and unofficially used Jesuits to administer policy and augment the spread of French values. In fact, the Jesuits were efficient proponents for the dissemination of French values operating an observatory, orphanage, and printer, among other services, in addition to the school and university.¹⁶

The colonial policy of the day demanded the imposition of French culture. The drive to civilise local populations through assimilation was part of the mandate for French presence everywhere, including Shanghai. Dissemination of the French language and Catholicism was a central part of the process. Each of these contributed to the creation of the Paris of the East identity of Shanghai, suggesting that this modern metropolis was, in fact, French.

Shanghai: Behind the Façade

The French Concession and International Settlement did hold certain aspects in common. After fifty years, both communities were beginning to identify themselves with the city. The emergence of self-referential nicknames such as ‘Shanghailanders’ and ‘Old Shanghai-hand’ was indicative of the attachment felt for their community.¹⁷ This shared notion of belonging points to the serious inconsistencies in the reputation of Shanghai as a French city. For the economy, geopolitical power, and cultural manifestations, it can be shown that interests other than French provided the identity, if not the face, of the city.

¹⁶ Henri Cordier, *Les Origines de deux établissements français dans l'Extrême-Orient, Chang-Hai – Ning-Po*. Paris: [s.n.], 1896, p. III.

¹⁷ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, p. 96.

The British were the dominant economic force, the Municipal Council of the International Settlement was the dominant political force, and, while English language and culture dominated foreign interaction, Shanghai was culturally dominated by the Chinese majority. The merging of foreign and Chinese within concession territory was unique to Shanghai as the other open ports reserved those areas for foreign habitation.¹⁸ The International Settlement housed the greatest numbers of foreign and total residents. The companies based there had the largest capital investment. In fact, among all the foreign interests, it was the British presence that was culturally dominant in all of China. Each foreign community in Shanghai maintained cultural and religious distinctions, but the tone was set by the British, who shaped social relations, inside of the foreign community as with the rest of China. The British influence was evident in the rhythm of daily activities, in the organisation of the living environment, in the development of leisure and recreation, and in the use of English as the language of interaction between the foreign communities.¹⁹

Economic Power: It has been suggested that cultural policy was less of an end in itself than a means to serve the true double ambition for opening all colonies, that is, political and economic domination.²⁰ The Chinese who lived within the Concessions were part of a new and developing segment of the population who were designated to be the local agents in the redevelopment of China along Western lines in trade, finance, transport, industry, politics, and ideology, modeled on British systems.²¹ These wealthier members of the Chinese business class were critical to the economic development of Shanghai. But, it was the Chinese middle-class that kept order in the

¹⁸ E. Bard, *Les Chinois chez eux*. Paris: A. Colin, 1899, p. 265.

¹⁹ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, p. 97.

²⁰ Jacques Weber, *La France en Chine (1843-1943)*. Nantes: Ouest Editions, 1997, p. 103.

²¹ Rhoades Murphey, "The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization" *The Chinese City between Two Worlds*. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, eds. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, p. 20.

society. They operated shops, provided skilled labour, and formed the bulk of the police force. The Chinese of Shanghai had a profound effect on the practical composition of the city.

After some struggle with local magistrates to allow its creation, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was created and housed in the International Settlement. The proximity to the engine of the Western economic interest caused the Chinese business leaders to realise their economic power. In 1905 an anti-American boycott was launched by the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce as a show of political force.²² A marginal consequence was an increase in trade with French businesses and new interrelationship with the French economy. The economic power structure demonstrates that with Britain on top and the Chinese occupying a position of increasing power and providing critical services, French influence on this aspect of city life was peripheral. Shanghai certainly did not operate as a French economy. French goods were available, but English business interests dominated the economy. “La Concession française n’est pas importante par son commerce, qui est faible, ou par ses industries, qui sont négligeables.”²³

Geo-Political Power: The International Settlement maintained a significant police force and the Shanghai Volunteer Corps. Other stakeholders, such as the Americans and Germans used the power of the International Settlement to exert influence in their respective spheres. French direction and ambition was frequently filtered through the relationship with these other powers.

The Boxer Uprising was an anti-imperialist, anti-Christian movement started by peasant farmers in Shandong Province. With the tacit approval of the Qing government, the Boxers marched on Beijing in an attempt to force the foreign powers out with a siege of the diplomatic district of the capital. The siege of Beijing prompted the intervention of a joint expedition of eight

²² Edward Rhoads, “Merchant Associations in Canton, 1895-1911” *The Chinese City between Two Worlds*. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner, eds. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, p. 108.

²³ Laurent Metzger, *Les lauriers de Shanghai: des concessions internationales à la métropole moderne*. Geneva: Editions Olizane, 1999, p. 32.

foreign powers.²⁴ The initial success of the Boxers prompted fears of similar movements against Christians and foreigners in other parts of the country. This affected Shanghai's French community, administrators of the largest Catholic centre in China. France's participation in the victorious campaign, restored security, and the pride of another military success legitimised feelings of superiority over the Chinese, while reinforcing the reality of military inferiority to other foreign powers.

Cultural Manifestations: The enthusiasm that the French administration took in promoting the French language as a means of exerting influence was tempered by the results. Even within the French Concession, French and English were at least equally useful. "Dans la concession française a l'hôtel du consulat même, le concierge ne vous comprend pas, si vous ne lui parlez pas anglais. Vous êtes à l'église, dans la cathédrale catholique romaine, desservie par les missionnaires français; on y prêche en anglais!"²⁵ Despite the best efforts to maintain the French language in education and business, success was minimal. Other cultural customs also tended toward British norms. "La colonie étrangère tout entière a adopté la coutume des Anglais qui veut qu'on ne puisse se rendre à une invitation à dîner qu'en habit noir ou au moins en smoking."²⁶

The full force of the Western impact was concentrated in Shanghai, the flow of ideas and of non-economic institutions was, perhaps, of greater importance in the long run. By 1910 the calls for reform were reaching a crescendo within Chinese circles. Dissatisfaction with the state erupted into rebellion in October 1911. It was, after all, this administration that had permitted foreign

²⁴ In order of troop contribution – Japan, Russia, Britain, France, United States, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary.

²⁵ Gaston Pageot, *A travers les pays jaunes ; suivi d'un itinéraire de croisière*. Paris: Bibliothèque des auteurs modernes, 1909, pp. 124-127.

²⁶ E. Bard, *Les Chinois chez eux*. Paris: A. Colin, 1899, p. 261.

imperialist privilege to establish itself on Chinese soil.²⁷ The revolutionary wave washed over China's most important city, "because of its wealth, its level of organization, and its degree of political consciousness, Shanghai was a political city of the first rank. The capture of Shanghai was crucial for the revolutionaries of 1911."²⁸ The military response from the government was slow and the old order could not be restored. The breakaway provinces in the south organised into a republic and established a capital at Nanjing. The remnants of the old order became a rival republic with its capital in Beijing. Not wishing to plunge the country into civil war, the governments of Beijing and Nanjing negotiated the establishment of a united republic with Beijing as capital.²⁹ French involvement in the revolution was limited to interested observer and anonymous donations to Chinese factions. Quietly, there was a sense of pride among many French in seeing a republican revolution against a tired monarchy that had failed to maintain the nation for its citizens. This revolution for the Chinese was also an evolution for French identity. Seeing the fruits of their intellectual partnership and tutoring of the Chinese gave the French a renewed enthusiasm for their changing mission in China. No longer trying to be economically dominant, French influence would be realized through other means – education, religion and cultural exchange was now the differentiating dynamic of French presence – more and more the French saw themselves this way. Even so, the bulk of external cultural influence on the Chinese community came from a combination of English-speaking interests and the Japanese.

By 1900 France was looking to maintain a slipping influence in China, sensitive to the trade dynamics, the French administration viewed the Religious Protectorate as its primary resource in

²⁷ Nicholas R. Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire, Westerners in Shanghai and the Chinese Revolution of the 1920*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1991, p. 12.

²⁸ Joseph Fewsmith, *Party, State and Local Elites in Republican China: Merchant Organizations and Politics in Shanghai, 1890-1930*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, p. 13.

²⁹ Alain Roux, *La Chine au 20e siècle*. VUEF : Armand Colin, 2003, p. 34.

the competition with Britain, as well as with Germany and the United States. Missionaries were used to augment political weakness. “Catholics (whether foreign or Chinese) were surrogates for French power in China...In the minds of rivalrous foreigners, Catholic success was thought to presage superior French influence...and to block British ambitions.”³⁰ Ultimately, this may be the only area where France was able to hold an ascendant position against the other foreign influences and local tradition.

Conclusion

The French identity of Shanghai was strongly influenced by its setting between the Chinese administration and International Settlement. Certainly the interaction between these three communities shaped identity in all quarters. While, French philosophical tradition and cultural presence redefined the relationship with Chinese intellectuals, to suggest that Shanghai deserved its recognition as a French city – the Paris of the East – would require a blind-eye to the realities of economic and political influence. The joint foreign force that ended the Boxer Uprising further homogenised the foreign community through common interest. At the same time the military victory brought a sense of national pride to each of the victors. The transition of Chinese intellectuals toward a French model led to more philosophical exchange. The agitation for reform by the Chinese business and intellectual leadership was welcomed in French journals, seemingly as a continuation of their own revolutionary and republican legacy.³¹

The French presence in Shanghai was somewhat French in the manner of the home country, but also unique, owing to its geo-political circumstances. The French Concession was overshadowed economically and never attracted a large number of settlers from France, leading

³⁰ Daniel H. Bays, *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 102.

³¹ Edmond Rottach, *La Chine en révolution*. Paris: Perrin, 1914.

one to lament, “une communauté plus nombreuse aurait peut-être eu plus de poids dans le développement historique de Shanghai.”³² In 1900 France was still competing to be the dominant foreign influence in Shanghai and China. But, by mid-decade had given up this goal – influence over economics and language was lost to English-speaking interests, the French military was numerically unable to be a regional power. The Concession looked French, but French and English language were at least equally useful within its borders. French identity was powerful enough to assert independent ideas and direction, but it was not powerful enough to impose these on a broad scale. French identity was able to manifest itself in concentrated areas where it could be more influential – Catholicism, intellectual life, and entertainment – in part leading to the maintenance of the Paris of the East reputation through the ensuing decades. It has been suggested that French identity did not exist in any independent manner in light of the supremacy of the English language and the commercial power of Britain and the United States relative to France.³³ While the points on relative power are valid – France did exert a singular influence in certain areas of cultural life.

³² Laurent Metzger, *Les lauriers de Shanghai: des concessions internationales à la métropole moderne*. Geneva: Éditions Olizane, 1999, p. 33.

³³ Marie-Claire Bergère, *Histoire de Shanghai*, Paris: Fayard, 2002, pp. 128-129.

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