

**CAI YUANPEI AND THE TRANSNATIONAL QUEST:
INTELLECTUAL MOBILIZATION IN THE CHINESE
COMMUNITY IN FRANCE**

**CAI YUANPEI E A JORNADA TRANSNACIONAL:
MOBILIZAÇÃO INTELECTUAL NA COMUNIDADE CHINESA
NA FRANÇA**

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Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 21/05/2025
Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 10/03/2026

Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of Cai Yuanpei in the transnational intellectual mobilization of the Chinese community in France during the early twentieth century by highlighting how Cai's vision and leadership contributed to the formation of educational and cultural networks that bridged China and Europe. The article situates Cai's efforts within the broader context of Chinese migration, modernization, and reform movements, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective identity in a transnational setting. It also sheds light on the significance of the anarchist based work-study movement and related organizations in fostering a new generation of Chinese intellectuals who were deeply influenced by their experiences abroad. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural exchange, diaspora identity, and intellectual history in the Republican era.

Keywords

Cai Yuanpei; anarchism; Chinese diaspora; work-study movement; migration.

Resumo

Este artigo explora o papel fundamental de Cai Yuanpei na mobilização intelectual transnacional da comunidade chinesa em França durante o início do século XX, ao destacar como a visão e liderança de Cai contribuíram para a formação de redes educacionais e culturais que ligaram a China e a Europa. O artigo sublinha os esforços de Cai dentro do contexto mais amplo da migração chinesa, da modernização e dos movimentos de reforma, enfatizando a dinâmica interação entre a agência individual e a identidade coletiva num cenário transnacional. Também revela a importância do movimento de trabalho-estudo, baseado no anarquismo, e das organizações relacionadas na formação de uma nova geração de intelectuais chineses profundamente influenciados pelas suas experiências no exterior. Através desta análise, o artigo contribui para uma melhor compreensão das complexidades do intercâmbio cultural, da identidade da diáspora e da história intelectual na era republicana.

Palavras-chave

Cai Yuanpei; anarquismo; diáspora chinesa; movimento trabalho-estudo; migração.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, the migration of Chinese students to France gave rise to a dense network of educational initiatives, political expectations, and intellectual exchanges that would leave a lasting mark on modern Chinese thought. This article examines the motivations and strategies that shaped Cai Yuanpei's sustained engagement with the Chinese community in France, focusing on his involvement in the Association for Frugal Study in France, the Working-Study Movement, and the Educational Association in France. While scholars such as Paul J. Bailey have traced the institutional contours and political consequences of the Chinese work-study movement in France, less attention has been paid to the intellectual logic that underpinned Cai Yuanpei's engagement. This article fills that gap by foregrounding his pedagogical reasoning and

analysing how his educational ideals were shaped by the material and social conditions of migration. I argue that Cai's role in these initiatives should be understood not merely as institutional leadership, but as a form of transnational intellectual mediation that sought to align educational reform, moral cultivation, and national regeneration under the specific conditions of migration. This mediation, however, was structurally marked by a tension between universal pedagogical ideals and the material and social constraints experienced by student-workers.

Recent scholarship on migration has emphasized that mobility entails more than the physical movement of populations, involving instead a reconfiguration of social roles, ethical expectations, and collective identities (Bhugra, Becker 2005: 21). The migration of Chinese students to France exemplifies this broader dynamic. Closely linked to projects of educational reform and national renewal, it combined aspirations for individual advancement with a collective vision of social transformation. Within this context, Cai conceptualized education abroad as a morally charged enterprise, grounded in discipline, frugality, and shared responsibility. His emphasis on gradual self-cultivation and collective effort resonates with contemporary currents of social thought, including Kropotkin's description of social change as «a whole process of liberation progressed by a series of imperceptible acts of devotion to the common cause, accomplished by men who came out of the masses» (Kropotkin 1902: 85).

Cai's approach was shaped by his own experience of intellectual exchange in Europe, which informed his engagement with Western educational models while reinforcing his commitment to reforming Chinese society on ethical and cultural grounds. Rather than adopting foreign ideas wholesale, he sought to integrate selected elements of European pedagogy into a framework oriented toward Chinese social needs. This orientation found concrete expression in the organizations he helped to establish. The Association for Frugal Study in France aimed to secure access to education under conditions of economic scarcity; the Working-Study Movement institutionalized the combination of labor and learning as both a practical necessity and a formative ideal; and the Educational Association in France sought to facilitate intellectual exchange between Chinese students and French academic institutions. Together, these initiatives reveal an effort to stabilize migration as a structured educational pathway rather than an unregulated or purely economic experience.

By situating Cai's interventions within the broader history of Chinese migration and educational reform, this article contributes to ongoing historiographical debates on the circulation of ideas, the role of intellectuals in transnational settings, and the social dimensions of pedagogical projects. It treats migration not only as the movement of individuals, but as a space in which educational ideals, moral norms, and institutional practices were negotiated and contested. Methodologically, the study is based primarily on Cai Yuanpei's correspondence, which offers direct insight into his thinking and organizational strategies. These primary sources are complemented by secondary scholarship on Cai's intellectual trajectory, the working-study movement, and the history of Chinese migration to France, as well as biographical materials related to key figures within his transnational network. This combined approach allows for a historically grounded analysis of how educational ideals were mobilized, adapted, and constrained within the lived realities of migration.

Cai Yuanpei's intellectual journey to France

Cai Yuanpei is widely regarded as a transformative figure in the evolution of modern Chinese thought and education. Born into a period of upheaval during the late Qing dynasty, his early intellectual environment was steeped in traditional Confucian learning, yet it was also marked by a growing awareness of China's perceived decline and the urgent need for reform. The inefficacies of a system that clung to past glories while the nation faltered before the encroachments of Western powers spurred Cai's critical self-reflection and set him on an academic and ideological journey that would ultimately lead him to France. In his formative years, Cai became increasingly conscious of the limitations inherent in classical Chinese education as traditional scholarship. Centered on the civil service examinations and the moral rigor of Confucian doctrine, this education model was seen by many reform-minded intellectuals as inadequate for addressing the complex challenges of a rapidly modernizing world. Against this backdrop, new ideas began to circulate, such as ideas championed by earlier reformists like Kang Youwei (1856-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929), that questioned the rigid hierarchies and traditionalism of the imperial

system. For Cai, the burgeoning debates about educational and cultural renewal were not abstract musings; they were existential imperatives that called for an integration of Eastern wisdom with the progressive insights emerging from the West.

Cai's early exposure to European intellectual currents came through his studies in Germany, where he encountered the rigorous methodologies of Western research and the emancipatory philosophies of the Enlightenment. This period of intense academic interaction played a crucial role in reshaping his worldview. In Germany, Cai found a model for critical scholarship, one that prized empirical inquiry, rational thought, and a commitment to individual intellectual freedom. Yet, while Germany provided the analytical framework and methodological rigor he sought, it was France that would capture his imagination with its vibrant republican tradition and its emphasis on cultural and educational dynamism, specially as he considered the French and the Chinese «very similar in temperament» by valuing «sincerity, approachability, diligence without stinginess, self-respect without arrogance, and a refusal to let narrow nationalism override cosmopolitanism (Cai 1984 [1924], IV: 483).

France, during the turn of the twentieth century, was not only the epicenter of artistic and intellectual innovation but also a living laboratory of modern republican ideals. In this period, the secularization of education was closely linked to the secularization of morals, with standardized schooling placing the nation at the core of the intellectual and moral curriculum, where schools and the military mutually reinforced a republican faith in assimilation through institutions (Kusters, Depaepe 2011: 32). The French model, characterized by its staunch secularism, its democratic *ethos*, and its commitment to creating a citizenry capable of self-governance, offered Cai an attractive contrast to the autocratic systems that had long dominated Chinese political life. Cai's decision to venture to France was also profoundly influenced by the activities of an emergent network of Chinese intellectuals known as the Chinese Francophile lobby. Composed of reformers who embraced French revolutionary ideals and the spirit of modern education, this group viewed France as a beacon of progressive thought that could illuminate pathways for China's own modernization. For these intellectuals, France represented not just a repository of advanced knowledge, but also a dynamic site for the reimagining of China's cultural and educational destiny. In this context, Cai's engagement with France became more than

a personal academic pursuit as it transformed into an act of intellectual and national rejuvenation.

Moreover, Cai recognized that France's cultural and political landscape steeped in the legacy of the French Revolution and sustained by a vibrant tradition of intellectual debate offered the possibility of rethinking the very foundations of Chinese society. Here was a society that had managed to reconcile the ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity with a pragmatic commitment to collective welfare and civic responsibility. For Cai, whose vision of education extended beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to encompass the moral and social upliftment of an entire nation, France offered an inspirational blueprint. Cai Yuanpei (1984 [1917], III: 64) located in France a living demonstration of the moral economy he sought to inculcate among Chinese worker-students:

Observing the French people beyond Paris as a whole, they truly rank among the world's most adept savers—a model of 'economic democracy,' where the nation's wealth rests largely in the hands of farmers and the middle class. Their annual savings growth reportedly exceeds 200 billion francs. This demonstrates the French commitment to thrift, confirming France as an ideal land for economical study.

To Cai, French thrift was not mere parsimony but the outward expression of a national attitude that harmonized individual restraint with collective well-being, as an empirical counterweight to both the luxury that erodes human nature. A concept that echoes Mozi's (2015: 123) teaching on frugality rooted not in deprivation but in intentionality, where «to eliminate what is of no use is the way of the sage, and to avoid wasteful expenditure is the principle of the benevolent». Here, Cai discerned a cross-cultural resonance, an alignment of French *sobriété* with Mohist pragmatism, which reframed thrift as a moral teleology. Just as Mozi's condemnation of extravagance sought to dismantle hierarchies of waste that fractured social cohesion, so too did the French ideal of measured living reject both the hubris of expenditure and the nihilism of mere survival, proposing instead a third way: a calibrated existence where restraint, far from stifling the spirit, liberated it to pursue collective flourishing.

In this synthesis, thrift became neither denial nor dogma but a philosophy of sufficiency as a recognition that the measure of civilization

lay not in excess, but in the equitable distribution of enough, aligning individual moral economy with universal care. By highlighting France's capacity to combine material modesty with a vibrant civic life, Cai Yuanpei articulated a dialectical vision in which republican institutions that guaranteed academic freedom also cultivated mutual aid and self-discipline. Accordingly, immersion in the everyday practices of French frugality visible in provincial savings, the economy of public resources, and municipal support for worker education. In this regard, it constituted, for Cai (1984 [1915], II: 397), the indispensable crucible for forming citizens able to both «resort to diligence» and «pursue independent scholarship», thereby realizing the Confucian ideal of virtue through shared service.

Cai's journey to France thus emerges as a critical juncture in his lifelong commitment to educational reform. Far from an escapist venture, it was a deliberate response to the pressures of his time, as a strategic effort to draw inspiration from a society that embodied the transformative promise of modernity. Through forging transnational connections, Cai sought to channel educational and intellectual resources back to China, catalyzing a broader process of national renewal. His engagement with France was therefore rooted not only in intellectual curiosity, but in a sustained commitment to social transformation shaped by early frustration with traditionalism and a critical engagement with Western models of progress.

The Chinese migration to France in the early twentieth century

Chinese migration to France in the early twentieth century unfolded along two intersecting trajectories: the Francophile work–study movement and the mass recruitment of the Chinese Labor Corps during World War I. As early as 1902, the Francophile lobby had established a soybean factory—school in La Garenne-Colombes where Chinese students lived communally, labored by day, and attended lectures in science, history and ethics by night. This was an initiative that crystallized into the Sino-French Education Association in 1916, whose bilingual preparatory schools in Beijing, Baoding and Chengdu fed hundreds of frugal students into French factories (Bailey 2014: 23-24). Further confirming Kropotkin's (1902: 71) statement that «migration means war», the outbreak of the Great War vastly expanded this framework: between

1916 and 1918 France and Britain enlisted roughly 140,000 Chinese workers, 37,000 in France alone, to work in munitions, metallurgy and infrastructure, under military direction (Bailey 2009: 111). This scale of mobilization proved indispensable to Allied industrial capacity and, simultaneously, turned factory floors and YMCA sponsored evening huts into sites of cultural exchange, where Chinese migrants acquired rudimentary French, technical skills, and exposure to Western political thought (Ronen 2023: 1011).

This confluence of economic necessity, cultural immersion, and intellectual ambition transformed early Chinese migration to France into a fulcrum of modern Chinese identity. It seeded vocational reform, inspired political revolution, and forged a cosmopolitan cadre whose influence would reverberate through China's educational and political upheavals of the 1920s and beyond. Their presence in France thus became emblematic of a broader process of economic integration and global labor mobility, where Chinese workers became integral components of France's industrial narrative. Among these pioneers, the roles of figures such as Cai Yuanpei, Li Shizeng (1881-1973) and Wu Zhihui (1865-1953) were instrumental in shaping the intellectual contours of Chinese migration and transnational educational exchange. Li Shizeng emerged as one of the leading advocates for the integration of Western educational ideals into the fabric of modern Chinese society. He was not only an accomplished scholar but also a political activist whose endeavors spanned various sectors, from publishing radical newspapers to organizing labor movements. In 1902, Li traveled to France as part of an embassy delegation, marking his first encounter with a nation that, despite its reputation for political turbulence, offered a unique model of republicanism and cultural dynamism. His decision to study and ultimately settle for extended periods in France was rooted in a belief that the French model of civic freedom, secular education, and social innovation could serve as an ideal blueprint for modernizing China. Once in France, Li became a key figure in the Chinese Francophile lobby, which was a group of reform-minded intellectuals dedicated to cultivating closer cultural and educational ties between China and France.

Wu Zhihui, another prominent figure of the time, played a complementary role. Arriving in France after spending time in Britain, Wu was deeply impressed by French intellectual life and its commitment to individual freedom and scientific inquiry. His own academic pursuits,

coupled with his political insights, led him to engage with French intellectuals and policymakers. Wu's efforts helped open channels for cultural exchange and provided a critical perspective on how Chinese students and workers could integrate lessons from French society into China's reform agenda. Together, Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui symbolized a new generation of Chinese reformers who recognized the importance of a transnational dialogue, one that transcended national boundaries and challenged the very foundations of traditional Chinese society.

Culturally and educationally, the migration to France fostered a vibrant atmosphere of exchange. Chinese students who traveled to France did so under programs that emphasized a dual curriculum: rigorous academic study coupled with disciplined manual labor. This work-study model was not merely a practical adaptation to frugal living conditions; it represented an ideological commitment to the ideals of self-improvement, equality, and civic responsibility (Bailey 1988: 451). The rationale behind this model was both practical and philosophical. On the practical level, it ensured that Chinese students could support themselves economically while studying in a relatively expensive Western country. Yet in practice «their diligent work could hardly pay for their frugal study», and many students «were exhausted from practicing ironwork at the workshop», constraints that limited uptake of nightly pedagogy (Guo 2025: 488). Philosophically, however, it was imbued with the belief that true education was not confined to the reading of textbooks alone but also comprised the moral and ethical formation that arises from engaging in communal labor and living modestly. The French experience of republican citizenship, centered on the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, resonated deeply with these students, who saw in it a pathway to transforming Chinese society. Moreover, the Chinese migration to France created a unique confluence of intellectual and cultural endeavors that significantly impacted both countries as it «reshaped national identity and China's internationalization, which then in turn shaped the emerging global system» (Xu 2011: 198).

The French perception of Chinese laborers was marked by a striking dissonance between intellectual idealization and administrative reality. On one hand, French intellectuals and politicians constructed a narrative of unique cultural affinity, portraying the Chinese as «the Frenchman of the Far East» with whom France shared innate qualities of philosophical wisdom, family devotion, and humanistic values (Bailey 2011: 11-12). On

the other hand, French officialdom betrayed a fundamentally colonial mindset by categorizing Chinese workers alongside conscripted colonial labor from North Africa and Indochina, while simultaneously issuing paternalistic instructions to employers warning of the Chinese workers' supposed «self-pride» and «childlike» nature that required careful management. This condescending framework collapsed entirely when Chinese workers failed to conform to expectations of docility, protesting dangerous conditions and contractual violations. French employers and local communities swiftly reclassified them from objects of cultural fascination into «lazy troublemakers» and «undesirables» whose presence made villages feel unsafe (Bailey 2011: 13-14). This dramatic reversal from veneration to vilification exposed the fragility of the 'special relationship' discourse, revealing it as a rhetorical construct unable to withstand the complexities of actual Sino-French interaction.

Notwithstanding, Chinese migrants helped broaden understanding of Eastern thought within the French intellectual scene by establishing cultural groups, publishing bilingual works, and engaging in public discourse. Meanwhile, exposure to French academia and philosophy reshaped Chinese views of modernity, fueling transformative movements like the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth protests.

Beyond seeking personal advancement, these migrants grappled with complex questions of identity and belonging. Navigating a space between being viewed as exotic outsiders and vital economic contributors, they faced the challenge of reconciling Chinese traditions with Western influences. This tension fostered hybrid identities that merged their cultural heritage with modern, global currents, a synthesis that would later inform key political and educational reforms in China.

Cai Yuanpei's role as a migration mediator

The Chinese Frugal Study Association in France emerged in the early 20th century as part of a broader ideological and practical experiment to reconcile labor, education, and revolutionary idealism. Rooted in the anarchist principles of mutual aid and self-reliance, it sought to transcend the rigid hierarchies of Confucian tradition and the encroaching authoritarianism of Marxist-Leninist. Inspired by European anarchist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin, the Francophile

lobby visionaries established cooperative ventures, like bean-curd factories and printing presses, where participants engaged in manual labor during the day and studied science, languages, and philosophy at night, embodying the *ethos* of work-study as a means of personal and collective liberation (Scalapino, George 1961: 3). This synthesis of labor and intellect aimed not merely to fund education but to cultivate a new class of self-sufficient, critically minded individuals capable of reshaping China's future. The movement's goals were twofold: to democratize access to knowledge by breaking down the elitist divide between mental and manual work, and to foster a decentralized, egalitarian society rooted in libertarian socialist ideals. However, in 1913 President Yuan Shikai, alarmed by the scale of unauthorized overseas organization and fearful that returning students might import subversive republican or radical ideas, ordered the closure of the Beijing preparatory school, effectively terminating the frugal-study scheme at its inception. With the outbreak of World War I in mid-1914 further compounding the impossibility of sending new recruits to Europe, the Association ceased all formal activities until it was reimagined years later as a work-study program for Chinese laborers in France.

In 1915-16, as France began recruiting large numbers of Chinese workers for its wartime economy, these organizers seized the opportunity to scale up their educational vision and relaunched the movement on a new footing under the banner of the Educational Association in France. By March 1916 the formal Work-Study program was underway, enrolling thousands of less-educated rural recruits in French factories, where their wages would fund concurrent evening classes in French, Western science and political theory. From its inception, the program was driven by three intertwined aims. First, participants would achieve financial self-sufficiency, since rather than relying on costly scholarships or government stipends, they would work their way through study, earning modest wages in factories. Under strict frugal rules, with «strict prohibition of visiting brothels, gambling, smoking, drinking, or any harmful/extravagant activities» (Cai 1984 [1917], III: 37), they would share communal lodgings to minimize expenses. Second, by immersing students in the European workers' movement, the organizers sought to expose them to socialist and anarchist ideas circulating among French workers (Scalapino, George 1961: 3). They viewed the factory floor as a living laboratory for collective organization and political awakening,

as «work-study was to have a moral as well as an educational function [since] in addition to making workers more knowledgeable, work-study would eliminate their ‘decadent habits’ and transform them into morally upright and hard-working citizens» (Shurtleff, Aoyagi 2011: 121). Third, the program aimed at cultivating a new cadre of modern Chinese leaders. Recruits, often ignorant of modern science, would return home equipped with both technical skills and a revolutionary consciousness, ready to spearhead China’s social and political renewal, since «to impart scientific knowledge in East Asia, studying in the West is essential» (Cai 1984 [1917], III: 36). Cai Yuanpei understood the Work–Study Movement as an experiment in ethical reciprocity and self-formation rather than mere vocational training. Cai (1984 [1915], II: 396) invoked Mencius’ dictum—«A single person depends on the labor of countless craftsmen»—to emphasize Guanzi thought that «if one man does not plow, others will starve; if one woman does not weave, others will shiver», thus framing every act of toil as a moral obligation. Here, the absence of one’s toil fractures the delicate symbiosis of communal life, transgressing not just societal norms but the ethical fabric of benevolence itself. Mencius’ craftsmen metaphor, rooted in Confucian role ethics, posits that each individual’s labor is a thread in the tapestry of collective harmony—a harmony contingent on the dutiful fulfillment of one’s station. For Cai (1984 [1921], IV: 33), true expertise required more than manual dexterity; it demanded an integrated intellect that continuously interrogates the conditions of its own practice:

(...) it becomes clear that those engaged in scientific pursuits can not only select certain arts during their leisure time to cultivate their minds but also discover an aesthetic dimension within their specialized field of study. Is this not a case of «killing two birds with one stone»? It is often observed that those who devote themselves exclusively to science, without engaging in the arts, tend to fall into a state of bleak monotony.

Cai’s vision of an aesthetic education compounded into the daily life by situating factories, farms and workshops as laboratories of philosophical inquiry, and such ontological vision underpinned his insistence on diligent work and frugal study. Therefore, by collapsing the hierarchy between thinking and doing, Cai’s model sought to produce individuals capable of both technical innovation and critical

selfreflection—a synthesis of Confucian selfcultivation, Kantian autonomy and anarchist mutual aid that, in his view, held the seeds for personal virtue and national renewal (Duiker 1971: 224). This nascent project of national regeneration must, by necessity, embark upon a deliberate phase of iconoclasm, in which the prevailing moral edifices and inherited mores of contemporary Chinese society are subjected to a rigorous, even ruthless, deconstruction, in order to create «a “new” world bottom-up» (Müller 2023: 4). Only through this radical severance can the raw materials of custom and convention be reassembled into a novel socio-cultural synthesis, or, a new China whose coherence is neither servile replication of the past nor unreflective imitation of Western modernity, but rather an autonomous articulation of communal life. In this endeavor one discerns the influence of Peter Kropotkin’s anarchist thought, particularly the claim that liberation depends not on the mere rejection of authority but on collective self-organization grounded in cooperation rather than coercion. As Kropotkin (1898: 28) argues, anarchism seeks to abolish imposed authority and hierarchical organization while preserving «the precious kernel of social customs without which no human or animal society can exist», insisting that such customs be sustained «by the continued action of all, rather than by the authority of a few».

In a 1916 letter to the Ministry of Education, Cai Yuanpei sought financial support for the newly founded Sino-French Educational Association by situating its activities within both educational reform and migration policy. He argued that French education embodied ideals of intellectual freedom compatible with Confucian moral philosophy and possessed scholarly resources beneficial to China. Cai noted that, over the previous decade, he and his collaborators had promoted educational exchange through the circulation of books and journals, the facilitation of overseas study, and the organization of educational programs for Chinese laborers. Although these initiatives had begun with limited means, their scope had gradually expanded. Cai further emphasized that, with the support of French educators, the Sino-French Educational Association had been established as a joint Chinese–French institution, enabling greater efficiency through access to French resources. In response to France’s recruitment of Chinese workers, the association prioritized the creation of a school for Chinese laborers. The French government, he reported, had provided a school building and committed

an annual subsidy of 10,000 francs. While based in Paris, Cai stressed that the association's ultimate purpose was to serve China's educational development, thereby justifying the need for official support from the Chinese Ministry of Education (Cai 1984 [1916], II: 474-475).

Responding to this plea, the state endorsed and partially funded the Overseas Chinese Workers' School, while Cai himself organized a parallel teacher training college in Beijing to supply pedagogues fluent in both Chinese and French. Within France, Cai cofounded and cochaired the Sino-French Education Association, alongside the Sorbonne historian Alphonse Aulard. At its inaugural session in 1916, Cai (1984 [1916], II: 415) invoked the Ancient Chinese education, harmonizing ritual and music as embodiments of Heaven's natural order, cultivated profound philosophical traditions yet lacked empirical rigor, hindering structured scientific and artistic systematization—a historical gap that galvanized China's turn to French educational collaboration to fuse its rich heritage with modern precision and theoretical innovation. These frequent analogies between the French and Chinese cultures have been used to reinforce the narrative of a need for a development in the Chinese education. Previously, Cai (1984 [1912], II: 131-132) has drawn on the shared affinities between «French republican ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*» and «Confucian values of *yi* (righteousness), *shu* (forbearance) and *ren* (benevolence)», thereby securing French intellectual endorsement of the workers' school. This institution not only provided logistical support, such as arranging classroom space, subsidizing instructors and liaising with local authorities, but also symbolized a highlevel cultural accord that legitimized the Chinese educational mission within France's republican framework.

Pedagogically, Cai's most concrete mediating act was the compilation of his forty lectures into *Teaching Materials for the Overseas Chinese Workers' School*. Eschewing rote memorization, Cai structured the chapters on History and Geography to train migrants in critical analysis rather than the passive absorption of content (Ronen 2023: 1018). In History, for instance, Cai (1984 [1916], II: 452) insisted upon examining the «right and wrong, examine their successes and failures, emulate what was right and successful, and guard against what was wrong and failed» behind each chronicle and urged workers to recognize historiography as a contested field shaped by power dynamics. In Geography, Cai (1984 [1916], II: 453) likewise presented human—environment interactions as contingent and

dialectical, equipping migrants to interpret their new milieu in France and to reflect upon China's own regional diversity.

Cai transformed migration into intellectual cultivation by merging Confucian, Kantian, and French pedagogies. He institutionalized this vision by collaborating with Li Shizeng in 1920 to establish the Sino-French University network, which linked colleges in Beijing and Guangzhou with the Lyon Sino-French Institute. Operating until 1946, this arrangement enabled nearly five hundred Chinese graduates to study in France, creating a lasting educational corridor through which France supplied critical methods to China while China projected its values onto Europe. Leveraging his roles as Education Minister and Peking University Chancellor, Cai bridged state reform and migrant aspirations, establishing migration as a conduit for ideas, ethics, and institutional innovation that shaped future Sino-European exchanges.

Pedagogy and Praxis: The Work–Study Movement as Dialectic of Emancipation and Constraint

The Diligent Work–Frugal Study Movement first assembled a cohort of Chinese youths in Paris factories and evening schools where they endured «ten hours a day of grueling work, pitiful wages, poor food in the factory cafeteria, and abuse by masters» (Pantsov, Levine 2015: 26). And after all that, workers still had to attend nightly lectures on Marx, Bakunin, science, and Confucian ethics. Despite Cai Yuanpei's unwavering belief that education and migration could serve as twin levers of emancipation, the lived realities of the Chinese laborers in France frequently lay in stark contradiction to his pedagogical ideal. Preparing students for life in France proved fraught with challenges, as many lacked the necessary linguistic, technical, and financial foundation, as «many went unprepared; upon arrival, some had weak mental stamina, others insufficient French proficiency or technical knowledge» (Cai 1984 [1920], III: 375), leading to struggles in securing suitable work or adapting to rigorous study demands. The Sino-French Educational Association acknowledged these hurdles, revising guidelines to mandate at least one year of preparatory training in language and vocational skills, alongside a physical examination to ensure students could endure labor. However, the financial barrier of requiring 600 silver yuan for travel and

living costs remained prohibitive, not everyone could afford it. These constraints underscored the tension between idealism and practicality, forcing organizers to concede that even with rigorous preparation, «however much they expanded efforts, the number of students would always be limited» by France's finite industrial capacity and the steep costs of cross-cultural education (Cai 1984 [1920], III: 375). Cai's own proposal for Diligent Work and Frugal Study presupposed a degree of agency that many laborers simply did not possess. His educational materials, most notably the *Teaching Materials for the Overseas Chinese Workers*, were drafted with the assumption that workers would have both the leisure and the material security to attend nightly classes in moral cultivation, history, geography and science. In reality, exhaustion from long hours at munitions plants, metallurgical works or railway repair sites left many too physically depleted to benefit fully from even modest pedagogical offerings.

Beyond these failures of implementation lay a more profound philosophical tension. Cai's synthesis of Confucian selfcultivation, Kantian autonomy and French republican secularism implied that rational education could dissolve social hierarchies and engender a cosmopolitan solidarity transcending national and racial barriers. Yet this very universalism risked occluding the particularities of migrant suffering. To speak of universal brotherhood in a context where Chinese migrants were routinely considered expendable labor ignored the intersection of race, class and empire mediated through a French colonial mindset (Burrows 2018: 71). When Cai invoked the shared moral ideals of East and West, he did so from a position of transcendent theoretical abstraction, one which lacked the concrete tools to dismantle the material conditions of exploitation.

The real potency of the work-study alumni, however, lay in their political ferment, as

many early Chinese Communists emerged from this movement, making significant contributions to China's revolution—an outcome beyond the original intentions of founders like Cai Yuanpei, yet one in which they indirectly played a role (Tang 2018: 132).

In the smoke-filled back rooms of Paris and Lyon cafés, student-workers such as Zhou Enlai who «wrote weekly dispatches on diplomatic events

and international relations [,] actively participated in the establishment of Communist Party organizations all over Europe and became himself an important leader of the communist youth» (Barnouin, Yu 2006: 29). It is important to notice that were these actions somewhat directly contributed to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in July 1921, where nearly one-third of the inaugural fifty members had honed their class analysis on European factory floors.

By early 1921, however, ideological fractures erupted over Marxism's emphasis on a centralized dictatorship of the proletariat, championed by figures like Chen Duxiu, and anarchism's rejection of all state authority. The debate grew irreparable after the Bolsheviks' violent suppression of anarchist dissenters during Russia's Kronstadt uprising in March 1921, which alienated Chinese anarchists from the Socialist League, a short-lived coalition of Chinese Marxists, anarchists, and radicals united by their opposition to capitalism and imperialism (Liu 2000: 297). Deprived of its unifying purpose, the League disintegrated, clearing the path for Marxists to dominate China's revolutionary movement. These schisms illuminated a deeper ideological fault line: whether China's modernization required a slow, cosmopolitan integration with Western liberal models or an abrupt, proletarian-led rupture with all existing power structures.

The movement's *alumni* embodied a dialectic of universalism versus particularity that tested the limits of Cai's pedagogical abstractism. Upon returning to China, many alumni discovered that the status conferred by their European credentials opened municipal employment doors but closed elite party corridors controlled by old-guard revolutionaries suspicious of foreign influence. This revealed that universal ideals of brotherhood and rational self-governance could founder on the particular demands of racial hierarchy and intra-party factionalism due to the «Kuomintang emphasis on state-controlled education emphasizing party indoctrination» (Bailey 1988: 461). Confronted by these contradictions, the final generation of anarchists and former workstudy activists, as Tom Marling (2013: 191) shows, gravitated toward a «deessentialized ontology» grounded in pragmatic, situational action rather than doctrinal fidelity. They foregrounded situational responsiveness to mass suffering over imposing idealized blueprints, thereby foreshadowing contemporary debates on localized praxis and antiauthoritarian feminism that remain relevant in China's ongoing experiment with bottom-up

governance. Collectively, these experiences forced a reckoning with the paradox of agency. The critical tools imparted by Cai's curriculum, such as historiographical reflexivity, Kantian autonomy, or anarchist mutual aid, proved insufficient to dismantle the systemic racism and military discipline that faced migrant workers, just as the CCP's organizational rigor found itself constrained by the inertia of feudal warlordism and colonial-era infrastructures.

Thus, Cai Yuanpei's institutional mediation and transnational pedagogy both expanded the horizons of modern Chinese education and exposed its limits, rendering the work-study movement a double-edged sword: a fount of revolutionary leadership and vocational innovation on one hand; and a cautionary emblem of liberal cosmopolitanism's fragility in the face of entrenched power and structural violence on the other. The movement's enduring legacy, visible in China's vast network of vocational colleges, in the CCP's foundational mythology, and in recurrent debates over the role of education in promoting social justice, remains inseparable from its contradictions. These contradictions continue to animate academic and policy discourse on migration, pedagogy and modernization, reminding us that the quest to align educational aspiration with material liberation demands both visionary ideals and rigorous engagement with the particular realities that shape human destinies.

Final considerations

The Chinese presence in France during the early twentieth century constituted a critical arena in which migration, education, and political imagination intersected. This article has argued that Cai Yuanpei's engagement with this context should be understood not simply as a set of pragmatic organizational interventions, but as a sustained attempt to think of migration as a pedagogical and moral process. His involvement in the Association for Frugal Study, the Working-Study Movement, and the Educational Association in France reflected a broader effort to reconcile educational universalism with the concrete social conditions of Chinese student-workers abroad.

Rather than treating migration as either a source of cultural loss or an unqualified vehicle of emancipation, Cai approached it as a space of disciplined transformation. The institutional frameworks he promoted

sought to mitigate the disorienting effects of displacement through structured forms of labor, study, and communal life. At the same time, these frameworks inevitably imposed normative expectations—of frugality, discipline, and moral self-regulation—that did not always align with the lived realities of migrant students. The history of these initiatives thus reveals a persistent tension between pedagogical aspiration and social constraint, highlighting both the ambition and the limits of Cai's project.

Cai's intellectual orientation was shaped by his selective engagement with European social and moral thought, including the emphasis on voluntary cooperation associated with Peter Kropotkin and the universalist ethics of Immanuel Kant. Yet these influences were not adopted wholesale. They were reinterpreted through a Confucian ethical lens that stressed moral cultivation, social responsibility, and continuity with historical tradition. The resulting synthesis was neither internally seamless nor politically dominant. As revolutionary ideologies hardened in the following decades, Cai's plural and mediating vision was increasingly marginalized by more doctrinaire frameworks.

Nevertheless, the significance of Cai Yuanpei's interventions lies precisely in their refusal of ideological closure. His engagement with the Chinese community in France exemplifies a mode of transnational intellectual practice grounded in negotiation rather than rupture, and in adaptation rather than abstraction. By foregrounding the interaction between educational ideals and migrant experience, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how intellectual projects operated within the material and social realities of early twentieth-century migration. Cai's legacy, viewed in this light, is not that of a completed synthesis, but of an unfinished experiment in mediating between cultures, institutions, and historical trajectories. In this light, future research may further illuminate this dynamic by foregrounding the voices and agency of the student-workers themselves, exploring how their experiences both conformed to and contested the normative frameworks designed for them.

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