

**CHINESE WOMEN BETWEEN
EDUCATION AND MONEY**

**IDEAL AND REALITY OF FEMALE
WORKER-STUDENTS IN THE EARLY
YEARS OF THE REPUBLIC**

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Background

Chinese women who were striving for education at the beginning of the 20th century had to face various obstacles. Apart from the conventional image of women and common custom which regarded school attendance for girls as superfluous or even harmful for their future, further practical problems resulted from these received perceptions: on the one hand, the available financial resources of most families were, first of all, invested in the education of their sons; thus, on principle, only rich families were in the economic position to consider an education also for their daughters at all.¹ On the other hand, there was a lack of available schools for girls. Apart from foreign missionaries, some reform-minded Chinese had also started to establish girls' schools on their own initiative, but financing of these schools was usually precarious.² Furthermore, such endeavours often encountered local opposition. The alternative was to study abroad; however, the financial barrier for potential female aspirants choosing this option was even higher than for school attendance in China.

The first female students studying abroad went to Japan which, after the spectacular success in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/5, attracted more and more Chinese students. The advantages of Japan were its proximity and its affordability; the cultural and language environment was not as foreign as that of Western countries, and Japan had apparently made the right selection of Western knowledge for becoming successful as

¹ Missionary schools were an exception in so far as they usually did not charge any fees. On the contrary: often they had to create incentives to recruit new students. Problems of acceptance lead to the fact that most of their clientele did not come from "average Chinese" families. The Christian girls' schools recruited primarily orphans or girls from poorer families by means of respective incentives (and of course girls from converted families). As a consequence, however, many Chinese families that considered themselves "dignified" would not send their daughters to these schools.

² The first girls' school in China was founded by missionaries in 1844 and the first Chinese initiative to found a girls' school is reported in 1898. In the following years, private initiatives increased. The Chinese state, however, started only in 1907 to actively push ahead the establishments of girls' schools.

an Asian nation. Thus the Qing establishment endorsed the idea to take a “shortcut” to China’s modernisation by a “learning from Japan”.³

The first Chinese women went to Japan along with their families. Active promotion of female students studying abroad finally started in 1905 with the founding of two special programmes for Chinese students attending Japanese girls’ schools to which China sent its first batch of students that year. These women were China’s first official female students abroad.

A further official programme for students travelling abroad which was extended to include also female students started in 1907 with the US as its destination. In the context of the Boxer indemnity payments, which the Americans had promised to turn into US-scholarships, it was agreed upon in 1910 to introduce at least set quotas for women.⁴ For Europe, however, no governmental programme that also took women into consideration was realised anymore under the Qing.

The majority part of Chinese students studying abroad financed their study with private resources anyway. Accurate data about these sources are difficult to find but it is obvious that those who drew on their own resources went to Japan in large numbers and only rarely found their way to far-away Europe. In France – later the destination of several work-study programmes – the (to my knowledge) first Chinese woman travelling privately there to study arrived in 1906.

The name of this woman was Lu Yueqin 陆悦琴. She belonged to a group of privately funded students from the home area of Zhang Jingjiang 张静江, the son of a rich

³ On Chinese students in Japan see Sanetō Keishū’s 實藤惠秀 classic: *Chūgokujin Nihon ryūgaku shi* 中国人留學日本史 (History of Chinese students studying in Japan), Tokyo 1960. See also Huang Fuqing 黃福慶: *Qing-mo liuri xuesheng* 清末留日學生 (Late Qing students studying in Japan), Taipei 1983² (first edition 1975); and Paula Harell: *Sowing the Seeds of Change. Chinese Students, Japanese Teachers 1895-1905*, Stanford 1992.

⁴ On the beginnings of state-financed study abroad programmes for Chinese women see Shu Xincheng 舒心成: *Jindai zhongguo liuxueshi* 近代中國留學史 (History of studying abroad [during the era of] Modern China), 3rd edition, Shanghai 1929 (first edition 1927), pp. 129-132.

Chinese businessman, who ran an import-export business in Paris and took over the function of a guarantor.⁵ There is not much known about the further fate of Lu Yueqin. Zhang Jingjiang himself came to France in 1902, together with Li Shizeng 李石曾, the son of a senior Qing-official, in the entourage of the Chinese ambassador to France. While Li Shizeng was studying biology, Zhang Jingjiang founded his own company and thus offered his compatriots a first contact point and shelter in France.

After the demise of the Qing and the founding of the Chinese Republic, the efforts to help Chinese students acquire a modern education started to blossom. With the help of – amongst others – Wu Zihui 吴稚晖 as well as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培,⁶ the minister of cultural affairs at that time, the above mentioned Li Shizeng set up a preparatory school in Beijing in 1912 for prospective students who wanted to study in France. The goal of their efforts was to enable young Chinese who were not well-off enough to study in France nevertheless. They tried to achieve this by effectively bundling all resources and by strict frugality. Li Shizeng, in particular, who himself was an anarchist, regarded France as the ideal example for China since France embodied a great revolutionary tradition, and at the same time it also maintained a strict separation of church and state. As a consequence, the public French education system was – in contrast to other Western countries – free from any religious colouring. Apart from that, France exhibited, Li argued, extraordinary achievements in many fields of knowledge. In addition to French language classes, the preparatory courses in Beijing taught their students mathematics and further fundamental knowledge. Beyond that, students were also taught Western etiquette and hygiene regulations.⁷ Another special feature of this school was further that men and women were equally accepted to enter as long as they were

⁵ See *Lüou jiaoyu yundong* 旅欧教育运动 (The Education Movement of [Chinese] staying temporarily in Europe), Tours 1916, p. 49.

⁶ All of them had already worked together in Europe in the last years of the Qing era. Li and Wu were central figures of an anarchist group in Paris that published the *Xin shiji* 新世纪 (New Century), a magazine that had been influential amongst Chinese students studying in the West.

⁷ See the rules and regulations of the preparatory school in *Lüou jiaoyu yundong*, pp. 54-55.

over the age of 14.⁸ By this, the school was China's first co-educative institution run by Chinese.⁹ The dimension of this step towards co-education can be seen in the fact that even in so-called "progressive" girls' schools, male teachers were separated from their students during class: by a curtain!¹⁰

However, due to the political situation in China, this first preparatory school did not exist very long; and after only four courses (the participants of which went to France), in Europe the First World War broke out. Thus, de facto only two women had finished the course: Zheng Yuxiu 鄭毓秀 (who later became famous as Soumé or Soumay Tscheng or as "Madame Wei Tao-ming")¹¹ and Zhang Yibao 章一保,¹² but only the former made it to France in the end. In France, however, more women joined the "frugal study" programme; most of them were family members of the organisers or of the participants.¹³

⁸ Ibid. p. 51.

⁹ According to Li Shuhua 李書華, it was even the first co-educative institution throughout China. (See "Wo yu liufa jianxuehui yubei xuexiao" 我與留法檢學會預備學校 [Myself and the preparatory school of the society for frugal study in France] in Chen Sanjing 晨三井 [comp.]: *Qingong jianxue yundong* 勤工檢學運動 [The movement for diligent work and frugal study], Taipei 1981, p. 42). However, Lingnan University, which was led by missionaries, was already performing co-education at the time.

¹⁰ Cf. Dai Xugong 戴緒恭: *Xiang Jingyu zhuan* 向警予傳 (Biography of Xiang Jingyu), Beijing 1981, p. 12, on the influential Zhounan girls' school 周南女校 in Changsha, which was said to be very progressive. Some of the female worker-students were later recruited from this school (see below).

¹¹ Her later husband Wei Tao-ming (Wei Daoming 魏道明) was a lawyer like her. He served, inter alia, as the minister of justice under Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 ("Chiang Kai-shek") and as his ambassador to the US.

¹² According to Li Shuhua (*op.cit.*, p. 23), she later became the wife of Tang Zaizhang 唐在彰. There is no further information about her. Li Shuhua had attended the preparatory school as well and went to France.

¹³ See the list of members in France of the "society for frugal study in France" from 1913. (Printed in Zhang Yunhou 張允候 et al. [comp.]: *Liufa qingong jianxue yundong* 留法勤工檢學運動 [The movement for diligent work and frugal study in France], 2 vols., Shanghai 1980-86, vol. 1, pp. 12-14). This list mentions 18 women.

Zheng Yuxiu (1896-1959),¹⁴ who later became China's "first female lawyer" and supported later female worker-students in France, was a very remarkable person. Similar to other rebellious women, her idol was the popular figure Mulan 木蘭; Zheng fought against foot binding, arranged marriages and further for educational opportunities. After attending girls' schools in China, she managed to convince her wealthy family to send her to Japan for study, where she, however, soon rather kept in touch with Sun Yatsen's Tongmenghui 同盟會 (Revolutionary Alliance). When she returned to China, she actively participated in the assassination corps during the 1911/12 revolution led by Li Shizeng, which aimed at forcing the Manchus into final abdication.¹⁵

She thus met Li Shizeng in the course of revolutionary activities and as a young girl took part in the study programme in France.¹⁶ From 1915 onwards, she studied law at Sorbonne, was involved with the Chinese delegation at the Peace Treaty of Versailles negotiations in 1919 and lobbied for preventing a Chinese signature under the treaties.¹⁷ In 1924 she was the first Chinese woman who did her PhD in Paris in law and later went for a career in China.¹⁸

¹⁴ Her year of birth is very often given as 1891. In her auto-biography (*My Revolutionary Years. The Autobiography of Madame Wei Tao-Ming*, New York 1943), she herself stated the year of her birth to be 1896.

¹⁵ Though Southern China had already fallen into the hands of the Republican forces in 1911, North China was still under the power of the Manchus. Li Shizeng had returned from France in 1911, and organised an assassination corps to selectively eliminate "hardliners" in order to force the Manchus to abdicate for good. Zheng Yuxiu, in her autobiography chap. 5 and 6, mentions that she transported bombs and describes the assassination attempts. Li Shizeng and Zheng Yuxiu remained members of the Guomindang, the successor of the Tongmenghui.

¹⁶ Before she left for France, she had taken part in the battle against Yuan Shikai's dictatorial ambitions and had planned another assassination. (For details see her autobiography chapters 7-10). That is why she did not travel together with her classmates.

¹⁷ As a result of Japanese demands that claimed the right of ownership over former German properties in Shandong, there had been disputes within the Chinese delegation over the signature which in the end was, in fact, refused.

¹⁸ Together with her later husband, she founded a lawyer's office and was the first woman that received a licence to practice at court. She and Jiang Jieshi's wife were the only female representatives in the parliament; and as one of very few women, Zheng took over various tasks for Jiang Jieshi's government.

During a visit home in 1920, she propagated the emancipation of women via education and took care of a group of young women who travelled with her to France for the purpose of a work-study programme. Zheng Yuxiu thus became, though being young herself, the “grande dame” of the study programmes in France.

The work-study programme¹⁹ was a modification of the above mentioned project initiated by Li Shizeng and Wu Zihui in 1912 to send Chinese students to France. De facto several participants of those initial frugal study programmes were cut off their financial sources due to domestic developments and the outbreak of the First World War. They could not – though being very frugal – focus on their study exclusively anymore but had to earn their own living. On the other hand France started to recruit foreign workers due to labour shortage. Li Shizeng, Wu Zihui and Cai Yuanpei thus organised a school for Chinese labourers in Paris during the First World War, and Li set up his own recruitment system in China in order to guarantee a minimum qualification of his workers on the one hand, and a fair treatment of these workers in France on the other. That way he hoped that the employed Chinese workers did not only sell their physical power but would also take something home from their stay in France – not only for themselves but also for their country. Though the French side was only concerned about the replacement of French workers who were fighting at the front, and thus did not recruit female Chinese labourers, the interest in male Chinese labourers strengthened Li Shizeng’s and his group’s idea to support financially weak Chinese students to go to France to also study there in the future: these students should be able to support themselves by first working in French factories.

These tasks took her back to France again in 1928. Apart from that, she was in charge of the education of jurists in Shanghai for seven years.

¹⁹ This programme in its stricter sense involved the years 1919-1921; however, very often it is hard to differentiate between pure students and worker-students, i.e. those who did also some work. For more information see the already mentioned compilations of Chen Sanjing and Zhang Yunhou; or *Fufa qingong jianxue yundong shiliao* 赴法勤工檢學運動史料 (Historical materials on the movement for diligent work and frugal study in France), 3 vols., Beijing 1979-1981.

Still during the First World War, Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui (together with influential French friends) thus founded an association for Chinese-French education. Beyond that, the preparatory school in Beijing was revived in 1917 and many offshoots eventually emerged all over China, which were partly combined with workshops for practical job training. The first worker-students arrived in France in 1919. During the main phase of this programme (1919-1921), approximately 1600 Chinese worker-students went to France, amongst whom were about 46 women.²⁰

The goal of the organisers around Li and Wu was to train as many Chinese in France as possible. On principle, women were also addressed but not specifically motivated.²¹ Work was only seen as a means to an end. As soon as the worker-students had enough money, they were supposed to devote themselves to their studies. The participants of the programme, however, held different opinions on this. Most of them shared the organiser's opinion that studying was the true aim of their stay; others were attracted by new ideas that were circulating in China in the meantime. One was Tolstoy's famous slogan of the "sanctity of work" which claimed that, for moral reasons, every person is obliged to do physical labour (primarily farming). Another was the specific Japanese model of *atarashiki mura* (new village), which was propagated in China by Zhou Zuoren from 1919 onwards. The founder of *atarashiki mura*, the Japanese writer Mushakōji Saneatsu, wanted to make a "genuine human life" possible in his commune by combining farming and artistic-intellectual activities. Furthermore, the cry for overcoming class antagonism between workers and intellectuals was growing louder. Workers should get more access to education via evening schools and intellectuals should not withdraw themselves in their ivory tower. Furthermore, the propagated individualisation during the New Culture Movement which dissociated the individual

²⁰ This figure is taken from Geneviève Barman and Nicole Dulioust who, as far as I know, were the only authors so far to have written on the female worker-students more specifically: "Un group oublié: les étudiantes-ouvrières chinoises en France" in *Études chinoises* vol. VI, no. 2, 1987, pp. 9-46.

²¹ Hua Lin 華林, a co-organiser, ran some kind of a promotional campaign in 1917 which explicitly addressed men *and* women. Apart from the educational opportunities for women, he also mentioned the highly developed mechanical weaving mills as a possible field of work and learning. (See Chen Sanjing pp. 116-118, or Zhang Yunhou pp. 46-48).

from the traditional family structure also required, as a consequence, economic independence. Hence, there sprang up many initiatives in China at the same time as the work-study programme in France that worked towards a connection between work and education.²² And also women participated in those programmes.

In the following the female Chinese worker-students in France as well as the women's group of the *gongdu huzhutuan* 工讀互助團 (group for mutual help in work and study), one of the most influential projects of a "new lifestyle" in China, shall be discussed, since these projects represented realised attempts to solve the dilemma of education and financial dependency also for women.

Chinese female worker-students in France

To which extent the female worker-students that had been arriving in France from 1920 onwards had attended the special preparatory schools set up in China,²³ is hard to tell. Apparently, in particular the French courses offered there were frequented also by girls who, however, did not intend (or were hindered by their families) to go to France afterwards.²⁴ Male worker-students, who had already arrived in France, though, sent encouraging signals to China to women they were acquainted with. Xiao Zisheng 蕭子

²² For an overall picture see Guo Sheng 郭笙: "Wusi" shiqi de gongdu yundong he gongdu sichao "五四" 時期的工讀運動和工讀思潮 (The movement for work and study and the work and study idea during "May Fourth"), Beijing 1986. See also Gotelind Müller: "Atarashiki mura versus Xincun: Zur chinesischen Rezeption eines japanischen Modells alternativer Lebensführung" (Atarashiki mura versus Xincun: The Chinese Reception of a Japanese Model of Alternative Ways of Living). In: Stefan Wild and Hartmut Schild (ed.): Akten des 27. Deutschen Orientalistentages (Bonn - 28. September bis 2. Oktober 1998) (Proceedings of the 27th Congress of German Orientalists 1998), Würzburg 2001, pp. 685-694.

²³ These preparatory schools were generally open to both sexes. However, special schools only for girls also existed.

²⁴ The *Shibao* 時報 (The Times), e.g., reported on December 12, 1919, that two Cantonese girls had enrolled at a specially set-up French language school in Beijing with the declared goal of studying at Beijing University later on. (Printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 1, pp. 167-168). Finally it turned out that their families had opposed their educational aspirations, which was perceived as "typical". (Cf. the report in the magazine *Gongxue* 工學 [Work and study], printed in *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 375).

生, for example, got in touch with Li Shizeng, who had founded a *doufu* (soy bean curd) factory in Paris at the end of the Qing era, requesting whether he could hire also Chinese women to work for his enterprise. By this, a specific working opportunity was presented to potential female participants of those programmes.²⁵ He further suggested to found a corresponding organisation for female worker-students of his home province Hunan. He strongly recommended to Cai Chang 蔡暢, a woman he knew well, to set up such an organisation as she was a member of the Hunanese *Xinmin xuehui* 新民學會 (study group “new citizen”) just like him. Other members of the latter group were Mao Zedong 毛澤東, Cai Hesen 蔡和森 (a brother of Cai Chang) and Xiang Jingyu 向警予, a friend of Cai Chang and the later wife of Cai Hesen. Since Cai Chang and Xiang Jingyu had attended the Zhounan girls’ school in the city of Changsha, the first known organisation of female worker-students was also founded there in the autumn of 1919: the *Hunan nüzi liufa qingong jianxuehui* 湖南女子留法勤工檢學會 (association of Hunanese women for diligent work and frugal study in France). The declared goal of the organisation was to improve the professional education in China after work and study in France and to especially promote women’s issues.²⁶

Apart from the perspective of finding work in Li Shizeng’s *doufu* factory, Hunanese embroidery was seen as a possible second economic pillar; hence, a further initiative undertaken was the establishment of preparatory courses in Shanghai where future female worker-students were supposed to learn French, embroidery and design.²⁷ The idea of bringing in something uniquely Chinese with the embroideries was also supported by the argument that by this no competition on the French job market would

²⁵ See his report on work and study published on August 4, 1919, printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 1, pp. 196-198. It is remarkable that Li Shizeng or the manager of the factory (Li’s friend Qi Zhushan 齊竺山) did not come up with the idea themselves since French women had been working there for some time already!

²⁶ The rules and regulations of the association are printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 1, pp. 198-200.

²⁷ See the report of February 26, 1920, printed in *ibid.* vol. 1, pp. 201-202.

be created.²⁸ This idea was also met with a positive response from outside Hunan.²⁹ Wu Zhihui, one of the initiators of the work-study programmes, was invited to the Zhounan girls' school and reported on the Chinese women who had already been studying in France on their own. He welcomed this initiative of the Hunanese women and assured them that Chinese embroideries would be well received in France. He also emphasised that in Europe many women had made inroads into traditionally male professions especially after the First World War and the ensuing lack of men. However, on principle, due to compulsory education, European women and men had similar qualifications. Hence, as a precondition, Chinese women had to reach the same educational level as men first. In this respect, Wu Zhihui primarily supported *study* abroad programmes for women.³⁰ Funding, though, was up to the students themselves. Certainly, there was not much money to be made in France with embroidery in reality.³¹

The first female worker-students who arrived in France all came from Hunan, including Xiang Jingyu, Cai Chang and her already aged mother Ge Jianhao 葛建豪 (1865-1943).³² In total, however, the biggest group came from Sichuan arriving at the end of

²⁸ See the article of the Hunanese *Dagongbao* 大公報, February 18, 1920, printed in *ibid.*, pp. 312-314.

²⁹ Cf. the exchange of letters between Zeng Xianzhong 曾憲中, a female student from Beijing, and Zhao Shiyan 趙世炎, a male worker-student in *ibid.*, pp. 367-374.

³⁰ Wu's speech of November 2, 1919, is reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 301-302.

³¹ Cf. the notes in Barman/Duloust, pp. 12-13.

³² Ge Jianhao was apparently the only one who still had bound feet. These three women were later celebrated in Communist historiography. In 1928, Xiang Jingyu became a "martyr" of the CCP and was – despite her young age – posthumously elevated to the rank of the "grandmother of the revolution". (See the above mentioned biography as well as *Jinian Xiang Jingyu tongzhi yingyong jiuyi wushi zhounian* 紀念向警予同志英勇就義五十周年 [Memories of comrade Xiang Jingyu at the 50th anniversary of her heroic death], Beijing 1978, with a calligraphy of ex-worker-student Deng Xiaoping who at the time was making his political come-back after the Cultural Revolution. However, Xiang Jingyu, this early exponent of the communist women's movement, does not seem to have been treated very generously by the party in the last years of her life). (See also Catherine Gipoulon: "Xiang Jingyu ou les ambiguïtés d'une carrière entre communisme et féminisme" in *Études chinoises* vol. V, no. 1-2, 1986, pp. 102-131). Ge Jianhao was not admitted to the party because of her age (!) but she was guaranteed a place in communist historiography anyway as the helping "mother of Cai Hesen" – a friend of Mao and "martyr" of the CCP. (It goes without saying that her, in fact, extraordinary personality was not taken into account at all). (On Ge Jianhao see Luo Shaozhi 羅紹志: "Cai mu Ge Jianhao 蔡母葛建豪 [Ge Jianhao, the mother of Cai {Hesen}] in *Zhonggong dangshi renwuzhuan* 中共黨史人物傳 [Biographies of leading figures in the

1920 together with the above mentioned female jurist Zheng Yuxiu.³³ According to her description, not all young women went abroad with the approval of their family.³⁴ One of the key hurdles was the necessary financial means for the sea passage: thus the money issue already started in China and was a key factor in the pre-selection of potential female participants.

Most of the female worker-students that arrived in France had a better education compared to their male counterparts. All of them had received secondary education and some had already worked as teachers, although on average they were only 20 years old.³⁵ In other words, those women that travelled abroad were hand-picked; they already had had to prove themselves in China and thus demonstrated self-confidence accordingly.

Most of them used their starting budget to enrol at the Collège des jeunes filles de Montargis (and several similar institutes), where they began to learn French in specially arranged courses. Only three of them started to work right away: two at Li Shizeng's

history of the CCP], vol. 6, Xi'an 1982, pp. 47-49). Cai Chang was one of the few women who took part in the Long March and who remained, up to the time of the People's Republic, a leading figure of the Communist women's movement. (Biographies of Xiang Jingyu and Cai Chang can be found also, e.g., in the *Biographic Dictionary of Chinese Communism 1921-1965*, 2 vols., edited by Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark, Cambridge, Mass. 1971; and in *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier international: La Chine*. Paris 1985). Cai Chang was interviewed by Helen F. Snow in the 1930s and also talked about Xiang Jingyu and her mother Ge Jianhao. (See Helen F. Snow: *Women in Modern China*. The Hague 1967, pp. 233-249).

³³ According to the 46 short biographies of the women identified by Barman/Dulioust, 13 of them came from Sichuan, 12 from Hunan, 8 from Guangdong, 5 from Jiangsu, 3 from Hebei and one from Fujian, Zhejiang and Henan respectively. The local origin of the rest is unknown.

³⁴ Zheng Yixiu mentioned in her autobiography (p. 131) that the girls were between 15 and 20 years old and that it needed some negotiation with their parents before getting them aboard the ship.

³⁵ Xiang Jingyu, for instance, had already directed a girls' school in her home district; Ge Jianhao had been trained at an advanced age to become a teacher and also had run a girls' school. Also Cai Chang, Ge's daughter, who later would play an important role in the CCP, was a teacher: she taught physical education. (On the issue of physical "liberation" see Fan Hong: *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom*. London 1997). The profession of a teacher was one of the most popular and most obvious professions for Chinese women with educational aspirations. The training normally followed a two-stage basic education. As a consequence, at times women at the age of 16/17 were already able to practice their profession. According to Barman/Dulioust's short biographies, most Chinese female worker-students were around the age of 20 at the time of their arrival. However, the given data do not seem to me totally reliable.

doufu factory³⁶ and one in a glass factory in Paris.³⁷ Apparently their first impression of France was positive since their letters to China argued for more female worker-students.³⁸

In China, the whole undertaking was celebrated as a milestone in the movement for emancipation. Finally, Chinese women had the chance to prove their ability to catch up with men and to be no longer dependent on others. Had not the women in the west also achieved their greater freedom by fighting for it?³⁹ Also some men supported this euphoria by calling upon women to finally take up a life of their own – and to not further drain men’s pockets.⁴⁰ Somewhat more soberly, a report on the real situation was published by the newspaper *Shishi xinbao* 時事新報 on January 30, 1921. The female worker-students, as far as it was financially necessary to them, tried to earn their own living; but, in fact, a huge gap existed between reality and ideal. In reality, it was more difficult for Chinese women to find a job since they were not suitable for most

³⁶ When Cai Hesen and Xiang Jingyu visited the factory in March 1920, they met only one Chinese woman. However, Qi Zhushan, the manager of the factory, repeatedly emphasised his willingness to hire more female Chinese worker-students if they needed money. He further offered his help in selling embroideries. (See Cai Hesen’s letter from March 8, 1920, printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 2, pp. 204-206). Also the statistics published in *Shishi xinbao* 時事新報 in November 1920 present only one female worker-student as working in the *doufu* factory. (Printed in *Fufa qingong jianxue yundong shiliao* vol. 1, p. 89).

³⁷ This can be concluded from the short biographies of Barman/Dulioust. The ones working in the *doufu* factory are given as the cousins Fan Xinqun 範新群 and Fan Xinchun 範新順. Zhang Ruoming 張若茗 was the one working in the glass factory. (In Barman/Dulioust her name is given as 張若名, but in *Fufa*... it is 張若茗).

³⁸ See, e.g., Xiang Jingyu’s letter of June 7, 1920, to her female friend and co-fighter for women’s rights Tao Yi 陶毅; printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 1, pp. 203-204 or in *Fufa*... vol. 1 part 1, pp. 24-25.

³⁹ See the enthusiastic statements of Zeng Xianzhong, a female student from Beijing, in the magazine *Gongxue* no. 1 and no. 3 (December 1, 1919, and January 1920), printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 1, pp. 372-374.

⁴⁰ Opinions like these were expressed by men like the famous educationist Xu Teli 徐特立, the second eldest participant of the work-study programme after Ge Jianhao (see Zhang Yunhao Vol. 2, pp. 566-567), or Li Jinhua 李錦華 (ibid., vol. 2, pp. 608-609).

types of unqualified labour;⁴¹ and typical female labour was poorly paid. Even if women did the same work as men, they were paid less. Thus women could only afford one study year out of two working years; men instead could finance two years of study by the same. The report further cautioned that the women concerned were already relatively well educated and thus particularly interested in higher education and highly motivated. Thus, the report indirectly argued for more focus on their studies.⁴²

This estimation was shared by the female worker-students themselves. 18 of them sent a petition to the Chinese Ministry of Education asking for financial support since they had no solid financial backing for their studies. They argued that without a basic education in French and professional skills, they could not find a job. What followed was, however, an astonishing change in their argumentation: although they had come to France with the intention of financing themselves, they nonetheless regarded their work in France basically as a waste of time. Reasoning that they had proven to be useful members of society already back in China when they had been working as teachers, they pleaded for their right to be financed by their native country now. If they could fully commit to their studies in France, they would return home earlier and bring back their acquired skills to the benefit of their home country.⁴³ The targeted financing of women (compared to the much more numerous male worker-students) was no injustice, on the contrary: after all, China owed her women a great deal since she had neglected

⁴¹ It should be noted that the organisers of the work-study programmes generally misjudged the French labour market: in 1920/21 also most of the male worker-students did not find a job which, at times, led to dramatic consequences and radicalised a part of the participants politically.

⁴² Printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 2, pp. 158-160, or in *Fufa...* vol. 1, pp. 143-145. However, these were pure estimates since at that point no worker-student had already worked for two years.

⁴³ This was a very typical pattern of argument which should not only open the state's pockets but also articulated the nationalism most Chinese shared at the time. (Cf. the slogan "Save the nation by education").

them for such a long time. Thus they asked for sufficient support for the following four years.⁴⁴

Thus, these female worker-students claimed tangible “compensations” as representatives of their sex, and further they made clear that they regarded work as only a necessary evil and preferred to be plain students rather than worker-students.⁴⁵ In a most dramatic way, Guo Longzhen 郭隆真, a female worker-student from Hebei, drew a lot of attention to her case: in a letter written with her blood, she complained about not finding a job neither at a French nor at an overseas Chinese factory.⁴⁶ As main reasons she named manpower surplus, qualification problems in upper level jobs, in the area of unskilled work, in turn, the unbearable presence of rude men, and the preference for male worker-students in overseas Chinese factories (at times also induced by bribery etc). While some of the male worker-students were supported in their studies by scholarships from their home provinces, she had been left empty-handed despite her better educational background.⁴⁷

There were, however, also opposing voices amongst the female worker-students. Zhang Ruoming 張若茗, the daughter of a professor who had started to work right away in a glass factory, emphasised the ideational side of the life of a worker-student – namely, as the *conscious* connection of work and study. Without going into women’s issues in particular, she demanded that the connection of work and study should not be done in a

⁴⁴ This petition was published in the *Minguo ribao* 民國日報 on January 30, 1921 (printed in Zhang Yunhou vol. 2, pp. 738-739) and in the *Shishi xinbao* on January 31, 1921 (printed in *Fufa...* vol. 2, part 1, pp. 379-380).

⁴⁵ In this respect it would be, in fact, more accurate to speak of “so-called female worker-students” since, *de facto*, most of them only studied.

⁴⁶ Whether she had tried it in reality is unknown.

⁴⁷ See *Fufa...* vol. 2, part 2, pp. 688-690. It is noteworthy that Guo Longzhen as well as Zhang Ruoming emerged from the Tianjin group *Juewushe* 覺悟社 (Awakening Society). (Zhou Enlai 周恩來 who also participated in the France programmes, had belonged to this group as well.) Guo and Zhang, however, held different opinions on financial issues (see below). Xiang Jingyu, who had left France in 1921 because of personal reasons (her husband Cai Hesen had been deported from France together with other radical worker-students, and she was pregnant), tried to mobilise further money for female worker-students. (See her letters in *Fufa...* vol. 2, part 2, pp. 693-699).

one-sided way for the only purpose of raising the educational level of the labourers but should also go in the opposite direction: the intellectuals should “lower themselves” to do physical labour as well.⁴⁸ In her opinion, asking for state-support (which, in fact, many male worker-students did as well) was simply a perversion of the work-study ideal.⁴⁹

High hopes were finally placed on the founding of the so-called Chinese university in Lyon, more aptly represented by its French name “Institut Franco-Chinois” since in reality it was only an appendix to the French University of Lyon. Since long, Wu Zhihui had supported the idea of creating a new Chinese university as a model. Due to difficult circumstances in China and due to the assumption that the Western surrounding would positively influence every Chinese, this university should be founded overseas. Wu Zhihui wanted to make full use of all facilities of the University of Lyon, which meant that Chinese students would enrol as regular students there. The Institut Franco-Chinois should only be in charge of organising the preparatory courses and food and housing. Wu Zhihui’s intention was to train China’s coming generation of professors there who, later, should gradually help to establish a new university system in China herself. Thus the whole undertaking was from the outset an elitist one. Since Wu Zhihui’s acquired means came from only some specific provinces, access to the Institut Franco-Chinois was consequently restricted and allocated.

The project became known amongst the worker-students in the spring of 1921, who were hoping that by this a solution was found for their educational aspirations. However, they were only poorly or even not informed at all about the specific background. When

⁴⁸ See Zhang’s report in the *Chenbao* 晨報 (Morning newspaper) on April 10 and 12, 1921 (printed in *Fufa*...vol. 2, part 1, p. 420). The background of this was the popular slogan of the “sanctity of labour”, and Tolstoy’s ideal and firm belief in the benefit of manual labour for everybody. It is perhaps not insignificant that Zhang herself grew up in a professor’s family while the other 18 women of the petition originated from the lower middle class and had less of a “natural” access to education.

⁴⁹ See Zhang in a further report for the *Chenbao*, June 12, 1921 (printed in *Fufa*...vol. 2, part 1, pp. 431-433). Male participants, as well, criticised the “non-independent attitude” of their fellow female worker-students. (Sheng Cheng 盛成, for instance, mocked Xiang Jingyu, the most devoted “leftist” woman, as not knowing better than standing there to whiningly scream: “right to live, right to study”. See his memoirs in Chen Sanjing, p. 304).

the elitist character in form of entrance examinations or tuition fees for those not holding a scholarship from their home provinces became clear, protests ensued. The female worker-students in Montargis, who were, as previously mentioned, relatively well educated and highly interested in a university education, made an appeal, which reflected the particularity of their situation:

The fact that, apart from the entrance examinations and tuition fees, also the university places for women were generally limited to 10 per cent, was sharply condemned as discriminatory. In China, Beijing University and a few other institutes of higher education had just started to admit women but it turned out that almost no woman had the necessary qualification to enter. In an analysis on the main reasons for the lack of qualification, the female worker-students demonstrated that the cause for this lay in the still widespread belief that women were “different”. Even though in the meantime girls’ schools had been established in China, the girls were taught a different curriculum than the boys. As a result, women did not acquire the same qualification as their male competitors after graduating from secondary school; consequently, they had no chance to pass the entrance examinations for universities. That is why women could not be blamed for their lower qualification, but society and the educational institutions. To remedy this situation, the study content, the teaching staff as well as the economic conditions had to be improved for women.

The last point, in particular, was strongly emphasised by the female worker-students; after all, Chinese women at the time were still far from equal rights in ownership or inheritance.⁵⁰ In financial terms, they were still much more dependent on their families than men; and in addition to that, many families did not or did only hesitantly support the educational aspirations of their daughters. Beyond that, women normally had reached the marital age by the time they graduated from secondary school so that additional pressure was put upon them from that side.

⁵⁰ This only changed at the beginning of the 1930s when the new civil code was introduced, on the design of which Zheng Yuxiu had had some influence.

This being the case, they demanded that the future university should abolish the limitations for women and the entrance examinations for them, or at least that women should be given the opportunity to attend preparatory courses to catch up with their qualification, and finally that they would also receive funds for their tuition fees. This last point was, they argued, no unjust preferential treatment of women: as a matter of fact, China only spent 1 per cent of what she provided for men on women's education. If the new overseas university really wanted to call itself modern, it had better not follow the old patterns of male elitism.⁵¹

Here as well the female worker-students invoked their representative role for the female sex in China and self-confidently made demands. Their appeal did not go unheard. In fact, some male worker-students criticised the special treatment of women.⁵² At times, the wife of the French senator Hugues Le Roux, who was befriended with Zheng Yuxiu, helped them out financially.⁵³ Xiang Jingyu, who already returned to China in 1921, organised further money and also Zheng Yuxiu lobbied for the female worker-students. Some of the female worker-students were admitted finally in 1927 and 1928 to study at the Institut Franco-Chinois in the context of a special competition for worker-students.

⁵¹ The demands, which were formulated on May 30, 1921, and signed by 12 of the female worker-students studying in Montargis, was published in the *Chenbao* July 29-31, 1921 (printed in *Fufa...* vol. 2, part 2, pp. 519-524).

⁵² Li Huang 李璜, who also due to political reasons (he was a self-declared anti-communist) had only little sympathy for the Montargis women, did not forget to mention in his memoirs that the women received a special treatment from the school principal's wife. They got single-rooms and ovens. (See Chen Sanjing p. 134). (The group around Cai Hesen including his wife Xiang Jingyu and his mother and sister was called "Montargis faction" because they all navigated towards communism). The later famous female author Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (a non-Communist), who enrolled at the Institut Franco-Chinois, confirmed a special treatment of women, which had already started on the ship. She explained this, however, rather with the small number of women. (Chen Sanjing p. 462).

⁵³ Li Huang made the sarcastic remark that even „anti-capitalist" women such as Xiang Jingyu and Cai Chang did not have any objections against the money of that woman – an American by birth. (Ibid., p. 145). (According to Zhou Enlai, Madame Hugues Le Roux in the end did not support Xiang Jingyu and three other women because they broke their promise of not participating in a demonstration for more money from China – which in itself casts a certain light on the women concerned. See Zhou Enlai's report in *Fufa...* vol. 1, pp. 30-31.)

As far as work experience is concerned, apart from the three women mentioned earlier who first worked and then studied, only few had worked in France for sure.⁵⁴ Even though Cai Chang, who later was the only female worker-student in a leading position in the CCP after Xiang Jingyu's execution by the Guomindang, dutifully claimed that they had a friendly relationship with French workers in the factories,⁵⁵ a tangible exchange between female Chinese worker-students and French female labourers or the French women's movement is not evident. Apparently no closer contact or explicit solidarity existed within the gender boundaries beyond the cultural borderlines.⁵⁶

Concerning the relationship to the French labour force it was again Guo Longzhen from Hebei who formulated it most drastically: the French workers were of an "even more animalistic nature than Chinese dock workers". That was why the employers did not want foreign women to work together with them!⁵⁷

The female worker-students in France thus tended to be interested in study only. Apparently, most of them managed to avoid working altogether and to obtain the necessary funds from elsewhere.

⁵⁴ These were: Cai Chang, Xiong Liguang 熊立光, Zhang Zhenhua 張振華 and probably Xiang Jingyu. Cai Chang mentions two years of work in four different factories. (See her – somewhat embellished – memoirs in Helen Foster Snow: *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241). Xiong Jiguang's employment could be verified by Barman/Dulioust (pp. 25-26 and note 49). According to these authors, Zhang Zhenhua, who had studied silk production in Sichuan, had at least completed an internship in a French tannery (p. 45). In Xiang Jingyu's biography (Dai Xugong p. 50), it is stated that she worked in a textile and rubber factory, and also in Li Shizeng's *doufu* factory. This is mostly based on Cai Chang's statements. (See the latter's reminiscences of Xiang Jingyu in *Jinian Xiang Jingyu...*, p. 1).

⁵⁵ See her named reminiscences of Xiang Jingyu in *Jinian Xiang Jingyu...*, p. 2, or the reminiscences in Helen F. Snow: *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁵⁶ Of course this could be also due to a lack of evidence. Obviously, the language barrier is another factor to be considered.

⁵⁷ See the above mentioned letter from Guo in *Fufa...* vol. 2, part 2, p. 689. Cf. also Barman/Dulioust (p. 26), who, not without good reason, called this attitude (which was widely spread also amongst the male worker-students) an "abstract sympathy for the proletariat while keeping a certain distance from its representatives".

The women's group of the *Gongdu huzhutuan* in China

At the time when in 1919 the work-study programme in France began to take off, in China as well – as mentioned – various projects of alternative ways of living had been created which equally blossomed around 1919-1921.

The involvement of women was noticeable in the best-known of these: the group for mutual help in work and study (*gongdu huzhutuan* 工讀互助團). Inspired by Zhou Zuoren's reports about the Japanese agricultural commune of Mushakōji Saneatsu since March 1919, especially Wang Guangqi 王光祈, the central figure of the *Shaonian zhongguo* circle (少年中國學會 "Young China" study society) developed the idea to start a commune in China as well – but in the city. By the end of 1919, he published his ideas, which were mostly taken up by students who wanted to emancipate themselves from the dependency on their families, not the least in terms of economic dependency, through communal life. In addition, their ideal was a new lifestyle that eventually led to radical views like the total rejection of familial bonds, marriages and even to the withdrawal from universities as "capitalist institutions".⁵⁸ However, it is remarkable, that these communal projects retained one traditional characteristic: they did not aim at a gender-mixed collective membership but the women organised themselves in their very own group.⁵⁹

Following the example of the so-called first group that consisted of men, the women in Beijing wanted to finance their studies themselves through knitting, sewing and embroidery to achieve economic independency from their families. By this, they hoped

⁵⁸ On the details of this project and the failure see the report of the activist (Shi) Cuntong (施) 存統: "Gongdu huzhutuan' di shiyan he jiaoxun" "工讀互助團"底實驗和教訓 [The experiment of the "group for mutual help in work and study" and its lessons] in *Wusi shiqi de shetuan* 五四時期的社團 [Associations of the May Fourth period]. 4 vols., Beijing 1979, vol. 2, pp. 423-440. On alternative lifestyles of the time, see also Gotelind Müller: *China, Kropotkin und der Anarchismus. Eine Kulturbewegung im China des 20. Jahrhunderts unter dem Einfluss des Westens und japanischer Vorbilder* (China, Kropotkin and Anarchism: A Cultural Movement in Early 20th Century China under the Influence of the West and of Japanese Models), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2001, part II, chapter 7.

⁵⁹ In total, four subgroups of the *gongdu huzhutuan* existed. The third subgroup was the women's group. More material on the whole group can be found in *Wusi shiqi de shetuan*, vol. 2, pp. 361-496.

to finally open up a new, constructive third way apart from the widespread reactions of women to familial pressure, namely submission or suicide. But when women tried to develop something on their own, they needed a real alternative to turn to,⁶⁰ and this alternative was to be the commune. With the slogan "female independence", women hoped to be able to finance their collective life through shared income. Just like the men did, they aimed at a working time of four hours per day. However, there were discussions amongst men and women about which type of work would make sense. In this context, some argued against embroidery since it was regarded as on the one hand unhealthy and on the other would merely produce "capitalist decoration".⁶¹ Some women nonetheless considered also non-productive work such as the job of a salesperson for everyday objects as acceptable.⁶² The basic idea, however, was to organise life and work *within* the commune.

Mao Zedong, e.g., who was encouraged by the suicide of a bride from Changsha (in protest to her arranged marriage) to address the oppression of women in China, visited the women's group in Beijing and was very favourably impressed by their project.⁶³

Just like the men's groups, the women's group also primarily failed because of economic reasons. In their effort to finance themselves with their own labour, they did not take into account that, in the end, there was also competition from outside the commune. Even if everything within the commune was synchronised and agreed upon, the market that was needed was outside – and to this market no one had really given any thought. Goodwill could not replace experience. Beyond that, being situated in an urban milieu with no land ownership, the communes necessarily had to face also high fixed

⁶⁰ One woman summarised the dilemma like this: "When I call for a rickshaw tomorrow, where shall it take me to?" (See *Fufa...* vol. 1, p. 310). Cf. also the famous question posed by Lu Xun about what actually happened to Ibsen's Nora after she had left her home.

⁶¹ See Luo Dunwei's 羅敦偉 (a male student from Beijing) comment in his report on the women's group, in *Shishi xinbao*, January 24, 1920. (Printed in *Fufa...* vol. 1, p. 311).

⁶² E.g., a women's group in Canton accepted this. (See *Fufa...* vol. 1, p. 319).

⁶³ See Guo Sheng, p. 57. Besides, it is interesting to note that Hunan province was represented especially numerously in the women's group of the *gongdu huzhutuan*.

costs such as rents. Thus their idealistic attempt to combine work and study failed quickly. Similar to the female worker-students in France, the female activists here were also without exception intellectuals from the middle class. (The same applied to the men of the *gongdu huzhutuan*). Female workers neither participated in the projects nor was their example ever taken up as a matter of discussion. Thus, the impact of such projects quite naturally remained limited.

Conclusion

The two examples outlined above prove that there had been Chinese women who tried to free themselves from their familial dependency which not the least revealed itself in financial dependency by creating alternatives. An important insight was that amongst non-privileged women this had to happen in an organised way in order to have any chance of success. Another insight was the fundamentality of economic dependency. This problem had been addressed already earlier by Chinese women (and by men anyway),⁶⁴ but no trans-regional women's organisation had developed so far which aimed at the realisation of some alternative.⁶⁵ Since the women responsible for these now emerging organisations came from the intellectual middle class, their approach to solve the economic problem went via education. Consequently, most of them regarded physical labour (as far as they ever did some) as only a means to the end of achieving higher education and qualified work; and also to free themselves from familial pressure. Only few women regarded work as a moral duty or even as a turn towards the working

⁶⁴ Consider, e.g., Chen Xiefen 陳擻芬, the first female editor of a Chinese women's magazine, or He Zhen 何震, who went into details on this issue in the anarchist journal *Tianyi* 天義 (Natural Justice) which she published together with her husband Liu Shiwei 劉師培 in Tokyo 1907/08. They themselves, however, obviously did not take any steps towards economic independency. From the male side, from Liang Qichao 梁啟超 onwards, economic dependency was a recurring topic anyway. Jiang Kanghu 江亢虎, who founded the "Socialist Party of China" in 1912, even challenged women at the end of the Qing to finally become economically independent. (See, e.g., his essay collection *Hongshuiji* 洪水集 "The Flood"; n.p. The preface is dated 1913, pp. 6-17).

⁶⁵ Local organisations existed, though. One famous example are the "women's houses" in Guangdong. Here, however, the members were female labourers who worked in silk production.

class (as the CCP historiography tends to suggest for its “heroines”). Thus, they apparently did not really care when exchanging the ideal of self-sufficiency with a state-funded or other third-party funded study. (In this respect, admittedly, they did not differ much from the men, whereas the success in their studies was comparatively higher amongst women).⁶⁶

Apart from the socialist influences which were very obvious amongst the women in Montargis who wrote the petitions, their argumentation also revealed a new self-confidence of women – namely to stand up for their rights as a group, and further, to not simply accept the accusation of being responsible for their lower position in education themselves. Their option of reaction, i.e. to come forward as demanding petitioners, however, also shows that women were not yet able to conceive a satisfactory solution to their dilemma of educational ambitions and economic dependency. Hence, they merely expected it from society.

⁶⁶ This is emphasised by Barman/Dulioust (p. 28).