

**Pauline LAVOIX, "The relationships between China and France in the telecommunications" (Les relations franco-chinoises dans le domaine des télécommunications), Master thesis in contemporary history directed by Pascal Griset, University of Paris-Sorbonne Paris IV, 2008, 143 p.**

Studying the China of the beginning of the twentieth century is like diving in a huge disorder, trying to reorder it, with the help of our occidental standards, in order to found an historical sense. When we are analysing an event, or any decision of both parts, we immediately notice the tensions between China and the western world. We might also notice this tension when studying the complex relationship between two of the actors in China at this time: The Chinese people themselves and the French people, especially in the telecommunications' area.

With the term of communications, we have to include, first the telegraph, that the Chinese Authorities see, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a necessity to achieve the modernisation of the country. But China can't develop the telegraph without the help of the great western powers. Indeed, concerning telecommunication and modernisation, they are representing the model every country has to imitate. We are also studying the expansion of the TSF and the telephone. With these two techniques too, the Western powers represent a model. At this time the TSF and the telephone are in the foreigner concessions in China. These places – American, British, German, French or Dutch – are a sort of mirror of the "civilized country".

Nevertheless, imitate the western countries is not like being submissive to them. The aim is more to understand western techniques and process and then to adapt them to China. The problem is that, according to France, such an attitude is not acceptable. Indeed, before World War One, China is subordinate to the western countries on his territory. With the fall of the Empire, the financial loans increase a lot the weight of the western powers on any political decision. What we call at that time the "Question of the Extreme-Orient", is more a euphemism, which hide a colonial phenomenon.

In this "hypo colony" or "semi colony"<sup>1</sup>, France owns some influence's areas, both geographical – in north east Chine, in the South and around Shanghai – and administrative.

1901, a French man is called to be co-general chief of the Chinese Posts. This event explicitly symbolises French superiority in the Chinese French relationship. It's also this event that we choose as the starting point of our study. In China, the administration of the telecommunications is a part of the administration of the Posts and the Telegraphs. Do we have to conclude that France, who already controls the Posts, will found, in China, an attractive market for French telecommunication enterprises? France certainly has an advantage, but this advantage is more political than commercial. The commerce trade is more the result of French enterprises themselves, without the help of French personalities who work for the Chinese Posts. Nevertheless the French diplomatic body can hardly get clear of a paternalistic and colonial perception of China. According to a lot of diplomats, China is still the back territory of Indochina. France tries to have the same prestige, the same influence in China that she already has in Indochina. But, at the same time, she checks every French enterprise's ambition. Every action that could have bad repercussions on Indochinese development is left away. It's only when France lose the Indochinese colony, when China become totally independent after World War two, that France give up all her ambitions and

---

<sup>1</sup> These terms were creating by Sun Yat-sen and Lenin to designate China and the western domination.

illusions toward China. So, the superiority of France on the Chinese Posts is more a symbol of the French prestige and a proof of French superiority in this area. Due to the fact, in France opinion, this post is the most important fact. That the good working of Chinese posts could be attributed to a French man is primordial. So when the growth of the Nationalists began to be dangerous for foreigners' jobs in China, the French diplomatic body saw this event as a personal humiliation. The constant wish of Damien de Martel, first minister of France in China will be to restore the same situation as in the beginning of the twentieth century, before World War one. But, despite his efforts, he will fail. After China's refusal to replace Picard Destelan with another French personality, the decline of French influence in this Chinese administration is irretrievable. It's like a first decolonization.

We have decided to end this study in the year of 1931, for two reasons. The first one is the suppression of a French man as general chief, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1931. The Chinese government makes this decision unilaterally, and ends this way the period of French control on Chinese Posts. In fact it's the officialization of a non-official situation. Four days after, the 18<sup>th</sup> September, the Japanese troops overrun Manchuria. In March 1932, they enter Shanghai. Even if at that time, the Japanese army is not controlling the whole Chinese territory, in the opinion of some historians like John Fairbanks, these two attacks are the beginning of the World War Two in Asia. These events change completely the French-Chinese relationship, so that it would be the subject of another study.

From 1901 to 1931, there are a lot of political troubles in China. After the fall of the Empire in the year of 1911, China enters a troubling phase, which really ends only in the year of 1949, as Mao Tse-tung promulgates the People Republic of China. Even during the Nationalist Republic of Tchang Kai-shek, China is still divided between different Chinese factions and imperialists foreign powers. New governments quickly succeed to old governments, the country is divided between independent provinces and there is an atmosphere of civil war. All these facts are very important facts to understand the specificities of French-Chinese relationship. Besides, there is also the gap between two civilizations. This cultural gap explains partially this complex relationship. Our study evokes the French opinion. We want to underline the French habit, at that time, to think that Chinese people are inferior to French people. Chinese decisions can't be as serious as French ones. From 1921 to 1927, Chinese nationalism is more and more aggressive. There are a lot of signs of the approaching Nationalist Republic. But, still, France is very astonished, as she begins to suffer of Chinese nationalism.

During this trouble period, the growth of telecommunication is constant, stable. Even China can't avoid this general movement of expansion. The telegraph, the telephone and the TSF are very attractive for the modernising China. Meanwhile, it's a dreadful tool for the greedy western powers. Besides it's also a strategically stake. Indeed, contrary to the telegraph, with the TSF, there is no more the problem of countries crossed by the telegraph lines. TSF is also very practical to join quickly the colonies. For example, to establish the communication between Saigon, Shanghai and France, is a primordial stake for the French diplomatic body.

However, until the Republic of Nankin there is no really relationship, between France and China, concerning the telecommunications. It's more true to say that the CSF has some contacts with the British, the Japanese, the Americans, and that these contacts take place in China, and concern the international telecommunication of China. The three-part project of February 1923 is not approved by China. We have the impression that the French diplomatic body does not see China as a real international actor.

The history of French-Chinese relationship is at first the history of a check. Check between two countries, who don't try to understand each other, so who don't succeed to

communicate. It's also a part of French history. France doesn't want to dive on a new civilisation, but prefers stay on the surface. She does not understand clearly what is at stake in China. China, as she unifies herself, becomes "more Chinese". The matter is, concerning the telecommunications, to go from a situation of administrative and technological submission to something more equal, more strictly commercial.

We are studying, on the one hand how France considers this transition, on the other hand why it is so difficult to conquer the Chinese market. French enterprises stay very shy at developing telecommunications, even if China is asking for modernization. And, when the lack of good-willing is not the problem, it is China herself, who refuses any foreign colonialist or imperialist action. Nevertheless, China does not refuse any cooperation with the great western powers. Even Tchang Kai-shek says this cooperation is primordial. But France still pursues the process of colonization.

It's like blindness. French diplomatic body wants the same domination, the same facility as in Indochina. But at the same time, China is not the first market. The diplomatic body prefers do nothing as take any risk of losing his Indochinese prestige. A lot of French diplomats think the problem is the bad French method, the bad adaptation in China, and the lack of curiosity toward Chinese people. For example, even in the area of telecommunications, there are only very few French people who can speak Chinese.

The importance of the postal administration is great. Concerning first the French administration, we are studying there the "internationalization" of the French Posts. There is an original transfer of the powers, the competencies and the responsibilities from the French administration to the Chinese one. The French Authorities wanted to create, in China, a postal system that would be an extension of the French system. It's not without causing some troubles between the French ambition and the Chinese existing system.

Then, we analyse how the postal administration becomes a colonial tool – or at least a tool of domination. As they consider the Chinese Posts as the primordial tool of prestige, power and control in China, French people give them a too great importance. The study of the Chinese Posts let us observe each of these elements. All the contracts are the consequence of this French politic of colonization of the Chinese Posts. The post of general chief of the Chinese Posts is the starting point of a general movement of ambitions and pretensions. The Posts are a vector, of knowledge, human beings and prestige, but also a vector of the structural weakness of the French industry as the reserves of the diplomatic body. It's really impressive to see how the French authorities use the Chinese administration. It's like an appropriation. If France rules the Chinese Posts, so the Chinese Posts becomes French.

The kind of internationalization of the French postal model goes through the extension of the postal lines, but also through the exportation of the French skill. There are a lot of trouble and conflicts, but we can't deny the "pedagogical" effect of the French presence. Even if this pedagogy sometimes becomes more like obstinacy, as if French teacher did not want leave his Chinese pupil alone.

So we are standing at a cross-road between the history of international relationships and the history of innovation. How does China perceive these new techniques? How do the diplomatic body and the French enterprises broadcast them? How is evolving the dominating-dominated relationship inherited from the time of the colonization? And finally, in which way can we refer to an internationalization of the French Posts?

We have divided this study into three parts, in accordance with chronological and thematically evolution. In each part, the aim is to study each sight of the French-Chinese relationship: the administrative and political sight on the one hand, the commercial and economical sight on the other hand. We have tried never to forget the historical context, that

is to say the importance of the Chinese internal political evolution, but also the international growing of telecommunications, and the geopolitical overthrow.

The first part concerns the period from 1901 to 1921, from the nomination of a French as chief of the Chinese Posts to the Washington's Conference, which promulgate the closing of the foreign post offices. We will evocate the different ways of western penetration in China during the nineteenth century. We will try to explain clearly the historical context, which is the basis of the future French-Chinese relationship. We will also present the different actors and the way the French-Chinese relationship is evolving until 1921.

The second part concerns the growth of Chinese nationalism, from 1922 to 1931, just before the Japan attacks. We will first study how France is loosing her influence in the postal administration. Chinese Posts, after they have adopted the French model, left it, and lived their own way. France looses the post of co-general Chief. Each trial to have some weight in the new Chinese administration fails. Then, we will study the French commercial politic. Which are the strengths and weakness of French enterprises?

Finally, in the third part, we will study the city of Shanghai, as she reflects the complexity of the French-Chinese relationship.