

Education as a Bridge for Communication: Early Chinese Students in Europe and the Foundations of Global Citizenship

Charlotte Steffen, Pafos Municipal Museum, Cyprus

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of early Chinese students who travelled to Germany, France, and the United Kingdom between 1870 and 1930, situating their journeys within the context of global citizenship and education for peace. China's active initiative to send students abroad began during the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895), aiming to acquire Western technological and military knowledge. European countries welcomed these exchanges to foster diplomatic and economic ties with China. By the early 20th century, more students sought overseas education, motivated by the promise of better job prospects and political engagement. Many joined discussions with overseas political groups like the Kuomintang, expressing dissatisfaction with China's internal developments. Education remained the primary driver of migration, as European systems were perceived as advanced. The students' experiences extended beyond academic achievement. Their personal and intellectual growth abroad promoted cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. Though initially dispatched for national development, these individuals evolved into agents of global learning, exchanging ideas between China and Europe. Their contributions spanned technical, diplomatic, and social fields, underscoring education's role as a bridge for dialogue and mutual respect. Through a series of vignettes, this study illustrates how these students shaped China's transformation upon their return. Their legacy highlights the enduring value of international education in fostering global citizenship and intercultural dialogue—lessons still relevant for today's world.

Keywords: migration, education, Sino-European

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Introduction

Research on global citizenship education (GCE) has grown significantly in recent years, driven by the rise of a globalised economy and the increasing need for intercultural competence in educational systems. Although a universally accepted definition of global citizenship remains elusive, there is broad agreement on its core principles: fostering awareness of diverse perspectives, promoting intercultural understanding, and encouraging engagement across national and cultural boundaries. Scholars such as Schattle (2008) and Green (2012) emphasise that true global citizenship requires voluntary individual engagement with international issues and the ability to navigate multiple overlapping communities of identity and belonging (Green, 2012, pp. 1–2).

This paper re-examines these ideals through a historical lens, focusing on early Chinese student migration to European universities, specifically in the UK, Germany and France, between 1860 and 1930. It argues that these students, often overlooked in mainstream migration studies, actually were some of the earliest global citizens through their personal educational and intercultural experiences in the countries where they studied. Existing research on Chinese migration to Europe has largely focused on labour communities in port cities like London, Hamburg, and Rotterdam, beginning in the 1870s (Benton & Pieke, 1998, p. 4; Künnemann & Mayer, 2011). These workers were primarily active in the seafaring industries, where they would be seen as direct competition to the local labour market, who worried that they were “being priced out by ‘cheap’ Chinese labour.” (Benton & Pieke, p. 5). However, student migrants from China represented a fundamentally different type of transnational experience, rooted not only in economic necessity but in various levels of educational ambition and intercultural exchange (Steffen, forthcoming).

Origin of the Student Movement

The root of Chinese educational migration is found in the Qing Dynasty’s self-strengthening movement in the 1860s. Before the end of the century, the ruling dynasty had to face various struggles such as the first Opium War (1839), the Taiping Rebellion (1859), overpopulation, poor harvest and corruption. As a result, in the 1860s, China began a period of modernisation known as China’s self-strengthening period, also known as the Westernisation period (Hsü & Kachru, 2000, p. 268).

What is observed in primary and secondary sources is that there is a clear shift, before and after 1900 (Steffen, forthcoming). Before 1900, primarily military and naval students would find themselves abroad as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement, to help maintain the dynastic claim. These students typically came from newly established naval arsenals such as Fuzhou, which developed training programs that included overseas study. One notable student was Yan Fu, who joined the Fuzhou Arsenal out of necessity after his father's death (Lovell, 2012, p.154). He was among the first to be paid for training and was later sent to Greenwich, the first British Naval Academy to accept Chinese students, who were promised to be “treated with every civility” (Admiralty, 1877).

Students continued to be sent to France and the UK for primarily naval education and to Germany for artillery training until the 1910s, after which there was a broader shift toward general academic pursuits. Until then, their personal experiences were deeply shaped by their host countries vested economic, imperial, and diplomatic interests as well as the personal relationships that facilitated their studies abroad in the first place. In France, students had

access to a broader curriculum, beyond the naval studies, due in part to Prosper Qiquel, a French advisor at the Fuzhou Dockyard, who leveraged his connections to place students in institutions across France (Fong, 2022, p. 156). Students at the Greenwich Naval Academy in the UK experienced a more neutral reception, whereas accounts from Germany, despite the majority of the archives pertaining to these students being destroyed during the Second World War, suggest that early experiences there were fraught with cultural misunderstandings and limited communication, leading to significant difficulties. This included three members of the first student group being sent to an ammunition factory for insubordination, requiring diplomatic intervention to restore them to their student status (Meng, 2005).

The Shift

After 1900, the nature of Chinese student migration changed significantly. With the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the abolition of the Imperial Examination in 1905, studying abroad became a more accepted and personally motivated path (Elman, 2013, p. 5). Students were no longer exclusively government-sponsored; many received partial funding or paid their own way. Their fields of study diversified beyond military science to include engineering, textiles, diplomacy, and public administration (Steffen, forthcoming).

These shifts brought new dynamics. Social class, funding status, and personal background all shaped students' experiences as well as their engagement. One illustrative case is Ho Kai, the well-known barrister and philanthropist, who was a student at Aberdeen University (Choa, 1981, p. 10; Xianggang-Yixue-Bowuguan, 2006, p. 100). During his studies, he married a local woman named Alice Walkden in 1881; she returned to China with him but died soon after (Xianggang-Yixue-Bowuguan, 2006, p. 100). Nonetheless, the union that reflected early forms of intercultural connection, albeit later discouraged by official policy in 1910 (Lorke, 2019, p. 545). Indeed, the government would forbid scholarship students from marrying, under threat of having to return their scholarship funds. Yet, students from wealthy families who were self-funded often ignored these regulations and married anyway (Harnisch, 1999). These cross-cultural marriages typically involved Chinese men and local European women. This pattern was influenced by both social structures, such as the limited international mobility of women, and the fact that Chinese women did not generally attend higher education institutions abroad until the 1920s, after which there is evidence of women at universities in all three countries (Steffen, forthcoming).

Indeed, when it came to engagement and communication with host communities, interaction was not uniform. Factors such as political orientation, social class, funding status, and host country norms played a pivotal role. In the UK, Chinese students were advised not to choose an accommodation that would "prove conducive to a gentleman's life" such as a lodgings house (Hue, n.d., pp. 42–43). Hence, although students were trying to find accommodation, this had to fit within the frame of what was acceptable within British society. In France, for instance, students associated with the Diligent Work-and-Study Movement had to juggle academic goals with manual labour in local factories (Levine, 1993, pp. 29–32). Political activism further complicated these dynamics. At institutions like the Sino-French Institute in Lyon, students sometimes had to choose between maintaining academic progress and joining political protests or movements, which, throughout the 1920s, were particularly intense throughout Europe (Levine, 1993, pp. 29–32). This did not mean that all students lived a life of suffering. Some male students decided to focus on more of the freedom that going abroad leading to some very incensed reports by German officials stating that some young male students had undergone a shocking transformation from shy, well-raised young man had

become “pompous good-for-nothings.” (Berg, 1921). Another German government report even lamented that some Chinese students had been seen wasting time playing billiards and in coffee houses socialising with prostitutes (Traut, 1921). In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the majority of students across all three countries primarily focused on completing their education and returning home (Steffen, forthcoming).

Conclusion

The early Chinese students who studied in the UK, France, and Germany between 1860 and 1930 embodied a complex, multidimensional form of transnational engagement. Their journeys were shaped by historical, political, and primarily personal factors that illustrate how education served as a bridge for intercultural engagement and global citizenship, as observed in communication and intercultural understanding. Their experiences were often shaped by loneliness, financial strain, and cultural misunderstanding. And yet, through these struggles, they participated, sometimes consciously, sometimes incidentally, in shaping early forms of global civic engagement. Their daily negotiations across language barriers, social expectations, and political ideologies reflected not just adaptation, but also subtle forms of redefinition and contribution, as they would often be the first in-person interaction with Chinese people that other students and academics would have had.

Most of the students who went abroad were just trying to survive unfamiliar systems, improve their lives, or respond to the pressures placed on them by their families, by their government, or by circumstance. Some adapted well. Others struggled, made mistakes, or faded into obscurity. A few became influential figures, but most did not. Nonetheless, despite this outcome, the importance of these students is that they helped lay the groundwork for intellectual exchange and early forms of global citizenship, broadening the scope of how we understand migration, diplomacy, and identity formation in the modern world. Their experiences were often shaped by loneliness, financial strain, and cultural misunderstanding, themes that are very prevalent in international student migration in the present day. And yet, through these struggles, they participated, sometimes consciously, sometimes incidentally, in shaping early forms of global civic engagement. Their daily negotiations across language barriers, social expectations, and political ideologies reflected not just adaptation, but also subtle forms of resistance, redefinition, and contribution.

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Contact email: csteffen.research.intl@gmail.com