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“Sacred, the Laborers”: Writing Chinese in the First World War

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Chinese laborers in World War I France and their writing activities there. As the story of these laborers has been systematically overlooked in the history of World War I and the subsequent May Fourth Movement, this article endeavors to write the laborers back into the historical narrative that connects China, World War I, and May Fourth. It zooms in on how writing became crucial to the laborers and to the very program under which they were recruited. Between the laborers and a group of volunteers sent by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), there emerged the first modern Chinese mass literacy program. Writing became, on the one hand, a technology that supported the Allied war effort; on the other, it afforded a medium through which the laborers performed a test run of the new modern Chinese language that ushered in Chinese linguistic and literary modernity. An invaluable piece of writing produced by one of the laborers demonstrates how the “sacred laborers,” not unlike their intellectual counterparts, drove home the critique of the Great War and a particular version of the Chinese Enlightenment.

Keywords: World War I, May Fourth, James Yen, Chinese laborers, literacy, YMCA

On November 14, 1918, a celebratory crowd gathered outside Tiananmen in Beijing to commemorate the end of the First World War. Cai Yuanpei, then president of Beijing University, rejoiced over the Allies’ victory and China’s contribution to it. However, the triumphant sentiments would not last. In less than half a year, the prospect of a new world of peace, racial equality, and international justice would be tarnished by the scandals of the Paris Peace Conference. On May 4, 1919, Cai Yuanpei himself would see the victorious gathering at Tiananmen replaced by a crowd of 3,000 enraged students storming through the square to protest the Treaty of Versailles. In the immediate wake of the armistice, however, Cai and the crowd were still able to celebrate the Allies’ victory and honor the 150,000 Chinese laborers who served as workers and soldiers in the war. Cai hailed, “Sacred, the laborers” (Cai 1918).

It is not news that Chinese workers had labored overseas. For centuries, Chinese coolies worked in Mexican silver mines, laid American railroads, and travailed in the South African gold rush. But Chinese laborers' participation in World War I is a story less well known. From 1916 to 1918, between 140,000 and 200,000 Chinese laborers—most of them illiterate peasants from Shandong, Fujian, and Zhejiang Provinces—were recruited by the Allies and sent to Europe; the majority were stationed in France. The presence of these laborers in World War I was the precondition that enabled the Beiyang government to participate in the postwar peace negotiations and constituted the Chinese bid for the return of German leasehold territory in the Jiaodong Peninsula, now occupied by the Japanese. Were it not for the laborers, China's prize diplomat, Wellington Koo, would not have had the chance to make a plea in Paris for the return of the Chinese territory. The decision by the conference attendees to permit Japan's seizure of Qingdao, despite the laborers' presence and performance in the war as part of the Allied forces, was therefore interpreted as a betrayal and ignited widespread fury across China.

The Chinese laborers' direct contribution to the Allied war effort is best captured by Cai Yuanpei's rhetorical question in the same rallying speech: "Among us four hundred million Chinese, who else but the 150,000 laborers in France has engaged directly in the war?" (Cai 1918, 438). It seems only fitting that scholarly reflections on the Chinese experience in World War I and the subsequent May Fourth Movement should include the perspective of the laborers. However, generations of historians have largely left out the laborers' story. Canonical studies on May Fourth—such as Chow Tse-Tsung's *The May Fourth Movement* (1960) and Vera Schwarcz's *The Chinese Enlightenment* (1986)—affirm the causal relationship between the war and the movement, but they invariably overlook the laborers and their experience in the war. The May Fourth Movement—one of the most important political, intellectual, and literary landmarks in modern Chinese history—is thus generally subsumed under a narrative of intellectual history. Fabio Lanza's exemplary 2010 study on the emergence of the student figure during the movement corroborates such a tendency. This tendency can be attributed in part to the lack of primary materials from the laborers' sojourn in Europe. In addition, Paul Bailey speculates that the systematic oversight of these laborers is partly due to the interpretation of indentured labor in World War I as yet another episode in the Western exploitation of China; partly, too, the laborers' story has been eclipsed by that of the contemporaneous, high-profile work-study program of the 1920s in France (Bailey 2011). Be that as it may, even when historians do pay attention and

homage to Chinese laborers in World War I, the laborers have remained marginal in discussions of the May Fourth Movement and their critical engagement with the war has gone unrecognized (Bailey 2011; Xu 2005; 2011; Zhang 2009). They have been seen as either constituting “an important and significant aspect of China’s twentieth-century labour history” (Bailey 2011, 48) or functioning as “a critical tool” for the Chinese diplomats at the peace conference, who argued “for recognition, inclusion on the world stage, and internationalization” (Xu 2005, 13). It seemed as though the “sacred laborers,” once saluted, were ushered out of the narrative in both official and scholarly accounts of the May Fourth Movement.

This article endeavors to write the laborers back into the historical narrative that connects China, World War I, and May Fourth. In fact, the substantial connections between the laborers’ wartime experience and their contribution to May Fourth may be best located in their writing activities and the primary writings that emerged out of their European sojourn. The centrality of writing, inscribed in the very program under which the laborers were recruited, was brought to bear on the first modern Chinese literacy program, which emerged between the laborers and a group of volunteers sent by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Writing became, on the one hand, a technology that supported the Allied war effort; on the other hand, it was a medium through which the laborers performed one of the early test runs of the new Chinese language that helped usher in Chinese linguistic and literary modernity. Although the colloquialized written language used by the laborers was later misnamed by May Fourth elites as *baihua* (plain speech) for its appeal to pure orality, the direct connections between the laborers and May Fourth—not only as an anti-imperialist demonstration, but also as a literary and intellectual landmark—were distinctly legible in the writings produced during the first modern Chinese literacy program. Although the laborers’ voices—through both their choice of the written language and critical stance they expressed regarding the war—were overtaken by those of their intellectual counterparts, they contributed to the post–World War I discourse that sought racial equality and international justice. An invaluable piece of writing produced by one of the laborers demonstrated how the “sacred laborers,” not unlike their intellectual counterparts, drove home the critique of the Great War and a particular version of the Chinese enlightenment.

War and Literacy

The program that recruited the Chinese laborers was called “Laborers as Soldiers,” and it was adopted in May 1916 as a compromise between the eager Beiyang government and the reluctant Allies. From the onset of the war, the Beiyang government had made repeated attempts to send troops and arms to the Allies, in hopes of reinventing itself during the postwar peace negotiations. The Allies, however, adamantly refused a direct Chinese military presence, for fear of having to grant China postwar trophies and of causing complications with Japan, a member of the Allies under the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Alliance. It was not until late 1915, when the French and British armies had to square with a growing labor shortage, that the scheme of “Laborers as Soldiers”—previously proposed by the Beiyang government and declined by the Allies—was put back on the table.¹ Instead of sending troops, the Beiyang government would provide the manpower to release Allied troops from wartime labor such as digging trenches, working in munitions plants and arsenals, clearing camps and airfields, repairing roads, constructing railways, and transporting supplies. To avoid German suspicion and Japanese objection, dummy companies were established under the Allies’ supervision and put in charge of recruitment. These companies acted as representatives of the laborers and produced contracts binding them and the French and British governments. From the signing of the first contract in May 1916 to the end of the war in November 1918, some 140,000 to 200,000 Chinese laborers were recruited and served the Allies.²

While firsthand accounts of the “Laborers as Soldiers” program are scarce, surviving historical records such as the labor contracts produced by these dummy companies offer a glimpse into the Chinese presence in the war, where the issue of “literacy”—specifically, reading and writing letters—comes to the fore. Perhaps in view of preceding labor abuses of the Chinese in Peru and the United States (McKeown 2001; Gonzales 1989), these contracts appear to have been carefully negotiated to ensure a smooth and steady supply of Chinese manpower. The parameters laid out in the contracts included, but were not limited to, transportation, work conditions, food quotas, health care, penalization, and payment method (Chen 1986, 191–203; Chen, Lü, and Yang 1997, 184–195). The language adopted in the payment clauses merits special attention. Take, for instance, the contract between the Huimin Company and the French government:

Article 4 The wage is one franc per day, which should be paid to the workers by the employer weekly or bi-weekly, according to the employer's payment policy. The treatment of the Chinese workers should be no different from that of the French workers. Aside from the daily wages, the employers must pay *another 30 francs* per worker every month to one of the appointed banks by the Huimin Company so that Huimin will deposit the money *in China* for the use of *the worker, his family, or any person designated by the worker*. The employer must give a proper receipt to the laborer for deposits or remittances. (Chen 1986, 192, emphasis added)

What stands out is the two-part structure built into the wage payment, which also applies to workers recruited by the British (Chen 1986, 205) and prefigures the centrality of literacy for the Chinese labor corps.³ The full commodification of labor in this case included both the actual labor performed in Europe and the laborers' displacement from home. The system of the two-part wage distribution accentuated the international nature of the circulation and exchange of labor, which necessitated frequent long-distance communications. Sound in theory, the two-part wage payment could continue to function only when the laborer received constant confirmation that his absence from home was compensated in timely fashion and payment continued to arrive on the other side of the world. Instead of relying solely on the employer to provide "a proper receipt" for remittances per the Huimin contract, the laborer sought a less mediated and more reassuring method for confirmation: direct communication with his family. It is important to note that the laborer's employment by the Allies mandated strict military supervision of all his communications and his limited means excluded expensive telecommunication technologies such as telephone and telegraph.⁴ Affordable and permissible, epistolary communication availed itself as the ideal channel through which the laborer and his family could confirm the monthly payment of the half-wage. The structure of the two-part wage distribution added an economic reason for letter writing. The desire to write and be written to became not a mere emotional need and a safety check, but a financial necessity that was written into the very contract of the "Laborers as Soldiers" program.

To be sure, the laborers' fierce demand for letter writing was less a demonstration of their active agency in pursuing literacy than an organic response to the two-part wage distribution system, on the one hand, and the lack of alternative means for long-distance communication, on the other. This historical contingency—the laborers' demand for literacy—might have functioned as the perfect catalyst for the emergence of the first modern Chinese literacy program,

but that very program would not have come to fruition were it not for the YMCA in the United States and its War Work Council. In the spirit of the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s), and under the guidelines of the Social Gospel Movement, the YMCA established more than sixty service stations for Chinese laborers across Europe.⁵ To staff these service stations, the YMCA dispatched a group of volunteers, mostly made up of overseas Chinese students in the United States and Britain. These YMCA service stations were by no means built explicitly to address the laborers' pressing need for letter writing; they provided a whole range of services, including screening films, translating news, and organizing sports programs. However, not long after the Y men started working with the laborers, they realized that "the laborers' most needed service was letter-writing"; their service stations thus came to function above all else as surrogate writing centers.⁶ The centrality of literacy thereby reinstated itself in the form of lack. Soon after the Y men identified illiteracy as the root cause of strained and disrupted epistolary communication between Europe and China, one of the volunteers took the lead in combatting it. That it took a YMCA volunteer to bring about the first modern Chinese literacy program was hardly coincidental. The YMCA had become, since the Progressive Era, a major organization that practiced the new philosophy of American philanthropy, which put an increasing premium on employing scientific methods to eliminate the root causes of social ills.⁷ If illiteracy stood in the way of effective communication, sustainment of the labor corps, and the fulfillment of the YMCA's mission abroad, then it would be eradicated.

The volunteer in question was James Yen 晏陽初 (Yan Yangchu). A Yale graduate, Yen was to become one of the most influential educators in modern China and a leading figure of international mass education and rural reconstruction. Co-founder of the Chinese National Association of the Mass Education Movement and later the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Yen's reform programs proliferated around the globe: France, China, the United States, the Philippines, Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, and Ghana (Wu 1981, 5–7). A visible and popular figure across the Pacific, Yen was named in 1943 one of the ten most outstanding "modern revolutionaries," alongside John Dewey, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, and Albert Einstein (Wu 1977). However, his entire career, as Yen himself confessed many times, owed its roots to his initial contact with the Chinese laborers in Boulogne, France (Yen 1992, 542).

Yen arrived in mid-June 1918 and immediately started his service in a Chinese labor camp of 5,000 workers. The mass literacy program did not install itself in one fell swoop but groped its way through three stages. The first stage was a night class held in the labor camp canteen. After coping with surrogate letter writing and money remittance every day for a few months, sometimes at a rate of several hundred cases each night, Yen was more than ready to tackle the high demand for literacy among the Chinese laborers. Calling a meeting for all 5,000 workers in the station, Yen announced that they would learn to write their own letters and cease to borrow literacy from the Y volunteers. The laborers, in disbelief, roared with laughter. Only a handful of them were bold enough to join Yen's class that night. Held in the labor corps canteen, these letter-writing classes started with Chinese and Arabic numerals and progressed to teaching the laborers how to write their own names and address their parents and family. Over a period of four months, more than forty laborers attended the embryonic literacy class; thirty-five "graduated" with basic literacy (Yen 1992, 533–534).

As the canteen class thrived, the next step was teaching the "One Thousand Characters" (also called the "foundation characters"). Inspired by the classic *Thousand Character Text* (Qian zi wen), which had been used to teach basic literacy since the sixth century, Yen selected approximately 1,000 of the most frequently used characters from "a Chinese dictionary, some newspaper articles sent from China, colloquial expression of the laborers and the most employed characters and phrases in their letters" (Yen 1992, 536). These "One Thousand Characters" were later largely corroborated by a group of statisticians headed by Chen Heqin—Yen's colleague and also a YMCA member—in the study "Determination of the Vocabulary of the Common People."⁸ Strengthened with statistical precision, one of the oldest literacy primers in Chinese literary tradition reemerged in a modern approach to combat illiteracy. A new set of the "One Thousand Characters" was recognized as a scientific antidote to illiteracy, much in line with the YMCA's emphasis on employing scientific methods in addressing social ailments. The "One Thousand Characters" soon proliferated beyond its pilot version in France, launching a national mass education movement in China starting in the 1920s.

The third and final stage of the literacy program was the publication of *The YMCA Chinese Labor Workers' Weekly* (Jidujiao qingnianhui zhufa huagong zhoubao, hereafter *The Weekly*) in January 1919. Conceived for advanced students in the literacy class, *The Weekly* functioned as supplementary reading material, with a circulation of between 500 and 1,000. Yen

served as its chief editor until he completed his YMCA post in 1920. *The Weekly*, though no more than four pages per issue, included an array of sections such as “Commentaries,” “China Stories,” “News from Europe and America,” “A Brief History of the Great War,” and “Laborers’ Updates.” By no means the first journal to envision laborers as potential readers, *The Weekly* was preceded by two other journals: *The Magazine of Chinese in Europe* and *The Chinese Laborers’ Magazine*.⁹ Otherwise similar to its predecessors in content and format, *The Weekly* distinguished itself on two fronts: first, *The Weekly* featured writings by the workers themselves; second, its publication at the time and discussions of it thereafter revealed important clues to the nature of the modern Chinese language.

Orality and Literacy

The publication of *The Weekly* was crucial not only because it was the capstone of the first modern Chinese literacy program before its influence spread from World War I France to Republican China. More importantly, the misnaming of the written language used in *The Weekly* signaled an important discrepancy between the laborers’ actual writing (a colloquialized written language) and the intellectuals’ categorization of it as *baihua*. While the writing practices of the laborers were taken over by intellectuals to conform to the linguistic legacy of the May Fourth Movement, the critical content penned by one of the laborers was kept buried in the discourse of a particular brand of the Chinese enlightenment.

There is scholarly consensus that the modern Chinese language is a new national language, a linguistic legacy shaped by and passed down from the May Fourth period, defined broadly to include both the New Culture and May Fourth Movements (Chow 1960, 5–6). Historians and literary critics follow the reform intellectuals’ own branding of the new language as *baihua* and attribute its prevalence in modern China to those very intellectuals. Chow Tse-Tsung summarized the *baihua* legacy as a “literary revolution” that manifested “the new intellectuals’ intention” (1960, 273). Vera Schwarcz saw it as a “collaboration” (1986, 80) between two generations of intellectuals—the May Fourth students and their teachers. Together, they created a *baihua* rhetoric—in essence, a constructed binary between the more classical and literary language known as *wenyan* and the plain speech of *baihua*. This modern *baihua*, flaunting its phonetic—or, rather, phonocentric—nature, sets itself apart from the premodern *baihua*. While the premodern *baihua* accommodates a far more eclectic body of literature

encompassing a wide spectrum of colloquialization and literariness, the ideal *baihua* of the twentieth-century literary revolution commits itself to the principle of phonocentrism—a systematic privileging of speech over writing.¹⁰ The ideal *baihua* envisions the full realization of orality in writing, encourages the subjugation of writing under speech, and promises to lower the threshold of literacy for modern China. The pursuit of the ideal *baihua*, which runs in tandem with a series of movements dedicated to alphabetizing the Chinese script, constitutes what I call the “phonocentric dreams” of modern Chinese writing. Though a full account of the fraught history of May Fourth language reform is beyond the scope of this article, it bears pointing out that the ideal *baihua* of plain speech—championed by May Fourth intellectuals—does not describe the actual written language that constituted the de facto new national language.¹¹ Instead of plain speech, the staple of modern Chinese language was a colloquialized written language, more in line with the eclectic premodern *baihua* than the phonocentric modern *baihua*. The solution to the modern crisis of the Chinese script lay, in part, in this colloquialized written language, which was practiced, rehearsed, and proven effective by the Chinese laborers in World War I France. While cultural elites were busy pursuing the embodiment of pure orality in an alphabetized Chinese, the collective choice made by the laborers and the Y men, as instantiated in *The Weekly*, provided a viable path to linguistic modernity.

James Yen was among the first to mistake the nature of the writing practices in which he himself played a major role. Writing a decade after the 1919 literacy classes, Yen summarized the model literacy program of “One Thousand Characters” in English as follows:

The system of teaching Chinese illiterates, which had its humble beginnings behind the firing lines of the battle-fields of France, consists of the following features: a) four readers written in Pei Hua (spoken language) based upon thirteen hundred “foundation characters” scientifically selected out of more than two hundred different kinds of literature and publications containing upward of 1,600,000 characters. (1929b, 1)

Yen’s conflation of “Pei Hua” (*baihua*) and script aside, it seems certain from his description that the language that emerged behind the firing lines was *baihua*-cum-speech, in strict accordance with the May Fourth rhetoric on the desired new national language. Although *baihua* never achieved the status of pure orality, its characterization as the new national language had been consolidated by 1929, which was when Yen ascribed his World War I literacy program to the tutelage of the May Fourth literary revolution. This invented genealogy would have been real

had Yen actually used the term *baihua* to characterize the writing of *The Weekly* in the newspaper itself or written *baihua* in it. Yet Yen never adopted the term *baihua* in his own writings for *The Weekly* to capture the linguistic model at work, nor did he commit to writing the “spoken language” in the newspaper. Instead, Yen attempted three other, different characterizations—“the common language” (*putonghua*), “mandarin” (*guanhua*), and “common mandarin” (*putong guanhua*)—in *The Weekly*’s discussions of the desired style of writing in its prose competitions. Neither equivalent to the “spoken language” that Yen retrospectively evoked, nor commensurate among themselves, these three categorizations fell under the umbrella of the colloquialized written language, with decreasing degrees of colloquialism.

In the second issue of *The Weekly*, Yen first proposed “the common language” when announcing a prose competition. Of all the prose competitions held by *The Weekly*, this was the only one whose results were announced, leading to the publication of a laborer’s essay.¹² Yen detailed the requirements as follows:

To encourage brethren who can read and write, the YMCA has decided to award the first prize winner of the prose competition 20 francs, the second place 10 francs. The composition should be no more than 600 words and in *putonghua* [the common language]. The deadline for submission is February 15. Late compositions will not be accepted. To avoid delay, please turn in your work to YMCA secretaries to be mailed to Paris. The topic of the composition is listed below: “The Pros and Cons of Chinese Laborers Being in France.” (Yen 1919b)

The language in which Yen wrote and wanted the compositions to be written was named “the common language,” but it was not clear whether he was referring to the common spoken language, the common written language, or a combination of both. Although hardly the same, the common language did not stray far from the ideal of *baihua* as plain speech, since both indicated an aversion to and abstinence from the classical and literary language of *wenyan*. If Yen’s use of “the common language” could still be read within the rubric of the constructed dichotomy between *baihua* and *wenyan*, the next characterization blurred the boundary.

In a general call for essays for *The Weekly*, Yen wrote in a distinct style and gave this style, which set the tone for future essay submissions, another name:

Knowing that our countrymen in France are all gentlemen serving the public and favoring righteousness, be they Y men in the Association or interpreters in the labor camps or workers in the factories or on the piers; [they] would not sit around and speculate on the success or failure of our journal. They must be

willing to shoulder obligations and enable the advancement and development of our enterprise. Now that all has just commenced and is in dire need of help, our enterprise cannot thrive without all you gentlemen's assistance. We welcome all writings regardless of length, preferably in mandarin [*guanhua*] and for the promotion of morality and intelligence...¹³

In the original Chinese, the call for essays reads as a mixture of *baihua*, which strives to register hints of the everyday spoken language (for example, *de* 的, of), and *wenyan*, which contains the frequent use of single characters (for example, *zhi, mou, zhi, kuang* 知, 謀, 置, 況, to know, to plan, to place, and the expression “not to mention”), idioms (for example, *jigonghaoyi* 急公好義, eager and anxious to work for the public good), and four-character formulations (for example, *xuzhuweiji* 需助為急, in urgent need of help). These usages are all markers of literary composition and cannot pass for plain speech. Yen terms the mixed style “mandarin.” The equivalence between “mandarin” and “common speech,” though quietly implied, could hardly be maintained. On the one hand, mandarin, if defined strictly, meant the speech of officials, which changes diachronically and varies synchronically by region.¹⁴ The necessary plurality of mandarin thus confounds the assumed simplicity of common speech. On the other hand, if interpreted broadly, mandarin can be taken to denote an administrative language generally used in government documents. Otherwise a fairly accurate description of the linguistic model in *The Weekly*, its explicit function as a written language contradicts the promise of the common language in alignment with the ideal of plain speech.

The last definition appears in the seventh issue of *The Weekly*, which included a special section entitled “The Laborers’ Composition.” After announcing the winners of the prose competition, Yen warns those who wrote in “literary language” and demands that all follow a “common mandarin.” Yen further stipulates that future submissions would not be read if they did not abide by the linguistic model or if they exceeded “the character limit of 600” (Yen 1919c). In adding “common” to “mandarin,” Yen’s last definition unwittingly reveals the plurality of mandarin speech and the conflation of written and spoken mandarin. Although Yen pits “common mandarin” against “literary language,” his own admonishment is penned in a style that is neither nonliterary nor anticlassical. The frequent use of single-character words like 若 (*ruo*, “if”) and the habitual evocation of the idiom structure 十居八九 (*shijubajiu*, “eight or nine out of

ten”) cannot be glossed over by the attempt at colloquial auxiliaries that comes at the end (for example, 咯, *lo*). While Yen claimed in 1929 that the wartime literacy program followed the phonocentric ideal of *baihua*, Yen’s own writing in 1919 suggested otherwise.

Reminiscing almost six decades later, Yen finally clarified the linguistic model at work in *The Weekly*: “This paragraph of written prose is a kind of ‘mandarin’ at that time. It is not *wenyan*. Nor does it measure up to ‘my hand writing my mouth.’ And the punctuation is only limited to the comma ‘、’ and a full circle stop ‘。’” (Yen 1992, 536). Yen’s confession is crucial, not only because it confirms the language adopted in *The Weekly* to be a linguistic amalgamation that was neither *baihua* nor *wenyan*, nor because the neither-nor style disproved the genealogy drawn between the World War I literacy program and the May Fourth *baihua* revolution. His confession ironically betrays the real legacy of the literary revolution. What the May Fourth intellectuals ended up achieving was, in fact, the very linguistic amalgamation that defied the resolute dichotomy between *baihua* and *wenyan* as instantiated in *The Weekly*. This colloquialized written language became the mainstay of modern Chinese, while the residue of the phonocentric pursuit of plain speech was preserved in the naming of *baihua*.

A Laborer’s “Chinese Enlightenment”

Yen was not the only one writing the colloquialized written language. Although presumably an intellectuals’ tour de force, the colloquialized written language was by no means monopolized by the intellectuals. A laborer named Fu Xingsan 傅省三, who won the aforementioned prose competition, penned his essay in the same style (Fu 1919). Perhaps the only extant work of the laborers, this piece of writing is reproduced in figure 1 (see appendix for English translation). Though incontestably rare and important, this unusual record of a laborer’s reflections on war, equality, and his critique of one brand of the Chinese enlightenment has heretofore escaped critical attention. If the linguistic materiality of the World War I literacy program was misnamed to conform to the phonocentric impulse of the May Fourth *baihua* revolution, then the critical content of the laborer’s writing has been eclipsed by the very brand of the Chinese enlightenment that it set out to critique.

Following an overall appraisal that “our cause has gained substantial advantage,” Fu stipulates eight points explicating “the pros of laborers being in France.” These points cover a wide spectrum of socioeconomic and political reasons—including a sophisticated gendered perspective—and offer an explanation for the Chinese rage over the Paris Peace Conference. The first three points are laid out as personal gains in terms of legal obedience, financial solvency, and access to literacy and knowledge. The next three points touch on gender equality, industrialization, and religious practice. These first six points are organized around the issue of development, either on a personal-familial level or on a social scale. The last two points, however, take a different direction and escalate the argument into political commentary, thus echoing Fu’s opening paragraph.

This shift in content is signaled and assisted by a concomitant shift in narrational perspective. In the first four sections—on delinquency, poverty, ignorance, and gender discrimination—Fu employs a third-person narrative, addressing those who fall prey to the abovementioned vices as “they” or “the Chinese laborers.” Creating narrative distance, Fu is able to objectively describe the undesirable situation of the laborers if they had continued to stay in China and to argue that their displacement has worked to both their benefit and that of society at large. From the fifth point on, a subtle shift takes place. In the absence of a formal subject and by way of the ambiguous pronoun *ziji* (oneself), the section could be read from the point of view of either the first-person plural or a third-person narrative. Fu therefore could be either speaking in his own voice, appraising the prospects of transplanting European industrialization into China; or employing free indirect speech, casting the laborers as go-betweens for the cause of industrialization in China. The ambivalence extends to the sixth point, where Fu’s wording of “we/our laborers” cannot be determined strictly as the first-person plural perspective. Only in the seventh point does Fu clearly identify himself as the first-person narrator speaking for a collective “we,” before the text quickly slips back into the ambiguous “Chinese laborers” and “our country” in the eighth point.

The seventh point—the one that Fu holds dearly enough to write in the unmistakable first-person plural—reads as a challenge to European superiority and a bid for racial equality. Fu, in a moderate tone, calls into question whether “the Westerners were superior to us fellow Chinese,” as he and his fellow laborers had believed before they embarked on their European journey. Fu’s skepticism arises from daily contact with Europeans in “competing with them in

intelligence and physical strength.” The verb “to compete” denotes open comparison and defies a priori racial hierarchization. Fu’s resistance to Western superiority was audaciously ahead of his time, considering that, a few months after his composition, the Paris Peace Conference rejected a treaty affirming racial equality. Fu’s realization that his French colleagues and supervisors were “hardly any better” than the Chinese workers empowered him and his fellow laborers to dare to aspire to self-reliance and self-determination, to “contribute to the development” of China upon their return.

It bears pointing out that Fu was not the only one who saw the laborers’ abilities as comparable to that of their European counterparts. Commanders of the Allies who worked with the Chinese laborers also sang their praises. For instance, the British commander Douglas Haig observed, “Our experience with the Chinese labour in France has shown us that in all classes of routine work, both skilled and unskilled, Chinese men can labour as efficiently, if not more efficiently, than the best European workmen and with a persistence without rival. They are content with a far smaller wage, accustomed to less food, and expect fewer comforts.”¹⁵ *The Far Eastern Review* regarded the laborers’ presence to be “possibly ... one of the most important aspects of the Great European War.”¹⁶

One crucial outcome of “the Great European War” was the possibility of a new world on the ruins of old empires, which promised all oppressed peoples their rights to equality and self-determination. *The Far Eastern Review* might have been dramatic in its praise for the Chinese laborers, but the importance assigned to them—as one group of marginalized people with their own rights to equality and self-determination—was not too farfetched. In the few months after the armistice and before the Treaty of Versailles, the ideals of racial equality and international justice, as well as the Wilsonian fourteen points, mobilized an array of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements all over the world, the Chinese May Fourth Movement being but one. As Erez Manela argues, both the origin of “international anti-colonial nationalism” and the rise of a new U.S. “diplomacy of liberal internationalism” may be traced to this particular time slice, which he calls the “Wilsonian moment” (Manela 2007, 63).

Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of equality among nations and self-determination may have galvanized the development of many anti-imperialist and independence movements in various parts of the world, but the disillusionment with the Wilsonian moment contributed, as much as the Wilsonian promise, to the course of anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements around the

world. More important, the vision of equality and self-determination was by no means Wilson's alone. As Michael Adas demonstrates, the post-World War I reflection—a shared project among “thinkers from the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia”—had a pre-World War I origin and constituted “the first genuinely global intellectual exchange.”¹⁷ In fact, the long list of thinkers who participated in the global interchange could well include several late-Qing Chinese intellectuals, such as Liang Qichao and Zhang Taiyan, as well as the Chinese laborer Fu Xingsan.¹⁸

At the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of equality helped Chinese intellectuals cultivate a new global consciousness that began to recognize a colonial world order and see China's place in it among many other targets of imperial and colonial conquest, such as Poland, South Africa, and the Philippines. As Rebecca Karl argues, the late-Qing intellectuals' attempt to come to terms with the temporal and spatial order of the “capitalist linearity”—China being but one part of “the production of unevenness on a global scale”—construed the theoretical foundation of Chinese nationalism for decades to come (2002, 201). To break with the colonial world order, one first had to comprehend it. To that end, journalistic writing—mostly penned in the colloquialized written language¹⁹—became the textual testing ground. Though it is difficult to discern whether or to what degree Chinese laborers like Fu Xingsan came under the influence of contemporary journals and newspapers, Fu's political commentary bore substantial resemblance, both in style and content, to late-Qing journalistic writing. Not unlike his intellectual counterparts, the Chinese laborer turned writing into a critical medium through which he partook in the discourse of equality and self-determination.

Fu Xingsan's eighth and last point of commentary on the Paris Peace Conference pointed to the crucial crossroads that China faced in the postwar world. Writing in the first month of the conference, Fu seemed to be well informed about its proceedings. Within this period, the conference reduced the five seats of the Chinese delegation to two, though the first rounds of Sino-Japanese debate on the Shandong question ended in favor of China. Fu would not have foreseen the final disposal of Shandong at the time that he composed his piece, and he had reason to remain cautiously optimistic. However, he nevertheless captured the sense of astonishment and betrayal, using the word “unexpectedly” twice in a few lines. The conference's definition of nations—China as a “little” one and Japan as a “great” one—came as a wake-up call that suddenly “awakened” the laborers as if “from a dream.” Invoking the tropes of “awakening” and

“dream,” already popular in the late imperial period and increasingly relevant in the early Republican era,²⁰ Fu went on to perform a critical act of “double awakening.” Fu’s use of “dream”—it is unclear in the Chinese original whether the word was meant to be singular or plural—warranted two possible readings: one a dream of the Chinese “celestial dynasty,” and the other a dream of European superiority. Swiftly, Fu took on both dreams. As he lamented that the laborers should not boast of China as a great nation, he immediately criticized the Allies’ belittlement of it. The laborers’ path to awakening was thus necessarily conditioned by disillusionment with both notions of Chinese and European superiority. Rooted in the principles of equality and self-reliance, the act of “double awakening” defined the laborers’ take on the Chinese enlightenment.

Fu was not alone in suggesting a “double awakening.” Liang Qichao, who made the trip to Paris to observe the peace conference, shared similar sentiments in his *Reflections on the European Journey*. Witnessing firsthand the postwar destitution in Europe, Liang asked, “Who dare say that the fiery European nations and their comfortable-living people would one day unexpectedly have no coal and rice?” Even Liang, who claimed to be “used to leading a simple and clumsy life,” found the situation “already arduous and embarrassing.” He could only wonder, “How will the Europeans live?” (Liang [1920] 1963, 5–6). Now that both the Chinese and the Europeans shared a condition of “destitution,” neither dream had much appeal. Using the same word, “unexpectedly,” as Fu Xingsan, Liang was shocked into rethinking the superiority of European civilization and went on to raise the question of whether this civilization was in fact complicit in the massive warmongering. The European dream—the perceived antidote to China’s ailment—was called into question by the catastrophes of the war and the betrayal of Versailles. The disenchantment with both the Chinese and European dreams prefigured critical reflections on the war, for both the Chinese laborer and the leading intellectual.

Much like the writings produced by important thinkers around the world at the time, Fu’s essay engaged with the most urgent discussions on equality and international justice and negotiated the postwar world order and the position of the marginalized within it. Fu’s writing was unusual not only because laborers’ writings were scarce, but also because critical engagement with war was rarely expressed in writing by subalterns and even less likely to be taken seriously by intellectuals. It would be naïve to expect Fu’s voice in the global post–World War I discourse to have gained much notice beyond its selection by James Yen and its

appearance in *The Weekly*. In fact, it is doubtful that Yen picked up Fu's essay because of its critical pitch. In the statement announcing the result of the prose competition, though Yen refrained from directly commenting on Fu's arguments, he did take a moment to share his own thoughts on the issue (Yen 1919c). Yen, after applauding all submissions, contemplated that it was entirely "one's own action" that determined whether the pros could outweigh the cons. Yen focused on two aspects of laborers' actions: the first being monetary matters, the other regarding the laborers' treatment of the YMCA "teachers." On money, Yen cautioned the laborers against gambling, lest they lose the opportunity to save up, "establish themselves and benefit their families." Even worse, they would create for all Chinese "the reputation of a gambler in a foreign land." Yen paused and asked, "Is this pro or con?" He then moved on to some laborers' lack of appreciation of the YMCA programs. "The best part of the program," Yen stated, was that "university graduates from both China and the United States come and teach for free." Those who refused to seize "this unprecedented opportunity" lived as though "still in a dream." Yen reiterated the rhetorical question, "Is this pro or con?"

Employing the same trope of "dream," Yen's call to awakening did not, however, aim for the kind of "double awakening" that Fu had in mind. The prose competition, as Yen's editorial message revealed, rather than being a critical forum assessing the Chinese experience in World War I, was meant to function as a conduit of self-reflection and self-improvement. Although there was no reason why critical thinking could not go hand in hand with awareness of self-improvement—after all, Fu's "double awakening" has already demonstrated otherwise—Yen's vision of the laborers—disclosed by his editorial statement and echoed in his other writings (1919a; 1919b)—excluded the former from the latter. Inasmuch as a gambling and illiterate laborer who refused to learn could hardly question racial inequality, a laborer who was capable of "double awakening" might not fit in Yen's enlightenment project. This liberal and reformist brand of enlightenment was neither the European enlightenment, which pursued disenchantment from religious superstitions, nor the kind of "Chinese enlightenment" defined by Vera Schwarcz, which disavowed "the unquestioning obedience to patriarchal authority" (1986, 4). At its core, it was a civilizing mission that was predicated on the image of the uncivilized masses and their need for self-improvement and education.

Yen's concern for the underprivileged laborers naturally contributed to his discontentment with their refusal to be educated by teachers like himself. In contrast, his favorite

story about the laborers—recorded in his various speeches and articles—was the one where a certain generous laborer wrote to him to donate 365 francs to *The Weekly* and to thank him, “Mr. Yen, big teacher,” for teaching him “everything under the heavens.”²¹ In an interview with Pearl Buck, Yen confessed, “That is the kind of thing that touched me. I determined to use my life to enlarge his life. The word ‘coolie’ became for me a new word. I said, I will free him from his bitterness and help him to develop his strength” (Buck 1945, 8). The image of the underprivileged and grateful “coolie” became the cornerstone of the enlightenment project championed by Yen and his colleagues. It grew from literacy programs and mass education to integrated rural reconstruction and citizenship training, and it eventually aimed to spread the gospel of Christian love.²² By the same token, a different image of the Chinese laborer—enlightened and critically minded—was hardly appropriate for the civilizing mission. Therefore, although *The Weekly* solicited the laborers’ writing, it could not have published many of the laborers’ political commentary, for such writings ran the risk of undermining the urgency of the literacy program, on the one hand, and undercutting the very enlightenment agenda, on the other. However, one winning essay from Fu Xingsan was enough to preserve the possibility of imagining the Chinese laborers differently. Although Yen framed Fu’s work in the framework of the civilizing discourse, his silence over the critical dimension of Fu’s essay confirmed that the laborer’s voice was hard to tame. What for Yen and his cohort was a path toward a reformist and liberal brand of Chinese enlightenment became, for Fu and his fellow laborers, a territory for critical thinking and writing, as well as a lasting medium for staking their claim to racial equality and international justice. The historical irony is that, although the story of the “sacred laborers” was written out of the collective memory of World War I, the laborers’ writing stood as living testimony to the true postwar legacy that sought peace, equality, and justice, inspiring May Fourth and beyond.

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Appendix: English Translation of Fu Xingsan, “The Pros and Cons of the Laborers Being in France.”

It was probably the proud heart of the German kaiser that gave rise to the outbreak of the Great War in Europe. As the kaiser coveted to take over the whole world, the Allies were gravely

offended. They struck their drums and started battles. My homeland, China, is also a member of the Allies. As much as China detested the intervention of a bullying neighbor, it could not join the Allies on the battlefield. Fortunately, the Allies came to recruit laborers and thus enabled China to participate in the war effort. This was indeed a golden opportunity for us to assist the Allies in winning the war.

Arriving in France, the Chinese laborers were installed in the most dangerous positions. Though many of them were hurt, dead, shaken up, and suffering illnesses, the laborers contributed to the Allied troops and managed what we could for the final victory of the Allies. Far from being damaged, our cause has gained substantial advantage. Thus, in my mind, the pros of the laborers' presence in France outweigh the cons.

First, not all laborers who came to France are law-abiding citizens. If they had not come to France for work, they might have engaged in wrongdoings in China.

Second, the majority of the Chinese laborers are destitute. If they had not chosen to come to France, they might be suffering from cold and hunger. Now that they are here, not only are they themselves well fed and well clothed, but their families in China are also taken care of.

Third, a good portion of the laborers might be ill educated. They did not know heretofore the relationship between individuals and families, between families and countries. Now, thrust into the forefront of the battlefield, they witness for themselves how others and foreigners sacrifice their lives for their own countries and families, which unwittingly gives rise to the laborers' love for their families and their country.

Fourth, the workers used to think that foot-binding was a beautiful practice and did not realize that it was those foot-bound women, who could neither walk nor work, that they were laboring so hard to provide for. In sharp contrast to these Chinese women, they have now seen female soldiers, farmers, and doctors in the West and therefore have realized how much disadvantage they have subjected themselves to in the past. If they get to return home, the vicious habit of the old days will have to be reformed.

Fifth, the laborers saw weapons, farming devices, and various machines used in France. In the meantime, they were introduced to the military strategies employed by foreigners. All of these things have broadened their horizons. If they make their way home in the future, they can enlighten their countrymen.

Sixth, when in China, we/our laborers used to worship idols, burn incense, revere monks, conform to the rules of *feng shui*, and pick a so-called auspicious date [for certain things]. They believed in all sorts of superstitions but did not explore the truth nor acquire true learning. Now that they have come to Europe, if they are one day homebound, they cannot be as stubborn-minded as before.

Seventh, when still in China, we thought that the Westerners were superior to us fellow Chinese. Now that we are competing with them in intelligence and physical strength, we have come to the realization that they are hardly any better than we are. Given the chance to go home and equip ourselves with adequate education, we dare to expect to contribute to the development of our motherland.

Finally, in the past, all we knew was to boast that our country was vast in land and rich in population, while slighting foreign nations as scant in territory and scarce in human resources. Now, as a result of the peace conference, China has been unexpectedly denied its status as a great nation and a celestial dynasty and ranked at the bottom of countries. Meanwhile, a little country such as Japan was unexpectedly listed as a great nation. The peace conference went so far as to forbid China to speak at the conference. Provoked by such humiliation, the laborers

awakened as if from a dream; their patriotism for China and their will to strengthen it was suddenly aroused. This kind of thought would not have taken form if we had not traveled to a foreign country. Had we not come to France, we might still be dreaming in China.

These few points are no more than my humble opinions. Whether or not they are true is subject to critique.²³

Notes

- ¹ For details of the conception and initial stages of the “Laborers as Soldiers” program, including the Chinese negotiation for a written contract from the French and the British, the British and French competition in recruitment, the colonial and racist treatment of the laborers, etc., see Chen (1997), Zhang (2009, 30–45), Levine (1993, 65–71), Tseng (2002), Xu (2005, 114–126), Xu (2011, 10–54), and Graft (1994).
- ² For the lower estimate, see Summerskill (1982, 39) and Griffin (1973, 191); for the higher number, see Chen (1986, 34–35).
- ³ Chen Ta claimed to have synthesized the Chinese and French versions of the contract and offered an English translation of it (1967, 207–210), which was quoted verbatim by Xu (2011, 245–250). This synthesized version cuts the contract articles from twenty-eight to twenty-one, omitting seven whole articles. The two-part payment structure is also distorted.
- ⁴ For sections in contracts regarding letter writing, see Chen (1986, 198, 208). While the British allowed a quota of two letters per laborer per month and required standard envelopes to be used by the laborer and his family, there is no record indicating that the French practiced the same limitation for letter writing (Zhang 2009, 107–108).
- ⁵ For a historical survey of the YMCA during the Social Gospel Movement, see Hopkins (1951, 510–548) and Dorrien (1989, 117–122). For detailed accounts of the YMCA’s wartime contribution, see Wang (2009) and Hayford (1990, 22–27).
- ⁶ This is a direct quote from James Yen’s memoir (1992, 531); see also Gu (1937, 48).
- ⁷ Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz explicate how the Progressive Era witnessed the change from traditional charity to modern philanthropy (Karl and Stanley 1981, 236–270). Hopkins (1951, 532–538) and Huebner (2016, 17–54) instantiate the YMCA’s development toward scientific methods in its service.
- ⁸ This is Yen’s original English formulation (1924, 3). Later editions of “One Thousand Characters” are based on the character list put together by Chen ([1928] 1933). Yen took pride in the fact that his statistical hunch in 1918 did not stray far from the later mathematical calculation.
- ⁹ Both journals were established by the Société Franco-Chinoise d’Education. *The Magazine of Chinese in Europe*, with Cai Yuanpei as its chief editor, was in circulation between August 1916 and March 1918, and then between August and December 1928. *The Chinese Laborers’ Magazine* ran from January 1917 to December 1920.
- ¹⁰ The premodern *baihua* literature included but was not limited to Tang dynasty–era *baihua* poetry and *baihua* fictional works of the Ming and Qing dynasties, *The Water Margin* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* being two prominent examples. *Baihua* remained a literary and written language even in early twentieth-century newspapers, such as the

- Hangzhou Baihua Newspaper* and *Zhongguo Baihua Newspaper*, until leading intellectuals in the May Fourth and New Culture Movements envisioned pure orality for *baihua*. For the constructed genealogy of May Fourth *baihua*, see Xia (1985) and Owen (2001).
- ¹¹ The challenge posed by phonocentrism influenced nonalphabetic writing systems around the world, the Chinese script being but one of them; see Zhong (2014, 1–24). For more on Chinese language reform at the turn of the twentieth century, see Ni (1948), de Francis (1950, 31–54), Tsu (2010, 18–47), Kaske (2008, 27–54), Cheng (2001), and Mair (2000, 302–307).
- ¹² *The Weekly* proposed other prose competition topics, including “What is the Republic of China?” “The cause of the decline of China,” and “If the Republic were to promote education, what do you think we should do?” See appendices 1 and 2 for the laborer’s essay (Fu 1919).
- ¹³ The original microfilm is missing and this paragraph is quoted from Yen’s memoir (1992, 536).
- ¹⁴ For the origin and development of the concept of mandarin, see Norman (1997, 21–28), Geng (2007), and Ye (2001).
- ¹⁵ Douglas Haig’s remark is quoted in the English original in Gu (1937, 61–62).
- ¹⁶ *The Far Eastern Review* 15 (4): 126–127, as quoted in Xu (2005, 147).
- ¹⁷ Michael Adas included figures such as Paul Valéry, Herman Hesse, Georges Duhamel, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghose, René Maran, and Léopold Senghor, among others, in his long list of international figures who contributed to the post–World War I discourse (Adas 2004, 61).
- ¹⁸ Zhang Taiyan challenged the universalizing tendency of the modern concept of equality and read it against Buddhist and Daoist traditions of equality (Murthy 2011).
- ¹⁹ The colloquialized written language covers a wide spectrum. I do not suggest that the level of colloquialization remained the same among late-Qing publications, the laborers’ compositions, and the modern Chinese language, as we know it today. In his study constructing the *baihua* genealogy, Hu Shi delineated different shades of colloquialization in *baihua* as a written language (Hu [1928] 2002).
- ²⁰ John Fitzgerald discusses “Awakening and Dream Fiction” in the late Qing and early Republican period in his important study on awakening China as a historical narrative (Fitzgerald 1996, 57–62).
- ²¹ The same story is seen in Yen (1992, 1990) and Yen quoted the letter in English to Pearl Buck (Buck 1945, 8).
- ²² Yen defined his philosophy as “3Cs”: “Confucius, Christ, and Coolies” (Wu 1981, 24). He elucidated his reform vision in three serialized pamphlets (Yen 1929a, 1929b, 1931). For the connection between the literacy program and rural reconstruction, see Hayford (1990, 39–59) and Merkel-Hess (2016, 23–54).
- ²³ All translation, including the punctuation and paragraph divisions, is mine. There is no other biographical information on Fu Xingsan, except that he was from Pingdu, Shandong Province.

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