CHAPTER 1

Cultural Connections in a New Global Space: Li Shizeng and the Chinese Francophile Project in the Early Twentieth Century

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In the early decades of the twentieth century a remarkable Francophile Chinese anarchist, Li Shizeng 李石曾 (1881–1973), and a group of like-minded Chinese activists sought to forge educational, cultural and social links with France as part of their wider agenda to reform Chinese society. Focusing on the thought and activities of Li Shizeng, who very much saw himself as an active and contributing member of a global radical community, illuminates an alternative way of perceiving China’s cultural and intellectual interactions with the West. Rather than viewing China as always the passive imbiber of “superior” Western knowledge—paralleling China’s geopolitical status as a “semi-colony” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of unequal treaties and the establishment of foreign “concession” areas in China that impinged on Chinese sovereignty—the initiatives energetically taken by Li Shizeng and his Chinese Francophile “lobby” suggest that Sino-Western interaction was not always unidirectional but could constitute a dynamic two-way process. In implementing his agenda, Li Shizeng was able to create new global networks that were both personal and institutional. Furthermore, the wide variety of French officials, academics and businessmen with whom he cultivated personal ties themselves valorized and promoted Sino-French “connections” on the basis of purported shared cultural, intellectual and social values.

This chapter explores the origins of Li Shizeng’s Francophilia and the nature of his transnational educational projects in China and France, perhaps the first of their kind in China’s modern history. The latter included the championing of Chinese overseas study in France and the establishment of colleges in China whose graduates would be recruited for a higher education institution in France (the Sino-French Institute in Lyon). At the same time Li was an active promoter of Chinese worker education, while his “work-study” (qingong jianxue 勤工儉學) project in France for Chinese students (again in collaboration with French officials and educators) was a core element of his radical new vision of a future Chinese society in which educational elitism would be eliminated and the barriers between mental and manual labor removed.
The chapter also highlights Li’s intriguing effort to influence Western dietary culture with his creation in 1908 of a soybean processing plant just outside Paris whose employees were Chinese workers Li recruited from his home district in north China. Long before the English publication in 1945 of the celebrated Chinese cookery book that introduced Chinese cuisine to a domestic American audience, *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* by Chao Yang Buwei 趙步偉, Li Shizeng was advertising to a French audience the sustaining and medicinal virtues of bean curd (*doufu* 豆腐), symbolic in his view of China’s healthy and prudent nutritional regime.

### Early Years in France

Li Shizeng came from a distinguished line of imperial officials. His father, Li Hongzao 李鴻藻 (1820–1897), was a Grand Councilor and one-time tutor to the Tongzhi Emperor (r.1861–1874). His paternal great-grandfather had passed the metropolitan degree examination (*jinshi* 進士) in 1767, and became an editor in the Hanlin Academy, educational commissioner in Guangxi province, provincial governor of Anhui and Fujian provinces, and, eventually, Governor-General of Zhejiang and Fujian. Li later reminisced that as a child important government officials such as Weng Tonghe 翁同龢 (1830–1904) and Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909) had been frequent visitors to the Li household. Li also remembered that his father discouraged him from taking the traditional civil service examinations; Li Hongzao’s ambivalence concern-

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1 Chao Yang Buwei (1889–1981) trained as a medical doctor in Japan during the early years of the twentieth century. In the 1930s she moved to the United States with her husband, the linguist Chao Yuenren 趙元任.


3 *Shizeng biji* 石曾筆記 (Notes by Li Shizeng). 1961. Taipei: Zhongguo guoji wenzi xuekan-she, 15, reprinted in *Li Shizeng xiansheng wenji* 李石曾先生文集 (Collected Writings of Li Shizeng). 1980. Taipei: Dangshi weiyuanhui, 2: 1–226. Weng Tonghe had also been a tutor to the Tongzhi Emperor and was a member of the Grand Council in the 1880s. Zhang Zhidong served as viceroy (Governor-General) of Huguang (Hunan and Hubei), Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi), and Liangjiang (Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Anhui) in the 1880s and 1890s.