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## **The French consulate in Hong Kong during interwar: distorted hierarchies and civil diplomacy**

From 1862 until 1949, the French diplomats appointed in Hong Kong were in a peculiar position. At the junction between East and West, they answered different and sometime contradictory hierarchies, and depended on a complex network of influences. A situation that illustrates the blurry boundaries of institutional diplomacy as well as the strategic yet informal roles of deeply-rooted nationals in the host country.

The British colony of Hong Kong experienced rapid developments soon after its occupation in 1841, which naturally raised the interest of French observers in the area, especially French Indochina. Facing chaos in China after 1911, the Frangant Harbour appeared as one of those Eurasian rimlands<sup>1</sup>, dynamic and stable edge of a great geostrategic importance. Hence, a French community anchored there. A religious presence at first. As soon as 1847, the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (SFMP) fled Macau to settle its regional headquarters in the British colony<sup>2</sup>. A year later, the Sisters of Saint-Paul-de-Chartres arrived with social and welfare projects that will soon become indispensable to some districts<sup>3</sup>. From the diplomatic point of view, after a few traders have been nominated as honorary consuls, a young civil servant was finally appointed in 1862.

The transition to a career diplomat corresponded to the establishment, the same year, of an agency of the shipping line *Messageries Maritimes*. Every fortnight, its liners began to provide a precious hyphen to and from the French metropolis; there will be no interruption until 1940<sup>4</sup>. It is no coincidence that this installation was concomitant with that of the first French bank, the *Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris* (CNEP, ancestor of BNP-Paribas), replaced in 1894 by the Bank of Indochina<sup>5</sup>. The bonds between the diplomats and strategic economic actors were already obvious. By focusing on the interwar period, this article aim at highlighting the different influences at stake above and around the French consul.

### **A. Above the consul, a complex network of hierarchies**

The bonds with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained the umbilical cord of the consulate. Correspondence with the Political and Trade Affairs Department was almost a daily business depending, however, on the twenty-nine days of navigation through the mail boat service<sup>6</sup>. Factually, the consul was autonomous with regard to strictly consular matters (civil registry, notaries, etc.) and reported only to Paris; but with regards to diplomatic

matters, he was, as anywhere else, an "information agent for the ambassador and for the execution of his instructions"<sup>7</sup>". In the case of Hong Kong, which embassy? It has not always been clearly identified by the ministry's civil servants themselves<sup>8</sup>.

#### a. The Embassy in London, an official but distant authority

Hong Kong was a British colony thus the French consulate depended on the French embassy in Great Britain. In the diplomatic directories, the consular post was located between Calcutta and Singapore, under the aegis of London; and in the personal files of staff appointed in Hong Kong, the annual evaluations were always submitted to London for completion of the section "specific observations and proposals of the direct supervisor"<sup>9</sup>". When a consul took the liberty of sending such a document to Beijing in 1921, even the Plenipotentiary Minister wrote: "the consulate in Hong Kong reports administratively to the London embassy, so I do not know if I have the right to make my remarks here"<sup>10</sup>". During the period, no rules were fixed and this recurrent question remained unanswered.

The volume of dispatches kept in the diplomatic archives nevertheless attests to the meagre interaction between London and Hong Kong, especially compared to the correspondence with Beijing. The agent was regularly reminded to send a copy of all his missives to the Legation in China, it was however up to him to appreciate what must be communicated to London<sup>11</sup>. Spontaneous correspondence from the latter embassy to the consulate was even thinner and consisted most often of irrelevant circulars for a diplomat in the Far East. The embassy in London made little of this far away consulate, and the ministry did not seek to force this relation. French diplomats in Hong Kong were sometimes surprised to discover, in the British colonial government gazette, the existence of legal conventions between France and England that could have been useful to them<sup>12</sup>.

Though, the embassy was sometimes used by the French consul in Hong Kong as a scarecrow to win a case against an official of His Majesty. For instance, when the Harbour Master created difficulties for the *Compagnie indochinoise de navigation* to transport migrants, the consul exhumed a copy of a 1909 Franco-British convention on this subject, and denounced the discriminatory nature of the new measure enacted by the director of the port. When he threatened to inform his embassy in London, everything worked out<sup>13</sup>.

The embassy intervened when it was called upon, most often in legal cases related to the application of treaties, and always on disputes concerning the colonial government. Consul Jules Leurquin summarized the guiding principle during a dispute between Hong Kong and French cognac importers: in order to enforce the application of a treaty, he

considered that it would be better for the complaint to come from the embassy in London to the British government, rather than from the consulate in Hong Kong to the colony government, "given the particular care with which the British authorities refuse to recognise foreign consuls as having any diplomatic character, competence or order<sup>14</sup>". The extradition treaty between Great Britain and France is surely the subject that occupies most of the correspondence between the two posts. In addition to the famous case of Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh), the consulate in Hong Kong was regularly confronted with extradition procedures, always at the request of French Indochina. This question of international law worried successive consuls as the flaws of the system were obviously exploited by many marauders<sup>15</sup>; the procrastination of French diplomats in London shows their reluctance to satisfy the sometimes embarrassing demands of the colony.

#### b. The Legation in Beijing, the true supervision

"Hong Kong actually falls within the competence of Beijing,<sup>16</sup>" the French embassy in London said. And geography demonstrates the obviousness. The consulate in Hong Kong was placed in the orbit of the Legation in China (which became embassy in 1936), and most of the events that punctuated the life of the consular post were managed from there. Due to communications delays, Beijing naturally reacted faster than London. The intensity of the correspondence reflects this special bond. 20.2% of the documents kept in the diplomatic archives of Nantes, in the series concerning Hong Kong are exchanges between this consulate and the legation/embassy in Beijing. Moreover, of the 17% between Hong Kong and the Ministry, and of the 20.3% between Hong Kong and other posts in the region, Beijing was almost always copied<sup>17</sup>. In return, the consulate received all the circulars concerning China.

With the frequent changes of the French diplomatic headquarters in China during the political upheavals of the interwar (from Beijing to Chongqing, passing by Nanking or Hankou)<sup>18</sup>, the reliability of communications in Hong Kong allowed the French consulate to play a strategic role as a relay, but also as an astute informant. The Sino-Japanese conflict makes this idea even clearer<sup>19</sup>. The post appears to be a valuable extension of the French representation in China and it is permissible to qualify as diplomats the consular officers who succeed one another in Hong Kong.

Perhaps stronger than this hierarchical and administrative link, it is important to mention the existence of the *Cadre d'Orient* (Orient Frame), a caste from Quai d'Orsay that brought together diplomats based in the Far East. "The department had always taken care, with good reason, to choose the incumbents of the post among the best specialists in China's

consular career,<sup>20</sup> explained a Plenipotentiary Minister of France in China. Yves du Courthial's arrival in Hong Kong in 1924 challenged this tradition. He arrived from Mauritius after a career in Santiago, Puerto Rico, Jerusalem and Larache; he did not speak a single Asian language<sup>21</sup>. An interesting exception which confirmed the rule. He sent his dispatches to London and the Legation in China complained "not to receive any information from him". He even opposed a number of instructions from Beijing. The reprimand did not take long to come. And the Plenipotentiary blamed "a consul who has not been nourished by Far Eastern doctrine, and more particularly the Chinese one". The more Yves du Courthial tried to escape Beijing's influence, the more his credibility crumbled; his departure was then wished "urgently". His stay in Hong Kong was the shortest time of all diplomats. Over the entire period, he has been the only one appointed to this position without belonging to the *Cadre d'Orient* (including interim managers).

Hence the department has a particular network in the Far East, experts whose long careers have almost exclusively been spent in China. This *frame* was also made of friendships and enmities between diplomats who met many times in their professional paths. Almost all of these men knew each other, which inevitably affected the tone of their communications and their promotions. With the exception of Yves du Courthial, who paid for it, the diplomats stationed in Hong Kong showed no zeal towards London. Their willingness to communicate with the Legation in Beijing reflected as much their loyalty to the *Cadre d'Orient* as much as their interest in advancing their careers through regular exposure.

Through an effect of redistribution of power and hierarchical influences, the French consul in Hong Kong (always an experienced diplomat at the end of his career), had a particular but informal authority over consular posts in the surrounding area, starting with Guangzhou. The geographical proximity of these two posts was quite unique in China<sup>22</sup>. When Dufaure de la Prade took office in Hong Kong in 1926, he sent a letter to his colleague there, in which he skilfully asserted his authority over him, with advices that looked more like instructions<sup>23</sup>. Beyond, the consulate in Hong Kong had a tangible influence on an area that extended in an arc from Longzhou (745 km east, on the border with Tonkin) to Fuzhou (667 km west on the coast, halfway to Shanghai). The limits of this zone of influence can be determined by two factors: the density of correspondence and the nature of the exchanges, which shows a strong administrative and financial dependence of these branches. The consulate based in the British colony thus went far beyond the jurisdiction and boundaries of his official constituency.

### c. The Concession in Shanghai, more than a commercial influence

The French consulate in Hong Kong also had to report to the consulate general in Shanghai. For commercial affairs in the first place, but from there followed a global ascendancy. In 1919, when the war censorship of coded telegrams was slow to be abolished, the consul in Hong Kong asked his colleague in Shanghai to intercede with the Ministry. He argued that, being "in direct contact with the China Chamber of Commerce, [this] consulate was better entitled than I was to draw the Department's attention to this matter<sup>24</sup>".

In 1938, Hong Kong's trade volume was two-thirds that of Shanghai<sup>25</sup>. Because of its proximity to the Chinese central government and its well-established concessions, the latter port was the centre of economic diplomacy in China. When the statutes of attachés and commercial agents were created in 1919<sup>26</sup>, it was naturally in Shanghai that such an official found his place. The authority of the French consulate in the Oriental Pearl considerably strengthened, which is clearly evident in the regularity of Shanghai's requests and the readiness with which Hong Kong responded. Successive diplomats in the British colony constantly demanded the creation of such a post, explaining the particularities of the markets in southern China and then insisting on the importance of the traffic with Indochina. In vain, throughout the period. Hong Kong's commercial correspondence thus transited through Shanghai and depended on this post which, most often, was at the initiative of all exchanges.

Because of the French concession in Shanghai, the managements of French trading houses naturally settled closer to their country's place of power and influence. This is the case with Pathé, Optorg, Hardivilliers and many other companies which, despite the heavy traffic generated in Hong Kong, kept this harbour under the thumb of the Shanghai headquarters. This situation had repercussions on the scope of the consulate's actions in the British colony. The case of the *Messageries Maritimes* is probably the most obvious. The General Agent in Shanghai imposed his views and quotas on his subordinate in Hong Kong. It thus curbed the development of certain traffic or prevented passengers from boarding in the British colony<sup>27</sup> even though, in some years, the tonnage transiting through Hong Kong was greater than that of Shanghai<sup>28</sup>. Although the *Messageries Maritimes* were linked to the French State, the Consul of France in Hong Kong had to undergo, passively and indirectly, the power of Shanghai. And if he had the idea of making an exceptional request, for example to delay a stopover, he had to negotiate directly with the General Agent in Shanghai, without going through the office of the local representative which was a hundred meters from his.

The diplomat in Hong Kong also turned to the consulate in Shanghai, and the large French community in the concession, when it came to donating to the charity fund<sup>29</sup>. Regular

exchanges between these two consulates during the period attested that Shanghai was financing repatriations or assistance to the needy, even after the creation of a special fund in Hong Kong<sup>30</sup>.

#### d. The General Government in Hanoi, a disruptive interaction

What was true for Shanghai was even more so for Indochina. Entrepreneurs and wanderers alike used the British colony as a springboard or a refuge, and the influence of the General Government of Indochina (GGI) in the activities and decisions of the French consulate in Hong Kong was enormous. For Yves du Courthial (whose willingness to depart from the Legation is known), "the French consulate in Hong Kong is also and above all the consulate of Indochina<sup>31</sup>". Many events taking place in Hong Kong were of primary interest to the French colony. For this reason, direct and privileged contacts developed, either to follow up political events or to settle simple commercial matters.

The exchanges took a more regular and formal aspect with the creation in Hanoi, in 1927, of the External Affairs Department under the direction of Roger Garreau, Secretary of Embassy at-Large. The ties forged with the Hong Kong consular agency were all the stronger as Roger Garreau was a personal friend of Georges Dufaure de la Prade, then stationed in Hong Kong<sup>32</sup>; other ramifications of the *Cadre d'Orient*!

The GGI paid close attention to Hong Kong because, to a large extent, the British colony was the commercial port of Indochina. Southern China was either the almost unique outlet (cement) or the most important customer (rice, coal, fish) and even the only rising market (rubber, wood, etc.) for Indochinese productions. It was also the only place where the French colony could find certain products at good prices<sup>33</sup>. The projects of Guangzhouwan and the Yunnan railway did not change anything there, Hong Kong was the privileged axis of commercial penetration. The French diplomat in the Fragrant Harbour often found himself in the position of a sales representative of the Indochinese "administrative economy<sup>34</sup>". More generally, the consul was an essential intermediary of the policies developed in Hanoi: Hong Kong was a checkpoint for the Chinese diaspora<sup>35</sup>, but also a strategic ground for Indochinese Security Services chasing dissidents<sup>36</sup>.

The consul in Hong Kong took advantage of this Indochinese tutelage, notably through decorations used as an exclusive diplomatic tool. First, on a personal basis since there were few agents who have passed to Hong Kong without having obtained honorary titles; and even more for local elites who could not claim metropolitan orders but could be proud of these

exotic honours. In this area, the consul's proposals were wise, and served to enhance French prestige and establish his own local position.

There was an area in which the consulate in Hong Kong was more dependent than elsewhere on the GGI: financial support. The consulate relied on Hanoi even for its most innocuous material expenditures, and sometimes for consumption that did not directly concern Indochinese interests (the repair of the roof of the consular residence for instance)<sup>37</sup>. But the expenses of the GGI in Hong Kong were above all to serve the colony itself: telegrams, repatriation reimbursement or officials' travels... There was also an allowance paid by the Security Services, an annual flat rate for a diplomatic bag service as well as one for "representation and touring expenses"<sup>38</sup>. There were also staff salaries. As early as 1919, a metropolitan agent of the colonial administration was appointed to deal with passports and Sino-Indochinese matters<sup>39</sup>. Presented by the consul as the "attaché of Indochina", his presence was used to compensate for the absence of a commercial agent. The experience did not last but was not unique. Among the other colonial officials sent to Hong Kong, there was also a doctor between 1920 and 1926<sup>40</sup>, different consular assistants, a typist and a Chinese interpreter<sup>41</sup>. Even after the drastic budget cuts of the early 1930s, Hanoi maintained this strong financial link.

The localisation of Hong Kong sometimes placed the consul between the hammer and the anvil, more exactly between his ministry and that of the Colonies. Depending on the subject, he was obviously inclined to favour the authority that suited his situation. When General Claudel wrote a report on the "immediate and permanent liaison which could be established in Hong Kong with the Government of Indochina" by placing agents of the colony there to support the action of the representative of Foreign Affairs, the consul did not fail to approve with enthusiasm. However, the reaction of the Plenipotentiary in Beijing left no doubt about his willingness to limit the Indochinese grip: "The Hanoi authorities [...] already have a marked tendency to substitute their action for that of the agents of the department. It would seem inappropriate to me to give them a further opportunity to extend their influence in an area which must remain under the exclusive control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>42</sup>." This influence was, however, impossible to stem in practice and the positions already funded by the GGI were both the proof and the symptom. When the Legation in Beijing sometimes demanded to choose and transmit by itself the dispatches from Hong Kong to Hanoi<sup>43</sup>, it was never successful. The GGI always received directly all information about the British colony<sup>44</sup>.

The British authorities were disturbed by the apparent vagueness about the powers of each ministry, which was sometimes quite convenient for Hanoi. When opium from



Indochina spread in Hong Kong, the British Foreign Office wanted increased cooperation between the Hong Kong authorities and Indochina, notably via the French consulate; the GGI played the clock and sent the ball back to Beijing<sup>45</sup>. On such questions, the French consulate in Hong Kong had limited room for manoeuvre, between the goodwill of its ministry and the assumed passivity of the neighbouring colony.

Last but not least, Hong Kong regularly hosted the French flag of the Far East Naval Division (DNEO), a military deployment at the heart of French maritime strategy and whose command was based in Indochina. Throughout the period, there was almost always a French navy ship anchored in the British harbour, mainly small units of the Xi Jiang fleet and, sometimes, the flagship. If a certain hierarchical rivalry may have been recurrent in the past, the Quai d'Orsay was now clear in its guidelines: DNEO ships were autonomous. The instructions of the Minister of the Navy abounded, while encouraging collaboration<sup>46</sup>. The consul was therefore authorized to make suggestions (for an escort, a parade, an arms loan or a rescue operation), but had also to act tactfully with this other form of authority which reported directly to Paris.

## **B. Around the consul, an influent community**

The different layers of hierarchy were not the only challenge the French consul in Hong Kong had to deal with. Diplomats came and went at relatively short intervals (2,5 years in average) and it was sometimes difficult to understand and integrate into British colonial society. The men of the Quai d'Orsay had to rely on some fellow nationals with a long-lasting experience of the area. Thus, those influent members of the community contributed to mould local French diplomacy. It is particularly visible on the economic level.

French residents in Hong Kong were few throughout the period under consideration: officially between 80 in 1918 and 227 in 1940; insignificant numbers when absorbed in the whole population. However, there is no systematic relation between the size of the community and its influence or power. On the basis of a 1935 census (which only considered registered men at the consulate), the predominance of religious (36%) can be noted, then traders (31%) and finally bankers (15%)<sup>47</sup>. There was hardly any room left for other professions.

In the absence of a commercial agent, the consul officially relied on the valuable network of *Conseillers du Commerce Extérieur* (Foreign Trade Advisors), well-established notables who collaborated graciously with the consular post. Despite the overload of business

inquiries of all kinds, there was only one of those consultants in Hong Kong at the beginning of the period, most often a banker<sup>48</sup>. In 1935, the Department of Commerce appointed another advisor so that there would always be one in finance and one in trade<sup>49</sup>. All profiles were chosen according to two recurring criteria: in-depth knowledge of the Far East and a good reputation with the British authorities. It is however only the emerging and visible part of a civil diplomacy solely focused on the economy; these honorary advisory posts hid a more complex intelligence network: the Bank of Indochina, the *Messageries Maritimes* and the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris were more often the real source of information for consuls, in almost all fields.

#### a. Bank of Indochina, an eye on the finance

The Bank of Indochina (BOI) in Hong Kong was obviously a "second-rank player<sup>50</sup>" in a British-dominated economy. Nevertheless, the cumulative results of France (Indochina, Guangzhouwan and metropolis), do not give the image of a trading power lagging behind: first place in imports and third in exports in 1920<sup>51</sup> (head to head with the United States), then fifth in imports and second in exports in 1931<sup>52</sup> (well after China but far ahead of the others), France and its empire were unavoidable partners of Hong Kong.

As a bank of issue, the BOI enjoyed a privileged contract with the French State, and the GGI always imposed it as the sole intermediary<sup>53</sup>. As a conciliator of French economic interests, the director of the BOI was therefore a personality who counted in Hong Kong. He was aware of all French financial movements and closely followed their developments. The consul referred to him as soon as he needed information. Following the same pattern than the consulate, the Hong Kong agency had a strong influence over the BOI representatives in the region, starting with Guangzhou. It was a subtle and unofficial authority that drained exclusive information to the British colony.

The director was a witness and often an actor in the meetings between businessmen travelling in the area. No major French boss could visit Hong Kong without going through the agency, which was expressly instructed to meet all the personalities in the business world<sup>54</sup>. A valuable source of information about the Chinese market<sup>55</sup>, the director set the course for French commercial initiatives and, by the same token, guided diplomats' potential actions. BOI's headquarters often insisted on this role and advised the director to visit the Hong Kong Club at noon every day to "meet with the representatives of the different houses of the place and thus keep abreast of business<sup>56</sup>". He was also associated to the discussions with the British banks during the different crises.

In 1926, for prestige as well as long-term savings, the bank built an elegant edifice under its name in the heart of the city<sup>57</sup>. Ninety metres high, it dominated the neighbouring Standard Chartered and rivaled the brand new Canton Bank building just behind<sup>58</sup>. The floors offered attractive conditions for French or Francophile companies wishing to set up within the bank. It was a real instrument of French diplomacy as it defended the interests of France, but totally beyond the control of the consulate.

#### b. The *Messageries Maritimes*, an eye on the trade

The *Messageries Maritimes* were also linked to the French State. The agreement signed in 1920 marked the entire period and thus, from that date, existed a company called *Société des services contractuels des Messageries Maritimes* and another called *Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes*, which managed the first. The contractual service binded the State with the shipowner who undertook to provide a certain number of public services on shipping lines: territorial continuity with the colonies, mail transit, transport privileges upon requisition or regulation of shipbuilding and repairs<sup>59</sup>. Missions whose diplomatic scope was obvious and whose consul was not the guarantor on the spot.

The *Messageries* represented a new face of the French corporate world. The modern operation of the head office and its links with the agencies also made it an instrument for promoting France<sup>60</sup>, just as the quality of the liners set the national colours in the harbour and defended the prestige of the country. It was a tangible French presence, visible to everyone in the port. And when there was no liner or cargo ship, *La Licorne*, the company's steamboat, was always there.

The director of the agency and the representatives of France were very close. Geographically first of all, since exactly 140 meters separated their offices, and professionally of course. In his general service reports, each year the director discussed the economic and commercial situation of the colony and shared political observations on the nearby region. One can see that a large number of passages have similarities with the conclusions presented by the consul to his own administration, sometimes word for word. In view of the agent's relations with a number of Western and Chinese entrepreneurs, as well as his frequent visits in South China, he surely served as a privileged informant for the French consul<sup>61</sup>. Allusions to confidential letters also suggest it<sup>62</sup>.

The agent was a prominent French personality in the port, an ambassador of the company's prestige and a character not to be missed in society. On behalf of his employer, he was seen in charitable actions or at official events<sup>63</sup>. He invested himself on grounds

apparently far removed from his primary functions, being for example appointed Vice-Consul for some South-American States or special juror<sup>64</sup>. Like the consul and the director of the BOI, the *Messageries*' agent, whose loads came mainly from Guangzhou, had to frequently control onsite<sup>65</sup>. During his "customer tours", he also visited the ports in the region where the company's correspondents operated<sup>66</sup>. This network of relationships contributed to the creation of a commercial network that the Quai d'Orsay intended to encourage.

### c. Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, an Almighty eye

Perhaps more unexpectedly, the role of the French religious should be underlined; in particular that of the general *procure* of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (SFMP). The purpose of a *procure* was to provide the missions with the material and money necessary to accomplish their work of evangelization. Hong Kong's was *general*: its authority extended to all missions and other *procures* in the Far East. It was therefore more of an administrative centre than a religious establishment<sup>67</sup>. In fact, the fathers of the SFMP in Hong Kong submitted themselves only timidly to the apostolic vicariate whose charge officially felt to the Italians. The financial power of this congregation was such that it gave it autonomy, authority over other religious societies and even a role in French diplomatic influence.

The Society's headquarters in the British colony was at the head of a veritable treasure. In 1932, the SFMPs produced 4% net income on a real fortune of 40 million hkd. The annual accounts listed an endless litany of investments. From ferries to trams, electricity, real estate and even dairy products, SFMPs were everywhere in the life of the British colony<sup>68</sup>. The congregation took out national loans and speculated on currency exchange. The real estate patrimony was also abundant. There was not a part of Hong Kong where the SFMPs did not, at some point, invest and speculate<sup>69</sup>. These purchases went beyond the borders of the British colony and extended throughout southern China and even as far as Hankou, Shanghai, Singapore and Indochina<sup>70</sup>.

All this is mainly the work of one man in particular, Father Léon Robert in his role of General Procurator. Historian Alain Le Pichon considers him as "one of the most remarkable persons living in the British colony at the time<sup>71</sup>". The priest erected Hong Kong's general *procure* as a financial fortress. Creator of a religious bank, the operation was such a success that other congregations came from all over Asia to feed this capital. Remuneration rose to 6% in 1928, experiencing an unprecedented influx as the congregation represented a security "which is nowhere to be found in China<sup>72</sup>". The General Procurator even managed the capital of the Paris seminary from Hong Kong<sup>73</sup>. But the religious was not content to invest money.

He intended to administer. This is how he could be found in the boards of many large companies: newspapers (*Hong Kong Telegraph*, *SCMP*, *L'Avenir du Tonkin*), but also major Hong Kong societies (seven in real estate, three in communications and transport, one in hotels and one in food supply)<sup>74</sup>.

His friendly relations were stronger in business circles than in the clergy. About Sir Paul Chater, a key character of Hong Kong's development, he confessed: "I hold him for my best friend in the Far East, more devoted and loyal than any man." The priest was the exclusive intermediary of the BOI to access the powerful tycoon, and all successive directors used him as a privileged source of information, because he "approaches official circles and influential Chinese daily"<sup>75</sup>. The religious intervened as a specialist in political and social issues about Hong Kong in *La revue du Pacifique*<sup>76</sup> and he was so famous that he was recommended from Paris<sup>77</sup>. Always present in the political arena, he was of all consular worldliness and sometimes received confidences from Claud Severn, the Colonial Secretary<sup>78</sup>. Father Robert's plans and ambitions, quite far from the religious canons, were sometimes subject of strong criticism; he also made some misjudgments, but in the end, he set up a system too lucrative to be abandoned after him. In the correspondence of the procurators who succeeded him, his shadow still hovered until the end of the period. Not surprisingly, the consul relies heavily on the prelate, even to the point of entrusting him with delicate negotiations, for example between the government of Southern China, the Macanese and the British in a project to build a railway in the Pearl Delta<sup>79</sup>.

#### [d. The biased approach of the French-speaking network](#)

If there is one thing all these influences have in common, it is that they are French or, at the very least, French-speaking. It is obvious that speakers of Molière's language were systematically more likely to approach the consul and, in a second stage, to win their case. The French, like any nation, colonizers moreover, had an ethnocentric vision of the world. As soon as a foreigner handling French language crossed the path of a consul, this characteristic was systematically noted; it was a criterion of connivance and rapprochements.

The stopover brochures of the *Messageries* stressed that at the Peninsula and Gloucester Hotel "French is spoken", implicitly guiding the French clientele<sup>80</sup>. Many other examples showed that the consul, the director of the BOI or the agent of the *Messageries* dealt in a privileged way with a trader or an official if he could speak French. Decisions motivated by comfort or practical necessity, sometimes a form of pride or chauvinism... As a result, these Francophones, even if they represented a biased minority, participated in shaping French

opinion. The image of the British territory was therefore constructed, in priority, from these relations or information emanating from them. One could call the French language an intangible diplomatic instrument.

In relations with the British authorities, the place of French language was very important. Governor Cecil Clementi, a fluent French speaker, flattered the consuls by always addressing them in their own language, as did the Colonial Secretary Severn, Chief Justice Davis and the Superintendent of the Police Wolfe. Their predecessors or successors were not mentioned as frequently and it is possible to assume that linguistic competence comes into play, without this being an exclusive criterion. While the Commodores of Hong Kong were almost never mentioned, the arrival of Admiral Kelly, former naval attaché in Paris, was greeted by the consul. He jubilated that relations with the British navy had never been marked with "such direct, so frank, so whole cordiality<sup>81</sup>".

The White Russians, so numerous in Shanghai<sup>82</sup> and for many from the aristocracy, constituted an appreciable contingent of deprived but no less talented Francophones, who were often employed by French companies<sup>83</sup>. This was equally true with local elites. Throughout the period, General Gaston Wang was never far from the consulate. A subtle Francophone and fervent Catholic, he was "known for his pro-French sentiments and appreciated by the French authorities for the services he rendered to them on many occasions<sup>84</sup>." Whether it was the former compradore of the BOI or fallen General Li Chun, refugee in Hong Kong, the relationship to France was not purely linguistic. The former Chinese Chief of Staff celebrated the "French life which remains, despite everything, the basis of universal democracy<sup>85</sup>". It is difficult to grasp their true influence in the decisions of the consul, but it is obvious that they possessed privileged entrances...

French consuls also depended on a disembodied diplomacy: factors outside their power (the spread of the French language) or events that had consequences on their work (evangelization of a province long before, leadership on technological innovations such as aviation or cinema, etc.). It is also a way of defining cultural diplomacy, a shifting concept that became, in the inter-war period, "one of the new diplomatic imperatives<sup>86</sup>" of most major states.

Thus, the French consul in Hong Kong found himself in an interesting position: his tutelage was multiple and revealed the strategic importance of his post; to carry out his mission, he relied (even depended) on various actors whose competences also exceeded their institution. A situation that invites to rethink the role of the diplomat beyond the limited

framework instructed from far away in the metropolis, but also the preponderant diplomatic role of French nationals long established abroad.

From a purely methodological point of view, it is necessary to note the non-diplomatic use that can be made of diplomatic archives. These documents inform the historians about external actors with unique material about trade, religion, navy or even the underworld of the downgraded citizens. It can be use for itself like that. A second degree reading also reveals that these mentioned presences played a role in the diplomatic structure, and shaped the work of the consul. Stimulating influences which still need to be highlighted more.

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<sup>1</sup> SUBRAHMANYAM Sanjay, “Connected histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia”, in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 31, n°3, Cambridge, 1997, p.743. The author extends the concept of the geostrategist Nicholas Spykman to modern times, but values its relevance for the studied area.

<sup>2</sup> AMEP, Hong Kong procure, 314-1.

<sup>3</sup> BORD Marie-Paul, *En Chine*, Chartres, Maison mère des sœurs de Saint-Paul-de-Chartres, 1994, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> RAMONA Philippe, *Paquebots vers l'Orient*, Joué-lès-Tours, Editions Sutton, 2001, p.27.

<sup>5</sup> MEULEAU Marc, *Des pionniers en Extrême-Orient: histoire de la Banque de l'Indochine, (1875-1975)*, Paris, Fayard, 1990, p.153.

<sup>6</sup> DRÉMEAUX François, *Les Messageries Maritimes à Hong Kong, 1918-1941*, Scientrier, Gope, 2014, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> BAILLOU Jean, PELLETIER Pierre, *Les affaires étrangères*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1962, p.184.

<sup>8</sup> In the classification of CADLC, correspondences with Hong Kong are in series E, under-series China until 1922, and then move to the under-series British possessions until 1939.

<sup>9</sup> CADLC, AGP, Staff series, DIC, 2<sup>nd</sup> et 3<sup>rd</sup> series.

<sup>10</sup> CADLC, AGP, Staff series, DIC, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, file 1290.

<sup>11</sup> CADN, pLDN, series C, n°488.

<sup>12</sup> CADN, pHKG 4, 16 September 1925.

<sup>13</sup> ANOM, Indochine, GGI, 40 824 et 40 825, 18 September 1930.

<sup>14</sup> CADN, pHKG 4, 15 June 1936.

<sup>15</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°47, 8 April 1929; CADN, pHKG 17, 19 April and 3 October 1929.

<sup>16</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°46, 18 June 1925.

<sup>17</sup> CADN, pHKG 14, 2 November 1920.

<sup>18</sup> BAILLOU Jean (dir.), *1870-1980, Histoire de l'administration française. Les affaires étrangères et le corps diplomatique, tome 2*, Paris, CNRS, 1984, p.484.

<sup>19</sup> CADN, pHKG 18, 4 January 1938.

<sup>20</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°46, 7 September 1925.

<sup>21</sup> CADLC, AGP, Staff series, DIC, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, n°67.

<sup>22</sup> CADN, pHKG 17, 22 June 1927. Only Beijing and Tianjin are at the same distance.

<sup>23</sup> CADN, pHKG 23, 3 March 1926.

<sup>24</sup> CADN, pHKG 16, 14 August 1919.

<sup>25</sup> CADN, pPEK, series A, n°281bis, 5 February 1938.

<sup>26</sup> BAILLOU Jean (dir.), *1870-1980, Histoire de l'administration... op. cit.*, p.433.

<sup>27</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1929, Staff; 1919, 1920, 1924, 1925, 1927, 1928, 1931 et 1932, Traffic.

<sup>28</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°85, 9 January 1936.

<sup>29</sup> CADN, pHKG 24, 19 January 1931.

<sup>30</sup> CADN, pHKG 49.

<sup>31</sup> ANOM, Indochine (nf), 111, file 1046, 30 August 1924.

<sup>32</sup> ANOM, Indochine, GGI, 39 286 à 39 296, 10 June 1927.

<sup>33</sup> WANG Wen-Yuan, *Les relations entre l'Indochine française et la Chine*, Paris, Éditions Bossuet, 1937, p.188.

<sup>34</sup> MARSEILLE Jacques, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français, histoire d'un divorce*, Paris, Editions Albin Michel, 1984 (rééd. 2005), p.328.

<sup>35</sup> CADN, pHKG 17, 15 January 1935.

<sup>36</sup> CADN, pHKG 36 et 37.

<sup>37</sup> ANOM, Indochine, GGI, 39 071 à 39 107, 6 December 1927.

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- <sup>38</sup> CADN, pHKG 27.
- <sup>39</sup> ANOM, Indochine, GGI, 41 137, 23 October 1919.
- <sup>40</sup> CADN, pHKG 16, 25 August 1920 and 2 May 1921 ; 12, 4 September 1925.
- <sup>41</sup> CADN, pHKG 29, 25 January 1927.
- <sup>42</sup> CADN, pHKG 15, 15 September 1927.
- <sup>43</sup> CADN, pHKG 15, 30 April 1930.
- <sup>44</sup> CADN, pHKG 3, 25 November 1924.
- <sup>45</sup> NAL, CO129/508/7 pp.1-108, 3 February 1928.
- <sup>46</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, China, n°178, 8 April 1928.
- <sup>47</sup> CADN, pHKG 17, 12 March 1935.
- <sup>48</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°46, 14 February 1925; CADN, pHKG 29, 13 December 1928 ; 4, 31 January 1933.
- <sup>49</sup> CADN, pHKG, 4, 23 April 1935.
- <sup>50</sup> BONIN Hubert, “French banks in Hong Kong (1860s-1950s): challengers to British banks? ”, in *Cahiers du GREThA*, Bordeaux, n°9, 2007, p.3.
- <sup>51</sup> CADN, pHKG 12, 15 June 1921.
- <sup>52</sup> CADLC, AP, series E, British possessions, n°84, 9 January 1932.
- <sup>53</sup> CADN, pHKG 26 and 28, 30 July and 12 August 1918.
- <sup>54</sup> BDI, DSE 040-2, 1918-1931, 2 October 1924.
- <sup>55</sup> BONIN Hubert, “French banks...”, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- <sup>56</sup> BDI, DSE 040-2, 1918-1931, 12 December 1928.
- <sup>57</sup> SCMP, 17 March 1926.
- <sup>58</sup> BDI, DSE 009-11, 1922, 1923, 1924 and 1925.
- <sup>59</sup> ROZET Guy, *Nos liaisons maritimes officielles et leur financement*, Paris, Editions Domat-Montchrestien, 1941, pp.86-92.
- <sup>60</sup> BERNERON-COUVENHES Marie-Françoise, “Le rôle de l’agent des Messageries Maritimes à Alexandrie de 1882 à 1914: coordination, information, innovation”, in *Histoire, économie, société*, n°19-2, Paris, 2000, p.268.
- <sup>61</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1928 à 1936, Secretariat. The consul sent his reports after the shipping company agent's.
- <sup>62</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1924, Secretariat.
- <sup>63</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1921, etc., Accounting.
- <sup>64</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1932, Secretariat.
- <sup>65</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1919 à 1939, Secretariat.
- <sup>66</sup> AFL, CMM, RGS, 1927, Secretariat.
- <sup>67</sup> CADN, pHKG 29, 11 March 1930.
- <sup>68</sup> AMEP, Accounting, procure 01 to 04.
- <sup>69</sup> AMEP, HKG, 316D-02 (1917-1921), 11 February 1920, 30 April 1921.
- <sup>70</sup> AMEP, HKG, 316D-02 (1917-1921), general accounts 1917.
- <sup>71</sup> LE PICHON Alain, “Portrait of a Practical Visionary: Father Léon Robert MEP and the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres in Hong Kong, 1914-19”, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, vol.52, 2012, pp.225 et 256.
- <sup>72</sup> AMEP, Accounting, procure 02, general accounts 1925, 1926 and 1927.
- <sup>73</sup> AMEP, Accounting, procure 01, 1918-1940.
- <sup>74</sup> CADN, pHKG 16, 19 September 1919; AMEP, Staff series, Léon Robert – 1, 8 April 1924 and 26 January 1926
- <sup>75</sup> AMEP, Staff series, Léon Robert – 1, 18 April 1925; BDI, DSE 009-11, 1921-1925, 11 April 1923, 26 May 1924, 20 June 1925.
- <sup>76</sup> ROBERT Léon, “La grève maritime de Hong Kong”, in *La revue du Pacifique*, Paris, tome 1, n°6, 1922, pp.10-19.
- <sup>77</sup> AMEP, Staff series, Léon Robert – 2, 7 March 1924.
- <sup>78</sup> CADN, pHKG 28, 31 October 1919; 12, 25 April 1923.
- <sup>79</sup> CADN, pHKG 12 and 14, 20 August, 5 September and 2 November 1921.
- <sup>80</sup> AFL, CMM, Communication, 1997 002 4990 and 5019. Port leaflets 1938 and 1939.
- <sup>81</sup> CADN, pHKG 12 and 13, 24 April, 1922, 24 March 1929, 6 February 1930, 31 January 1932; 17, 13 March 1928, 2 March 1931.
- <sup>82</sup> HENRIOT Christian, ROUX Alain, *Shanghai années 30*, Paris, Autrement, 1998, p.43.
- <sup>83</sup> CADN, pHKG 12, 11 October 1921; 29, 16 April and 4 September 1929 ; 17, 16 March 1934 ; AFL, CMM, Staff series, 1997 002 5140 ; interview with Yvonne de Farcy, 17 July 2010.
- <sup>84</sup> CADN, pHKG 12, 18 October 1928.
- <sup>85</sup> ANOM, Indochine, GGI, 55 446 à 55 531, 11 May 1920.
- <sup>86</sup> CHAUBET François, *La politique culturelle française et la diplomatie de la langue. L’Alliance française (1883-1940)*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2006, p.161.