

Dr. Anna Kołodziejska

Poland-Polynesia Association & Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

Chinese Community in the Area of French Polynesia – History and Present Times

1. Introduction

Upon mentioning “Chinese” in French Polynesia, we come across a complicated issue for the people currently living in the region. When we are talking about the Chinese community in French Polynesia, we mean the great-grandchildren or great-great-grandchildren of Chinese immigrants from the years 1890–1930, who arrived in the area as agricultural workers or purchasers. The first two generations were still considering returning to their homeland; however, the people born in the French colonies increasingly preferred to stay rather than go back to China. In the French colonies, as opposed to the territory of the European France, the law of the land (in particular *jus soli*) was very underdeveloped. As result, the second-generation migrants who were born in French Polynesia were still considered Chinese rather than French. Even in the 1960s, they still had the status of foreigners. As a matter of fact, in 1962, there were 7,120 Chinese descendants living in this area, but only 1,435 held French citizenship.¹ It was not until 1973 that the Chinese were granted French nationality *en masse*, which was the consequence of changes made in the nationality law in the French overseas territories to match the legislation in France.

2. History

At that time, colonial administration was mainly using the term “Asians”; the term “Chinese” was introduced later, as it had political rather than racial connotations. The latter became more frequent in the 1930s and 1940s, after the formation of the Republic of China and the establishment of a Chinese consulate

¹ A.-Ch. Trémon, “Les Chinois en Polynesie francaise, Configuration d’un champ des identifications,” *Etudes chinoises* 26, 2007, p. 258.

in Tahiti. On May 24, 1945, Yao Ting-Chen became the first Consul General of China in Papeete.

The French colonial system in this area was introduced gradually. Queen Pomare IV accepted the French protectorate in 1843, and in 1880 King Pomare V ceded power over Tahiti to France.² Currently, French Polynesia is an area encompassing the Society Islands, which includes the Windward Islands of Tahiti and Moorea and the Leeward Islands of Huahine, Raiatea-Tahaa, Bora Bora, Maupiti, the Austral Islands, Marquesas, and Tuamotu-Gambiers. The French developed their plantations from the very beginning of their activity in this region, directing the reaped profits to Europe. The local population was acting as a kind of an audience for the activities of the European businesses in the area. The complete lack of industry and local manufacturing made the area dependent on the French metropolis and hindered the economic development of the colony. Its maintenance costs outweighed the profits for the French. The emerging enterprises related to food production required much manpower, which was scarce in the area. The first Chinese laborers were probably brought to Tahiti in 1864 to work on a new cotton plantation (the date of their arrival varies slightly according to different sources, sometimes it is given as 1865). In 1871, the plantation went bankrupt and could not meet its obligations, which also included the repatriation of Chinese workers. Over the decades, various plantations brought in more Chinese laborers.³

One may form an opinion about the position of such workers by reading Jack London's short story *The Chinago* (June 26, 1909).⁴ It was inspired by real events.

The protagonist of the story is Ah-Cho, a twenty-two-year-old Chinese man working on an English plantation in Tahiti employing 500 other laborers like him. He didn't speak French. He came from a poor village in China. When he signed a five-year contract to work in the colonies, he considered himself lucky. He imagined that when he returned to China, he would be so rich that he wouldn't have to work ever again. The story begins when Ah-Cho finds himself in a courtroom, accused of killing another Chinese worker. He witnessed the murder but did not commit the crime himself. In his opinion, the French are stupid, because in China, torture would quickly extract a confession, and the culprit would be punished. He calls the French "white devils," because their behavior is incomprehensible to him – from the foreman who drives them with a whip at work to the judge who does not care about discovering the truth. Thanks to the narrator, we learn that Ah-Cho worked on a plantation belonging to an English company. The owners wanted to find a scapegoat to punish and avoid losing more employees in similar circumstances, because it was a financial loss for them. Ah-Cho does not know what motives stand behind those conducting the trial.

² É. Conte (ed.), *Une histoire de Tahiti des origines à nos jours*, Au vent des îles Éditions-Pacifique, Pirae 2019, pp. 187–188.

³ É. Conte (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 204.

⁴ J. London, "Chińczyk," in: *Opowieści Mórz Południowych*, Wydawnictwo Spółdzielcze, Warszawa 1987, pp. 20–34.

He assumes that he will be back to work soon, having already worked there three years out of the required five. Another Chinese man – also innocent – is sentenced to death, while Ah-Cho gets twenty years in prison; however, at the last moment the sergeant mixes up the two men, as to him all Chinese look the same, and Ah-Cho is guillotined. This story reflects the status of the Chinese in the colonial system.

The Chinese who remained in Polynesia initially tried to work in the villages. With time, however, having no outside support, they started to mainly be active in crafts and trade. They were also quickly recognized by European merchants (German, French, English) as a threat and charged with responsibility for the economic crisis. Anti-Chinese articles began to appear in the press.⁵

3. Problems with Chinese identity

The Chinese who were recruited to work in the colonies (Établissement Français de l'Océanie, EFO) in the late 19th century came mainly from the province of Guangdong. As the language they use in that province is called Hakka, this entire ethnic group began to be referred to by this name in Polynesia. The language was passed down through generations. Today, however, the descendants of the original newcomers study in cultural institutions which only promote Chinese Mandarin culture. Every year, there appear more and more institutions aiming to defend the Chinese identity in Polynesia and to promote Chinese culture: they teach exclusively the Mandarin language and work actively by offering tastings, tea making demonstrations, exhibitions of Chinese art and pieces from Chinese collectors, as well as by compiling research on the Chinese presence in the area.

An additional element complicating the identification of the discussed group of inhabitants of French Polynesia is the very distinction between the French and the Polynesian identity. An important factor is also the participation in the *ma'ohi* (indigenous) world. Increasingly, those who call themselves Polynesians understand this as being a member of a multicultural community. The term “neo-Polynesian society” is promoted, pointing to the fact that today’s inhabitants of the area originate from different ethnic groups (metization) and their multiculturalism. In Chinese centers, this image of Polynesian society is emphasized, but not the *ma'ohi* world. Today, people whose parents spoke Hakka make an effort to learn Mandarin, assuming that it will help them develop their economic dominance and believing that playing the multicultural card might give them the upper hand in the world of business, politics, and culture.

In 2007, a consulate of the People’s Republic of China was established in Tahiti.⁶ Its opening ceremony was attended by many French politicians, including President of French Polynesia Gaston Tong Sang (who held his office for two more days). On this

⁵ É. Conte (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp 204–205.

⁶ A.-Ch. Trémon, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

occasion, the Chinese consul announced the opening of the first Chinese consulate in France's overseas territories. The fact that a consulate of the Republic of China had existed in the years 1945–1965 went unmentioned. After the French government had recognized the People's Republic of China, this consulate had been closed.

The consulate in Papeete, although it has an administrative role, serves to increase Beijing's influence in Polynesia by deepening Chinese ties with local businesses and politicians. The number of Chinese tourists and the volume of new Chinese immigration is constantly growing. Thanks to expanding the country's influence, Beijing was able to donate 2.2 million surgical masks and 15,000 FFP-2 masks to Tahiti during the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions emphasized China's position on the island and undermined the role of the French state as the one in charge of protecting the local population.

Since the 1970s, the Chinese New Year has been publicly celebrated in French Polynesia, and representatives of local authorities always take part in the events. In 2013, the Confucius Institute was incorporated into structures of the University of French Polynesia. Its role is to promote Chinese culture internationally and highlight the technological and social progress achieved by the Communist Party. It is symptomatic that simultaneously with emphasizing multiculturalism, the Chinese organization also underlines the ethnicization/reinforcement of ethnic borders resulting from Chinese association. More and more ethnic Chinese events are attended by local authorities.

4. Chinese investments in French Polynesia

From the late 1980s, China became increasingly interested in French Polynesia. In recent years, Chinese representatives have acquired several hotels, including two five-star establishments. A diplomatic network is being developed by China in the archipelagos. Its economic involvement is no longer limited to the purchase of real estate. There are attempts to launch large-scale investments involving millions of dollars, which are particularly attractive to the poorer archipelagos.

One of the largest Chinese investments in French Polynesia is aquaculture in Hao Atoll (in the Tuamotu Archipelago, 900 kilometers from Tahiti).⁷ This project aims to create the largest aquaculture farm in the world, which will produce over fifty thousand tons of fish annually. To implement this gigantic project, the involved Chinese company would invest more than 600 million euros over ten years. Great economic benefits for the island are promised, and residents are tempted by the vision of the initiative creating numerous new jobs. In addition, they see it as an opportunity

⁷ M. Valo, "A Hao, en Polynésie française, un projet controversé de ferme aquacole géante," *Le Monde*, 6 February 2022, www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2022/02/06/a-hao-en-polynesie-francaise-un-projet-controverse-de-ferme-aquacole-geante (accessed 6.02.2022).

to become independent from the French mainland. However, lying behind this project is Beijing's ambition to extend its influence to the farthest reaches of the Pacific.⁸ Polynesia is located at the crossroads of the Asian continent, the North American continent, and Antarctica, which is strategic for the Chinese policy of expansion.⁹ If Beijing achieves its goals, it will become a key player in the local life and will eventually be able to easily install its submarine cable infrastructure in the area. Initially, China was showing interest in Makemo Atoll as the location for building this gigantic farm project. Chinese investors, however, ended up choosing Hao, which was a former back base of the Pacific Experimentation Center and an island with a deep-water port and a very long airport runway.

Preparations for the creation of the gigantic aquaculture enterprise have been underway since 2014. Land has already been prepared on the atoll, and the cornerstone has been laid to symbolize the agreement on this matter. Local authorities in Polynesia highlight the benefits of the new investment.

Ecologists, however, have raised the alarm, pointing to the catastrophic effects on the natural environment resulting from such mass production of fish in one place. From 1966 to 1996, Hao Atoll hosted the Pacific Experimentation Center, an organization which supervised nuclear testing in the region. There is a risk that fish farmed in these waters would be contaminated with radioactive residues. Such a concentration of fish would contaminate the waters flowing out of the lagoon and other fisheries of the archipelago. In addition, opponents of the project argue that if these fish are sold on the local market, they will lower prices, because their production will be very cheap. In this way, they will compete with the local fishery sector. As a result, real profits will bypass the island's permanent residents. Only after the visit of French President Emanuel Macron to French Polynesia last year (July 2021) were Chinese activities on the atoll halted. Emmanuel Macron recalled how other Chinese investments had led to the looting of natural resources in Pacific Island countries. The president strongly opposed plans to build an aquaculture farm. Instead, he promised state remedies to improve the economic situation of the atoll and the region. France has undertaken to perform restoration works on the atoll and form of a military service regiment that will enable young people to gain a profession through serving in the army.

Apart from strong supporters and opponents of the investment in Hao Atoll, there also exists a group that, while acknowledging the profits which could come from this undertaking, also fears that a port may be built at the site under the pretext of fishing. Such a facility would ultimately become a base for Chinese ships.

⁸ Cf. K. Iwanek, O. Pietrewicz (eds.), *Chiński projekt „Nowego Jedwabnego Szlaku”. Retoryka a rzeczywistość, Raport Ośrodka Badań Azji, Centrum Badań nad Bezpieczeństwem Akademii Sztuki Wojennej, Ośrodek Badań Azji, Centrum Badań nad Bezpieczeństwem, Akademia Sztuki Wojennej, Warszawa 2017, pp. 5–7.*

⁹ P. Milhiet, “French Polynesia Has Its Own China Dream,” *The Diplomat*, 23 June 2022, thediplomat.com/2022/06/french-polynesia-has-its-own-china-dream (accessed 4.12.2022).