

# **The Rockefeller Foundation's China Medical Board and Medical Philanthropy in Wartime China, 1938-1945**

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On July 7, 1937 the Marco Polo Bridge Incident [Lugou Qiao *shibian*] marked the official beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, known in China as the War of Resistance against the Japanese [*Kangri zhanzheng*], and to most others as part of World War II. The incident took place in a suburb of the previous capital Beijing; eleven days later the city surrendered to the Japanese Imperial Army. Nonetheless, for the first several years this did not affect the operations of the Peking [Beijing] Union Medical College (PUMC), China's top medical school at the time, which received financial assistance from the Rockefeller Foundation's China Medical Board (CMB) beginning in 1917, and fell under its direct care in September 1921.<sup>1</sup> Not until December 8, 1941, did the Japanese Army occupy the College, and the school was officially closed on February 1, 1942.<sup>2</sup> It re-opened in 1946 after the war, and was officially handed over to Chinese control in 1951, after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Civil War.

Prior to this handover, the CMB and the Rockefeller Foundation donated a combined total of over twenty million dollars to the Peking Union Medical College for its land, construction, equipment, capital, and operating costs.<sup>3</sup> Yet this sum constituted but a tiny portion of the Rockefeller Foundation's overall donations to health projects in China, which included medical schools and libraries, scholarship funds, medical training programs, governmental health programs, translations of medical texts, and missionary-run hospitals: donations for the period 1915 to 1941 totaled over thirty-two million dollars.<sup>4</sup>

As the Japanese Army moved south along the coastline, attacking all of eastern China's major cities, many of the nation's hospitals and medical schools had to relocate to the inland provinces. Meanwhile, millions of refugees fled the war zone and moved by train, bus, boat, rickshaw, car, mule, and foot to Free China. These refugees poured into areas that were not well prepared for such an upsurge in population, and the Japanese Air Force followed: many cities in Free China suffered air raids for several years. China was in a state of medical as well as national emergency, yet had very few personnel trained in scientific biomedicine. A 1937 survey listed only 8,900 physicians, 2,740 pharmacists and druggists, 3,700 midwives, and 575 nurses nationwide.<sup>5</sup>

At this critical moment, many of the people who had the proper training to take on high-level posts in state administration of public health were graduates of the PUMC. These included Robert K.S. Lim, who headed the Emergency Service Medical Training School, which provided basic medical training to over 14,000 people over the course of the war.<sup>6</sup> Hsu Ai-chu (PUMC School of Nursing, Class of 1930) first supervised public health nursing at the Beijing First Health Station in 1937, and in 1942 became head of Public Health Nursing at the National Institute of Health in Geleshan, Chongqing. Dr. C.C. Chen (PUMC, Class of 1929) became Director of Rural Health in the Dingxian Rural Reconstruction Movement. During the war he returned to his hometown of Chengdu, Sichuan, where he held many top positions, including Director of the Sichuan Provincial Health Administration. A previous PUMC faculty member, Marion Yang, directed the National Health Administration's Division of Maternity Child Health. Thus it is clear that Rockefeller Foundation sponsorship of biomedical education in early twentieth century China provided an absolutely crucial support - in the form of highly trained top personnel - in a moment of crisis.



Yu-Chan Vera Nieh



C. C. Chen



Marion Yang

However, this group of PUMC alumni and top-level Nationalist Party health workers constituted but a sub-section of China's most elite social class, whose PUMC degrees gave them even greater social capital as well as actual capital. The CMB trusted its own College's graduates over and above those who attended other medical schools in China, and PUMC alumni frequently received China Medical Board scholarships for subsequent study, grants for their professional projects, and even salary subsidies when wartime inflation rendered their actual salaries insufficient. In short, PUMC graduates were blessed with access to an external source of money and sponsorship that kept them in an elite category throughout the war period, and they felt extremely grateful for this support. For example, when Dr. C. C. Chen published his English-language biography, *Medicine in Rural China: A Personal Account* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), he dedicated his book to the children of John B. Grant, the first Director of PUMC.

In this context, it is clear that the China Medical Board's sponsorship of biomedical education in twentieth century China had an enormous impact upon specific individuals who achieved professional success, and therefore upon the development of a modern public health system in China. However, when seen from a different angle - through the eyes of the non-elite during the war - the CMB did virtually nothing to help the millions of Chinese who suffered tremendous hardship throughout the eight years of war. Although neither the Chinese government nor an American philanthropic organization could have saved all Chinese people from a situation so dire as to be nearly insoluble, the China Medical Board's immovable focus on biomedical

education at a time when only a fraction of the population had any desire or resource to seek such services at least partially neglected the actual needs of the people in favor of pursuing a medical ideology that was utterly foreign to the majority of Chinese.

Although the China Medical Board and its parent organization, the Rockefeller Foundation, supported dozens of medical schools in China, almost every grantee institution was either a Western-Chinese cooperative or Western-run university, and the list of grantees completely excluded medical schools and health programs that followed the tenets of Chinese medicine. This demonstrates a lack of confidence in Chinese medicine as an effective element of modernized public health services. Hindsight shows this exclusive confidence in biomedicine to have been misplaced, since Chinese medicine thrives in contemporary China and is an indelible part of its current healthcare system.

This difference in medical epistemologies serves as a framework for additional conflicts that occurred around Rockefeller projects in wartime China. Within the further context of Western imperialism in East Asia and the overwhelming power of the U.S. government and military at the time, these conflicts have layers of significance that illustrate how national, racial, gender, and class hierarchies shaped interpersonal relations between grantors and grantees.

Even after the Japanese occupation of the PUMC in December 1941, the Medical College faculty and staff decided to stay in Beijing. The basis of this decision requires further investigation and lies outside the realm of the current research report. On the other hand, several faculty and alumni of the PUMC Nursing School, which first opened in September 1920, decided to move the school to Free China and continue its operation outside of Japanese military control. Every step of the process took a long time, so it was not until early 1943 that the PUMC Nursing School finally re-opened in Chengdu. Unfortunately, some Chinese misunderstood the Nursing School Sub-committee's decision to move its relocated School to the campus of West China Union University in Chengdu. For reasons beyond the Sub-committee member's control, it became impossible to relocate to Geleshan, Chongqing (the wartime capital), and site of both the National Health Administration and the National Institute of Health. The PUMC Nursing School students were therefore incorporated into the National Central Medical College, itself relocated to Chongqing from its pre-war site in Nanjing.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, administrators at this College placed many unnecessary strictures on the PUMC students and they subsequently moved again to the British and American missionary-run West China Union University (WCUU) Medical School in Chengdu. This move sparked rumors that PUMC students were inferior to National Central students and could not "take the heat", that they wished to avoid government service, and that they were too pampered and could not deal with the overcrowding and poor facilities at National Central.

Then on July 31, 1943, an anonymous blackmail letter was delivered to PUMC Nursing students

Wang and Lu stating that, "because what you are prepared to do is the action of a shameless traitor and dangerous leftist Communist, we absolutely cannot let you." The letter ended with a veiled death threat that, fortunately, was never fulfilled. The reaction of the two nursing students Wang and Lu does not appear in the archival records, but CMB Director Claude E. Forkner was quite incensed by this letter and wrote to the Minister of Education Chen Lifu in hope of a response to the situation that was not forthcoming.<sup>10</sup> It is notable that the blackmailers used nationalism and the notion of treason as a means of shaming the students, and that they targeted the lowest people on the totem pole who in fact had no say in administrative decisions.

Misconceptions about the Nursing School's move to Chengdu were, in fact, quite widespread. CMB Director Forkner was also verbally attacked by two of his Chinese colleagues, James Shen and Dr. Chow Shou-kai. Of the former, Forkner wrote, "I believe he is manipulating to have me withdrawn from China."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Y. L. Mei, Superintendent of Central Hospital in Chongqing, refused to release two PUMC Nursing School students who had been working at his hospital with the understanding that they would move with the school at the appropriate time.<sup>12</sup> Shen, Chow, and Mei had all expected that the PUMC Nursing School would relocate to Geleshan, and saw its retreat to WCUU in Chengdu as cowardice at best.

It took Director Forkner a couple of months to clear the air with his colleagues, and one can only presume that if it had not been a conflict between an American and three Chinese, it would not have been so heated. One cannot forget that all interactions between the U.S. and China - even during the war when the two countries were staunch allies - were colored by East Asians' previous experiences with Western imperialism.

Director Forkner himself was no expert at cross-cultural relations, and was repeatedly involved in mutual misunderstandings. A more long-lived conflict that presumably did greater damage to people's morale and reputations surfaced between Director Forkner and the Dean of the relocated PUMC Nursing School, Vera Nieh (Nie Yuchan), in spring 1944. Nieh had served as Dean beginning in 1940, prior to relocation, and was elected by her peers to continue in this position and lead the faculty and students to safety across enemy lines. From the beginning, Dean Nieh continually asked for the authority and title of School Director (*xiaozhang*) rather than Dean, as the PUMC itself no longer existed and the regular structure that would have made operation as Dean smooth and efficient was also gone. She felt that if she had more autonomy all of her tasks would be more easily completed. When her requests for a change in title were repeatedly ignored, she began acting as such without official permission; she ceased delivering financial and other reports, began speaking directly to those above her within the CMB administration rather than going through their subordinates, and repeatedly fought with Director Forkner, his staff member Stephen Chang, and Dr. Li Ting-an, Executive Director of the Administrative Committee for the Nursing School. Dr. Forkner concluded that she should be fired and began asking his Chinese colleagues for their approval of specific individuals who might replace her.<sup>13</sup>

There is enough documentary evidence to suggest that Vera Nieh had a temper and could be quite demanding and stubborn, and that under the strenuous conditions of the war these qualities were all exacerbated, but the majority of this evidence comes from male observers. What did the women who worked with Dean Nieh think of her? Their perspective, in fact, was precisely the opposite. On March 20, 1944, the PUMC Nursing School faculty wrote a letter in full support of their Dean, citing all of the same frustrations that Nieh had been dealing with for months without response.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that one of the main complaints that Dean Nieh and her faculty had was that male doctors wanted to control the School, while she felt that the professional nurses themselves were far more competent and did not need the doctors' input.<sup>15</sup> Just as Western imperialism serves as a constant backdrop for U.S.-China relations during the war, here the gender differences of the two parties involved undoubtedly affected the way in which both sides interpreted and interacted with the other, and Dean Nieh chafed at male control.

Rockefeller Foundation and China Medical Board contributions to public health in wartime China were either invaluable or invisible, depending on the angle of one's line of sight. Similarly, Dean Nieh was either a highly competent yet overlooked school administrator, or an extremely incompetent and even slightly insane woman, depending on one's relation to the PUMC Nursing School situation.<sup>16</sup> She was probably a little bit of both, especially during the highly stressful wartime. As everything in life has multiple aspects, both angles on Rockefeller projects in wartime China were also true: biomedical education at the Peking Union Medical College provided some of wartime China's - and subsequently post-war China and post-war Taiwan's - top officials in the state public health bureaucracy, while most commoners had no idea that the Foundation even existed, nor did its millions of dollars save them from starvation, bombing, and death by treatable disease.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. Bowers, John Z. *Western Medicine in a Chinese Palace: Peking Union Medical College, 1917-1951*. Philadelphia: The Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1972, 1; Henry B. Van Wesep, "Rockefeller Foundation Work in China, 1913-1947," p. 1, Folder 133, Box 13, Record Group (RG) 1, Series 601, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).
2. "Report of School of Nursing PUMC for the period of December 8, 1941 to June 30, 1944," p.1, Folder 708, Box 99, China Medical Board, (CMB), "Survey of Medical Aid Given to China by American Organizations in the War Emergency," p. 3, Folder 1037, Box 143, CMB, RAC.
3. The CMB donated \$3,113,492.88 to the PUMC for operating costs between 1934 and 1942, and the RF donated an additional \$17,935,186.09. See "The Rockefeller Foundation Payments for Work in China, 1914-1951," pp. 2 and 6, Folder 133, Box 13, Series 601, RG 1, RF, RAC. Another document lists a much larger total sum of fifty-five million given to the PUMC. See Henry B. Van Wesep, "Rockefeller Foundation Work in China, 1913-1947," p. 1-2. (The China Medical Board was initially a division within the RF, but in the reorganization of Rockefeller philanthropies in 1928 it became an independent organization with its own endowment and program).
4. The precise sum was \$32,810,322.33. "The Rockefeller Foundation Payments for Work in China, 1914-1951," p. 9, Folder 133, Box 13, Series 601, RG 1, RF, RAC.
5. Watt, John R. *A Friend in Deed: ABMAC and the Republic of China, 1937-1987*. New York: ABMAC, 1992, 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7. Four women proposed the move as well as the re-located school's administration and faculty: Hsu Ai-chu, Mrs. Chen Chu Pi Hui, Sia Yun Hua; and Liu Ching Ho. See Hsu Ai-chu, et al., "A Proposal for Reopening the PUMC School of Nursing in Free China," Folder 1038, Box 43, CMB, RAC.
8. Vera Nieh, "Report of School of Nursing, PUMC, for the period of December 8, 1941 to June 30, 1944," p. 5, Folder 708, Box 99, CMB, RAC.
9. Yip, Ka-che. *Health and National Reconstruction in Nationalist China: The Development of Modern Health Services, 1928-1937*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 1995, 143.
10. See Folder 156, Box 22, CMB, RAC.

11. Claude E. Forkner to Lobenstine and Pearce, October 4, 1943, Folder 221, Box 32, CMB, RAC.

12. Ibid.

13. Claude E. Forkner (CEF) letter No. 50, March 9, 1944, Folder 1040, Box 143, CMB, RAC; CEF to Dr. Tsur, February 24, 1944, Folder 1039, Box 144, CMB, RAC; and Stephen Chang to Edwin Lobenstine (ECL), March 18, 1944, Folder 1040, Box 143, CMB, RAC.

14. Faculty, PUMC School of Nursing to Dr. Y.T. Tsur, Chairman of PUMC Board of Trustees, March 20, 1944, Folder 1040, Box 143, CMB, RAC.

15. Li Ting An to Dr. Y. T. Tsur, confidential letter, March 3, 1944, Folder 1040, Box 143, CMB, RAC. This letter includes the line, "Miss Nieh at once raises the opinion that she does not want a doctor to head up a nursing school."

16. Stephen Chang wrote in his letter, "[i]f I may be allowed to say so I am afraid she really needs some psychiatric attention." Stephen Chang to ECL, March 18, 1944, p.6. Claude Forkner wrote, "I think she is emotionally unstable and is so difficult to get along with that she is doing harm to the school." CEF to Dr. Tsur, February 24, 1944. The fact that women have long been targeted as "hysterical" and over-emotional should not escape our notice here.