

Rockefeller Foundation and China's Wartime Nursing, 1937-1945

By Dewen Zhang

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of History
State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook

dewzhang@ic.sunysb.edu

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I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center twice, in March and May 2009, as part of my doctoral research on Chinese women's relief efforts during the War of Resistance, 1937-45.¹ I became interested in the collection at the RAC because of its potential in shedding light on major nursing personnel and nursing training programs during the war years in China. The history of the administrative and institutional growth of the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC) has received academic attention both in China and in the U.S., but very little has been written exclusively on the School of Nursing and its graduates.² The Rockefeller Foundation and its major investment in China, the PUMC, played a most crucial role in developing modern nursing in the first half of the twentieth century. Many PUMC graduates played leading roles on both sides of the Taiwan straits. This research report, however, will

only investigate major PUMC nursing graduates and their medical adventures in southwest China during the War of Resistance, a relatively short period in history but a profound epoch in modern China.

The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) created the Peking Union Medical College in 1921, but soon turned over its administration and funding to the new China Medical Board (CMB) of New York in 1928. The RF continued to make grants to specific programs, however, after the open hostility broke out in 1937, emphasis was given to protecting the needs of PUMC staff and students and to facilitating China's medical needs through grants for purposes such as salaries, student aid, teaching supplies and emergency building needs. When the war erupted, the Chinese military suffered gravely for its lack of necessary medical personnel. For example, by 1937, the Central Military Medical School located in Nanjing only had "a dozen student nurses in training," which left the nationalist army severely unattended by medical care.³

The need for nurses had been recognized by RF representatives and the Commission on Medical Education in thinking and action. The Commission materialized this vision by allocating and securing funds for "fellowship and stipend for the training of medical midwifery and nursing teaching personnel(s). Also, we hope that the Foundation will continue to subsidize the Commission along the lines of compilation, translating and printing of medical textbooks and reference books." Among the medical literature that was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation for China, a package of 72-books and journals were arranged in 1942. The nursing office took a great effort in compiling the book list by leading personnel in the field of nursing at the time. The point is "we must get on with this project and take some chances, just like getting war materials to the front, because nursing education in China,

with consequent effect on morale and quality, is at least 3 to 5 years out of date.”⁴

Fully aware of the inadequacy of nursing training in Nationalist China, the Rockefeller Foundation took this matter from a consideration for long-term development. In 1941, the RF’s China Program gave the Committee on Nursing of the Commission on Medical Education a grant of LC25,000 for purchasing nursing textbooks and periodicals. This grant of US\$800 was estimated to be able for approximately 150 items, with subscriptions to medical journals for a two-year period.⁵ Balfour, the director of the International Health Division, trusted this issue to Mary E. Tennant. Professional opinions on the list for a nursing library were sought from a number of outstanding nursing professionals in the U.S. and China, including Barnice Chu, the chairman of the Committee on Nursing in Chongqing; Vanderbilt School of Nursing; Gertrude E. Hodgman, director of the New York Hospital School of Nursing; Hazel Corbin, director of the Maternity Center Association in New York City; Anna D. Wolf, the director of the School of Nursing and of the Nursing Service at Johns Hopkins Hospital; and Margaret E. Conrad, a professor of nursing at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia Medical Center. The book list published by the National League of Nursing Education was also consulted.⁶ The compilers from these institutions meant to incorporate essential readings, as well as the latest publications into this important purchasing list for relocated medical institutes in China. In her reply letter to the RF office, Gertrude Hodgman, director for the School of Nursing at Russell Sage College, states that “the list you sent we made up in Peking some time ago and on the whole it seems to me a very good list. There are later editions of a large number of the book lists and I am sure you would want to get the latest education in each case.”⁷

The cooperative program also extended financial aid to nursing students. One hundred and six students received local fellowship grants for a duration varying from 4 -12 months from the China Program, and in 1943, 55 students again received the same kind of financial support for a duration of 6 months from the latter through the National Health Administration.⁸

This leads us to ponder what were the roles of PUMC nursing graduates in southwest China during the War of Resistance? Records have shown that most PUMC faculty members and graduates stayed in occupied regions as war went on; however, a small number of them went into exile in China's remote southwest together with the Nationalist government. Despite the small number of personnel, they represented the best quality of PUMC medical work that could be of great use to the China at war. PUMC graduates brought expertise of high quality to the field of medical nursing, and assumed leading roles in this profession open to women. In the following section, I will take three highly visible PUMC graduates as examples to illustrate my argument: Nie Yuchan, graduate of PUMC'27 and Dean of the PUMC School of Nursing; Lin Sixin of PUMC'26; and Zhou Meiyu of PUMC'30.

These women continued their work in directing and shaping modern nursing in the new milieu, which was considered socially more conservative and economically more primitive compared with the eastern coastal cities which were under Japanese occupation. Their work, challenged by social customs, increasingly severe inflation and rampant corruption in the Chongqing government, continued to grow and gained national dimension during the war.

Nie Yuchan (Vera Nieh) was the first Chinese who assumed the position as the dean of the PUMC School of Nursing prior to the war. When PUMC was forced to close its operation in Beijing in 1941, Nie continued her duty as the mentor of her students and made proper

arrangements for the former students who were under her direction. She arranged for the first and second year nursing students to transfer to the Nurses Training School of the Presbyterian Douw Hospital, and for senior students to complete their practical experience in hospitals in Beijing and Tianjin.

Nie soon joined the exodus to southwest China and resumed the directorship to reopen the School of Nursing in the fall of 1942. As the director of the exiled school, Nie spent much of her time adjusting the PUMC superior training to the realistic situations in Sichuan. Though the relatively conservative social environment and rampant inflation did not facilitate the expected growth, nonetheless, the reopening of the School of Nursing under Nie's directorship boosted confidence and morale among PUMC alumni both in Free China and those who chose to stay in occupied China.

During her tenure as the dean of the School of Nursing in exile in Sichuan, Nie was caught in affairs of adjustments to the co-operation with West China Union University with the absence of the Peking Union Medical College in total. Despite much of her time being spent on work of coordinative nature, the School went on and admitted four classes of undergraduate and one class of postgraduate students. The School facilitated West China Union University setting up a new hospital, which was used as a practice field for PUMC students. As the School had charge of the nursing service of the hospital, they were able "to introduce PUMC system into it, although numerous adjustments had to be made."⁹

Another PUMC graduate assumed a leading position in national scale. Lin Sixin (Evelyn Lin), once a candidate for the position of the superintendent of the Central Hospital in Chongqing during the war, was the president of the Nurses' Association of China. Lin most famously upheld nursing as a profession for women during the war. She stated: "Miss

Florence Nightingale founded modern nursing. This was the birth of nursing as a profession. Today nursing is recognized as a scientific profession which requires cultured people to enter it. It took centuries of hard work of our pioneers to develop nursing from the simple care of the sick to the status of a profession. Nursing is national and international; in other words it is democratic. It takes care of friends and enemy.”¹⁰ This statement by Lin expressed the work ethic upheld by nurses in the 1930s. Combating against the socially prejudicial recognition of nursing as an extension of women’s domestic duties, Lin incorporated Chinese nursing into the global scientific development; by doing so, she laid down authoritative power for this profession staffed mostly by women.

Perhaps the most direct contribution to Chinese military nursing came from another PUMC graduate, Zhou Meiyu, who gained her experience in public health nursing in Dingxian in the Mass Education Movement after graduation. Her work had been in both the administrative and educational fields. According to the evaluation made by the governing council of the Education Division at PUMC, she “has shown unusual ability and promise in these two important aspects.” Similar to Nie and Lin, as PUMC graduates of the late 1920s, after a decade of medical work, Zhou was already an integral part of modern nursing prior the war. She possessed the professional capacity and social network for a leadership role. Upon her arrival at Kuiyang, she organized nurses and established a new branch of the Nurses’ Association of China in Guiyang.

At the initial years of the war, she worked with Robert K.S. Lim, another famous PUMC patriotic, in China Red Cross Society. As war went on, Lim was appointed as the director of the Emergency Medical Service Training School (EMSTS), and Zhou as the dean of the School of Nursing. The purpose of the school was to try to meet China’s emergent need of

medical personnel, including nursing personnel. Intensive three month courses in the fundamentals of first aid, nursing, sanitation, military medicine and simple surgery were given to the officers and assistants who carried on the bulk of the medical and surgical work of the army. Emphasis was laid on practical methods of combating disease—not necessarily the ideal methods described in text-books, but those most practicable in the conditions met with in the Chinese Army. Theory was largely dispensed with, “how” being more important than “why”. Instruction was given by means of lectures and demonstrations, followed by practice drills, but in most of the courses less than one-third of the time was devoted to lectures. Stress was laid on the importance of doing simple things correctly and well.

Over 7000 officers and assistants received this type of training at the Central School in Kweiyang and at the five branch schools located in the war areas. The army medical Administration hoped to expend this program to train additional 7000 officers within the coming year. These graduates were not doctors, but they provided the only medical care that the majority of China’s soldiers would obtain. For this reason, the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China believed that the funds it sent to the Emergency Medical Service Training Schools contributed substantially to the welfare of the Chinese Armies, and ultimately to the success of the United Nations.

Not surprisingly, all three women trained at PUMC with best medical quality of their time, carried their trailblazing work and continued to shepherd modern nursing profession in the mainland China and Taiwan. Nie and Lin maintained a low profile as the political situation in mainland China became increasingly rigid in Mao’s era, while Zhou assumed a highly visible role in developing nursing programs in Taiwan based at National Defense Medical University. Nonetheless their contribution was highly regarded by their peers and

students in both the societies separated by political divergence. Zhou Meiyu, for example, was honorably recognized as the “mother of modern military nursing in the Republic of China” (minguo junhu zhimu); while Lin and Nie were regarded as “distinguished predecessors” (qian bei) of modern nursing in the mainland. Their positions in modern Chinese nursing development were confirmation of PUMC’s major policy of training medical teachers and leaders for China. It is in this sense that PUMC did not fail its mission; instead it continued to harvest its success even after the college was forced out of China in 1951.

I made major use of the Rockefeller Archive collection for the writing of the chapter on Chinese women’s role in wartime nursing. Besides communications between China personnel and the RF New York offices, memorandum, observations, statistics in the archive offered a thorough reading on wartime financial problems and livelihood difficulties, which was at large, the social settings of the historical figures examined by my dissertation.

The visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center might have shaped my next research project. After reading materials related to nursing and nursing training, I became increasingly interested in this topic in a wider spectrum of time. The debate on nursing development, and the blueprint the major medical leaders of the PUMC depicted in the 1920s and 1930s had shaped the development of this major branch of modern medicine. I am very interested in developing a research project on the modern development of nursing in China.

ENDNOTES:

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² For a thorough discussion on the chronicle history of Rockefeller Foundation and the Peking Union Medical College:

Ferguson, Mary E. *China Medical Board and Peking Union Medical College: A Chronicle of Fruitful Collaboration, 1914-1951*. New York: China Medical Board of New York, Inc., 1970.

Bullock, Mary B. *An American Transplant: the Rockefeller Foundation and Peking Union Medical College*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1980.

³ Chenying, Shan. 南京陆军军医学校医院概况 (“The Nursing Service of the Central Military Medical School, Nanking.”) *Nursing Journal of China*, 17: 2 (April 1936).

⁴ RG 1, Series 601, Box 3, Folder 29, Interoffice correspondence from M.C. Balfour to MET/HP, September 22, 1942.

⁵ RG 1, Series 601, Box 3, Folder 29, New York Letter No. 275, Correspondence from M.C. Balfour to Mary E. Tennant, October 24, 1941.

RG 1, Series 601, Box 3, Folder 29, New York Letter No. 302, Correspondence from Charles N. Leach to Mary Elizabeth Tennant, November 14, 1941.

⁶ RG 1, Series 601, Box 3, Folder 28, RAC, “Annual Report of the Commission on Medical Education, July 1939 to December 1949.”

⁷ RG 1, Series 601, Box 3, Folder 29, Correspondence from Gertrude Hodgman to Helen Payne, December 5, 1941.

⁸ RG 1, Series 601, Box 15, Folder 151, RAC, “China Program: Local Fellowship Grants by Institutions, 1941-1942”, pp. 4-5.

⁹ CMB, Box 99, Folder 711, RAC, Nieh, Vera. “A Brief Account of the PUMC School of Nursing during and after World War II: a Message to its Alumnae.” *Alumnae News*, Alumnae Association of School of Nursing, Peiping Union Medical College (October 1948) pp. 12.

¹⁰ Sixin, Lin. “Nursing and Midwifery.” *Nursing Journal of China* 17: 4 (October 1936), pp. 236.