

Envisioning the Future of the Rockefeller Foundation in Wartime and Post-War China, 1943-1946

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Abstract

In April 1946, Walter W. Stewart, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), appointed a three-man commission to investigate the social and political situations of China in the immediate aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The commission was asked to make recommendations for RF's policy (and for the policy of the China Medical Board) regarding post-war China. After a three-month visit to major cities along the Chinese coast and in interior China, the Rockefeller commission drew a conclusion that the support of the RF should be restricted to a single project of re-establishing the Peking Union Medical College. This marked a deviation from the Rockefeller Foundation's pre-war China policy. This research report asks about the factors that caused this dramatic change. It traces back to the unhappy wartime experience of RF-sponsored projects both in and out of China, and the increasingly active role of the Chinese state in relief efforts. Contrasting with the rapidly expanding historical literature of humanitarianism, post-war China has received limited scholarly attention. Much of the current research has still focused on the Chinese Civil War (1946-1950) and on China's foreign relations. This research report, consisting of part of my PhD research on post-war relief and rehabilitation in China from 1943-1948, underscores the process through which the Sino-Japanese War and its immediate aftermath transformed the landscape of non-state agencies in China.

Envisioning the Future of the Rockefeller Foundation in Wartime and Post-War China, 1943-1946

In April 1946, eight months after Japan's surrender ending the Second World War, Walter W. Stewart, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), appointed a three-man commission to China, headed by Alan Gregg, Director of the Medical Sciences Division of the RF. Its aim was "to study the problem of the development of medicine and public health."¹ The other two men were C. Sidney Burwell, Dean of Harvard Medical School, and Dr. Harold H. Loucks of the China Medical Board. This commission not only served as a think tank for the Rockefeller Foundation and the China Medical Board to make their policies in post-war China, but also broadly investigated the political and social situations in immediate post-war China. This period, from 1945 to 1949, witnessed the collapse of Nationalist (Kuomintang or Guomindang) governance in mainland China. It was a chaotic period: prices were soaring; many people were still starving; and nationalist, and sometimes anti-foreign, sentiments were growing. China had emerged as a sovereign state on the side of victors, leaving behind not only the eight-year struggles of the conflict, but also the so-called unequal treaties with European imperial powers, an over one-hundred-year "humiliation." These social and political dynamics required transnational private agencies to reconsider their roles in post-war China.

This special commission visited major cities along the eastern coast including Shanghai and Nanjing, as well as inland cities such as Chongqing and Chengdu. It also went to Beijing, where the Peking Union Medical College (PUMC), the largest undertaking of the Rockefeller Foundation, was located. With the aid of U.S. General George Marshall, who was carrying out a political mission to mediate between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists, the commission held a conversation with the Communist leaders to explore the possibility to cooperate with them (see Fig. 1).² The photograph below recorded this meeting of these Chinese and foreign figures who obviously had different perspectives, which can be identified from their varied clothes ranging from Western-style suits to

military uniforms. The image manages to illustrate the disintegration of Chinese society, coming out of one war and on the cusp of further turmoil. Despite a harmonious atmosphere between different parties as we can see from this photo, it belied the fact that this commission was not going to suggest that the Rockefeller Foundation develop new connections in China. In its findings, the commission reported that 'China's present needs for nearly every type of aid could exhaust the total resources of any private organization'.³ It further observed that China was then "in a decisive stage of transformation" and suggested that the RF centralize its support to the re-establishment of the PUMC, rather than extensively support public health projects across China, as it did in the interwar years.



Fig.1 Ye Jianying, Chinese Communist General, and the Rockefeller commission in 1946 Peking.

Broadly, this Rockefeller commission of 1946 questioned continuities and discontinuities in the history of non-state participation in humanitarianism. It is an essential part of my PhD project, “Exploring the International Aid of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in Post-war China, 1943-1947.” My PhD thesis is scheduled to be completed in 2021. My research not only asks how the Nationalist government benefited from, and made use of, internationalism in relief, but also examines how civil society in China responded to the huge task of relief and rehabilitation after the Sino-Japanese War. It focuses on the interplay between various inter-governmental, governmental, and non-state agencies in relief.

In the recent expanding historical literature of humanitarianism, the humanitarian crisis subsequent to the Second World War has been understood as a crucial moment in the history of humanitarianism. Historians such as Matthew Hilton have argued that this crisis not only ushered official cooperation in relief, marked by the creation of UNRRA, but was also significant for the expansion of non-governmental organizations in the following decades.⁴ However, this scholarship on mid-twentieth century humanitarianism has largely focused on European examples. For instance, Jessica Reinisch’s articles on UNRRA have illuminated the European and American origins of internationalism in the 1940s.⁵ The China case instead provides us with a distinctive example of how private humanitarian agencies responded to the paradoxical situation in which a state, weakened by the eight-year war, began to assume a leading role in emergency relief and public health in an atmosphere of growing nationalism.

In modern Chinese history, the immediate post-war period from 1945 to 1949 has received limited scholarly attention. Some historians choose to skip to the post-1949 Maoist period.⁶ Others have concentrated on the Chinese civil war from 1946 to 1950 and China’s foreign relations.⁷ My research aims to look beyond this military and political framework of understanding post-war China and to situate this brief history in a long trajectory of modern Chinese history. The Rockefeller Foundation’s activities in wartime and post-war China provide me with a lens through which to examine the continuities and discontinuities of humanitarian networks in twentieth-century China. Using some of the interesting materials that I collected from the Rockefeller Archive Center in June 2019, the next section

presents part of my PhD research. It sheds lights on how the Sino-Japanese War and its immediate aftermath transformed the policy and destiny of non-state international organization in China.

Indeed, the year 1946 can hardly be understood as a turning point of the Rockefeller Foundation's China policy. The change was rooted in the decline of transnational establishments in wartime China and the "failure" of the RF's wartime aid scheme. In the 1930s, the Rockefeller Foundation extended its interest of investment, which had once largely been centred at medical education, to new fields including rural development. The subsequently-created North China Council for Rural Reconstruction intended to initiate "a comprehensive national program of rural reconstruction."⁸ However, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War greatly hampered this development. After moving to Chongqing, wartime capital of China, as James Thomson has illuminated, the North China Council functioned only as a refugee institution in Southwest China.⁹ This was a microcosm of the decline of transnational establishments in wartime China.

Apart from the plight of these transnational projects in wartime China, sympathy for the Chinese people and the Nationalist regime accumulated out of China, especially in the United States. It should be attributed to the Nationalist government's efforts of internationalizing Sino-Japanese hostilities.¹⁰ In 1942, this sympathy turned into practical support to the Nationalist army through the American official Lend-Lease Aid project. In the meantime, private aid was given to China not only through those fund-raising organizations born for war emergency of 1937, but also through the Rockefeller Foundation, which had already developed a variety of programs in China since the 1910s. Under the auspices of the RF, some Chinese students went to the United States to further their studies. Nevertheless, most of them were reluctant to go back to China after the war ended. RF officer Robert Lambert criticized this wartime project as a "miscarriage" of "the deep and widespread sympathy for China in America."¹¹ Such failure of non-military American aid projects to China further footnoted the collapse of the Nationalist government's prestige in the United States in the last phase of the war, at a time when the Nationalist military's disastrous response to Japan's Ichi-Go offensive of 1944 attracted worldwide criticism.

In a broader context, the Rockefeller Foundation's reluctance to expand or continue its pre-war projects in China reflected a reality that there was a narrowing space for private agencies to operate. It is first important to note that China's domestic private donations remained at a low level in the immediate post-war years. While the Sino-Japanese War aroused increasing public attention to the provision of emergency relief to the refugees, such attention did not lead to the rise in private domestic donations, which was still not a reliable means of income for non-state organizations. In a letter to the Rockefeller Foundation, the librarian of National Chiang Kai Shek University acknowledged in 1945 that domestic private aid was "unlikely to be forthcoming in the near future in view of widespread poverty."¹² It was frustrating that campaigns organized by local private relief associations often achieved limited success. For example, to raise more funds and attract more social attention, the Shanghai Relief Committee for North Jiangsu Refugees organized a Miss Shanghai Pageant in August 1946. Thousands of middle-class Chinese voted for dressed-up ladies in a ballroom, in which excitement revived, as if it were still the jazz age. But after the pageant, the refugees received only a few relief supplies because one third of the incoming donations from the event was used to offset operating expenses.¹³ Compared to substantial social attention to the issue of post-war relief, these local non-state agencies gained so little practical support from domestic private donation.

Second, the Chinese state was taking an increasingly active part in relief and rehabilitation. Rana Mitter has argued that the Sino-Japanese War transformed Chinese society in the way that the latter had greater expectations of the government's role in social provisions than at the outbreak of war in 1937.¹⁴ To meet this need, the Nationalist government actively participated in the inter-governmental organizational coordination of relief and rehabilitation, such as UNRRA. After the agency's establishment in November 1943, China was the only non-Western sovereign state in UNRRA's Four-Power Central Committee, alongside the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. UNRRA promised to deliver to China over US\$535 million worth of supplies, including food, clothes, medical supplies, and agricultural and industrial equipment. The Nationalist government did not solely rely on UNRRA's aid; instead, UNRRA stressed the significance of cooperation with existing private agencies. As Ludovic Tournès has argued, the Rockefeller Foundation provided the United Nations

organization with staff, working methods, and a network of contacts, especially in the field of health.¹⁵ Such cooperation bolstered transnational mass flow of people, resources, and currency in relief for the immediate post-war moment.

In the meantime, UNRRA's claim to help the local relief agencies led these organizations to turn to UNRRA for assistance to continue their operations. For instance, a large number of letters from private charity and religious organizations such as schools for the deaf and blind, orphanages, private refugee camps, and Buddhist societies poured into the Shanghai Regional Office of UNRRA.¹⁶ Despite these circumstances, the Rockefeller Foundation was unwilling and unable to extend or continue its pre-war project, except for the Peking Union Medical College. The immediate post-war years therefore witnessed the changing terrain of non-state relief agencies in China, which had multi-sources of income in wartime but became exclusively dependent on UNRRA supplies in the aftermath of the war.

My Rockefeller Archive Center research experience in June 2019 not only allowed me to fit non-state actors into the broad picture of post-war relief and rehabilitation in China but helped me structure my PhD research in the following three ways. First, there was important intersection of personnel between the Rockefeller Foundation and the UNRRA. For example, John B. Grant, a public health specialist from the Rockefeller Foundation who had stationed in China and in India before, returned to China in early 1944 to help the Chinese government investigate post-war requirements that it needed to submit to UNRRA.¹⁷ This continuity in personnel enabled me to envision a transnational humanitarian network connected by key institutions, and to incorporate the post-war moment into the history of public health development in China.

Second, a body of personal and official correspondence highlighted the distinctive clear-cut differentiation between “old” experts, for example those trained by the Peking Union Medical College, and relief workers of a new generation. The former usually did not recognize the latter as qualified relief workers. Pressured by the emergency of the post-war humanitarian crisis, many employees of UNRRA only received one or two years of training during wartime. The training mode of the

PUMC which had been prevalent in the pre-war years no longer fit the post-war moment. This distinction highlights the changing pattern of disseminating expertise in the immediate post-war years.

Third, the rich and well-organized collection of the Rockefeller Archive Center provided me with a chance to observe the UNRRA and the Chinese state operations of relief and rehabilitation from an external perspective. As this research report has shown, policymakers of the Rockefeller Foundation received useful observations and predictions on political and social situation of post-war China. They discussed hyperinflation, long-term medical education, emergency relief, and nationalism. Rather than merely revealing civil society of post-war China beyond a civil-war-centered narrative, my intention is to use these observations to underscore different streams of internationalism in the post-war moment.

¹ “Report of the Commission sent by the Rockefeller Foundation to China to study the problem of the development of medical and public health,” 15 November 1946. Folder 31, Box 3, Series 100, FA386b, RG 1.1, Projects, Rockefeller Foundation Records (RF Records), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

² “Ye Jianying to Harold H. Loucks, 1946 Peking”, undated. Folder 31, Box 3, Series 100, FA386b, RG 1.1, Projects, RF Records, RAC.

³ “Report of the Commission sent by the Rockefeller Foundation to China to study the problem of the development of medical and public health,” RAC.

⁴ Matthew Hilton, Kevin O’Sullivan, and Juliano Fiori, “Humanitarianisms in Context: Histories of Non-State Actors, From the Local to the Global,” *European Review of History*, (2016), 1-15.

⁵ Jessica Reinisch, “Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA,” *Past & Present*, 210 (2011), 258-289.

⁶ For example, the post-war years has not been fully discussed in Sherman Cochran, *The Lius of Shanghai* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁷ For example, see Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁸ “Inter-Office Correspondence,” 9 June 1952. Folder 478, Box 23, Series 1, Subseries 2, FA418, Cox and Reece Investigations, RF Records, RAC; “The North China Council for Rural Reconstruction,” February 1937. Folder 478, Box 23, Series 1, Subseries 2, FA418, Cox and Reece Investigations, RF Records, RAC; Mary Bullock, *The Oil Prince’s Legacy: Rockefeller Philanthropy in China* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), 19-21, 36-7.

⁹ James C. Thomson Jr., *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928-1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 148-9.

¹⁰ Tsuchida Akio, “China’s ‘Public Diplomacy’ Toward the United States Before Pearl Harbor,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 17 (2010), 35-55; Hans Van de Ven, *China at War: Triumph and Tragedy in the Emergence of the New China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 89.

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- ¹¹ Robert A. Lambert to R. G. Meader, 5 December 1944. Folder 1895, Box 276, Series 601, FA758, RG 2, General Correspondence, RF Records, RAC; Frank Blair Hanson to Geo. W. Beadle, 23 February 1945, Folder 2095, Box 309, Series 601, FA758, RG 2, General Correspondence, RF Records, RAC.
- ¹² Chung Fan Liu to the Rockefeller Foundation, 12 October 1945. Folder 2094, Box 309, Series 601, FA758, RG 2, General Correspondence, RF Records, RAC.
- ¹³ “Miss Shanghai Pageant”, *United Pictorial* [联合画报], 185-186 (1946), 20.
- ¹⁴ Rana Mitter, “Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-War China: UNRRA in China, 1944–7,” *Past & Present*, 218, suppl. 8 (2013), 51-69 (pp. 56-9).
- ¹⁵ Ludovic Tournès, “The Rockefeller Foundation and the Transition from the League of Nations to the UN (1939–1946),” *Journal of Modern European History* 12 (2014), 323-341 (pp. 323-4).
- ¹⁶ “Shanghaishi Shehuiju guanyu Ge Cishan Tuanti Qingqiu Shanhou Jiuji Gongshu Buzhu Wuzi Wenjian [上海市社会局关于各慈善团体请求善后救济公署补助物资文件, Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Social Affairs about Humanitarian Organizations Asking for CNRRA to Distribute Supplies]”, December 1945. Q6-9-618, Shanghai Municipal Archives.
- ¹⁷ Eugene Staley, “Relief and Rehabilitation in China,” *Far Eastern Survey* 13: 20 (1944), 183-185 (p. 183).

I would like to thank Tom Rosenbaum for his helpful and kind assistance before and during my research at the RAC.