

The YWCA in China

The Making of a Chinese Christian Women's Institution, 1899–1957

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I

Creating a YWCA Movement in China, 1899–1925

The whole stress will be upon securing Chinese secretaries and turning them loose to evolve a program for an Association that is made out of the stuff of Chinese life.

– Helen Thoburn, 1925

The YWCA entered China as a foreign transplant and cultural interloper, carried by the currents of the missionary enterprise and the expansion of the World YWCA overseas. Editorial department executive secretary Helen Thoburn acknowledged in her 1925 annual report that the Chinese YWCA had grown out of “the mission impulse,” admitting it would have been better “if the association here could have been started in the first place out of the genuine desire of Chinese women.” By 1925, the situation had changed. A Chinese woman had finally been appointed national general secretary, to take office the following January. While the actual transfer of leadership would be accompanied by challenges, Thoburn insisted that was better than “maintaining an artificial piece of work here just because we have the Western machinery and the impetus to do it.” For the next few years, “the whole stress will be upon securing Chinese secretaries and turning them loose to evolve a program for an Association that is made out of the stuff of Chinese life.”¹ That had been the intention from the beginning. It had simply taken a quarter of a century to achieve it.

This chapter examines the history of the Chinese YWCA from its precipitate beginning when its fraternal counterpart, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), organized the first YWCA national committee in 1899, to the critical year of 1925. It argues that while there were many important developments between 1899 and 1925, the latter was the transition year of the YWCA in China into becoming a Sino-Western hybrid, ending the formative period that Helen Thoburn described as "our life as an organization trying to be Chinese."² The first indication of that transition was Ding Shujing's appointment as incoming national secretary. Another key marker of that transition was a forceful statement of support for Chinese aspirations of national sovereignty in the face of foreign imperialism made by the Chinese leadership of the national committee after police in Shanghai's International Settlement fired on Chinese protesters on May 30. The May Thirtieth Incident sparked protests across China that were violently suppressed. These events led Western secretaries to take a political stance and oppose imperialist policies, such as extraterritoriality, that disadvantaged Chinese in their own country.

The early history of the Chinese YWCA was mostly about Western women's vision for the YWCA movement in China and what they believed Chinese women needed because they dominated the ranks of YWCA secretaries. Many Western secretaries were wedded to the evangelical and missionizing goals of individual moral and material uplift that were the focus of the World YWCA's early expansion overseas. However, as the World YWCA matured, so did its focus, and by the mid-1910s it pursued a more progressive reform agenda focused on larger societal needs, although it approached reform from a Western perspective. That same shift in focus occurred in the YWCA movement in China.

The force behind that shift was Grace Coppock, the second foreign secretary sent to China, who initially served as general secretary of the Shanghai city association and later as national general secretary. Her biographer maintains that her religious faith was a "product of her era," an observation that would have been true for most of the first American secretaries sent to China. Born on the Nebraskan prairie in 1882, the youngest child of five, Coppock believed in the inner strength of women, perhaps a legacy of her strong-willed, tenacious mother, who managed the family farm after her husband's death three days before Grace was born.³

One of Coppock's primary goals was the inclusion of Chinese women in the work of establishing the YWCA movement in China. Prairie-bred

practicality resulted in her yielding to the need to bring trained secretaries and women with specific expertise from abroad. Before her untimely death in October 1921, she did two things that impacted the future of the Chinese YWCA in significant ways. The first was hiring British industrial welfare expert Agatha Harrison in 1920 to open a national industrial department and commence work in the field of industrial reform. Second, also in 1920, she shared with a colleague her intent of finding a Chinese woman to replace her, and she believed she had found that woman in the new general secretary of the Beijing city association, Ding Shujing.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE YWCA MOVEMENT IN CHINA TO 1925

The first two and a half decades of the YWCA movement in China were marked by iconic dates in Chinese history: 1900, 1911, 1919, 1923, and 1925. In 1900, the Boxer uprising became a global event with the seizure of the British legation in Beijing. The name “Boxers” refers to a peasant religious cult called “Boxers United in Righteousness.” Social dislocation in west Shandong Province caused by floods, drought, the absence of local elites, and the intrusion of Christian missionaries accounts for the rise of the movement. For Shandong’s peasants, however, the cause was missionaries and their foreign religion. Violent attacks on missionaries in west Shandong and adjoining provinces began in 1898 but remained small in scale. They were reported in the most incendiary terms in foreign papers, however. The Qing court was initially ambivalent toward the Boxers. When Western nations responded militarily, the vacillating court sided with the Boxers in the hope of driving foreign imperialists from their shores. The escalation of hostilities with the siege of the British legation in Beijing, the arrival of an eight-nation expeditionary army, and the defeat of the Boxers became iconic events in the Western imagination.⁴ It should be noted that, although the Boxers were defeated, their cause was not. The association of foreign imperialism and Christianity would not only take root but prove to have staying power.

After the humiliating 1901 Boxer Protocol that ended hostilities was forced on China, Chinese reformers renewed calls for a modern centralized state, and revolutionaries demanded the overthrow of the Qing, or Manchu, dynasty. In this tense climate, the Qing instituted reforms. They created a Western-style school system, abolished the centuries-old civil service examination system, and took incremental steps toward

constitutional monarchy. A decade of conservative reform did not quell revolutionaries determined to overthrow the Qing dynasty, which they did in 1911 with the Xinhai Revolution. The attempt to establish a republican government failed under the inept rule of its first president, Yuan Shikai. After his death, and despite the continued existence of republican forms of governance, regional warlords seized control of most of China.

In this climate, radical intellectuals like Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and Cao Yuanpei looked for an alternative ideological framework to save China. These leading writers, journalists, and educators set in motion the New Culture Movement, an iconoclastic rejection of traditional Chinese culture and embrace of Western democracy and science dating from 1915, when Chen Duxiu launched his *New Youth* magazine. Another current of the New Culture Movement was its being anti-superstition, and in that vein it rejected both Confucianism and Christianity.⁵ When the New Culture Movement merged with the nationalistic, anti-imperialist tide generated by the May Fourth Movement, the various currents created a tidal wave. The May Fourth Movement began on that date in 1919, when Beijing University students protested the decision taken at the Paris Peace Conference to give Germany's concessions in China to Japan and the acceptance of those terms by China's weak Republican government. Student protests spread across China, politicizing an entire generation of young Chinese, among them future YWCA secretary Deng Yuzhi.

According to the late Daniel Bays, a leading historian of Christianity in China, by 1921 Chinese intellectuals had adopted anti-Christian rhetoric for two reasons. The first was what Bays called the "reification of Science," which targeted Christian beliefs as largely being superstition. The second was the association of foreign imperialism, with its roots in the capitalist system and expressed through empire building, with the idea that the purpose of Christian missionaries was to make the Chinese compliant to, if not complicit in, their status as a colonized people.⁶ As a movement, however, the first phase of the anti-Christian movement lacked coordination, and although there were vocal protests, as during the international meeting of the World Student Christian Federation held at Qinghua University in Beijing in 1922, it had little impact on Christian missionaries or the Christian community as a whole. It was not noted with interest in national YWCA records.

In 1923 the Russian Communist International (Comintern) brokered an alliance between Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party (Guomindang,

or GMD) and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Comintern forced the CCP to become a “party within a party,” a subgroup within the GMD. Its radicalism was unabated, however. The United Front sought to wrest military control of China from the warlords and end its economic control by imperialist nations. While its goals were clear, it was not united in its ideological goals, and when its armies marched north in the summer of 1926, they travelled different routes under different leaders. In the meantime, the United Front’s opposition to Western imperialism again made targets of Christian missionaries and Christian institutions. As mentioned above, on May 30, 1925, a clash between Chinese labour activists and gendarmes in the Shanghai International Settlement resulted in the death of several Chinese protesters and sparked protest all over China. It also reignited anti-Christian attitudes. The renewed anti-Christian movement was aggressive and violent and would last until 1927. When United Front armies marched north from Guangzhou in the summer of 1926, Christian churches, organizations, and schools were targeted, including the YWCA.

Not only was the Chinese YWCA buffeted by these events, but it had corresponding major events of its own. The first national committee was formed in 1899.⁷ The first secretarial conference was held in 1911. In 1919, a Chinese woman became the chair of the national committee, assisted by Chinese officers. The year 1923 saw the first Chinese YWCA national convention, and in 1925 the national committee appointed Ding Shujing national general secretary.

THE MANY WORLDS OF THE CHINESE YWCA

From its inception, the Chinese YWCA had a relationship with the World YWCA, an organization that itself was fairly new. The World YWCA was a product of the separate developments of YWCA movements in England and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. According to the first official history of the World YWCA, the British association took the lead in extending the movement overseas through its Colonial Division. As the association spread to non-Christian countries, YWCA women began to confront their identity as cultural interlopers. Another issue that influenced the formation of the world organization was the spectre of competition between the British and American YWCAs as the Americans also became interested in seeding their movement abroad. The British YWCA invited the American and seven other national YWCAs to an

international conference in London in 1892 to discuss closer relations and coordination between the organizations. These efforts led to the formation of the World YWCA, with its own constitution, in 1894.⁸ The energies of its founding women were focused on establishing a place for a multi-denominational women's institution among the many existing male-dominated Christian organizations. At its first world conference in 1898, the World YWCA accepted responsibility for the development of the association movement in non-Christian lands, but only when invited by missionary communities. Following the trends set in the British and American associations, the World YWCA also defined its mission as serving both the individual and society. Because of this, it came to see itself as a social movement and not simply a women's organization.⁹

The World YWCA eventually divided the responsibility for YWCA expansion to non-Christian countries between the United States and Britain in an unofficial but workable arrangement that came to be known as the "scheme of relationships." The United States was made responsible for China, Japan, the Philippines, the West Indies, and Central and South America. Britain was responsible for its colonies. The two associations shared responsibility for the Indian subcontinent.¹⁰ This constituted an organizational "world system," which, although considered pragmatic and necessary, carried colonial overtones as both Great Britain and the United States were imperial powers. Despite the policy of the World YWCA to promote local leadership, it was believed that Western secretaries, with their professional expertise and understanding of the YWCA's ideals and methods, were necessary to set up an association in a foreign land.

THE CHINESE YWCA

Despite the scheme of relationships, the Chinese YWCA never developed exclusive ties to the United States. National general secretaries, starting with Estelle Paddock (1905–13) and continuing with Grace Coppock (1913–21) and then Ding Shujing (1926–36), invited secretaries from many countries to serve in China. This was partially due to the presence of many different imperial powers in China and thus missionary organizations from many different Western nations. It was believed particularly necessary for the Chinese associations to have British secretaries to deal with the more parochial British expatriate communities and mission organizations. Most of the Western secretaries who served in China were

Americans. Several long-serving American women played key roles in mentoring Chinese women. For the most part, however, foreign secretaries served only two five-year terms.

The YWCA of the USA provided the salaries and living expenses for the American secretaries in line with its agreement with the World YWCA office. The YWCA of the USA sought sponsorship from local YWCAs, private donors, and other groups to support a single secretary. For example, Grace Coppock was initially supported by a well-to-do private donor and later by the University of Nebraska.¹¹ Those funds were sufficient to enable the secretaries to maintain a Western lifestyle, something that was believed necessary for their health and safety. Until at least the mid-1920s, foreign secretaries resided in association compounds, but they paid for their accommodations. The YWCA of the USA also provided funding or helped arrange loans for special projects, such as building a campus for the Normal School for Hygiene and Physical Education in Shanghai and constructing a YWCA headquarters building in the downtown area of the International Settlement. It also provided scholarships for Chinese secretaries to attend the YWCA National Training School in New York City. Otherwise, both the national office and local Chinese associations were expected to be self-supporting. For that reason, finance campaigns were an endemic feature of association life and served as one of the most elemental ways YWCA secretaries and members engaged in civic life. Also, despite the emphasis on “making the work Chinese,” neither national nor local secretaries and volunteers hesitated to fundraise in foreign communities or among foreign businesses. Both Western and Chinese secretaries also went to the United States on fundraising tours to ensure that the Foreign Division of the YWCA of the USA had the funds it needed to support China.

THE YWCA AND THE YMCA

Despite the protocols for expansion set at the first World YWCA conference, it was actually YMCA secretaries Robert Lewis and D. Willard Lyon who organized the first YWCA national committee in Shanghai in 1899, appointing the wives and sisters of YMCA secretaries to serve on it. Their action followed a pattern begun in mission countries such as India, where YMCA secretaries would organize a women’s association at the same time they organized their own local association. The Chinese YMCA was only four years older than the YWCA, and both associations developed slowly

during their first decade. In 1905, ten years after its founding, there were only two YMCA city associations in China, one in Shanghai and one in Tianjin. Ten years after its founding, the YWCA had one city association in Shanghai. At that point, however, the YMCA began a period of rapid expansion, whereas the YWCA did not. In 1914, the YMCA had 25 city associations and 105 student associations, while the YWCA had only 3 city associations and 30 student associations. During the remainder of the decade, the YWCA actually exhibited proportionately greater institutional growth: by 1920, it had 12 city associations and 89 student associations, while the YMCA had added only 5 new city associations and 69 new student associations.

Membership numbers illustrate more dramatically the relative difference between the male and female associations, although such numbers are not terribly reliable for either of them. In 1912, the YMCA had 4,631 city association members and upward of 4,459 student association members. Total YWCA membership in 1914 was 1,300. At the end of the 1910s, the YMCA had 41,699 city association members and 29,639 student association members, compared with only 1,862 members in city associations and 4,552 in student associations for the YWCA.¹² Throughout the 1910s, the YMCA's total membership was seven times greater than that of the YWCA.

The YMCA was more aggressively evangelistic and determined to attract Chinese elites to their organization. The 1907 China Centenary Missionary Conference devoted much discussion time to the propagation of the faith. After the conference, the YMCA held periodic revival-style meetings throughout major Chinese cities aimed at attracting students, officials, and other "influential Chinese." YMCA evangelists John R. Mott and George Sherwood Eddy spoke in China in 1907, 1911, 1913, 1914, and 1915. These meetings may have largely accounted for the rapid spread of the YMCA during these years.¹³ There is some indication that Eddy's preaching also attracted women. At least one American secretary held evangelical meetings in nine cities attended by government school students. However, the demand for such meetings was so great, and the resulting interest in Bible study classes so overwhelming, that the YWCA evidently did not pursue that approach further.¹⁴

One of the problems in promoting the YWCA movement in China was a lack of understanding about the association and its goals. This was not surprising. Delegates at the China Centenary Missionary Conference had been equally mystified – and possibly threatened – by the presence of a nondenominational women's association, affiliated with a network of

similar associations with a world headquarters in London. Many women simply regarded it as another missionary society, and not one they should necessarily prioritize. Grace Coppock pointed this out in her first annual report. Although she believed she could build up a membership quickly by offering women interesting and engaging programs, she sought an initial membership that would commit wholeheartedly to the YWCA.¹⁵

As a result of moving slowly, cautiously, and extremely methodically, by 1919 there were only five organized city associations: Shanghai, Canton, Fuzhou, Tianjin, and Beijing. Pre-organization work had begun in Shenyang (Mukden), Hangzhou, Changsha, Nanjing, and Hong Kong, and six other cities waited for qualified secretaries to begin pre-organization work. The pace of expansion was slowed by the World YWCA policy requiring missionary communities to invite the YWCA to establish an association in their city.¹⁶ Pre-organization work then began with assessing the needs of a city, finding women willing to serve on the governing committee, and, most important, getting a pledged membership large enough to support the new association. This was necessary because, except for foreign staff sponsored by their home countries, the national committee expected city associations to be self-supporting and to contribute to the budget of the national office. Further slowing progress, city associations were usually not organized until a trained woman was in place to serve as general secretary. This required appeals to the United States to find a suitable person who, even after she arrived, spent up to two years in language school before being considered ready to assume her duties.¹⁷

Gender was an important variable in understanding the growth patterns of the two associations. Men outnumbered women in school enrolment and social service organizations because education and public service remained social and cultural markers for the upper-class man. For new women, education and public service conveyed additional status, but their identity largely remained in their roles as virtuous wives and good mothers, even if those roles were being reinterpreted in modern ways. As a men's organization, the YMCA drew from a larger public constituency from the beginning, and with the abolition of the civil service examination system, it also offered an alternative form of service and intellectual community to elite men deprived of the traditional academy.

Although their organizations and methods were similar, a critical difference between the two was their relationship to parent organizations outside China. The Chinese YMCA maintained almost exclusive ties to the American YMCA. While the YMCA and YWCA would work

together at the local level in the future, their relationship at the national level was a bit fraught. The World YWCA eventually curtailed YMCA initiatives to forge some sort of alliance and ensured the future autonomy of the worldwide YWCA movement. Its women on the ground in China ensured the same for their association. When a World YWCA memorandum was circulated to member associations in 1919 suggesting that the YMCA and the YWCA cooperate in countries where both were weak, Grace Coppock replied that she assumed that did not apply to China. She noted that while the national committee saw some advantages in limited cooperation, they also believed that “by all means” the YWCA needed to keep its identity and independence in matters of management and policy.¹⁸

THE CHINESE YWCA'S FORMATIVE YEARS

The YWCA of the USA sent two women to serve as the first YWCA secretaries in China: Estelle Paddock, who served as the first national general secretary in 1904, and Grace Coppock, who became the general secretary of the Shanghai city association after completing her language training. Most of the other early secretaries were also American, so it is not surprising that the organizational structure, as it evolved over the first years, modelled that of the American association and became what Helen Thoburn, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, would describe as a “hothouse plant.” Coppock became the second national general secretary in 1913. She had the greatest impact on the formative years of the YWCA. Like the national general secretaries who followed her, she interjected her vision for the association mission in China. The principles she considered essential to advance the YWCA movement included the inclusion of Chinese lay volunteers and professional staff, emphasis on quality programs even if this required programs be smaller in size, and attracting a core of dedicated members rather than seeking a large membership whose numbers impressed but who were mostly interested in what the association could do for them and not in what they might be able to do for it.

Coppock's ideas on the spiritual purpose of the YWCA matured over time as her prairie-bred Christian beliefs confronted an ancient civilization whose intrinsic values she found meaningful. She believed that Christianity in China could use “some Confucian ideals in the foundation.” By 1920, she was insisting on an ecumenical spirit as YWCA

women sought to instill “the biggest possible idea of God, and His plan for all people” in their work. “The social gospel appeals [to the Chinese].” For this reason, she emphasized social service, and the YWCA mission to women became tantamount to introducing them to social service. The same message went out to YWCA women. “The missionary is a demonstrator both in life and as to work.”¹⁹

In 1907, World YWCA general secretary Clarissa Spencer toured China. She, Paddock, and Coppock attended the Centenary Missionary Conference in Shanghai from April 25 to May 8, along with over a thousand China missionaries and guests from abroad. Spencer suggested that the fledgling association pursue work with urban women, whom she deprecatingly referred to as “women of leisure,” and work with female students in government schools, the latter a field the Missionary Conference readily ceded to it. Critically important, Spencer realized the urgent need for more YWCA women on the ground in China. She appealed to the British and American YWCAs to send out young women who were “spiritual, refined, cultured, college-educated linguists with leadership ability.” After discussions with the two American secretaries, she also insisted that the work in China be made “Chinese” as quickly as “suitable” Chinese women could be found to lead governing committees and work as professional staff. Harriet Taylor, an American YWCA executive who travelled to China just weeks later, concurred with Spencer’s directives but also believed that establishing strong city associations was vital.²⁰

The national office followed those directives, especially the one regarding city associations. It spent the next dozen years expanding to cities across China. Many city associations were located in treaty ports – ports forcibly opened to foreign trade by unequal treaties signed in the nineteenth century – because they were locations with a large enough Christian population to support a local association. Nontreaty port cities like Beijing and Nanjing had sizeable missionary communities or major Christian universities.

The national and city associations also developed programs for urban women and students, worked out in broader and more imaginative ways than Spencer may have anticipated. This was due to the influence of the YWCA women on the ground in China, especially Grace Coppock. Coppock’s tenure as a secretary was immediately marked by her refusal to accept the position of general secretary of the Shanghai city association until it hired a Chinese associate general secretary. Ding Mingyu (Mary Ding) was finally, if reluctantly, hired by the Shanghai governing committee. Ding Mingyu was Christian-educated but had minimal experience.

When the Shanghai governing committee questioned the wisdom of hiring her because of her inexperience, Coppock declared, "But a Chinese secretary who knows her own people will make fewer mistakes than I would without her."²¹ Ding Mingyu remained part of the YWCA family for the rest of her life, serving as a secretary, board member, and friend. The Shanghai city association celebrated her eightieth birthday in 1956.²²

Work with Urban Women

The YWCA's real if modest success in expanding to a dozen Chinese cities by the end of its first two decades was largely due to the fact that its city associations addressed the needs of a wide range of urban women. However determined the general secretaries of the various city associations were to emulate Coppock's efforts to create a core of dedicated members, the reality was that to get an association up and running, they needed a pledged membership sufficient to support it. Thus, attractive as well as meaningful programs were an imperative. Work with urban women had been the catalyst for the development of both the American and British YWCAs in the mid-nineteenth century.²³ Clarissa Spencer thought that this earlier work should serve as a model, albeit with modifications.²⁴ Such work also directed the efforts of the independent-minded YWCA women toward respectable, maternalistic lines of work. Thus, Christian leaders might have been alarmed had they read the report of the first secretarial conference held in 1911, where eight secretaries stressed the need to teach women "how to lead or how best to direct the powers that in them lie" so they could avail of the opportunities the "new" China offered.²⁵ As an underpinning ideology, "maternalism" for YWCA women was not deployed as a rationale for their social reform work but rather as an empowering innate female quality that provided them with unique insight into social problems, their origins, and their solutions. Spencer's descriptive phrase "women of leisure" played off the missionary stereotype of upper- and middle-class Chinese women as idle and lacking real purpose in life. The fact that some women had little with which to occupy their minds was not ascribed to an essential female flaw but to extenuating circumstances, especially the lack of places to meet and opportunities to learn. One of the association's earliest emphases was in providing places for community and fellowship "where women may meet and make friends with one another, drink tea together, play games, listen to music and touch other women's lives."²⁶ Bringing these women together provided YWCA secretaries with the opportunity to introduce

new ideas into the lives of their members and visitors. A primary goal for work with “women of leisure” was to involve them in social service as a way to introduce them to the fundamental precept of Christianity, since to association women, “social service” and “Christian service” were one and the same. City association members created free schools for poor children and organized relief projects.²⁷ While there was an amount of token participation, the association sought to train those with more serious interest in the intricacies of social problems. In 1919, the Shanghai city association held a ten-day Social Service Institute that included a class on aspects of social service, lectures on social problems such as opium addiction and women in industry, and visits of inspection to three social service projects.²⁸

The broadest area of the YWCA’s early work was with “old-style” and “new-style” wives and mothers. If a distinction can be made between these two groups of women, it would be that the latter had attended new-style schools. The YWCA secretaries sought to fill a void in these women’s lives once they left school. An early brochure stated:

At best, a Chinese woman is in school but a few years, and then she must be reached by some agency other than school. The Young Women’s Christian Association, by opening seven days a week for such women, seeks to provide them with true fellowship, classes, group meetings, and those things which shall make them better home makers and more intelligent mothers, as well as to fit them for unselfish service beyond the home.²⁹

Among this group, the association had a special interest in those young women who converted to Christianity while attending mission schools but then married into non-Christian families or in other ways lost touch with the church. One strategy for averting this was to hold parties for graduating classes to introduce them to local association work.³⁰

One of the ways in which the YWCA arguably contributed to women’s education was by creating courses for young married girls and older women who did not qualify for government schools.³¹ YWCA reports and brochures published from the 1910s through the early 1920s reveal a great variety of course offerings – English, Chinese, Chinese classics, psychology, modern inventions, famous women, typing, sewing on machines, “fancy sewing” or embroidery, lace making, singing, folk dancing, organ, piano, drawing, painting, games, gymnastics, foreign and Chinese cooking, home decoration, hygiene, first aid, and home nursing.³² Lectures on a wide variety of topics supplemented formal course

offerings. Topics included social problems, current events, etiquette (Western and Chinese), physical education and health, travel, art, and music.³³ Critics viewed these activities as “luxury for the few not unlike a girls’ finishing school” and lacking in intellectual discipline. The YWCA viewed them as being an “easy first step to a life of bigger interests.”³⁴ A 1917 article in the *Chinese Recorder* mentioned that both the YMCA and YWCA worked “for the educated,” namely, the elite classes, but added that “their final aim is not confined to this class.”³⁵ As will be seen from the discussion of industrial work below, it was not.

Early Work with Students

The 1907 Centenary Missionary Conference charged the YWCA with working with students in the newly opened government schools, and even the YWCA noted the opportunities this field opened for it. Work with students had been among the first initiatives of Estelle Paddock when she became national general secretary in 1904. Her work had been exclusively with mission schools as the Qing court, which had just opened Western-style government schools for boys in 1904, did not open them for girls until 1907. Opening schools for girls did not so much constitute a reform as it was a means of controlling reform that was taking place outside of the court’s purview. In the previous decade, there had been a proliferation of both mission schools and private gentry schools for girls. Such efforts accelerated when Qing educational reforms in 1904 excluded girls. Confronted with this activity, Qing officials came to fear that unless the government introduced public education for girls and controlled the content of female education, they risked losing control of their national reform agenda. In 1906, they placed elite schools under the control of the ministry of education, and in 1907, established regulations for girls’ primary schools and women’s normal schools.³⁶

In 1917, the YWCA had only four student YWCAs in government schools. Why did it describe this progress as “perceptible growth”?³⁷ The main reason for this was the conservative nature of government-run girls’ schools. When Qing officials expanded the educational system to include girls, their purpose was to inculcate in young women Confucian morals. This policy continued into the early years of the Chinese republic. Although the provisional constitution granted religious freedom, when the new parliament met for the first time in early 1913, staunch Confucianists petitioned it to make Confucianism the state religion. After months of debates between Confucianists and Chinese Christians

lobbying against such a move, the parliament added an article to the provisional constitution that recognized Confucianism as “the great root of moral cultivation.”³⁸

The lack of trained student secretaries also greatly impeded student work. Throughout its first decades in China, the YWCA depended on the expertise of Western secretaries. Each new program area waited until trained secretaries arrived from abroad. This was true in student work and later in industrial and rural work. Estelle Paddock, the first national general secretary, worked tirelessly establishing student associations herself. The national office finally acquired a student secretary in 1916. The addition of five additional student secretaries resulted in the increase in total student associations in mission and government schools from fifty to seventy-two by 1919.³⁹

Recognizing the importance of student work in government schools, YWCA student secretaries organized conferences for students from non-mission schools during the winter vacation, and in this way put them in touch with local city association work.⁴⁰ They also tried to reach students in gentry and government schools through mission school students. Students could be very innovative. In Beijing, eight student associations formed a union committee and published a newspaper suitable for distribution in government schools.⁴¹

One of the association’s boldest moves in its effort to reach students in government schools was training physical education teachers, who would then be hired to teach in those schools. However, what ended up as a decision to create a Normal School for Hygiene and Physical Education in Shanghai began as something else entirely. Observing the great success of the YMCA in attracting members because of its sports and physical education classes, Grace Coppock asked the YWCA of the USA to send a physical education expert to China when she was still general secretary of the Shanghai city association.⁴² The only reason she gave at the time was her belief that physical education programs would attract women “like no other YWCA endeavor.”⁴³ Serendipity brought Coppock and forty-eight-year-old physical education pioneer Abby Mayhew together at the YWCA’s National Training School in New York City in 1911. Mayhew was eminently qualified and, despite her age, was willing to come to China to assess the field and advise the Chinese YWCA. She accepted a two-year assignment in 1912, but, like a number of YWCA secretaries, ended up making China her home for several decades. Mayhew’s first task was to study the field. By the time she finished, Coppock was national general secretary, and Mayhew joined her on the national staff.⁴⁴

The Normal School for Hygiene and Physical Education

The interest in physical culture was part of the reform discourse on how to strengthen the weak Chinese body. For this reason, calisthenics were introduced into the newly opened government schools. The gendering of calisthenics accompanied the expansion of government-sponsored education for girls. Educators insisted that calisthenics needed to address the gender-specific physiological and psychological needs of boys and girls, which in turn led to the recognition that trained women physical education teachers were needed to replace the Japanese instructors initially hired.⁴⁵ The YWCA national leadership saw a role for itself in training Christian-educated physical education teachers to fulfill that need. In 1913, the national committee decided to establish the Normal School of Hygiene and Physical Education in Shanghai's International Settlement. Years later, Abby Mayhew said that it was because the school provided the association with the means to spread the "gospel of the body" to the greatest number of women and girls, and to train future leaders in the field of health and physical education.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the YWCA's investment in creating the Normal School for Hygiene and Physical Education and later building a separate campus for it was unusual and would never be repeated.

The Normal School fit the mission of the YWCA because the health of the body was linked to the well-being of the soul. Abby Mayhew noted that "the National Committee of the Young Women's Christian Association early saw that ... in order to produce sane and vigorous Christians who could 'put on the armour of God' and fight to the end, we must help them first, as Christ did, to build up strong and health [sic] physical lives as the foundation for the spiritual superstructure."⁴⁷ Such statements make clear that although the goals of the Normal School naturally aligned with those of nationalistic reformers and educators in China, the YWCA had a clear agenda of its own in establishing the school. The school would contribute to the creation of a strong Chinese body, and thus to a strong Chinese nation. At the same time, however, the school's graduates would seek to Christianize society through example and to further the association movement.

It was a bold undertaking given the limited financial resources of the association, its staffing shortages, and its focus on geographical expansion. However, the endeavour had Coppock's full support and, at that stage in the YWCA movement in China, the national general secretary had more control over setting priorities than future general secretaries

would have. The Normal School would also meet another important goal: provide young Chinese women with opportunities for professional growth.

The Normal School opened in 1915, in a small space where Mayhew had taught fitness classes. Soon after, it joined the national office and the Shanghai city association in a large shared compound. Even after the national office relocated and the school expanded into the vacated space, the school was cramped, so much so that in 1919 the national committee purchased three acres of land and built its own campus – institution building in its most literal sense. Coppock was exuberant at the school's success despite the small number of graduates and the ongoing staffing problems. In 1919, she wrote: "I believe that nothing we are doing has counted more toward Christianity than the Normal Training School. It is looked upon generally as by far the best school of its kind in China."⁴⁸ Yet, four years later, the association began discussing affiliating the school with a four-year college. In 1925, the school joined with Jinling College in Nanjing. In 1930, the YWCA ended its relationship with Jinling and its involvement in the training of physical education teachers. Why?

The official reason was the re-evaluation of the Normal School's training program and the decision that four years of schooling were needed to prepare physical education teachers.⁴⁹ Four other important reasons, however, sprang from both external circumstances and internal dynamics. China's socio-political landscape had changed. Early reformers had referred to China as the "sick man of the orient." The Normal School had reflected the need to strengthen the Chinese nation by strengthening the Chinese body. After 1919, radical intellectuals blamed China's problems on Western imperialism rather than on inherent cultural weaknesses. Therefore, the school's goal of strengthening the Chinese body for China no longer resonated. In 1920, the national committee endorsed the pursuit of industrial reform work and agreed to campaign for child labour legislation. Coppock's death in 1921 was the fourth reason: in many ways, it left the association rudderless. The national committee struggled for six months to name a new national general secretary. Their eventual choice was Rosalee Venable. She faced major tasks in that role, including supporting the child labour campaign, planning for the first national convention, and grooming Ding Shujing to become the next national general secretary. Agreeing to accept the affiliation of the Normal School with Jinling was simple in comparison.

Industrial Work

Industrial work was actually the Chinese YWCA's first endeavour. In 1904, the national committee hired American Martha Berninger, who worked locally at Shanghai's Margaret Williamson Hospital, as its first secretary. She held small classes for factory women in a rented house in a mill district until 1907, when she resigned because she felt more like a missionary than a social worker. Her resignation may or may not have coincided with the visit of the World YWCA's general secretary, Clarissa Spencer; in any case, Spencer turned the fledgling association away from its industrial focus because it lacked the resources to create the type of programs needed by women workers.

By 1907, however, the World YWCA was waking up to the need for industrial work. The 1906 Paris world conference called for national committees to study how they could adapt YWCA work to the pressing needs of factory women. This call was renewed at the Berlin conference in 1910, where resolutions were passed asking member nations to address social and industrial conditions. Both conferences fell short of directly charging member associations to take direct action, however.⁵⁰

Grace Coppock had been interested in industrial reform before she came to China, and she brought that interest with her to the national office when she became national general secretary in 1913.⁵¹ The growth of Chinese industry after the outbreak of the First World War made it impossible for the association to ignore the problems of industrialization. In Shanghai alone, the growth of the cotton industry was dramatic. Between 1913 and 1918, the number of cotton spindles increased by 35 percent. By 1920, the increase since 1913 stood at 70 percent. The increase in number of looms was even greater. Between 1912 and 1918, the number of looms operating in Shanghai cotton mills grew by 57 percent. By 1920, the number of looms had more than doubled over the previous seven years.⁵²

As early as 1917, Coppock had asked the YWCA of the USA to send an industrial expert to China. In 1919, after three Shanghai factory owners petitioned the YWCA to conduct welfare work among their female workers, Coppock made a similar request to the British association.⁵³ Sometime after that, she again pressed her case with the United States, noting that with association work in three industrial cities, the YWCA needed at least two foreign experts.⁵⁴

The following year, she travelled to the United States with YWCA secretaries Fan Yu Jung and Ella MacNeill, the latter one of the first secretaries sent from Australia.⁵⁵ They attended the national convention of

the American YWCA held in Cleveland in April. According to most histories, it was the World YWCA Committee meeting held later that year that provided Coppock with the persuasive power to get an industrial program started in the Chinese YWCA. What happened at the American YWCA national convention most likely had a dramatic impact on Coppock, but also influenced the actions taken by the World YWCA Committee several months later. At the convention in Cleveland, the large contingent of working-class members joined forces with industrial secretaries and convinced enough of the conservative nucleus at the convention to “formally support workers’ rights, to educate its own members about workers’ problems, and to embrace an overtly political role.”⁵⁶ Coppock may have influenced the eventual outcome when she addressed the convention and spoke of the desolate conditions under which female mill workers laboured in China. Among other actions, the convention endorsed the “Social Ideals of the Churches,” which included recommendations for principles of industrial justice, and requested that the American association’s national board consider a set of labour standards for factory women, such as “an eight-hour workday, prohibition of night work, [and] the right of labor to organize.”⁵⁷

Coppock also spoke of the plight of Chinese factory workers when she addressed the World YWCA’s first postwar meeting, held in Chambéry, France. At the end of the meeting, the leadership joined with other international women’s organizations in claiming peace and social justice as women’s issues. Among the social justice issues it embraced was industrial justice. The World YWCA recommended that member associations engage industrial secretaries to study, research, and teach industrial issues, and to work with other societies from “the standpoint of disinterested service” to pressure governments to enact and enforce legislation where needed. The conference further urged:

Whereas in the present imperfect social order it is necessary in the interest of justice that groups of industrial workers should have the opportunity of combining to improve their status and voice their needs, we *recommend* that the Young Women’s Christian Association encourage organisations among women workers, and give opportunity for its members, through lectures, discussion circles, and other methods, to become acquainted with the principles underlying such organisations.⁵⁸

The policy statements issued at Chambéry are critically important, for they provide context for what appeared to be brazen statements by later

industrial secretaries in China who called for organizing a labour movement among factory women. In fact, they *were* brazen when made in Shanghai's International Settlement, which was suffused with Western imperialism. The 1920 policy statements did not mark a turn to the left by the World YWCA, but signalled that perhaps more radical action was on the horizon in order to empower working women. At least, that is the message YWCA secretaries heard.

Coppock brought the World YWCA's directive to develop industrial departments back to China. An acquaintance recommended that she consider Agatha Harrison, director of a welfare workers' program at the London School of Economics, as an expert to study ways for the Chinese association to engage in industrial reform work.⁵⁹ When World YWCA representatives interviewed Harrison, they hesitated because she subscribed to no particular church denomination and readily admitted that while she had a "very definite faith," she had been "put off" by organized religion in her youth; she also reserved the right to decide for herself regarding the need for taking Christianity to non-Christian lands. Being a committed, churchgoing Christian was a prerequisite for becoming a YWCA secretary at that time. This policy would not be eliminated until the third Chinese national convention in 1933.⁶⁰ Coppock, however, overcame the reluctance of the World YWCA, understandable given her long search for an industrial expert.

The question of Harrison's religiosity is important. Scholars only tend to problematize Chinese women's relation to Christianity and ignore the diversity of religious beliefs among Western women. Harrison, however, experienced an epiphany after meeting Coppock: "Her overwhelming faith literally pulled me up short. She showed me the unfairness of bringing my western conception of the Church's failure on this industrial question of China, and made me see that I'd got the chance of proving I was wrong."⁶¹

Harrison eventually came to believe that the church was the only force with the potential to bring about true reform because China was at the beginning of its industrial development.⁶² By the time she left China in January 1924, she believed that the most important attribute of an industrial secretary was "a great belief in Christianity." She also believed that future industrial secretaries should be chosen from among the YWCA women already in China.⁶³ Her brief sojourn in China had convinced her of the need to be on the ground in order to understand China's social needs.

Barely a month after her arrival, Harrison recommended that the association begin "making opinion."⁶⁴ Her first visits to Chinese factories

convinced her that illiterate factory women lacked the ability to organize. Emily Honig points out in her study of women in Shanghai textile mills that factories commonly hired women workers from a single locality, and thus native place identity, rather than class consciousness or worker solidarity, defined textile worker identity.⁶⁵ Helping these women organize “to improve their status and voice their needs” would have seemed to be a near-impossible task. Harrison also believed that factory owners did not want “genuine” programs but only superficial “see-what-we-do-for-our-workers’ kind of work.” She saw ameliorating working conditions through legislation as fundamental to any genuine reform.⁶⁶ “Making opinion” was emblematic of the Christian social campaigns that endeavoured to “awaken the individual conscience on a massive scale.”⁶⁷ “Making opinion” also described much of the climate of urban China during the May Fourth era. Respecting Harrison’s expertise, as they had the expertise of Abby Mayhew, the national committee adopted “making opinion” as the association’s approach.

The national committee appointed Smith College graduate Cheng Wanzhen to assist Harrison. Cheng had begun working for the YWCA editorial department and the *China Daily News (Shenbao)* soon after her return to China in 1919. A YWCA colleague described her as poised and articulate, with “a remarkable understanding of Anglo-Saxon thought and expression.”⁶⁸ Cheng assisted Harrison and used her journalistic skills to educate the YWCA’s constituency and the larger Chinese community about labour issues. She moved easily between English- and Chinese-speaking communities, and between moderate and more radical circles. Even the Chinese Communist Party acknowledged her as an industrial expert and workers’ advocate.⁶⁹

Cheng Wanzhen was exactly the type of Chinese secretary the national office sought. She was educated, fluent in English, a skilled writer in both English and her native language, able to cross cultural boundaries, and a skilled interlocutor. Her contributions to the first years of the national industrial program were many, but she decided to work only part-time after her marriage in 1925. The YWCA lost her permanently when she resigned due to ill health the following year, leading to the closure of the national industrial office for several years.

The Chambéry resolutions suggested cooperation with other organizations. Both Coppock and Harrison set out to find other groups to work with, although initially Harrison expressed concern that by joining with others the association might receive little recognition for its contributions. Coppock responded that “in this industrial question the association may

have to lose its life but in losing it, it will find it.”⁷⁰ Although Harrison remained concerned, the national committee agreed with Coppock.⁷¹

The YWCA found two groups to work with. The first would become the National Christian Council (NCC), which was in a pre-organization phase when Coppock approached it. Coppock had been appointed to chair a subcommittee to study the church's relation to economic and industrial problems and submit a report at the NCC's first meeting the following May.⁷² When she died suddenly in October, Cheng Wanzhen replaced her as chair of that subcommittee.⁷³ When the NCC convened in May, it endorsed the standards set by the International Labour Organization: no employment of children under twelve, one day's rest in seven, and limitations on work hours.⁷⁴ It also created a standing Committee on the Church's Relation to Economic and Industrial Problems.

The second group was the Joint Committee of Shanghai Women's Clubs, an organization the YWCA essentially created. Sometime just before or after Coppock's death on October 15, Harrison invited the American, British, and Shanghai (Chinese) clubs to meet and discuss their shared interest in child labour, an invitation all three clubs accepted.⁷⁵ She called it an “epoch-making event” because the clubs were so clearly divided along national lines.⁷⁶ These women would soon confront the staunch patriarchal and misogynist milieu that thrived in the colonial world of the International Settlement. In discussing the complications faced by a Christian women's organization in Shanghai, it must be borne in mind that for the YWCA there was the additional factor that whether their social community was the traditional Chinese world dominated by Confucian norms or the imperialistic world of Chinese treaty ports, those social communities were all dominated by men.

The YWCA dominated the Joint Committee. Each club appointed three representatives. The British Women's Club chose YWCA national committee member Mrs. D. MacGillivray as one of its three. Cheng Wanzhen represented the Shanghai Women's Club. The YWCA had its three seats, and Harrison was a *de facto* member. Thus, there were six YWCA women on the Joint Committee.⁷⁷ Harrison wrote World YWCA industrial secretary Mary Dingman that “each day I come more and more to the realization that though there is plenty of good will on this industrial question it has no backbone. I think the Association will have to be that backbone.”⁷⁸ It was a role the association did not shrink from. Harrison, and later Dingman, who replaced her, became closely and often solely identified as the committee's leaders by the foreign residents of the International Settlement.

Cheng Wanzhen published three articles on industrial topics in 1922. In March, she published on the Second International Congress of Working Women in the widely circulated *Ladies' Journal*.⁷⁹ The other two articles appeared in *YWCA Magazine*, one on the creation of the YWCA industrial department and the other on the campaign for labour legislation.⁸⁰ In the latter article, Cheng emphasized the need for a national labour policy. She discussed the creation of the Joint Committee and its intent to get every woman in the settlement interested in the labour question and to involve them in working to improve the lives of working women. She concluded that article with the YWCA's role in that work:

The YWCA originally sought to elevate the spiritual, intellectual, physical and social lives of Chinese women so that they could reach their highest potential and come together as a group to fulfill their obligation to God and the world ... These goals for Chinese women include all Chinese women. As working women have not had the opportunity to develop their potential, the YWCA must provide them with opportunities by promoting a labor movement. The Association cannot do this alone; it must join with other groups to help working women seek happiness and well-being.⁸¹

Cheng's mention of the YWCA's providing working women with "opportunities to develop their potential" aligned with association rhetoric and would not have raised eyebrows. The idea that the YWCA should promote a labour movement in order to provide them with more opportunities aligned with the World YWCA's policy statements at Chambéry, but few of Cheng's readers would have known that. Thus, her words may have been considered those of a liberal-minded labour advocate.

The Joint Committee began by studying conditions in Shanghai factories. It addressed its concerns and recommendation to the Shanghai Municipal Council in a letter dated February 9, 1923, urging the council to do three things: abolish night work for children under twelve, provide part-time schools in factory districts under the council's authority, and extend the health department's jurisdiction to include the supervision of factories.⁸² In June, the council created the Child Labor Commission. Some YWCA histories state that this action was a result of "pressure" from the Joint Committee, which suggests that in just three months a small group of reform-minded women became a genuine moral force in a very patriarchal community.⁸³ This interpretation ignores the larger world of politics in the International Settlement, which included months-long

debates over educating the settlement's Chinese children, and another over the exclusion of women ratepayers (taxpayers) from the list of those eligible to stand for elected office. One woman ratepayer, Dr. Margaret Polk, had publicly challenged the council in a letter to the *North China Herald* in which she accused them of deliberately leaving off the names of women ratepayers. She called for the American and British Women's Clubs, the YWCA, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and all other women's organizations to "unite in seeing that women's interests are guarded."⁸⁴

The Shanghai Municipal Council commissioned a study on employment of children in mills and factories and invited the Joint Committee to submit names to serve on it.⁸⁵ Creating the Child Labor Commission and inviting the Joint Committee's participation solved several dilemmas for the council. First, it obviated the need to take any action regarding schools for Chinese children; at the same time, it made the council appear responsive to the issue of child labour. Second, it provided women with an avenue of service. The Joint Committee stood as an example of women's ability to take coordinated action. Polk's call for women to raise the issue of political rights undoubtedly disturbed the council. By creating the Child Labor Commission, the council allowed women to choose how they would serve the community and, obligingly, women chose the route of maternalistic service. The council appointed three women to the commission: Agatha Harrison, Song Meiling (former YWCA secretary and future wife of Chiang Kai-shek), and prominent Chinese physician Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone).⁸⁶

When Harrison left China in January 1924, secretary Mary Dingman arrived to serve in an interim capacity. Dingman had spent several months in Shanghai the previous year, assisting Harrison. This was insufficient to prepare her for the challenges she would face when Western imperialism clashed with the Chinese desire for sovereignty. Several months after her arrival, Cheng Wanzhen published another article in the *YWCA Magazine* that, while promoting the child labour campaign, also severely criticized Western views of China's working poor:

Most people ... say "Industrialization in China is still so young, what is the use of passing labor legislation? China has so many poor people, what more do they want besides a job?" People who speak like this ... fear that labor laws will put limits on capitalism and cause great difficulty in world markets ... [T]hey feel that the poor should work from dawn to dusk ...

they should simply work all the time. Rest and relaxation, sanitation, education, recreation, entertainment, all of these luxuries belong to the rich. As for the poor, as long as they do not starve to death, they should be content.⁸⁷

Cheng's impassioned comments reminded her YWCA colleagues that, although she had a "remarkable understanding of Anglo-Saxon thought," she was Chinese and took certain aspects of the ongoing debates over Chinese child labour very personally. As debates in the *Herald* and Cheng's writings reveal, there were clear undertones of race and class in the debates over the welfare of the settlement's Chinese children.

Against this backdrop, the Child Labor Commission carried out its work. When it published its report in July, the *North China Herald* called the report "one of the most significant documents published in this country," and described the recommendations as "humane, moderate and conservative."⁸⁸ Those recommendations included a minimum age of ten for child employment, to be raised to twelve in four years, a maximum twelve-hour workday for children under fourteen, and no night work for children. The newspaper believed that the commission's report could not be rejected "even by the most avaricious and hard-hearted."⁸⁹ But it was.

The Shanghai Municipal Council decided it needed the settlement's ratepayers to provide it with statutory powers to remediate industrial conditions. The next ratepayers' meeting was not until the following April, however.⁹⁰ In the intervening months, there was no aspect of the issue that was not raked across the pages of the *North China Herald*.⁹¹ This debate masked another controversial topic – the printed matter, or press, bylaw. Control of Chinese printing companies located in the International Settlement had been an issue since 1916. The Municipal Council wanted to restrict "scurrilous and seditious" literature through a seemingly benign requirement that printing companies register with the council. Chinese printing guilds opposed this restrictive legislation as the International Settlement was a haven from Chinese government and warlord control. The bylaw had been reintroduced at every ratepayers' meeting since 1917 but always failed, not because of Chinese opposition but because there was never the necessary quorum to pass a bylaw.⁹²

The April 15, 1925, meeting was no exception – it failed to attract a quorum and adjourned without even discussing the child labour bylaw.⁹³ Between the debate over the meeting's failure and a petition for a second meeting signed by seventy-six ratepayers, the council took the unprecedented step of scheduling a second meeting for June.⁹⁴ This action did

not forestall debate or prevent allegedly communist propaganda attacking the conservative nature of the proposed child labour bylaw.⁹⁵ There was equal agitation against the press bylaw from the settlement's Chinese businessmen. In this climate, Chinese members of the Joint Committee feared repercussions from their community if they continued to campaign for a child labour bylaw linked to the press bylaw.

Cheng Wanzhen decided that the harm the press bylaw would do to the Chinese press outweighed whatever might be accomplished through the child labour legislation. She hoped that the second meeting would also fail to reach a quorum. Mary Dingman could not accept that opposition to the press bylaw was the reason for all the agitation, and had difficulty accepting Cheng's position. Even though thirty leading Chinese organizations and firms signed petitions supporting the child labour bylaw but opposing the press bylaw, she failed to make the connection between opposition to the press bylaw and the rising feelings against any form of foreign control over Chinese life in the settlement. A history of industrial work published after Dingman's departure noted that the "obscurity in which the Chinese and foreign groups are cut off from understanding each other's real motives in a community such as this blocked her way."⁹⁶

Two other groups "cut off" from understanding each other were conservative men and civic-minded women. Some conservative men objected in very uncivil tones. W. Bruce Lockhart wrote a letter to the *North China Herald* directly attacking the YWCA for an ill-conceived and costly reform plan:

If Shanghai signs a blank chit at the next Special Meeting of Ratepayers on June 2 at the behest of the hard-luck story of one of these young things from the Young Women's Christian Association, that blank chit ... has to be paid ... Miss Agatha Harrison and Miss M.A. Dingman who are the origin and energy of this YWCA agitation show a most laudable interest in other's people's children ... When Miss Harrison and Miss Dingman know as much as I do, and have good working experience of the subject it will not be necessary for me to draw public attention to the parable in the Bible – the one about the young ladies with the lamps – (possibly members of the YWCA of those days!) – the young ladies *who forgot the oil for their lamps!* Do you remember it?⁹⁷

But it was labour unrest rather than inflamed rhetoric in the *North China Herald* that ended the campaign. Tensions erupted into violence when a Japanese factory guard killed a striking mill worker on May 15. Students

protested and some were arrested. On May 30, a large, angry crowd of more than fifteen hundred converged on a police station in the heart of the settlement where they believed those students were being held. Afraid that they would be overrun, police opened fire, killing or wounding over a dozen people. The May Thirtieth Incident spawned nationwide protests that caused more violence and deaths. The situation in the International Settlement was so grave that on June 1 the Shanghai Municipal Council declared martial law.

In the middle of this crisis, the Municipal Council held the ratepayers' meeting. It adjourned after fifteen minutes, once again short of a quorum. One reason was that many men were serving with the defence force as the city struggled to restore order.⁹⁸ Sometime after that, a letter to the editor of a Shanghai newspaper attacked the Joint Committee as "a group of women reformers" who "obviously had no realization of the economic factors involved."⁹⁹ With their actions criticized and their cause defeated, the Joint Committee temporarily disbanded. It organized again the following May as the Joint Committee of Shanghai Women's Organizations, and expanded its membership to include other foreign women's clubs and such organizations as the Chinese Women's Suffrage Association and the Chinese Women's Christian Temperance Union. It remained active until the war with Japan. One of its first tasks was to write a history of its first social campaign. The YWCA remained an active member.¹⁰⁰

Ironically, the women of the YWCA who had worked hardest to get the child labour bylaw passed felt only relief when the meeting was declared "never to have been held."¹⁰¹ Even Mary Dingman commented that "it is now a real question in the minds of some as to whether there ought ever to be another attempt to get this By-Law adopted ... A complicated international situation exists ... so we must wait." As she left China, she found some comfort in the fact that Chinese who opposed the extension of foreign control over their lives and country did believe in the principle of limiting child labour.¹⁰²

The Chinese leadership on the national committee distanced themselves from the indignation of the foreign community and refuted foreign press accounts that explained away the nationwide protests as communist influenced. They stated emphatically that the protests came from "forces deep in the inner spirit and history of the Chinese people." The protesters opposed the imposition of foreign laws on Chinese residents. The committee pledged "to aid in all possible ways in the securing of such justice and in all processes, which may help to bring about a better

understanding and a right relationship between our own people and the foreign nations concerned.” Both Chinese and foreign staff endorsed that statement. However, the fact that they considered it separately suggests that the political realities of the International Settlement, where foreign and Chinese belonged to separate communities, momentarily intruded into the YWCA.¹⁰³ It is possible that when the foreign staff met separately, they began to recognize their complicity in Western imperialism, living as they did in a settlement that was considered to be foreign soil, and whose residents were by treaty immune from prosecution under Chinese law, a principle called “extraterritoriality.” Some American secretaries had the courage to petition the US State Department to revoke this principle, but to no avail.¹⁰⁴ Extraterritoriality ended only in 1943 when the United States signed the Sino-American Treaty for the Relinquishment of Extraterritorial Rights in China, which ended a century of extraterritorial rights and allowed limited immigration of Chinese into the United States.¹⁰⁵

The national committee’s response to the May Thirtieth Incident was a key marker in the history of the YWCA in China. While future events would receive more attention, it was a rare moment when the national committee came out of the shadows and spoke publicly, asserting the right of the Chinese people to their national sovereignty, and sent a clear signal to the International Settlement’s municipal government and foreign residents that the foreign-inspired association had a Chinese soul because the voices that spoke about “our own people” were clearly Chinese. The national committee’s Chinese leadership could not be easily dismissed either, for they themselves did not live in the shadows. The *North China Herald* recognized committee chair Gong Hezhen as a leader among serious-minded Chinese women.¹⁰⁶

The story of YWCA industrial work in 1925 was not entirely about the child labour campaign. In March, the national committee agreed to lend Lily Haass to the National Christian Council to serve as its industrial executive. Haass, originally a Beijing city association secretary, was studying at the London School of Economics and planning to return as a national industrial secretary. In a letter to national general secretary Rosalee Venable, she questioned the wisdom of reassigning her, without knowing that the decision had actually been made the day before she wrote her letter. Among her many concerns, most of which turned out to be valid, was that working through the NCC would be slow and cumbersome, and that it would not prioritize local work as the YWCAs would. She also worried that the embryonic industrial “department,”

which had not yet been formally organized, would fail for lack of staff and resources. She was bold enough to ask if she could do both jobs – serve as NCC industrial executive while still having a special responsibility for YWCA industrial work. Her request was denied.¹⁰⁷ When she returned to China to assume her new job, Haass worked closely with Shanghai city association secretary Edith Johnston to plan how that city association would continue its local industrial work, but on September 15, Johnston died.¹⁰⁸

The national office had already been trying to secure a British secretary for national industrial work. Left on the staff were Dan Dexing, who was listed as industrial executive, and Cheng Wanzhen, who was working only half-time after her marriage. Both were temporarily reassigned as local Shanghai city association secretaries. Dan resisted this designation, but it became a moot point as health concerns forced her to leave by the end of the year. Cheng resigned midway through the following year for the same reason.¹⁰⁹

Unable to find a suitable British woman to replace Johnston, who was Irish, the association settled on Australian Eleanor Hinder, who agreed to come for two years to finish Johnston's contract.

MAKING THE WORK CHINESE

“Making the work Chinese” had been the goal from the time of Clarissa Spencer's visit in 1907. Spencer essentially meant making its leadership Chinese. It had also been Grace Coppock's goal, although she first had to build up the YWCA movement in China by hiring foreign secretaries to establish city associations. It took two decades for indigenization to begin bearing fruit. “Indigenization” and “devolution” are the terms this book uses to describe the transfer of leadership to Chinese YWCA women, whether lay volunteers serving on governing boards or professional staff who performed executive functions and led program work.

The transfer of leadership to the Chinese women who served on governing boards occurred earlier, was more widespread, and was a less formal process as there were no specific qualifications other than being Christian, being educated, and being willing to serve a diverse community. The situation was different for professional staff. In 1918, the national committee decided that for a young Chinese woman to be accepted for the training program for association secretaries, she must have a middle school education and some experience with her local association, and the

recommending association had to agree to hire her when the training was completed.¹¹⁰ College-educated Chinese women were actively recruited by the national office. Appointing a Chinese woman to a professional position was one thing; enabling her to exercise the authority of her position was quite another. Western women, many of whom came to China to fulfill their own professional ambitions, did not always step back willingly and let their Chinese colleagues lead.

Devolution proceeded slowly for several reasons. The first was the nature of the organization itself. Speaking in the United States in 1925, future national general secretary Ding Shujing pointed out that in the beginning Chinese women neither grasped the purpose of the YWCA nor understood the needs of China's women. Subsequently, they understood the association a little better but thought it was just another mission organization, so they came to "help" the foreign women with their mission work. To Ding, it was at the first national convention, held in 1923, that Chinese women finally had a "self-awakening," and stepped forward with questions, criticisms, and considerations.¹¹¹ Ding Shujing's observations represent a Chinese voice attempting to interpret the Chinese experience to a foreign audience. Devolution was also slowed because of the lack of educated, professionally minded Chinese women. In 1920, there were only 117 women enrolled in Christian colleges and universities throughout China.¹¹² A third reason was the nature of the work itself. At the 1919 secretarial conference, Grace Coppock stated in her address to conference participants: "We should now turn very seriously to the enlarging of the Chinese staff. It will be hard for as a vocation, the secretaryship of the YWCA is still new. It carries a heavier responsibility that most women carry as teachers."¹¹³

The life of a YWCA secretary was intense. Even a local secretary travelled frequently. They organized and attended conferences and training institutes in China, and were often sent overseas for advanced training. Such opportunities for professional training attracted Chinese women to the YWCA, but they also became a pretext for leaving for easier jobs.

Finally, family pressure to marry and ill health cost the association many promising Chinese secretaries. After marrying, some former secretaries continued as members of governing boards, so the YWCA did not lose their knowledge and talent entirely. Ill health was a constant factor. Even if the association did not lose a secretary, it often lost her services for a time. For example, both Cai Kui and Deng Yuzhi had to take leaves of absence because of ill health.

Leadership on Governing Committees

Chinese leadership developed first among the women who volunteered on association governing committees. When the Shanghai city association organized in 1908, its governing committee consisted of both Western and Chinese women. Four years later, all of its members were Chinese. Shanghai city association general secretary Grace Coppock noted that when Western and Chinese women sat on the committee, meetings were held in English, and Chinese women were not always able to follow the discussions. Western women also tended to make quick decisions, causing Chinese members to hesitate, being unwilling to commit themselves to matters they were not sure they fully understood. In Coppock's opinion, the all-Chinese committee was a more effective governing body.¹¹⁴

No one who has ever attended one of those meetings of the Directors would ever say that the Chinese will not speak out their opinions. And they are full of ideas for the extension of the work. They talk so fast (and not *always* strictly according to parliamentary rule) that it is hard for me sometimes to get a word in.¹¹⁵

Unlike in Shanghai, Chinese lay leadership dominated city associations in Beijing, Fuzhou, and Changsha from the time each was established. Those cities had a number of educated Chinese Christian women willing to serve, and in Guangzhou, Chinese women had the fortitude to start their association without the help of the national office.¹¹⁶

The national committee included representatives from all city associations and additional members who lived in Shanghai and made up the executive committee of the national committee. The constitution passed at the first national convention in 1923 made the executive committee the policy-making body for the association, somewhat diminishing the ability of the national general secretary to act independently.

In its first three decades, both Chinese and Western women served on the national committee. Starting in 1915, all officers except the chair were Chinese. In mid-1919, Hu Binxia became chair. Future chairs included Gong Hezhen and Sheng Zuxin. These three were among Shanghai's most educated women. Hu graduated from Wellesley, Gong from Barnard, and Sheng from Columbia. Their years in the United States should not suggest that they did not consider the YWCA from a Chinese perspective, but theirs would have been a comparatively cosmopolitan view. Hu Binxia served as national committee vice chair from 1915 or 1916 to

midway through 1919, when she became chair. The year 1919 was the first year Sheng and Gong appeared on committee lists, although, as few committee lists were complete, they might have begun serving a year or two earlier. Gong took over from Hu in 1922 and chaired the national committee until at least 1928, when there is a gap in the records. Sheng served as vice chair. When the records pick up again in 1932, Sheng was listed as chair, but the following year, Gong was again listed as chair. She served in that capacity until 1937, and continued to be listed as a member of the national committee until the end of the war with Japan. These three women were not alone in the length of their service. Wang Guoxiu, who led the national committee after 1949, first appears on the national committee list in 1934 as the committee vice chair.¹¹⁷

The important role of the national committee has not been emphasized in other histories of the Chinese YWCA. In addition to making policy, the executive committee approved programs and hiring decisions. Committee members also oversaw the work of each department, as each department had an advisory committee chaired by a committee member. Thus, the lay volunteers were more fundamentally involved than the terse minutes of their monthly meetings indicate. Further, decisions taken at those meetings were based on first-hand knowledge as well as the reports of the national general secretary and her professional staff. The national committee approved each stage of Ding Shujing's advancement. It stalled the decision to transfer Deng Yuzhi from the student department to the national industrial department for months (internal politics played a role in the delay). After Ding Shujing's unexpected death in July 1936, the national committee delayed appointing Cai Kui the permanent national general secretary for two and a half years, for reasons that documents only hint at. After the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925, the national committee defended the Chinese residents of the International Settlement whose protests over the erosion of China's sovereignty had resulted in the shooting death of students at the hands of the settlement police. The national committee would speak out against Japanese imperialism in even stronger terms after the Shanghai War in 1932. Finally, it would be the national committee that declared the association's support for Mao Zedong and his state-building project in March 1950.

Leadership among Professional Staff

Finding qualified Chinese women became the quintessential dilemma of the Chinese YWCA. For foreign staff, the YWCA's professional ideal was

high, requiring secretaries to hold college degrees, to be trained in YWCA organizational methods, and, if possible, to be experienced in their fields of expertise. As noted earlier, the standard for Chinese staff at the local level was more modest, requiring only a middle school education and time spent in YWCA training programs. Understandably, Chinese women with college degrees were highly sought after, but they also had other options besides association work, and those options increased as the years passed. As already seen, retaining secretaries was also a serious problem.

Exacerbating the problem from the perspective of local city associations was the fact that when a Chinese secretary began to show real promise, the national committee tapped her for service on its staff, thus depriving local associations of the very women they needed to make local work Chinese. This was exactly what happened in the case of Ding Shujing. Ding joined the staff of the Beijing city association in 1916 and became its first Chinese general secretary in 1920. In 1923, the national committee brought her to Shanghai to work as secretary for the first national convention as the first step toward grooming her to become the national general secretary, which she did on January 1, 1926.

Numbers reveal progress. The first Chinese secretary was Ding Mingyu, hired as associate general secretary of the Shanghai city association in 1908. She was still the only Chinese secretary, along with one British and six American secretaries, at the first secretarial conference, held at the seaside resort of Beidahe in June and July 1911. At the second secretarial conference in 1915, there were five Chinese secretaries and seventeen Western secretaries. The following year, there were seven Chinese secretaries and twenty-one Western secretaries. At the fourth secretarial conference in 1919, the number of Chinese secretaries had increased to eighteen and the number of Western secretaries to fifty-two. Numbers do not tell the complete story, however. Of the fifty-two Western secretaries, forty-two were Americans and ten were Europeans. Of the forty-two Americans, twenty-one had been in China for less than two years, and only eight had five years of experience. Also, a number of the Western secretaries listed were on furlough and thus not in China. The Chinese secretaries thus likely played a greater role at the conference than the numbers suggest.¹¹⁸

From a statistical standpoint, the 1919 figures represent an eighteenfold increase in Chinese secretaries, a tenfold increase in European secretaries, and only a sevenfold increase in American secretaries. It was at the 1919 secretarial conference that Grace Coppock clearly stated, with the foundational groundwork laid by foreign secretaries, that it was time to

develop the Chinese secretaryship. The growth in the number of Chinese professional staff over the next five years reflected the focus on that effort. In 1920–21, there were 42 Chinese secretaries and 84 foreign secretaries. In 1922, the ratio was 61/83; in 1923, it was 65/85; and in 1924, the margin had shrunk to 51/64.¹¹⁹ Anti-imperialist and anti-Christian unrest caused the dramatic reduction in the number of foreign secretaries after 1923. It would also be temporary, as more trained foreign secretaries were needed during the interim as the inexperienced new Chinese secretaries were trained or as new programs required particular expertise. Foreign staff would increase, then decrease again because of the worldwide Depression and Japanese aggression. In 1934, there would be only 11 Western secretaries on the national staff, and 3 in local associations, one each in Hong Kong, Changsha, and Mukden.

THE END OF 1925: THE YEAR OF TRANSITION

It is often not until the end of a year that hindsight brings that year into clear focus. For the Chinese association, the processing of annual reports sent to both the YWCA of the USA and the World YWCA provided the opportunity to explain and interpret events and developments of the previous twelve months. The 1925 report compiled by editorial executive Helen Thoburn, some of which was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and the 1925 report by outgoing national general secretary Rosalee Venable, who had replaced Grace Coppock and promoted the advancement of Ding Shujing, stand as critical measures of just where the YWCA stood as a *Chinese* association. Thoburn reported on the results of a conference of city associations in north China attended by mostly Chinese board and staff members. Those women described Western-inspired associations as being characterized by “departments” and “cooperation,” neither of which they understood. Their comment about “cooperation” reflected a policy initiated by Coppock in keeping with World YWCA directives made at Chambéry to cooperate with other groups to achieve certain reform goals. The YWCA had become deeply involved with the NCC, the child labour campaign had been a joint effort with other women’s organizations, and the Normal School for Hygiene and Physical Education had just been amalgamated with Jinling College. In Thoburn’s opinion, “we have ‘cooperated’ until no one knows what the YWCA proper, is.” As for the remark about “departments,” the Chinese participants grasped their organizational role, but

the departmentalization of work obscured the main purpose of the association. The participants stated that local associations could not “think out” future programs; Chinese national secretaries needed to lead the way. And the time for them to do it was “now.”¹²⁰

Rosalee Venable’s report was much in the same vein, except in a broader context. She admitted that although the 1923 national convention had done much, there had not been much original thinking and the regular lines of departmental work, modelled after the American idea of association work, had simply been reported on and the same pattern of work continued down to the present time. A disrupting factor had been the renewal of the anti-Christian campaign and the “new nationalism,” both of which threatened Christian churches and the Christian organization because of their foreign origins and foreign leadership. Chinese leadership in local associations became concerned over the possible withdrawal of foreign staff. The previous year, Venable had participated in a meeting of the Beijing city association board as it discussed the possible loss of all the foreign-lead programs such as girls’ work, religious education, and social service. The loss of those programs did not seem to matter. What the board members were interested in was a hostel for students coming to study in Beijing and programs aimed at “home life.” Unfortunately, Venable did not elaborate on what program changes were made, reporting only that “a year later, their association is far more simplified, and beginning to get closer to what those women understand.”

As for her report on work at the national level, in answer to the question: “What are the major departments or committees of your national committee?” she stated that there was no way to reply that year except that they maintained their departmental structure but were “not promoting work along departmental lines.” She did not elaborate further, however. She implied that any adjustments must wait until “Chinese women have come through this transition period and taken full possession of their organization.” Venable admitted that the shift from being “guardians” would be difficult for some Western secretaries. She did not go as far as Thoburn, who referred to the period to come as “chaos.”¹²¹ What her report revealed was that she was at least willing to listen to and entertain ideas that seemed counter to the “association way.” But then, she was leaving.

Whatever adjustments might have been made, the bureaucratic division of association work into departments did not end. New departments were added at the national level as programs expanded. In the next few years, this would include the creation of an industrial department and a

rural department. The second of two association histories authored before 1950 also included an organizational chart outlining lines of authority and division of work. That same history, however, emphasized the democratic values practised in everyday association life.

The first quarter-century of the YWCA movement in China – what has been described as the “formative years” – occurred against a backdrop of national struggle for political and cultural standing in an imperialist world that was attempting to deny China the independence to define either of those for itself. The failure of the child labour campaign is a dramatic example of how the association was buffeted by historical events. It also demonstrates how Western-inspired reform models identified the association as a cultural interloper and foreign transplant. Those foreign models, or what was called the “association way,” would be domesticated under Chinese leadership (see [Chapter 3](#)).

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