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**Gender, Christianity and Peace in Chinese Women's International Thought,  
1914-1953**

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**Introduction**

Throng after throng with their faces alight,  
Gay, dazzling streets, a most beautiful sight,  
Celebrate fully the most glorious peace.  
Bloodshed and tyranny hence forth to cease.

Comes the procession their chanting along –  
Carriages, motor cars lead the gay throng.  
Cheering and shouting loud fill all the air;  
Every one fluttering proud banners fair.

Onlookers standing with hearts in accord,  
Joyous and thankful, are praising the Lord.  
Seeing a future from far shore to shore,  
Knitted by love which endures evermore.

Weapons of warfare all put aside;  
Mercy and truth in their stead to abide.  
Classes and races all have a fair part,  
Peace and contentment are filling each heart.

Kwei Ts-Liang '20

In 1919 Kwei Ts-Liang (桂質良 Gui Zhiliang), a student at St Mary's Hall, an American Episcopal middle school for girls in Shanghai, wrote a poem for her school magazine celebrating the end of the First World War in Europe. Kwei uses a familiar gendered, Christian language of 'peace', 'love', 'mercy' and 'truth', learned from her missionary school education, to describe the peace celebrations which took place in Shanghai on 13 November 1918 (Kwei 1919, 32). On that day St Mary's students gathered for a 'short and beautiful' church service to thank God for granting peace. The veranda of the missionary residence in front of which the girls gathered was adorned with the

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American, British and Chinese flags. Christian hymns and national songs were sung, accompanied by the piano, after which ‘three cheers for world peace were sounded joyously’. In the afternoon, the students decorated the school with lanterns and Chinese flags and the day ended with a candlelight performance of skits, dancing and firecrackers in front of the main school building (Wong 1919, 8). The pageantry of such celebrations was clearly coordinated by missionary teachers, and we might question what impact the armistice had had on these teenaged Chinese schoolgirls beyond a pretty spectacle?

This article seeks to interrogate how Chinese Christian-educated women wrote and thought about peace in the period from the First World War to the Korean War armistice, 1914–1953. In both the literature on Christianity in China and the histories of the national and international women’s movements, Chinese Christian women have been subjected to multiple exclusions based on their race, class, gender and religious identity. The gendered discourse of ‘peace’ as an essential ingredient of international women’s movements in the interwar period has been well studied since the 1980s. Much of the focus, however, has traditionally been on the western, mainly Anglo-American and European women’s movements (Rupp 1997). In the last decade new scholarship on Latin and South American, Afro-American and Black Caribbean, and Pacific-based networks of women thinkers have helped to redress this imbalance (Blain 2018; Umoren 2018; Chase 2020; Siegel 2020; Delap 2020). However, as Francisca de Haan points out, continued Cold War paradigms in the historiography on international women’s organizations have resulted in the continued neglect of Communist women’s

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internationalism (de Haan 2010). Scholarship on the Pacific region, including the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA) has tended to focus on Japan (Paisley 2009). And while new scholarship on Communist women's internationalism, such as studies by Elisabeth Armstrong, Minami Kazushi and others (Edwards 2010; Armstrong 2016; Kazushi 2019; Lewis and Stole 2019; Gradskova 2021; Spakowski 2022) has redirected our attention to Chinese women's participation in international organizations during the early PRC period (1949–1957), Chinese women's international thought and contributions to international women's networks during the republican era (1911–1949) are still largely unknown.

This has not been helped by the Chinese historiography, which has after 1949 made a concerted effort to write out of history the 'remarkable' diplomatic achievements of the Nationalist Guomindang (GMD) party (Kirby 1997). Even less attention has been paid to the role of women in these achievements. Supposedly 'liberated' from a feudal society by the revolution of 1949, it is unsurprising that Chinese women's pre-1949 international thought and activities have received scant attention in the historiography of the Chinese women's movement. The contributions of non-Communist Party feminist intellectuals have been downplayed and Chinese Christian women, in particular, were labelled as western-influenced 'bourgeois' feminists who could not foster a true patriotic Chinese women's movement (Wang 1999).

Having endured centuries-long criticism, persecution, and questions over their loyalty to the nation for having imbibed a 'foreign' religion, both protestant Christians and scholars of Christianity in China have been at pains to point out how Christianity

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became a Chinese religion during the twentieth century (Xi 2010). While this is a very necessary corrective to the label of ‘brainwashed’ pawns of foreigners’ that was attached to Christians in China in the past, this does not tell the whole story. Indeed, by focusing too much on the ways in which Chinese Christians defined their patriotic credentials and rejected western imperialism, we can lose track of the fact that Christianity also opened new avenues by which Protestants and Catholics came to see themselves as members of a broader global community. That Christianity offered pathways for the construction of both national *and* international identities and thinking at a variety of scales is well illustrated in the scholarship by Ryan Dunch and Henrietta Harrison (Dunch 2002; Harrison 2013).

In this article I examine Chinese Christian women’s formulations of ‘peace’, both chronologically and thematically. Chinese Christian women’s thought on peace evolved in the period 1914-1953 in dialogue with and in resistance to internationally circulating protestant ideas. I start by outlining the ways in which American and British missionary educators and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) workers attempted to inculcate a gendered Christian internationalism, based on a liberal protestant vision of international world order, in their pupils throughout this period. This gendered Christian internationalism was based on the maternalist argument that Christian women as ‘Mothers to the world’ could bring about a lasting peace. These essentialist ideas about women’s supposed peace-making faculties were pervasive across many international women’s organisations and remained surprisingly stable during this period.

The article then considers Chinese female students’ own formulations of peace,

focusing on four key periods. These include a period which I define as ‘pacifism and utopianism’ during the May Fourth Era (1914-1924), when students and intellectuals recently returned from studying in war-torn Europe dreamed about the prospect of future peaceful world order in which Chinese women could play a leading role. These international daydreams of peace and racial harmony quickly gave way in the 1920s to more pragmatic concerns about national strengthening in the face of violent political realities. During this period, Chinese Christian women’s thought on peace became increasingly nationalistic, rather than internationally-orientated. They stressed the need for internal peace, so that China could better stand up to imperial bullies. After the outbreak of Second-Sino Japanese War (1931-1945), Chinese Christian women rejected what they saw as a western-centred, unthinking discourse of ‘peace’ and sought to educate their American and European counterparts as to what a ‘just peace’ would look like for China. Finally, the paper uncovers how some of these Christian women who represented the PRC after 1949 began to deploy a maternalistic discourse on peace in their international diplomacy.

Far from being ‘brainwashed’ puppets of foreigners, Chinese Christian women were able to selectively adapt from what they learned in mission schools, foreign universities and women’s organizations, forging their own patriotic vision of a patriotic Chinese women’s internationalism. They argued that world peace could only be achieved with Chinese women’s participation and leadership at the highest levels of international affairs. Christian educated Chinese women thus asserted their own vital role bringing about a new international world order where China would become the

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leading nation in founding a ‘just’ and ‘permanent’ world peace. They drew selectively on the rhetorical devices of the international women’s movement, deploying the language of ‘motherhood’ if and when it suited their aims. Whereas in Europe maternalist arguments about peace reached their zenith after the First World War, in China, Christian women’s use of a maternalistic pacifism peaked after the Second World War. Although maternalism was a key rhetorical tool in Christian nation-building discourses during the interwar period and in raising support for the Chinese war effort (Hubbard 2018; Calver 2022), Chinese Christian women deployed these maternalistic arguments in their international thinking about peace during the Korean War, when they were seeking to convince their international counterparts of the PRC’s friendly intentions by drawing on a shared vocabulary in international women’s movement. Chinese women’s international thought on peace helps us to complicate our traditional euro-centric chronologies of the international women’s movement.

Chinese women’s formulation of peace also offers important insights into how women’s international thought is fostered and developed. Firstly, our attention is drawn to the forums for exchange. As other articles in this special issue demonstrate, forums of international education such as summer schools, were important all-female spaces where women’s international thought could be exchanged and honed. This article builds on these insights by highlighting the importance of protestant international education venues as a pedagogical avenue to international thinking for Chinese women. Chinese women developed their international thought, in dialogue with ideas about Christianity, pacifism and feminism, though their studies at missionary schools, at foreign

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universities and in international women's organisations such as the YWCA. Secondly, the article seeks to highlight the important role of Christianity (including Christian institutions and networks) as practical, intellectual and discursive tools in shaping these women's international thought. It was often through their missionary school education that Chinese women were able to study abroad and enter international women's networks upon graduation. Indeed, it was these women, with their English-language education, long experience in international women's organisations and dedication to social service, who were so useful to the CCP in its diplomatic dealings after 1949. The fact that these women could be simultaneously Chinese feminists, Christians, and Communists helps to disrupt longstanding, rather ridged binaries in the historiography of the international women's movement and Chinese women's history.

### **Uncovering Chinese Women's Thoughts on Peace**

This paper draws on the memoirs and writings of Chinese Christian women thinkers active in international women's and Christian networks. It focuses on Zeng Bosun 曾寶蓀 (1893–1978) and Deng Yuzhi 鄧裕志 (1900–1996). Zeng was the great granddaughter of Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1853–1872), who is famed for his role in suppressing the Taiping rebellion. She attended protestant missionary schools in Shanghai and Hangzhou before becoming the first Chinese woman to earn a University of London BA degree. After graduation she founded the first Chinese-run Christian college for girls in Changsha, Hunan, and later became a representative of the Republic of China at the UN commission on the Status of Women (Bond 2019). Like Zeng, Deng Yuzhi was a devout Christian and was educated at missionary schools in China. She

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attended the Fuxiang Girls School in Changsha and Ginling Women's College. However, unlike Zeng, who was staunchly anti-communist, Deng's belief in the social gospel led her to support the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). She helped the CCP contact women factory workers through her role as YWCA industrial secretary and later headed the YWCA of China after 1949 (Honig 1996). In order to understand Deng and Zeng's thought on peace I draw on their contemporary writings, and in the case of Zeng, a memoir published in Taiwan in 1980.

In addition to these well-known Chinese Christian thinkers, this article also uncovers the international thought of female students writing in Christian missionary school yearbooks. While we must be aware of the adult audiences for the magazine (missionaries, Chinese teachers and parents) who certainly had an input into girls' writings, drawing on the work of Catherine Sloane and Aaron Moore, I argue that we should see these magazines as a product of a two-way dialectic between parental and teacher authority and student agency (Moore 2016; Sloane 2017). The magazines offer us a unique insight into Chinese schoolgirls' international thoughts on peace, voices which have rarely been considered important in the history of IR and international thought. Scholars have cautioned against characterizing international thought as 'utopian' in this period, because it has 'masked' and 'marginalized' the significance of internationalism as a real force in the twentieth century (Sluga and Calvin 2017). However, in the case of schoolgirls in the 1920s in China, who were consciously experimenting with new visions of the roles they could play in an international future society, I argue that we should see utopianism or 'daydreaming' as an essential



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characteristic of their International thought. Different from their adult counterparts, girls are more idealistic, direct and uncompromising in their style and presentation of their ideas in their school magazines. However, while their views are characterized by a directness and utopianism, we should not dismiss these girls as serious international thinkers due to their age and sex.

The importance of the thought of male students who came during the May Fourth period of radical intellectual change, including Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) and Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898-1976) has been widely recognized by scholars. The self-positioning of male students as public intellectuals in this period has been extensively documented (Chow 1960; Schwarcz 1986; Wasserstorm 1991; Forster 2018). Less attention has been paid to the role of female student's thought, particularly those women who did not become members of the CCP (Wang 1999). Female students were acutely aware of China's international position in this period and engaged with political debates going on around them. Indeed, they consciously viewed their student magazines as a forum where they could hone their literary skills to prepare themselves for entry into national and international politics upon graduation. Some missionary schoolgirls contributed to debates in public journals and other went on to have successful careers in journalism. Several of them, including Zeng and Deng, went onto play important diplomatic roles for the ROC and PRC.

### **‘Mothers to the World’: Missionary Hopes and Peace Education in Interwar China**

Foreign missionaries and YM/WCA workers in China attempted to inculcate a vision

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of protestant Christian internationalism amongst their Chinese students and co-workers. By fostering ‘world-mindedness’ in students they aimed to combat rising anti-foreign and anti-Christian nationalism in China in the 1920-30s. According to Michael Thompson ‘Christian internationalism’ of the 1920s, as propounded by YMCA international secretary and leading recruiter of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), Sherwood Eddy, distinguished itself from the ‘Imperial internationalism’ of earlier decades by embracing the social gospel and rejecting the notion of a white Christian nation at its centre (Thompson 2015, 67). Other scholars, including Karen Phoenix and Ian Tyrrell, have questioned how ‘liberal’ this ecumenical vision of Christian internationalism really was, pointing out the religious, racial and class hierarchies of power that continued to plague organizations expounding this vision, including the YWCA and YMCA well into the interwar years (Phoenix 2010; Tyrrell 2010).

In the Chinese context, the fault lines in this discourse were open for all to see, particularly during the anti-imperial protest movements which rocked China in the 1920s. In 1925, in the aftermath of the shooting of unarmed Chinese protestors by British police in Shanghai, Chinese Christians were quick to call out the ‘hypocritical’ nature of missionaries who continued to espouse ‘peace’, while their countries used force to kill Chinese citizens in the defence of their colonial possessions carved out by gun-boat diplomacy (Zhang 1925). While some individual missionaries recognized such hypocrisy, missionary publications and YWCA literature of the era continued to subscribe to a liberal protestant vision of ‘world peace’ brought about through educating an ‘international mindset’ in Chinese students.

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For missionary women and YWCA workers in China, the semantics of ‘peace’ also had a profoundly gendered element that presented them with unique opportunities to position themselves at the heart of international debates about suffrage and women’s roles in international society. International women’s organizations argued that there could be no lasting world peace without women’s suffrage and representation at the highest levels of world affairs (Burton 1994; Sinha 1999; Siegel 2020). The discourse on women’s roles in securing world peace coalesced around women’s shared experience of ‘motherhood’ and loss of sons during the First World War (Rupp 1994, 551; Hellawell 2018). These materialist-feminist arguments about peace remained central to international women’s organizations of all political stripes in the interwar period. Indeed, as Mona Sigel and Jasmine Calver have shown it was through these essentialist ideas about women’s innate mothering capacities and affinity for peace that western feminists, both left-wing and liberal, all tried to engage with their Chinese counterparts during the interwar and Second-Sino Japanese War (Sigel 2015; Calver 2022).

For Christian women working for missionary and other Christian organizations, such as the Christian Women’s Temperance Union (CWTU) and YWCA, this maternalist-feminist discourse of peace also had profound religious connotations (Tyrrell 1991, 170-178). During the 1920–30s, YWCA of China publications expounded the Association’s overarching vision of gendered Christian internationalism: the belief that a fellowship of the world’s Christian women could work together to bring about international understanding and world peace. Journal articles in Christian women’s magazines educated Chinese women about the position of their ‘sisters’

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abroad. Girls were encouraged to literally put themselves in the shoes of women of other countries in YWCA ‘pageants of world sisterhood’ where they dressed in the clothes of women of other nations (Bond 2018).

So strongly was this vision of gendered Christian internationalism adhered to by foreign women working in missionary schools and other Christian organizations in China, that even as Japan was raining down bombs on Chongqing on Christmas Eve in 1939, girls at Ginling College, who had followed their government into exile to the wartime capital, performed a play written for them by their British Missionary teacher, Eva Dykes Spicer, entitled ‘Mothers to the World’. In the play, four student actresses representing China, Finland, Japan and Germany come across an abandoned ‘baby Jesus’ on stage and debate which woman should take care of him. After despairing of the current international situation, in which war and unbridled nationalism had left no safe place for an infant – the baby Jesus – to grow up, the four women decide to form an ‘international motherhood’ to work for world peace in order to ensure the safety of the next generation (Spicer Papers 1939, 2). It is clear that this vision of world peace brought about by an international coalition of the world’s Christian women was strongly advocated by foreign missionary women and YWCA workers in China throughout this period. This prompts us to question: how did Chinese Christian women take on board, re-work or reject these ideas about peace which were being propounded in missionary schools and international Christian women’s associations?

### **Visions of Peace: Pacifism and May Fourth Utopias**

Although the influence of pacifism as a philosophy in China during the First World War

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was limited, several Chinese students studying abroad in Europe during the war, came to sympathize with the pacifist cause, including Zeng Baosun (see figure 1). In her memoir, Zeng recalls how during the war she was influenced by pacifism, became friendly with influential Quaker leaders, and often went to the Friends' Meeting Houses in London. Eventually, Zeng and her Cousin Zeng Yuenong 曾約農 (1993–1986), who was also studying in the UK, resolved to dedicate their lives to work 'for China and the world community' (Zeng 1970, 71-72; Kennedy 2002, 56).

Zeng at once embraced a deeply Chinese national and international perspective in her views on world peace. She aligned with a group of international women, particularly those from former colonies, who, in Leila Rupp's typology, strongly believed in the complementarity of Nationalism and Internationalism (Rupp 1997, 122). As Glenda Sluga has shown, the national and international were mutually constitutive in the international thinking that emerged in the early twentieth century (Sluga 2013). In a 1916 article entitled 'unity' published in a monthly magazine of the Chinese Student Christian Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Zeng hammers home this mutually reinforcing patriotic and internationalist message to her Chinese fellow students in the UK. Zeng argues that 'unity' is needed for the foundation of a permanent peace in China which was suffering from internal division. She uses nationalism and Christianity to appeal to her fellow students to work together to create such a peace, and suggests that, if they are successful, China can even serve as an exemplar, leading other nations into a new peaceful world order: 'If China possess this highest unity, she will be able to resist all wars, and more than that, will be the founder of the ideal and permanent peace'

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(Tseng 1916, 6). Zeng thus puts forward a deeply patriotic vision of Christian internationalism, using its peace-making potential as a way for China to forge a new international world order.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Zeng's was also a deeply gendered vision of a patriotic Chinese Christian internationalism. In another contribution to the same journal, entitled 'What Christmas Means to Women', Zeng uses the gospel to present Christianity as empowering women, advocating for their leadership roles within the church and duty to take action in society: 'Christ is indeed the emancipator of women! We women, who are given all the privileges and responsibilities, must pray for His grace and power, so we may not fail to carry out His purpose for us' (Tseng 1915, 11). Zeng, who was rather marginal to the homosocial world of male Chinese students in the UK in this period, was highlighting to her male compatriots the important role of Christian-educated Chinese women in bringing about a new world order led by a strong and prosperous China.

Zeng also drew on her knowledge of the Confucian classics to make direct comparisons between the Christian gospel of peace she encountered at the Quaker Meeting House and Chinese philosophy:

During the worst days of the European war, I frequently made the point that the civilized countries of the world must cooperate to avoid wholesale slaughter and destruction of entire societies. The more science advances, the more sophisticated and fearful the instruments of death. If mankind cannot cling to the loving heart of Jesus and honor Confucius words that "Within the four seas all men are brothers" it will destroy itself and human civilization.' (Zeng 1970, 81; Kennedy 2002, 61).

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Although Zeng does not reference the thought of Kang Youwei (1858–1927), it is likely that her father, Zeng Guangjun (1866–1929), who was a friend of Kang’s disciple, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) would have introduced her to Kang’s ideas (Kennedy 2002, 21). Kang believed that western nations drew their strength partly from the spiritual vitality of Christianity and in his book of Great Harmony (*Datong shu*), Kang later put forward a utopian vision of world harmony based on a re-envisioned Confucian philosophy (Thompson 1958).

As Erez Manela and other scholars have documented, the post-war period saw a very brief moment in which intellectuals in China were swept up in some of this thinking which Zeng expounded. Woodrow Wilson’s call for self-determination of all peoples was received enthusiastically across Asia, including by Kang Youwei, who saw the American president as a messiah for a peaceful post-colonial world order (Manela 2006). A few years later, the hopes for China’s future self-determination built on ideals of peace and equality would be crushed when Japan was awarded former German territories in Shandong province in the Treaty of Versailles. While China’s hopes for restoring its territorial sovereignty were dashed by the Treaty, and Chinese intellectuals started to turn towards Leninism as their best hope for recovering the concessions granted to foreign powers, the possibilities for achieving world peace persisted in some students writing during May Fourth era.

‘May Fourth’ refers to the national political protest movement which started in Beijing on May Fourth 1919 when Chinese students and intellectuals violently protested against the Terms of the Versailles Treaty. This political protest was set within

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a broader period of social, cultural and intellectual change which saw the birth of the Chinese Communist party in Shanghai in 1921. Chinese women used this period to push for their political rights for suffrage and equality with men (Edwards 2008). Like their western counterparts, they claimed that true world ‘peace’ could only be achieved with Chinese women’s representation and participation in world politics. In 1921, Lu Xueshi 陸韡識, a student at the Methodist missionary Laura Haygood Normal School in Suzhou, explained the reason why China had not yet taken its proper place in international society and could not yet be involved in upholding world peace is because it lacked girls’ education. She argued that by organizing their own societies within the school, here classmates were helping to produce women capable of participating in politics (Lu 1921, 1).

For Chinese Christian-educated students, who were amongst a tiny group of elite women who could receive an education at this time, this was an extremely heady and productive period in which they put forward myriad visions or ‘dreams’ of what they could achieve in China’s future society, often combining Christianity with feminism and Communism in their writings. A good example of this kind of gendered Christian internationalist utopian writing is provided in a short story by Tih Tuh Ping (葉德彬 Ye Debin), a student at McTyeire, an American Methodist girls school in Shanghai. In her story, Tih falls asleep, and in her dream she is led by an old man into the ‘kingdom of peace and equality.’ In the kingdom she is surprised to find a world of equality and interracial harmony, where peoples of all races intermarry, have mixed race children and live in equally small houses (Tih 1922, 73-74).



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In another utopian article written by a pupil at the same school in this period, the role of Christianity in creating an international society is even more clearly expressed. In her short story written in 1919, McTyeire student Tsiang Ku Ying (蔣如英 Jiang Ruying), recounts the tale of a ‘Young scholar and brave knight’, Earnest, who is filled with a burning desire to do patriotic deeds but does not know which country he belongs to as he is an orphan living on a deserted island. In the story, Earnest is forced to choose between joining a patriotic crowd of youths on a steamship who can reveal to him his nationality and saving an old man from drowning. Earnest finally decides to ‘sacrifice’ his own ‘selfish’ desire to be patriotic in order to save the old man’s life. He is rewarded by the old man, who explains to him how Christianity can transcend patriotism to any one nation by gaining entry to a heavenly kingdom:

The old man slowly took out a small bible, still wet and said: “Now my friend! Your kind deed in saving me is no obstruction. It cannot be isolated from patriotism. For when God created man He made him the incarnation of kindness, bravery, and love. Child, you need not seek your kingdom, and try and do patriotic deeds beyond your home. If you know yourself well, you should know God, and the source of all kingdoms and patriotism’... “Ah,” said the youth, “I failed to find my earthly kingdom; I have secured the better one, God’s Kingdom, the home of my soul (Tsiang 1919, 23-34).

In an era of fervent patriotism amongst students, the majority of whom believed firmly that China needed to strengthen itself politically, economically and militarily to resist foreign aggression, these more cautionary notes sounded by Christian-educated students stand out. Given the discussion of missionaries’ rather hopeful vision of education for peace-mindedness above, should we just dismiss these writings as a few

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girls who were influenced by and adopted this Christian rhetoric perhaps in the hope of currying favour with their teachers?

Actually, if we probe deeper into girls' writings about peace, racial harmony and internationalism in this period, we find a deeply patriotic and feminist message about the need for Chinese women's leadership if this vision of a Christian gendered internationalism is going to come to fruition. Writing in the same utopian vein in 1919, McTyeire student Mo Sih Tsung (馬雪珍 Ma Xuezhen), explains that Chinese women were the crucial agents who could, by combining the 'uplifting' elements of western music with the cultural traditions of China, produce a new form of Chinese Christian music which would result in more loving and harmonious families, expand to create national harmony, and ultimately world peace: 'We know that music is love in search of a word... Since home love can expand to include country love, it can also be perfected by being extended to all our brothers and sisters all over the world' (Mo 1919, 29). Chinese Christian women are thus positioned as agents who can transform Chinese society through their adaptation of western learning, and in doing so they will help to bring about world peace. At the centre of Mo's thinking, we find a long-standing argument made by scholars since the mid-Qing period about the importance of women's education for the correct ordering of the home, which would be the foundation for a well-ordered nation.

There was thus a deeply gendered element to how missionary schoolgirls positioned their role in bringing about world peace. As Helen Schneider has shown, Chinese women were able to argue that through an extension of their traditional homemaking

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roles into new realms, they would be able to transform the nation in the early twentieth century (Schneider 2011). So confident were girls that Christianity provides the key to Chinese women's future success, that they write about the contributions they envision Chinese women making, not only in China, but also to the international women's movement on the world stage (Saung, 1921, 4). This ambition and confidence that Chinese women were drawing from their Christian education is even more remarkable when we consider China's humiliated international position in the 1920s. Girls were keen to stress, however, that it is only via a Chinese-controlled church that Christianity can fulfil its true potential in transforming Chinese society and the position of Chinese women within it (T'sao 1921, 23).

#### **'War vs Peace' or 'Nationalism vs. Internationalism': Debates amongst students**

After 1925, May Fourth visions of a gendered Christian internationalism led by Chinese women, which would help to bring about world peace, gave way to more pragmatic and nationalistic ideas about strengthening China in the face of violent political realities. Anti-imperial protests flared across China after the shooting of Chinese protestors by British Police in Shanghai on 30 May 1925, and again in 1926-27 when the GMD attempted to reunify China under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek. In both these periods, Christian institutions, such as missionary schools and churches, came under attack as very visible symbols of foreign intrusion. As Louise Edwards has found in her study of International Women's Day in China, the internationalist message was increasingly 'co-opted' and 'subsumed' into efforts for national strengthening and resisting imperialism in China which stressed militarization (Edwards 2016). Similarly,

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Missionary schoolgirls' views on peace changed with these changing political realities and threats from imperial powers that China faced.

As Alison Kauffman has shown, Chinese male diplomats at the league of Nations rather paradoxically drew on the discourse of 'peace' to promote China's diplomatic affairs in the 1920s, arguing that China as the pre-eminent power in Asia should have a permanent seat on the League Council. Figures such as Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun) and Chao-hsin Chu (Zhu Zhaoshen), argued that cultural and demographic factors should be used for assigning great power status and that using military power alone was a 'narrow-minded point of view' which would encourage 'military preparation.' They also asserted that Confucian traditions of 'benevolence' and 'virtue' made China uniquely placed to lead the world into a future era of peace. As Kaufman points out: 'China's delegates to the League sought equality for all nations to work out their own destiny without interference from outside and without regard to their material circumstance ... But the case they made for China's membership on the League Council was indisputably based on a view that some countries, are, in certain ways, inherently superior to others.' (Kaufman 2014, 625, 630-31).

Within the pedagogical space of their school magazine, missionary schoolgirls also discussed China's international political situation and diplomatic affairs in the 1920s. As early as 1919, some missionary schoolgirls had voiced caution during the peace celebrations after the First World War. For example, McTyeire Student Zhu Yixuan 朱懿宣 used a sarcastic tone to comment on the peace celebrations in Shanghai in November 1918. She questioned why everyone was celebrating peace when it was still

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unclear how the great powers would treat China at the peace conference. She reminded her classmates that China was still beset by internal fighting and, rather than getting carried away with the end of the war in Europe, they should concentrate on the domestic problems that China still faced. She explained that China needs internal peace before it can think about international peace (Zhu 1919, 18).

In a similarly contradictory manner to the arguments about ‘peace’ made by Chinese diplomats at the League of Nations, Chinese female missionary school students drew on the discourse of ‘peace’ to combat China’s ‘enemies’, both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ in the 1920s. Writing in the 1921 edition of her school magazine, pupil Yu Soo Tsing (俞素青 Yu Suqing) argues that ‘the Lansing-Ishii Agreement, Article 21 of the League Covenant and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance ‘must be removed or else not only China will fall a victim to the aggressive policy of a certain nation, but also the peace of the Orient will be endangered’ (Yu 1921, 18). As Elisabeth Forster has shown, the pursuit of ‘peace’ for ‘just causes’ could be ‘brutal and even bellicose’ in China, and was routed in international political thinking from the end of the First World War (Forster 2020, 259, 262). While ‘peace’ is the purported object of Yu’s article, she uses rather aggressive and militaristic language to describe China’s domestic and international situation. She talks of international treaties and powers as China’s ‘enemies’ and ‘foes’, and does not hesitate to take aim at America, the nation to which many of her missionary teachers belonged for endorsing Japan’s ‘Special Interest’ in China in the Lansing-Ishii Agreement. In describing the menace that a strong and prosperous China could pose to Japan, the chief target of the anger that suffuses the

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article, she does not hold back: ‘Such a China would be a menace to the very existence of Japan. But on the other hand, if Japan obtain the recognition that she has special interest in China, she could at least delay the awakening of this vigorous oriental giant who might throttle her life with a single grip’ (Yu 1921, 19).

Tsing’s interesting use of a world ‘peace’ discourse alongside a rather militaristic language aimed at Japan is also evident in other students’ writings in this period. In 1921, Chu I Shiu (朱懿宣 Zhu Yixuan), describes her vision of China in 2021, where China is one of the world’s leading nations and has even become an imperial power, ‘having got control over Japan’ two decades earlier (Chu 1921, 101). Therefore, while some missionary schoolgirls might have picked up on the utopian language of the post-war moment, they were not all composing rosy poems about world peace and racial harmony in this period; they also kept China’s national interests and current weakness firmly in sight.

The Northern Expedition of 1926–27 nominally reunified the country under the rule of the Nationalist party, but it did not usher in internal peace. Nationalist China continued to be beset with internal fighting: between warlords who challenged Chiang Kai-shek’s authority and between the Nationalists and Communists, who, after helping the GMD come to power in 1927, were mercilessly purged from the United Front and forced to flee from the cities. Wu Zhiying 吳志英, a student at the Southern Baptist Huiling girls’ school in Suzhou, critiques Chiang Kai-shek’s violent strategy in an article in her school magazine in 1930. Although she is not sympathetic to the Communists, she uses the words of Sun Yat-sen to suggest that China needed a peaceful

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approach within the country to bring about national unity. However, she does not extend this advocacy of peace to China's foreign relations. Instead, she believes that a peaceful approach internally will bring about a stronger nation, better able stand up to encroaching imperialist powers (Wu 1930, 1). In the period from 1925 to 1931 we can see how a discourse of 'peace' was applied by Christian students to Chinese national politics, rather than to China's international affairs. 'Peace' still had a positive meaning to these students but one that was only applicable to Chinese domestic affairs.

After the Manchurian Incident of 18<sup>th</sup> September 1931, when the Japanese army planted explosives on its own section of the South Manchurian railway as a pretext for launching a full-scale military invasion of Manchuria, this positive discourse on 'peace' largely disappeared from students' writings. Female Christian students clearly underwent an intellectual struggle to reconcile the Christian doctrine on peace and internationalist mindset which they are receiving through their missionary school education with the need for China to militarily resist Japan. In an article for the *Chinese Recorder* in 1936, Zeng Baosun, by this time the Principal of Christian Yifang Girls' College in Changsha, sums up the ideological difficulties that Chinese Christian students were facing:

Most people are inclined for peace, particularly the Chinese, but the events of the last few years have induced in China youths of a pugnacious mood ... At the bottom of their hearts, they want peace, yet war seems the only way out for the nation. Between inclination and duty, reason and passion, love and vengeance, the youth is much puzzled as to which to choose. The Christian students are put to even more searching questions, such as ought a Christian to fight, does loving your enemy mean loving your national enemy, does Christian meekness mean

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absolute non-resistance even for self-defense, etc? (Tseng 1936, 200).

As well as summarizing the situation amongst Chinese Christian youth for a western missionary audience, Zeng was also clearly describing tensions in her own thinking as she struggled to reconcile her Quaker pacifism absorbed during her studies in London during the First World War, with the existential threats that China was facing.

The accuracy of Zeng's assessment of the situation amongst Christian youths of a younger generation is born out when we examine Christian pupils' writings in this period. Two students at a Presbyterian and Baptist girls' school in Ningbo, Riverside Academy, writing in the 1933 edition of their school magazine, address these issues of 'War' vs. 'Peace'. Pupil Li Xiuyun 劉秀雲 uses her article to debate the advantages and disadvantages of war. She used the example of the First World War to show the inhumanity of war, the destructive legacies of which only consolidated the hegemony of imperial powers and led to the present-day unrest. On the other hand, she used the example of the European Crusades which she believed resulted in fueling 'geographical discovery' and cultural renaissance in Western Europe. Having surveyed these historical examples, Li concluded that China, in its current position of being at the mercy of greedy politicians and bullying foreign powers, had no choice but to choose war as the only way out:

Chinese people are peace-loving by nature. In most of my countrymen's thinking, they believe that war as a terrible evil, and that peace is the well from which harmony and prosperity spring. Who knows this kind of thinking is like a poison... Because we are a people under colonization, because we have really suffered from foreigners bullying, so we need to find a way to save ourselves. The peaceful method is of no avail, the final solution is to resist through military



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preparation for war, only then will we be able to break out of this bloody path (Li 1933, 40).

Li ultimately rejected an absolute pacifist stance in this period of national crisis. ‘Peace’ in this context becomes a negative idea, a type of ‘poison’, according to Li as she criticized her countrymen’s ‘peaceful’ inclinations. Another Riverside pupil, Fang Yunxian 方雲仙, is unequivocal about the harm that following a ‘peaceful’ path will bring to China. After the Manchurian Incident, Fang sarcastically derides her countrymen’s peace-loving reputation, complaining that Japan was able to occupy Manchuria with little resistance from the Chinese army: ‘After this incident, our Chinese people’s peace-loving reputation, was etched deeply into Japanese people’s minds. All Japanese thought: Chinese people don’t like war; If we send our troops to every part of China, the Chinese will certainly continue to use peaceful methods to face us’ (Fang 1933, 41-42). Fang also takes aim at the international community for not punishing Japan for invading Manchuria: ‘the League of Nations, when they debated this affair between China and Japan, they did not give us a ‘peace’ prize, rather they defended the vicious Japanese’s movements in occupying Shenyang and invading Dongbei and Shanghai as a self-defense reaction, to protect its people living there’ (Fang 1933, 42). She believes that only through military preparation can her country be saved: “Peace’ is actually a kind of morphine! It will take away our lives. My countrymen! My people! Wake up from your dreams!’ (Fang 1933, 42-42).

Fang’s rather vehement tirade against ‘peace’ which is harming her country suggests that she could have been reacting against a political doctrine that she was being inculcated with at her school. Her school principal, Shen Yixiang, was a family friend

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of Chiang Kai-shek. In 1933 Chiang was still pursuing a policy of appeasement towards Japan and concentrating on first tackling the internal threat posed by the Communist Party. The tone of the articles leaves the reader in little doubt that Christian Chinese students were turning away from a liberal internationalist Christian discourse on peace in the face of existential threats to their country. The goal of foreign missionary and YCWA women to inculcate in their students the idea that Christian women could unite to form a ‘world motherhood’ that would bring about world peace, was obviously an increasingly futile and rather naïve endeavor in this period.

Even committed pacifist, Zeng Baosun eventually changed her mind on the question as to whether a Christian could take up arms in defence of their country in this period. In her 1936 article, she discusses ‘Ultra-Nationalism’ vs. ‘Internationalism’ amongst Chinese students, making her own views on the matter clear:

The youth with his face towards the future cannot but see the dark clouds gathering. Is he going to be ultra-nationalistic – in China just now there seems to be a great need of such youths to face an unprecedented crisis! – or is he going to be very idealistic and become international in his own outlook? Though all our students are very patriotic and nationalistic, this conflict is not entirely absent among them’ (Tseng 1936, 200).

By 1936, Chinese Christian women educators such as Zeng, had to admit that the Christian internationalism that missionaries in China were espousing was ‘idealistic’ at best. However, perhaps because of her early exposure to Quaker ideas, Zeng, unlike many of her contemporaries who never questioned that China should fight Japan, continued to be troubled by the question of whether a Christian should bear arms. The problem still vexed her over forty years later. Writing her memoir aged seventy-seven

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in Taiwan, she recalled: ‘Since China’s eight-year war of resistance against Japan, I have discovered that the will to resist the enemy and patriotism are important considerations for the Christian. How can one have an impartial love for all and at the same time maintain the will to oppose a national enemy? To this day, this remains a perplexing problem for me’ (Zeng 1970, 78; Kennedy 2002, 60).

### **A Just Peace? The Second Sino-Japanese War and Korean War**

After the Marco Polo Bridge incident on 7 July 1937, which triggered all-out war between China and Japan, Chinese Christian women, including Zeng Baosun, laid aside former reservations and vigorously supported China’s war effort against Japan. Christian international women’s organizations in which both Chinese and Japanese women participated, such as the WCTU became sites of ideological struggle as both nations defended their countries actions, with tensions coming to a head when American women backed the Chinese cause. Manako Ogawa argues that the ‘international sisterhood’ based on shared membership of a Christian women’s organization between the Japanese and Chinese Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was completely destroyed in the interwar years due to the rising nationalist sentiment on both sides (Ogawa 2007). In China, the head of the WCTU, Liu-Wang Liming 劉王立明 (1897–1970), was one of twenty-three leading Christians in Shanghai to sign a nationwide public proclamation rejecting Japanese demands on China. The document stated: ‘We love peace, but we love justice more. We are against any action that will lead to unnecessary sacrifice, but are not afraid to shed our blood for the sake of truth and justice’ (Barwick 2011; 152). Their support of the war effort

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did not mean that Chinese Christian women abandoned the discourse of peace in this period. During the war of resistance against Japan, Chinese Christian women began to employ the discourse of a ‘just peace’ in their dealings with their international counterparts.

Chinese Christian-educated women, who with their English language skills and Christian credentials could easily move in American society and enter international women’s organizations, became an important resource for the Chinese government in raising support for the Chinese war effort abroad. The most famous example is Wellesley-educated Song Meiling (1898–2003), wife of Chiang Kai-shek, who in 1943 gave a speech to raise support for China’s War of Resistance at the US House of Representatives. Less attention has been paid to Chinese Christian women who operated in non-official diplomatic capacities, but nevertheless also worked to influence foreign observers to support China against Japan.

In 1939, Chinese YWCA secretary and CCP supporter Deng Yuzhi made her own excursion to raise support for the Chinese war effort in Europe and America amongst Christian women. She attended several international women’s conferences, including the International Peace Conference of Women Leaders in Washington DC and the meeting of the World’s YWCA in Geneva (Wen 1939, 25). Deng was determined to put forward her own point of view on what was a ‘just peace’ for China. She planned to awaken her international counterparts to the fact that only by fighting the Japanese could China achieve this ‘peace’. According to an interview she gave to the Communist-leaning women’s magazine, *Shanghai Funü*, shortly before her departure,

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Deng wanted to:

hear if their ideas about peace, are these based on justice? Do they understand that the war of resistance against Japan is actually for peace and is not for starting a war? ... In this period of our history, when faced with the cruel faces of our invaders, international friends cannot once again espouse the doctrine of 'use peace to make peace' this kind of high-sounding but poorly thought through words'(Wen 1939, 25).

The anonymous author of the article believed that Deng was well-placed to be an 'ambassador' and 'diplomat' for 'new Chinese womanhood'. Rather than focusing on 'unnecessary' details such her stature and clothing, the writer stressed: 'I just want to inform the reader that her spirit, her health and her resolve are really capable of representing new Chinese Womanhood, and moreover she really is going to be an official diplomat for China. She really can bring us honour and will not disgrace us.'(Wen 1939, 25). Conspicuously absent from this article is any mention of Deng's Christianity. Indeed, her Christian credentials for this role are not made obvious to the reader, despite this being her obvious qualification to attend the conference and enter these international Christian women's circles where she could represent Chinese Christian women and raise support for the Chinese war effort.

Deng continued to deploy her diplomatic skills for the benefit of the CCP after 1949 by representing Chinese Christian women at international women's conferences. In 1953 Deng travelled to Copenhagen as one of thirty delegates to represent Chinese women at the meeting of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) (Spakowski 2022, 150). Deng describes her experiences at the meeting, in an article published in the Christian magazine *Tianfeng* (Deng 1953). She explains that each

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country has sent a representative who has ‘rich experience in the international women’s movement.’ In contrast to her 1939 trip, where she downplays her Christianity, in 1953 according to Deng, her Christian faith was also an important reason why China sent her: ‘China has sent me to represent Chinese women because of my beliefs in peace and Christianity. Words cannot express my honour, but I want to thank God for this’ (Deng 1953, 95). Christianity also suffuses the article and Deng describes how she met other Christian (Protestant and Catholic) representatives from Japan, Indonesia and Poland: ‘We were very close, mutually sharing our experience, and firmly agreed to work together for peace. This is really the work that Jesus wants us to do’ (Deng 1953, 102).

China needed international allies in this period, and Christian woman, such as Deng, with her English skills, Christian faith and experience in the international women’s movement, was, again, perfectly placed to represent the gains of New Chinese womanhood to the world, and advocate the New Chinese government’s peace-loving nature and intentions. According to Nicola Spakowski, during this meeting educated Chinese women within the delegation who had experience of pre-1949 diplomatic decorum, knowing how to wear make-up, high-heeled shoes and Qipao, took the spotlight, whereas labour model Shen Jilan 申紀蘭 (1929-2020), who attended was relegated to a mute example of the gains of Chinese working women under socialism (Spakowski 2022). Deng fell into the former category of educated and diplomatically experienced women. She was also a useful propaganda tool for the CCP to reassure the international Christian community that Christians in China were well-treated after many of the missionaries had left.

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Another surprising aspect of Deng's diplomacy in this period is her use of a materialist discourse on peace. By 1953 China, along with other socialist countries, was using the rhetoric of a 'just peace' in its Cold War diplomacy (Forster, 2019). China's 'peace-loving' international reputation was now something to be expounded, rather than despaired of. Deng also drew on this official peace rhetoric, adding the gendered language of maternalism which was the currency in the WIDF of the period, and which Deng would have been familiar with through her previous interwar and wartime interactions in international women's organizations (Graskova, 2021). Throughout her 1953 article she deploys a maternalist rhetoric about peace, arguing that war destroys children's lives, and that the world's mothers, united in their shared experience of losing children through war, must come together to create a peaceful world for the next generation:

Children are the treasure of society, and we must not forget that we are struggling for the happiness and future of the next generation. But cruel war robs children of the happiness and rights ... What mother does not love her children! Because of suffering of children, women must continue to stop the evil of war...This teaches women: for children, for yourself, we must come together to oppose war and protect peace (Deng 1953, 99).

Although we must be aware that she was writing for a Chinese Christian audience in 1953, rather than being interviewed for a left-wing feminist magazine as in 1939, Deng's use of a heavily materialist Christian discourse on peace is at first-glance rather surprising. She often drew upon 'sisterhood', but not 'motherhood' in her pre-1949 diplomacy in international Christian women's networks. She was on the left-wing of the YWCA throughout the republican period, and before 1949 she was much more

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interested in helping improve conditions for Chinese working women, through the industrial branch of the YWCA's work, rather than the more traditional work of the YWCA which focused on students and housewives. Deng's had proven her left-wing credentials in the interwar period and after 1949 became the National General Secretary of the YWCA of China. However, by 1953, the YWCA was under the control of the umbrella organization of the All-China Women's Federation, and was no longer able to carry out their pre-1949 political work amongst working women. Its remit was limited to more traditionally defined 'women's work', including education of housewives. According to Emily Honig, who interviewed Deng in 1985, Christianity became a much more important feature in Deng's identity after 1949 as a way of 'protesting and maintaining her own agenda' from the Party (Honig 196, 245). This may also explain why Deng started to emphasise the maternal responsibilities of Christian women, tying this in neatly with the official CCP rhetoric on China's peaceful intentions and character, for an international audience who operated in this vocabulary, after 1949.

Other Chinese Christian women, who had played a diplomatic role for China during the republican period, were also working in this period to opposite ends for the Republic of China (ROC). Zeng Baosun fled with her family to Taiwan after 1949. In 1952 she was sent by the ROC to represent China at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in Geneva (Zeng 1970, 194). Zeng was horrified by the ways in which her Christian counterparts in the CCP were using 'peace' in this period and dismissed it as 'misleading', 'dangerous, dishonourable and frightening' 'propaganda' (Zeng 1970, 78; Kennedy 2002, 60). She was 'bitterly disappointed' when America formalized relations



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with the PRC and after the Watergate scandal she wrote a poem entitled ‘Nixon leaves office’ in which she expresses her approbation of Nixon’s actions and her views on the futile nature of peace (Kennedy 2002, 151-156).

Zeng and Deng, while representing opposite poles of the political spectrum, shared many commonalities: both were missionary-educated, devout Christians who had worked for the women’s movement in China and internationally before 1949. After 1949 they continued to be useful to their respective governments precisely because of their Christian identities, English language skills and connections to international women’s networks. They both engaged in a rhetorical battle over the meaning of ‘peace’, to opposite ends, in their dealings with their international counterparts after 1949.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese Christian women were important international thinkers and actors in the interwar period. This article has made a step towards uncovering Chinese women’s international thought in the period 1914–1953, by focusing in on the changing ways in which Chinese Christian women understood ‘peace’ in this period. The evolution of Chinese Christian women’s international thought on peace can be roughly divided into four overlapping phases: (1) pacifism and utopianism (1914–1924); (2) advocating internal ‘peace’ to strengthen the nation to be able stand up to foreign powers (1919–1930); (3) disillusionment with and rejection of internationally-circulating peace discourses and formulation of a ‘just peace’ for China (1931–1949);(4) Communist-maternalist peace discourse (1949–1953).

Chinese women’s formulation of peace draws our attention to the importance of

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religious and educational institutions and networks as important spaces for fostering women's international thought. Similar to international thinkers on Black liberation and decolonization, such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Chinese Christian women's international thought at once 'mirrored' and 'subverted' a liberal protestant international vision of world order (Rietzler 2022, 529). During the May Fourth era, Chinese women drew on the rhetoric of a gendered Christian internationalism, learned from missionary schools and international Christian women's networks, fusing it with their own patriotic concerns, to forge a vision of a future world order where Chinese women would play a vital role in securing world peace. Without women's education and full participation in domestic and international politics, they argued, China could not assume its rightful place as the leader of a future peaceful international world order.

The rise of the Nationalist party and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war in the late 1920s and 1930s caused students to increasingly critique and reject this liberal protestant international discourse on peace, forging instead their own understanding of a 'just' peace for China which necessitated military preparation to protect Chinese sovereignty. It was this understanding of 'peace' as a way to protect China's territorial integrity and combat its opponents that Chinese Christian women working for the communist party continued to deploy, fusing it with a new maternalism in their dealings with their international counterparts after 1949.

We cannot ignore the important role of Christianity and international Christian institutions in shaping these women's international thought. Receiving a Christian education or identifying as a Christian remained a crucial practical, intellectual and

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discursive tool in the construction of their international thinking. Firstly, Christian education often provided Chinese women access to the forums of exchange. Conversion to Christianity at school could lead to overseas educational opportunities and entry into international women's networks. Secondly, Chinese women harnessed a Christian, gendered discourse on peace which they encountered in these international educational settings, fusing it with patriotism, to construct their international thought and push for Chinese women's entry into new spheres of operation at home, including international politics and diplomacy. Finally, their Christian credentials often proved an essential asset to Chinese women in their engagement with their international counterparts in their diplomatic activities for the PRC and ROC before and after 1949.

As China continues to use the rhetoric of 'peace' to describe its ambitions in the twenty-first century, historicizing Chinese women's international thought on peace is essential for understanding the reconfiguration of international relations today. Chinese women's nationalization of 'peace' discourse underlines the fact that use of a peace discourse in China to define its international ambitions today, cannot be untangled from its longer history of resisting imperialism and the various competing political projects for national strengthening that emerged in the early twentieth century. Its intellectual origins in China are therefore both inextricably linked to and defined against a western-centred understanding of a liberal world order, as Elizabeth Forster has demonstrated for the Cold War Era (Forster, 2021). Chinese women's changing use of 'peace' in the formulation of their own international thinking across dramatic political changes in China's twentieth century, further highlights how peace is a 'vague' (Forster 2021) and

capricious term which can serve changing national and international agendas. Today, ‘peace’ continues to be a useful rhetorical device in the pursuit of national unity, subsuming many divergent ideas and constituents in an overarching patriotic agenda inside China, while projecting a benign image to the world. Within this international discourse of ‘peace’ today, recourse is again being made to a patriotic re-envisioned Confucian cultural tradition to argue for China’s inherently ‘peaceful’ national character, in order to position it as uniquely suited to lead the world into peaceful and prosperous future.

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