
**INCULCATING A GENDERED CHRISTIAN INTERNATIONALISM:
THE CHINESE STUDENT YWCA**

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Introduction

In 1925, as Chinese society geared up to resist foreign imperialism and domestic warlordism that was threatening to engulf the country, missionary school student Lydia Tsao recorded her impressions of a Japanese YWCA delegate who had come to the Chinese regional YWCA student summer conference in Hangzhou the previous year:

I will tell you something about our Japanese guest. She was not a tall lady, her figure had the grace of youth and an abundance of black hair shaded her face. Her eyes had charming brilliancy. She gave our summer conference a beautiful celluloid lantern and a beautiful Japanese doll, dressed in red, which were tokens of goodwill. Besides these, she delivered us many letters, which came from Japanese Y.W.C.A members. She made us two speeches. The subject of one of them was “The earthquake on September First.” This she told us in absorbed melancholy, because she herself had experienced it. The other was “The duties of the Young Women of the Y.W.C.A of Japan.” This she reported eagerly, her eyes sparkling with vivacity. Her account cheered us with its forcefulness and interest. She was affectionate and this made me think that although there are many international disagreements between our China and Japan, yet nothing can bar the endearing friendship of God’s children, the Christians. So I think if all people of all the countries believe in Jesus Christ, and are not merely so-called Christians, surely heaven will come down on earth.¹

This Japanese delegate to the YWCA student summer conference at Hangzhou, Yuki Kimura, is pictured in the October 1924 edition of the official Chinese YWCA

magazine *The Green Year*.² Through participating in YWCA activities, Lydia learned about the position of women in other countries, was given a forum for cross-cultural exchange and a chance to make international friendships. Despite increasingly hostile international relations between Japan and China, she could sympathize and find common ground with her Japanese counterparts through their shared identities and duties as Christian women and YWCA members. The following year the YWCA of China returned the favour and sent Ginling College student, Lilly Zia 謝文蓮, as an ‘Ambassador’ to the Japanese YWCA conference at Gotemba, Japan.³ This vignette encapsulates the aims of the YWCA as it functioned in Republican China: to inculcate in students new identities that transcended their school, local area and nation, to embrace a vision of a gendered global Christian citizenship. YWCA student activities gave girls access to new networks for women that functioned on a local, national and international scale and honed their skills in organization, leadership and diplomacy.

During the 1910-20s male and female Chinese intellectuals put forward myriad new visions Chinese women’s future roles in the effort rejuvenate Chinese society and create a ‘New Culture’. In particular, Chinese women’s roles in peace-making and diplomacy were stressed during the May Fourth Era. On 4 May 1919 female students protested alongside their male classmates in Beijing at the handing of former German territories in Shandong province to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles. It was an historic moment for women’s public political activism and the birth of Chinese communism. In the May Fourth Era which followed, various images of New Chinese Womanhood were created in a tense and evolving dialogue between Chinese and international, globally-

circulating images and ideas about women's roles in society.⁴ This was also an era of mounting Chinese nationalism, characterized by anti-foreign and anti-Christian hostility. Further protests against foreign imperialism in China broke out across the country in the aftermath of the shooting of unarmed Chinese protesters by British police in Shanghai on 30 May 1925. In 1926–27 the movement to expel warlords and imperialists reached a crescendo in the Northern Expedition, a military campaign which attempted to reunify China under the rule of the Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-Shek. Widespread violence against Christian institutions, seen as emblems of foreign interference in China, occurred during the reunification. It was thus a tense and difficult period, but also a hopeful one, to be a Christian girl in China.

In her 1994 AHR article entitled 'Constructing Internationalism' Leila Rupp encouraged historians to look at how internationalism was constructed, using the case study of three international women's organizations.⁵ Today almost three decades later, as far-right nationalism makes a resurgence around the globe, it has become perhaps an even more urgent task for historians to consider how international identities are inculcated. In particular, as China becomes increasingly assertive on the international stage, it is essential that we understand and historicise how local, national and international identities have been constructed, contested and deployed by state and non-state actors in Chinese history. As Francisca de Haan highlights, the continued influence of cold-war paradigms in western historiography of transnational women's organisations has led to the scholarly neglect of left-wing women's associations which continued to function in communist countries after 1945.⁶ Although the work of de

Haan and others has recently started to address this imbalance, Chinese women's conceptions of internationalism, both pre- and post- the 1949 Communist Revolution, have received very little attention from historians of international women's organisations.⁷ This case study of the Chinese student YWCA challenges us to rethink chronological ruptures and long-lasting assumptions in the post-war historiography of the international women's movement, which as de Haan points out has been built on binaries that characterised communist countries 'by everything it supposedly lacked (Christian civilization, freedom, civil society, feminism ...)'.⁸ Several Chinese women who entered the Student YWCA continued to embrace international Christian feminist identities as they represented China on the international political stage and became leading members of PRC women's organizations after 1949. Rather than fitting into rigid binaries imposed by continued paradigms in cold-war historiography, these gendered Christian international identities could be extremely fluid and flexible, allowing Chinese women to adopt a range of overlapping identities, as patriotic Chinese, devout Christians, Communists and members of an international women's movement according to the changing political circumstances and audiences they were addressing.

Drawing on theoretical and methodological insights provided by Rupp, De Haan and others, as to how we can dissect the ways in which women's international organizations constructed internationalism, this article reveals how Chinese women selectively drew on the rhetoric they learned through entry into international women's organizations to construct international identities and become international actors in a

period of mounting Chinese nationalism. In particular, it looks at how the Chinese student YWCA inculcated gendered international Christian identities in women at a variety of levels of engagement: local, national and international, from the start of the New Culture Movement in 1915 to the outbreak of full-scale war with Japan in 1937. This multi-level and multi-faceted identity was expressed in various ways: women as ‘caregivers’ to disadvantaged members of their local society; ‘sisters’ to other women in China and around the world; and ‘mothers’ and ‘peacemakers’ to the world.

Scholars of international women’s organizations have grappled with how to study the entangled and often conflicting relationships between local, national and international identities that membership in such organizations fostered.⁹ Without eliding the very real tensions between these identities in interwar China, this study of the YWCA offers further insights into how these identities were fostered and intersected through paying attention to how the Student Association offered girls access to new networks for women which operated at different scales. After briefly introducing the historiography on Student YWCAs in China and their development in the interwar years, the article dissects how the student YWCAs functioned at a local and regional and then national and international levels. Because the YWCA, like many international women’s organizations of the time, was organised in different national chapters, I use the term ‘international’ to describe the YWCA as an organization. However, through attending international networks, conferences and training opportunities which the YWCA provided access to, many of its members became transnational actors in this period.¹⁰ Throughout the article I show how student members learned to embrace new

identities as part of a world's Christian women's community which transcended national borders.

This article highlights how Christianity, for Chinese student YWCA members in the 1920s, provided a key tool for constructing internationalism. The complementary Christian, patriotic and gendered rhetoric of 'duty', 'service' and 'sacrifice' enabled Chinese girls to salve tensions between their national and international identities within an era of mounting anti-foreign hostility in China. While international women's organizations in China, such as the YWCA, continued to be strained by imperial power dynamics, by participating in such organizations, Chinese women learned skills in international diplomacy, organization and leadership, which they would put to use to advance their own aims and objectives, sometimes in ways which went far beyond those anticipated by the organizations which trained them.

Chinese women, like their Euro-American counterparts, skilfully deployed the rhetoric of 'international sisterhood' and their supposed 'peacemaking' faculties, to justify women's forays into the international public sphere and expand their roles into international diplomacy. For Chinese women this was a particularly accelerated leap, as the exit of elite women from the seclusion of their homes followed very closely their entry to new international forums of activity. Scholars have sought to recast Republican China as a period of 'stunning accomplishments' for Chinese diplomacy, with Chinese representatives taking part in international organizations and becoming signatories to important international treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).¹¹ Very little attention has been paid to Chinese women's roles as international

actors in the late Qing and Republican periods. Meanwhile, although recent studies have sought to gender the history of diplomacy and international thought, the project of writing Chinese women into a gendered history of ‘Global IR’ has barely begun.¹²

The Student YWCA Associations which were founded in the closing years of the Qing and early Republic provide an important case study as a training ground for Chinese women’s diplomacy, which would blossom in the Republican and Maoist periods. Daniel Laqua has described student involvement in international student organizations in the interwar period as ‘apprenticeship in internationalism’ which often led to careers in international organizations upon graduation.¹³ This was also true for women’s involvement with the Student YWCA of China. Women who became prominent in the international arena in Mao’s China, such as Health Minister Li Dequan 李德全 (1896–1972), who worked to re-establish relations between the Chinese Red Cross and the International Red Cross (IRC), and Cora Deng (Deng Yuzhi 鄧裕志) 1900–1996), who interned with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva and then headed the Chinese YWCA after 1949, joined the YWCA as student members.¹⁴ The Student YWCA therefore provides us with a crucial insight into Chinese women’s early training for and entry into international women’s organizations, where they learned to become international players and constructed their own vision of a gendered Christian internationalism.

Historiography

The story of the Student YWCAs in China has been overlooked by historians. Most scholarship on the Chinese YWCA has focused on the Association’s work with

urban working women and the clandestine activities of its left-leaning industrial secretaries who helped the Communist Party contact female factory workers through their night-time literacy classes.¹⁵ Scholars have thus attempted to rescue the YWCA as a Chinese ‘people’s’ organization and defend it from the charges of CCP feminists, such as Xiang Jingyu, who dismissed it as a foreign-inspired, bourgeois organization for women, that could not foster a true Chinese women’s movement.¹⁶ We have learned how the YWCA became an increasingly left-leaning organization during the Second World War in China that began in 1937 and on into the postwar period, as foreign and Chinese secretaries aligned their faith in the social gospel with the Communist cause.¹⁷ Wang Zheng, Emily Honig and Xia Shi have all explored how individual Chinese women were able to work within the YWCA to adapt its structures to suit their own objectives.¹⁸ Many of these studies have characterized the YWCA as different from missionary societies in that, although it had foreign roots, by the 1930s the association was dominated by Chinese women, who had a much stronger voice in its affairs.¹⁹

Associated with the ‘imperialist’ missionary enterprise, and the ‘bourgeois feminists’ who became its first secretaries, very little attention has so far been paid to the role of the YWCA student associations which comprised its earliest members. The Christian nature of the YWCA has also been downplayed in the effort to divorce it from the narrative of imperialist intrusion.²⁰ I believe it is a mistake to overlook the YWCA’s missionary school roots and its enduring Christian character. By 1924 there were twelve city associations with an estimated membership of 3000 and 91 student branches of the

YWCA in China exceeding 6,000 members.²¹ From these statistics we can see that the majority of YWCA members were young girls who were members of the YWCA student organizations. The YWCA used its student members as missionaries to spread the gospel to other non-Christian schools via the Association's summer camps and conferences. It also drew on its student members for its first Chinese secretaries, many of whom became left-wing and joined the Communist Party as underground members. The organizational and leadership skills, social service ethos and concern for the plight of women in other countries would unintentionally prove a great boon to the CCP as it sought to spread its influence in women's organizations and harness the organizational abilities of their members. International Christian women's organizations, such as the YWCA, played an important, if unwitting, role in the incubation of Chinese communism. We cannot understand why the YWCA became such a fertile ground for the CCP during the Second World War in China and postwar period without looking at the training and values inculcated in its student members in the interwar period. It is therefore important to look more closely at the activities of the YWCA within schools if we are to fully understand the role and importance of the YWCA within Republican Era society and beyond.

Student YWCAs: A brief history

The first YWCA in China was established in 1890 within an American Southern Presbyterian missionary school for girls in Hangzhou, which later became the Hangzhou Union School for Girls. The foundation of the YWCA followed the visit of an American traveller who spoke about the work of the YWCA in the United States.²²

The YWCA in China as it functioned within the mission school environment had a very evangelical aim at its outset: to interest girls in the spiritual life of the school and to persuade others to join the church. During this early period it also had conservative gender values as it was envisioned by missionary educators: to give girls a healthy forum to practise their leadership skills and social service activities within the safety of their school and not to get caught up in the dangerous and ‘unfeminine’ military participation in which some radical female students became involved during the 1911 revolution.²³ This situation changed rapidly in the wake of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, after which the Association focused on giving girls a forum to engage with wider society and other non-missionary schools.

During the period 1890–1900 other school YWCAs were established across China.²⁴ It was not until 1899 that a Chinese national chapter of the YWCA was formed, and in 1904 the first City Association was founded in Shanghai. In 1905 the Chinese Association was affiliated to the World’s YWCA, and Anna Estelle Paddock was appointed as the first national secretary.²⁵ The Chinese national chapter of the YWCA, like other national chapters, although affiliated to the World’s YWCA, was independently administered. The main connection between the Chinese and the World’s YWCA was in the exchange of personnel and the organization of international conferences. Several foreign secretaries from other national chapters were sent to help establish the YWCA in China. The exchange worked both ways: in 1934 the former Chinese national YWCA general secretary Ding Shujing 丁淑靜 was elected as one of the eight vice-chairmen of the World’s YWCA Council.²⁶ Delegates of the Chinese

YWCA were regularly sent to attend the World's YWCA council meetings, and in 1947 the Chinese YWCA hosted the World's YWCA council meeting in Hangzhou.²⁷ Chinese women were therefore very active leaders in international organizations for women in the interwar period. The national headquarters oversaw the work of the city and student branches and dedicated student secretaries travelled between student branches, offering help and advice. It also had a publishing department which was responsible for editing a quarterly (and after 1920 eight issues per year) magazine called *The Green Year* (*Qingnian nü bao*, 青年女報).²⁸ This magazine became the official voice of the YWCA in China, facilitating the sharing of information and ideas between different YWCA branches.

Student Associations were formed in both high schools and colleges along similar lines in the period 1890-1937.²⁹ It was also from amongst this pool of student members that the YWCA drew its first Chinese secretaries. The first Chinese YWCA secretary was Wei Zengpei 韦增佩, a graduate of McTyeire, an American Methodist school, in the class of 1908.³⁰ At a time when careers for Chinese women were limited, the YWCA opened new paths by which girls could step from school into professional roles in society upon graduation. By 1924, apart from those who were married (15 percent), pursuing further study (18 percent) and teaching (34 percent), 10 percent of McTyeire alumnae were working for the YWCA as board members, committee chairs or national secretaries.³¹

Although at first dominated by foreign secretaries, (mainly Americans and British, but also including Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Norwegians and Swedes)

over time the number of foreign secretaries decreased and Chinese secretaries increased.³² By 1947 there were only seven foreign secretaries compared to twenty-nine Chinese secretaries, and only one foreign secretary sat on the National Executive Committee out of twelve.³³ The aim of the YWCA to become an indigenous Chinese women's organization was stated by Grace Coppock, the YWCA national secretary from 1913 to 1921, in the inaugural edition of the *Green Year* magazine in 1916.³⁴ The Association sought to distinguish itself from foreign-dominated missionary enterprises by pointing towards its independently organized student associations, as the YWCA's foundation. Despite trying to distinguish itself as a 'Chinese' women's organization, evidence suggests that not all foreign secretaries were well-trained for their work in China or prepared to treat their Chinese colleagues on an equal footing. Zeng Baosun 曾寶蓀 (1893–1978), revealed on her voyage back to China from England in 1918 that two new YWCA recruits were unwilling to share a cabin with a Chinese girl who was suffering from seasickness.³⁵ Cao Shengjie 曹聖潔 and Cora Deng, who worked for the YWCA before and after 1949, both criticized the Association for its continued dominance by foreign women during the Republican Era.³⁶

Tensions came to a head in the aftermath of the shooting of Chinese protestors by British police on May Thirtieth 1925 in Shanghai, when the YWCA, like many other Christian associations in China, was on the defensive against the charge of foreign imperialism and had to carefully negotiate its position to ensure its survival in this turbulent period. Elizabeth Littell-Lamb has argued that the events of May Thirtieth caused some Chinese secretaries to become more 'nationalistic' rather than

‘international’ in their outlook, and Karen Garner has documented how both foreign and Chinese secretaries became increasingly left-wing in this period. There was even a suggestion that the word ‘Christian’ be dropped from the Associations name.³⁷ However, while it might have been politically expedient to downplay the Christian character of the YWCA in the immediate aftermath of the May Thirtieth shooting, evidence from the *Green Year* magazines suggest that the YWCA did maintain a Christian character throughout the 1920s. The main change that occurred was an increasing push towards the indigenization of the Association. In 1925 Ding Shujing was invited to become the first Chinese General Secretary of the Chinese national chapter.

It is important to question the idealized rhetoric of ‘international sisterhood’ and harmonious transfer of power from foreign to Chinese secretaries that the official history presents us with. As Leila Rupp points out, these tensions between nationalism and internationalism in the women’s movement of the 1920s largely depended on the racial and cultural vantage point of individual women in these organizations, with women from colonized nations fighting for national autonomy as a ‘a prerequisite to internationalism.’³⁸ As we shall see, in the 1920s YWCA student members espoused Christian women’s shared duties and unique skills to justify their entry into new sphere of activity and salve these ongoing tensions in their identities.

The Student YWCA: Local networks

One of the first contacts a Chinese girl might have with the YWCA was joining the Association as a student member. Student YWCAs in China were designed with a

distinctively Christian aim in mind. In 1924 the Chinese YWCA published its own guidance to students on how to set up and run a student YWCA in the form of a *Student Handbook*.³⁹ The *Handbook* reveals the missionizing function of the student YWCA as it was conceived from the perspective of national secretaries:

- 1) Based on the Christ-like friendship, to unite those of the same purpose through Bible study and prayer to know thoroughly Jesus Christ as the highest revelation of God, perfect example of man and Saviour, and to copy His way of Living.
- 2) To lead fellow-students to share the friendship of this movement in order to grow in faith and spiritual character, to understand Jesus Christ clearly, to become active members in the Church, with united strength to help meet the needs of society, to carry out the teaching that “within four seas all are brothers” and to help establish the Kingdom of God upon earth.⁴⁰

The student YWCA thus had a clear Christian message at its core with an emphasis on bible study, social service and international fellowship. Although any student could join, the YWCA sought to incentivize girls who wished to play a leading role in their school YWCA to become Christian, by stipulating that ‘the majority of the cabinet shall be church members.’⁴¹ In schools where there were insufficient numbers of church members this rule was relaxed. This was especially important for the establishment of YWCAs in government schools for girls, which became a priority as the association sought to widen its influence in Chinese society and spread its reach to non-Christian students in the 1930s.

It is difficult to judge the real popularity of the student YWCAs in terms of membership numbers. In some mission schools, becoming a member of the YWCA by a certain grade became compulsory.⁴² Despite the YWCA’s official guidelines that

student YWCAs should be student-led and -run, evidence suggests that in some schools enthusiasm for school YWCAs ebbed and flowed, and it was sometimes only with a ‘push’ from teachers that girls took an interest in having an association in their school. This seemed to be the case in Hangzhou Union School for Girls, where by 1923 interest in the YWCA seems to have waned and teachers had to remind girls that the YWCA was a ‘voluntary student organization’ which they were responsible for maintaining.⁴³ Students who did join may have wanted to win favour with their teachers as well as being committed to the aims of the association itself.

With the guidance of missionary teachers, travelling student secretaries and the official *Student Handbook*, girls were expected to design their own school YWCA structure and programme of activities for themselves. Apart from the essential standards regarding the name, purpose and membership requirements, student YWCAs were free to design their own administration structure, programmes, committees, meetings and by-laws.⁴⁴ As a result, no two student YWCAs across China were identical. This was purposely designed to help inculcate in girls organizational skills which would equip them for public roles in later life. By electing their own president and committee members, girls were also given a practical lesson in democracy and leadership.⁴⁵ Student associations were also self-supporting, with student members raising the funds needed for their own activities, via annual membership fees, and local fundraising activities.⁴⁶

The YWCA formed within a jointly-run American Baptist and Presbyterian Girls’ school in Ningbo, Riverside Academy, provides us with a nice case study of how a

student YWCA was designed and functioned on a local level. Riverside YWCA was organized into eight different committees: Moral Education Committee, Missionary Committee, Bible Study Committee, Health and Hygiene Committee, Music Committee, Temperance Committee, Citizenship Committee, Social Committee.⁴⁷ There was also a Cabinet Committee which included the Association President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. At Riverside, the YWCA programme of activities was divided into two sections: internal and external. Internal activities were designed to foster social cohesion in the school, helping girls in different grades to get to know each other and cultivate a Christian character amongst girls. Internal activities included regular meetings, welcome parties for new students and a big-sister/little-sister scheme which was designed to help new students find their feet in boarding school life. According to Riverside YWCA student member Li Rongmei 李榮美, the purpose of internal YWCA at Riverside was designed so that: ‘Students can all help each other, learn by mutual interaction, and serve others through a sacrificial spirit.’⁴⁸

Riverside YWCA members took the rhetoric of ‘service’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ that they used to describe their ‘internal’ activities and applied it with vigour in their ‘external’ activities, which focused on social service in their local community. For students at Riverside, participating in social service activities organized by the YWCA provided them with ideal opportunities to defend their school’s contribution to society in an era of mounting anti-foreign and anti-Christian hostility in the 1920s, particularly after the May Thirtieth 1925 shooting in Shanghai.⁴⁹ The motto of the World’s YWCA was ‘In service to the girls of the world’. By participating in these social service

activities organized by school YWCAs, missionary schoolgirls learned to articulate both a gendered Christian patriotism and simultaneously transcend the nation in their new identities as part of an international organization of Christian women.

The external activities of the Riverside YWCA reveal the extent to which girls conceptualized their nation-building efforts in Christian terms. Riverside YWCA's external activities were focused on organizing a variety of local and national charitable relief activities, including the establishment of a Sunday school for local street children in their school gymnasium, collecting donations for flood and famine relief after the devastating Yangzi River flood of 1931 and sewing warm clothes to send to soldiers fighting against the Japanese.⁵⁰ Li Rongmei explained that the Riverside YWCA was making a 'great contribution to society' through its Sunday School. By teaching children bible stories and hymns they were cultivating 'moral' and 'vivacious' future citizens.⁵¹

The YWCA *Student Handbook* helped girls to conceptualize their patriotic and Christian identities as mutually-constituted by clearly explaining how such social work was by its very nature a Christian-inspired enterprise: 'Our best evangelistic work is often done not by preaching or teaching but by living. This social service work can therefore be a very strong and appealing piece of evangelistic work.'⁵² Riverside girls made a direct correlation between their nation building and evangelistic efforts in the language they used to describe their social service activities. This distinctively Chinese Christian sentiment is revealed by Tu Fengyun 屠鳳韻 in her explanation of the Riverside collection and donations movement: 'Mencius said: 'everyman possesses a

sympathetic heart', my schoolmates have a charitable project for everything, such as disaster relief, helping at orphanages, all have the spirit of self-sacrifice, fearlessly go out to collect contributions, these in short, are carrying the foundation of Jesus Christ's spirit, ah!'⁵³ By referring to Mencius, girls also demonstrate their awareness of a long history of philanthropy which existed in Chinese society. As Xia Shi has explored, the YWCA allowed Chinese women to practise philanthropy, which had long been an established field of virtuous female activity in China, in new ways through their participation in the YWCA. While Chinese philanthropy did change through its interaction with western methods, particularly in the popular adoption of charity balls or galas, this was much more of a process of fusion and indigenization than a one-way imposition of western ideas.⁵⁴ Missionary schoolgirls in East China were also active agents in this new type of philanthropy that was emerging. Indeed, by combining Christianity with longstanding Chinese ideas about philanthropy, Chinese YWCA student members were active in forging a distinctively Chinese mode of social service, one that combined longstanding ideas of gendered charitable giving, May Fourth student patriotism and Christianity.

The Student YWCA: Regional and national networks

A core aim of the YWCA in China was to inculcate in students a sense of identity in an organization that transcended their school, local area and nation. It sought to convey the idea that girls could make the world a better place through their participation in a global network for Christian women. Through the YWCA girls were taught to link their school to China's national situation and the position of Chinese women in the world.

By participating in the YWCA they gained access to a network for educated Christian women that functioned on the local, national and international scale and that could provide them with important connections and opportunities for work and study upon graduation. What were these local, regional, national and international networks to which the YWCA gave mission schoolgirls access and how did they function? The nature of these networks was very clear to the national YWCA of China in the 1920s. The *Student Handbook* advised that at the welcoming meeting for new members ‘there might be several speeches telling students what the Association is doing in the school, in China and in joining up the students of the world.’⁵⁵ By making this connection between the school, China and the wider world, girls entering the YWCA were taught to relate their school not only to China’s national situation, but also feel part of a larger community of women that transcended local and national boundaries.

One forum where girls learned to connect their school YWCA local activities to Chinese National and World’s YWCA agenda was at the regional and national summer camps and conference activities which were organized for student YWCA members. These conferences were designed for girls from different student YWCAs to connect, share ideas and influence non-Christian members to become Christian. Summer camps and conferences were often residential and could last several days. They were convened in remarkable beauty spots, including the West Lake at Hangzhou or hill-top retreats such as Guling 鼓嶺 near Xiamen in Fuzhou.⁵⁶ Recreational activities included climbing hills and visiting sites of local interest, as well as singing and dancing performances by the delegates. There were also more structured activities including

morning exercise sessions, sports competitions, bible study and speeches made by famous scholars and preachers. Conferences were thus designed for the holistic development of girls' bodies, minds and spirits.⁵⁷ Student YWCA members elected delegates to represent their schools at these regional summer conferences and they were often accompanied by foreign missionary teachers. Reflecting the cohort of girls able to receive a missionary education in this period, students who attended summer conferences tended to be from middle-class, merchant, and sometimes Christian family backgrounds. The programme of events was thus designed to appeal to and cultivate an interested group of educated middle-class Christian girls, some of whom might serve the Association as its future secretaries.⁵⁸ Evidence from student recollections in their school yearbooks revealed that girls seemed to have enjoyed these opportunities to travel, sightsee and get to know girls from other schools. Riverside pupil Harriet Sze recalled in 1925: 'According to the conference custom, they went to the west lake every afternoon. Therefore, our delegates asked us to go with them when the meeting was over and we did. Oh, we had such a good time in the boats! Some girls ate to their hearts content, some sang at the top of their voices, and some girls paddled energetically. It was dark when we returned to the hotel, and I was quite satisfied with this visit.'⁵⁹

Student delegates were also impressed with the idea that they were the representatives of Chinese Christian womanhood on a national and international stage at conferences. The theme of the regional YWCA summer conference held at Hangzhou on 29 June - 8 July 1917 was 'Ambassadorship'. Girls were conscious that they were representing their schools, and recalled proudly singing their schools songs and raising

their school banners at the welcome meeting.⁶⁰ One-hundred-and-fifty delegates from regional YWCA student associations had a chance to connect to and get career advice from older peers from Ginling College who spoke about vocations for Chinese women. They also discussed the national political situation and learned about the large scope of Christian work waiting to be done in China.⁶¹

The theme of “Abassadorship” was also deeply tied to a Christian message and resonated with the missionizing function of the YWCA student associations. Faith Tong, a student delegate to the 1917 regional conference in Hangzhou reported that she learned: ‘To be a King’s ambassador one must have the ambassador’s characteristics, one in whom both King and people must have confidence... we are all God’s ambassadors and our work is not only to lead people to the Church but to lead them to come to Christ Himself.’⁶² Student summer conferences and camps were also seen as an ideal opportunity for YWCA members to interact with girls from non-Christian and government schools with the aim of encouraging them to join the Association and eventually become Christians. Some summer and winter camps were purposely organized for this function of spreading Christianity to non-missionary schools, such as the winter meeting for non-Christian women in North China which took place at CMS Peihua Girls’ School 培華女校 in Beijing in 1919.⁶³ An article entitled ‘Questions about attending the YWCA summer conference’, published in the June 1919 *The Green Year*, prompts students to consider: ‘Will my behaviour have a positive or negative influence upon the non-Christian students? Have the friends who I met at last year’s summer camp who expressed their desire to become a Christian become

Christians?’⁶⁴ An article entitled ‘The purpose of the Student YWCA’ in the March 1918 edition of the *The Green Year* clearly lays out its missionary function:

To lead non-Christians to convert to Christianity. Normally, when those who have never heard of the Bible are suddenly introduced to Jesus’ teaching, they think it is ludicrous. However, if invited under the name of YWCA, sometimes there would be someone who will want to have a try. Gradually, they will become friends with Christians. The YWCA has its own missionaries, responsible for guiding these kind of non-Christians.⁶⁵

It is clear that the YWCA regarded its student members as missionaries for the Association, helping to spread Christianity to non-missionary schools in China. This was a particularly vital task from the Association’s perspective as missionary schools had to increasingly compete with, and were outstripped numerically by, their government counterparts in the 1920s.⁶⁶ At the same time, the Association was keen to hone girls’ leadership and organizational skills, to create a pool of competent, socially-minded Christian students from which they could draw their future secretaries.

Inculcating International Identities: National and international networks

The YWCA held three national conventions in 1923, 1928 and 1933, all of which included student delegates.⁶⁷ By representing their schools, girls became aware of their membership in a broader national association for women and learned to act as representatives and leaders. By cultivating their student members’ leadership potential, and encouraging them to participate in the national conferences, the YWCA was also training their student members to be of future service to the Association as National Secretaries.⁶⁸ It was also at these national and international conferences girls had a chance to connect to YWCA members from other countries and gain a sense of their

identities within an international women's organization. For example, Deng Yuzhi, joined the YWCA at age fourteen as a member of the Fuxing Girls high school YWCA in Changsha, later went on to work for the Association as a student and industrial secretary, and eventually became the leader of the YWCA in PRC China. Deng remembered that it was through attending the first and second national conventions in Hangzhou (1923) and Shanghai (1928), that she began to feel part of a broader national and international women's movement: "At that moment I realised that the Changsha Association was part of a Christian women's movement at a national level ... that a united women's movement could have certain capabilities – it had the capacity to transform individual character, to improve families, to transform society, to build the county, and to build a harmonious world, all it took was for women to really unite together!"⁶⁹

One of the outstanding concerns of the YWCA throughout its history in China was to inculcate a concern for the position of women in other countries and foster in girls a sense of belonging in a worldwide Christian women's movement. This aim of inculcating 'global' identities in students is revealed in an article in the March 1919 edition of the *The Green Year*:

To give students a global vision. Students cooped up in school with their heads in books, often forget how big the world is and their own relationship to the world. Once they become Association members, they will start to connect to the world. Every year there is a global prayer meeting. At a set time every country's YWCA for the same purpose prays to God. As Association members present at this event, they will begin to feel that they are part of a global sisterhood, in which they themselves are just one drop

in the ocean, not only a part of the Chinese nation, but also a part of a global community.⁷⁰

The signs and symbols of internationalism, what Leilia Rupp describes as the ‘rituals of belonging’, including ‘cultural displays, organised symbols and personal interactions’, are highly visible in the pages of the *Green Year* magazine in the 1920s.⁷¹ Articles in the 1920s–30s discuss the position of women in Japan, Russia and India and student members were encouraged to – quite literally – put themselves in the shoes of women in other countries in the international pageants organized by the YWCA.⁷² In the YWCA magazine of February 1923 we find images of Chinese student members dressed in the clothes of other nations for the Tianjin YWCA World Fellowship Pageant, held in celebration of the World’s Week of Prayer in November 1922.⁷³ Flags of other nations bedeck the stage, and a woman in Chinese dress stands at the forefront of the triangular formation, perhaps symbolizing Chinese women’s leadership in this international women’s association. Similarly, the Chengdu YWCA held a ‘Pageant of world sisterhood’ during which student members dressed in the clothes of women of other nations from Japan to United States, India, Switzerland and the Philippines.⁷⁴ As Daniel Gorman has highlighted, pageants, games and international exhibitions were visible manifestations of, and important tools for, inculcating ‘imperial internationalism’ in interwar Britain.⁷⁵ In the case of the YWCA of interwar China, pageants and festivals, such as the Tianjin World Fellowship Pageant and Chengdu Pageant of World Sisterhood, served as visual celebrations, impressing a Christian internationalism directly upon women’s bodies, with membership of the YWCA, rather than the Empire, as the transcendent theme.

Above all, designed to transcend these international boundaries and cultural differences was the YWCA symbol itself. The image of the downward facing blue triangle, the official insignia of the YWCA, is prevalent throughout *The Green Year* magazine in the 1920–30s. Chinese women’s bodies were often used to form the triangle, impressing upon them their membership in the organization in a very physical sense. The three sides of the ‘Blue Triangle’ stand for body, mind and spirit, representing the recreational, educational and spiritual goals of the Association. In the March 1921 magazine, we find an image of the members of the YWCA at the Ningbo Sarah Bachelor Memorial School. In this image, girls proudly display the blue triangle logo embossed on the white cards which they hold in front of them. They are dressed homogeneously in their school uniform of white and black skirts with white headbands covering their neatly tied-back hair. There is also an air of military discipline about the girls as they are arranged in a neat triangular formation for the photograph. The girl at the head of the triangle wears a dark-coloured scarf across her shoulder, perhaps distinguishing her as the president of the school YWCA.⁷⁶

How did girls respond to this pageantry of internationalism that was imprinted on their bodies in such a tangible way? While the efforts of the YWCA to ‘inculcate’ a gendered Christian internationalism can clearly be seen, what student members took away from such pageantry remains elusive. As Rupp has highlighted, it is difficult to gauge from the available evidence how far such organizational symbols served the propaganda functions they were intended for.⁷⁷ It is also important that we do not take this rhetoric of an all-embracing international Christian feminism at face value. Rupp

warns that we must distinguish between the ‘possibilities of inclusiveness and the realities of exclusion.’⁷⁸ In its early period of operation, the imbalance in power between China and the West also affected the power relationships between foreign and Chinese secretaries within the YWCA, as we have witnessed in the story relayed by Zeng Baosun. As Mark Mazower has pointed out, it is important not to confuse the rhetoric and wish for internationalism by its proponents in the interwar period with its fulfilment.⁷⁹

While continued entrenched racial hierarchies meant that Chinese women may not have enjoyed an equal sense of belonging in or access to leadership positions within international women’s organizations, through entering international women’s networks such as the YWCA, Chinese women learned skills in leadership, organization and international diplomacy. Lucy Hong (Hong Lüming, 洪侶明), who attended McTyeire High School in Shanghai recalled that participating in the YWCA student activities helped to hone her organisational skills, which she later put to use working for the national YWCA, including training in the UK, after the end of the Cultural Revolution.⁸⁰ They also mastered the rhetoric of ‘international sisterhood’ and women’s peace-making roles that they would use, like their Anglo-American counterparts, to step into hitherto barred spheres of activity, including international diplomacy.

During the interwar period, and particularly during the May Fourth period in China, the idea that an alliance of the world’s women could help bring about lasting world peace became an important part of the international women’s movement.⁸¹ The

role of Christian women in bringing about peace was the main topic of speeches given at the third YWCA meeting for non-Christian women in North China in 1919.⁸² We can see this rhetoric of Chinese Christian women as international peacemakers and diplomats in the pages of *The Green Year* magazine. While Rupp describes how after WWI women in international networks engaged in symbolic displays of peace and sisterhood, Chinese women stamped this commitment to internationalism on their own bodies, literally wrapping themselves in the flags of other nations.⁸³ For example, in the March 1918 edition of *The Green Year* there is an image of five Chinese young women dressed to represent different nations, including: Switzerland, England, America, China, France and Germany, with these countries' flags draped across their bodies, and headbands emblazoned with a star are affixed to their neatly tied-back hair. At the middle and front of this group of six girls arranged in a triangle formation, is a seventh girl attired simply in Chinese dress. She holds the flags of these six nations, symbolizing the aspiration of Chinese women to play a leading role in international diplomacy.⁸⁴ This became all the more pressing after China had been betrayed by the Allies, and the male Chinese diplomats who represented their country, by failing to restore China to full sovereignty in the Treaty of Versailles. Perhaps it was time for Chinese women to have a go.

Chinese student members active in the YWCA embraced an international rhetoric of Christian women's roles as mothers and peacemakers to justify their foray into the hitherto male-dominated realm of international diplomacy. They did not stop at words and images, but put their desire to represent their country internationally into action,

acting as representatives of the Chinese YWCA at international Christian conferences throughout the 1920–30s. Students who engaged with the YWCA at the national level by becoming student delegates or working for the association after graduation, took this chance to take the step into the international arena. The YWCA sent student delegates to the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam (1939) and the World Student Christian Federation conferences in Java (1933) and Mills College, USA (1936). In 1946 the Chinese YWCA sent student representatives to three international student conferences, and in 1947 YWCA student representatives were included in the China delegates to the World Christian Youth Conference in Oslo.⁸⁵

The YWCA also offered members who became secretaries advanced training abroad, often in the UK or America. For example, Gong Pusheng cut her teeth in diplomacy by representing the Chinese YWCA as a student delegate to the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam in 1939. After graduating from missionary-run St. Mary's Highschool and Yanjing University, Gong became a YWCA Student Secretary and was sponsored by the YWCA to receive further training in India and the USA.⁸⁶ She received an MA in Religion from Union Theological Seminary in 1942 and worked at the Research Department of the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations in New York from 1946-48. She later became a pioneering female diplomat in PRC China in the 1950-80s, becoming China's first ambassador to Ireland in 1980.⁸⁷ From 1934–1947 the YWCA sent a total of twenty-one secretaries abroad for advanced training to the USA, UK, Europe and India.⁸⁸ Other national YWCAs hosted these visiting secretaries, who were engaged in half-work, half-study

programmes at relevant universities, teachers' colleges, and seminaries, where they obtained MA and PhD degrees funded by scholarships from the national YWCA.⁸⁹ India, Burma, Singapore and the Philippines also sent their secretaries to the national YWCA of China for periods of training and study in the pre-war period.⁹⁰ Secretaries travelled across China and internationally to give speeches representing the Chinese YWCA at other countries' YWCA national conventions, including Japan, India, Canada (1935) and the United States (1936, 1938, 1946).⁹¹

Participation in the student YWCAs could lead girls into new networks which expanded their horizons and opportunities to travel, study and connect with other Christian and non-Christian women from the local level to the international. This was particularly important for girls who joined the YWCA from less affluent family backgrounds, who might not have been able to finance an international college education for their daughters. They put the organizational and leadership skills they had learned in their student YWCA activities to good use, representing Chinese Christian women on the world stage by the 1920–30s. In 1939 Deng Yuzhi travelled to the United States and Europe to receive further training and attend 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. According to the communist women's journal *Shanghai Funü* she would act as an 'Ambassador' of 'New Chinese Womanhood'. Deng was determined to raise sympathy and understanding for the Chinese war of resistance against Japan by explaining to their 'foreign sisters' the plight of Chinese women faced by Japanese aggression.⁹² The student YWCA was

therefore an important forum for Chinese women's training in international diplomacy in the 1930–40s.

How Chinese women practised diplomacy within International women's organizations, and how their own vision of a gendered Christian internationalism impacted on these largely Euro-American dominated associations at a global level, is a topic for another article. Karen Garner provides tantalizing clues as to how American women, such as Maud Russell, who worked for the YWCA in China, became increasingly left-wing in the course of their dealings with their Chinese counterparts.⁹³ This also worked two ways: questions remain about the exact means by which in their participation in these international conferences and networks exposed Chinese women to Communist ideas that they would later use to influence other Chinese YWCA members, and the budding CCP, back home. It is clear that the international identities and social service ideals which the YWCA had been so keen to instill upon women's minds and bodies in the interwar years, unwittingly became a fertile ground for the CCP in the 1930s–40s. Progressive YWCA student secretaries drew upon ideals of the Christian social gospel and a Christian internationalism to influence socially-minded girls to join the Communist Party.

Conclusion

The Student YWCA provided an access point and training ground for Chinese women's entry into international Christian networks for women in the interwar period. The Association's aims were clear: Student YWCAs, through an emphasis on Christian

social service and internationalism, would foster in girls a concern for the plight of women in their local area, China and the world. They would thus create Chinese missionaries for a gendered Christian internationalism that the YWCA sought to advance. These overlapping, local, national and global identities for students are neatly summed up in a *Green Year* article which lays out the purpose of the Student YWCA associations: ‘To firmly understand that I am towards the Association, towards the school, and towards my country a fellow Sister. We are all responsible for the global women’s world...You should have the courage to act, to put all your energy into making a contribution to the women’s world.’⁹⁴ Girls could first learn skills in organization and leadership by founding their own Student YWCA committees and programmes of activities. They were encouraged to serve their nation in a Christian way and connect with other YWCA members on a local and regional level through social service, summer camps and sports competitions. Finally, some YWCA members put their leadership skills to the test by representing their school at national level conferences, and those chosen for future service to the Association stepped into the world of international diplomacy, representing their country through participation in international Christian conferences and women’s networks. At each level, the Student YWCA fostered new identities for women, with a social-gospel inspired gendered Christian internationalism as the transcendent theme, helping girls to harmonize these new international identities within an environment of mounting Chinese nationalism.

That is not to say that we can take the YWCA’s rhetoric of a harmonious ‘international Christian sisterhood’ during the 1920s at face value. The Association

continued to be plagued by their foreign secretaries' association with imperial powers that were operating in China under the terms of unequal treaties, sparking anti-foreign and anti-Christian hostility within Chinese society. Very real tensions along class and racial lines continued to exist in the Association. Nor were Chinese women passive recipients of the international identities which were being inculcated in a very tangible way upon their bodies and minds. In their experiments at school YWCAs girls constructed their own vision of how to be a modern, Christian, Chinese woman, drawing on ideals of an 'International Sisterhood' as it was useful and meaningful to them. In particular, they harnessed the rhetoric of Christian women's peacemaking roles to expand Chinese women's activities into international diplomacy. While they drew on the rhetorical devices, skills, tactics and training provided by entry into international women's associations and networks, Chinese student YWCA members adapted the message to suit their own needs and objectives.

¹ Lydia Tsao, 'A Japanese Delegate in the Summer Conference', *Yongjiang Sheng* [Riverside Echo] (1925), 10.

² 'Yuki Kimura, Delegate from Japan to the Hangchow Student Conference', *Qingnian nü bao* [The Green Year], (October, 1924). Front matter.

³ 'A Young Ambassador' *Supplement to The Green Year: Concerning the Events on and since May 30 in Shanghai*, 1 July 1925, (Shanghai, 1925), 14. 'Front Matter' *Qingnian nü bao* [The Green Year], (October, 1925).

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⁵ Leila Rupp, 'Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945' *American Historical Review* 99.5 (1994), 1571–1600.

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- ⁷ Including Michelle Chase, "'Hands off Korea!': Women's Internationalist Solidarity and Peace Activism in Early Cold War Cuba", *Journal of Women's History*, 32.3, (2020), 64–88.
- ⁸ de Haan, 'Continuing Cold War Paradigms', 556.
- ⁹ Leila Rupp, 'Feminisms and Internationalism: A view from the Centre', *Gender and History*, 10.3 (1998), 536.
- ¹⁰ As Patricia Clavin defines it, transnationalism is 'first and foremost about people'. Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History* 14.4 (2005), 422.
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- ¹⁵ Zhao Xiaoyang, 'Jidujiao hui yu laodong wenti –yi shanghai jidujiao nü qingnian hui gongyexiao wei zhongxin' [Christianity and the Labor Question: The Shanghai YWCA night schools for workers] in Tao Feiya (ed.), *Xingbie yu lishi: jindai zhongguo funü yu jidujiao* [Gender and History: Modern Chinese Women and Christianity] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2007), 183–209, and Niu Shengni, 'lingyi zhong funü yundong – yi zhonghua jidujiao nü qingnianhui de nonggong shiye wei li [A different kind of Women's movement: The Chinese YWCA rural and factory Work] (1904–1933)' in Tao Feiya (ed.), *Xingbie yu lishi: jindai zhongguo funü yu jidujiao* [Gender and History: Modern Chinese Women

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- ²⁴ Tsai and Haass, ‘A Study’, 8.
- ²⁵ Tsai and Haass, ‘A Study’, 23.
- ²⁶ Shanghai Municipal Archives (SMA) - U121-0-18 - The National Committee, Young Women Christian Association of China, *The YWCA of China 1933–1947*, (Shanghai, 1947), 91.
- ²⁷ *The YWCA of China 1933–1947*, 91.

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Although the majority of its contents are in Chinese, the contents and title pages of the magazine were printed in both English and Chinese. A relatively complete run of the magazine (1916–1937) can be found at the Shanghai Municipal Archives. See: U121-0-13 to U121-0-60.

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³² Tsai and Hass, ‘A Study’, 11.

³³ *The YWCA of China 1933–1947*, frontmatter.

³⁴ Tsai and Haass, ‘A Study’, 5.

³⁵ Kennedy Thomas L. (trans.). *Confucian Feminist: Memoirs of Zeng Baosun 1893–1978*

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³⁸ Rupp, ‘Feminisms and Internationalism’, 536

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⁴⁰ YWCA, *Student Handbook*, 3.

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⁴⁴ YWCA, *Student Handbook*, 2.

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- ⁴⁵ YWCA, *Student Handbook*, 2.
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- ⁴⁸ Li, 'Qingnian hui', 186.
- ⁴⁹ Chen Aizhen, 'Jiaohui nuxiao duiyu xiandai zhongguo zui shao xiandu de gongxian' [The smallest contribution of missionary schools for girls to modern China], *Yongjiang Sheng* [Riverside Echo] (1931), 42.
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- ⁵² YWCA, *Student Handbook*, 27.
- ⁵³ Tu Fengyun 'ben xiao de xuesheng hui' [Our School's Student Societies], *Yongjiang Sheng* [Riverside Echo] (1931), 178.
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- ⁵⁵ YWCA, *Student Handbook*, 14.
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