

The Rockefeller University and China

The Rockefeller University, founded in New York in 1901 as the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, has had a variety of educational and research connections with China since its second decade. The close relationship between the university and the Peking Union Medical College has been the outstanding connection at the institutional level, but the Rockefeller's connection with China has shaped the lives of numerous individual scholars over the years.

The following are brief sketches of the most important relationships between The Rockefeller and China, based on research in the historical collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

Simon Flexner was the first director of Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, serving from 1902 to 1934. In 1914 he was appointed a trustee of the newest philanthropy created by John D. Rockefeller, the China Medical Board, an institution created to support the development of Western medicine in China. As the leading medical research figure on the board, Flexner was a crucial figure in the CMB's actions for the next two decades.

Flexner traveled to China in 1915 with other CMB officials to survey Chinese medical schools. They visited Mukden, Beijing, Tientsin, Tsinanfu, Hankow, Wuchang, Changsha, Nanking, Shanghai, and Hangchow. Flexner personally made friendships during this visit that he drew on for many years thereafter, receiving his friends in New York, referring Americans visiting China to his acquaintances, and reconnecting with them on a return visit to China in 1921.

However, the 1915 visit was momentous primarily because the CMB decided to found a new, state-of-the-art Western-style medical school in China, the Peking Union Medical College. Fully in operation by 1921, when Flexner attended its dedication, the PUMC trained two generations of Chinese students in scientific research and medicine, many of whom were leaders in those fields in China well into the second half of the 20th century.

The interchange of staff between The Rockefeller and PUMC was substantial. Many Rockefeller staff went to the PUMC to instruct the staff and students in the advanced techniques of modern medicine and scientific research. Van Slyke in 1922 and 1940, Cohn in 1924-25, Ten Broeck in 1926, Pearce in 1932, and Kuttner in 1936 are important examples. Other Americans, such as Bauer and Cowdry, had their first professional appointments at PUMC and later became important figures at The Rockefeller.

Many Chinese graduate students and young physicians came to The Rockefeller to study in its laboratories. As early as 1918, before PUMC was fully in operation, Dr. Edgar Chen was conducting research at The Rockefeller in preparation for being appointed an assistant in bacteriology at PUMC. Flexner stated at this time that he would "give careful consideration" to any Chinese student who wished to study at the Rockefeller, and indeed the archives of the university for the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s record a number of Chinese scholars arriving to work in the laboratories for six months to a year.

Those who moved between New York and Beijing campuses probably felt at home, because the architect for the buildings and landscaping of both institutions was Charles A. Coolidge of Boston, who designed many university and hospital complexes.

An important continuing connection between The Rockefeller and China is the Rockefeller Archive Center, a division of the university that houses the archives of the Rockefeller family, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the China Medical Board, as well as the university. Including documents related to public health, education, the social sciences, science, and medicine, the Archive Center's collection of approximately 2,000,000 pages of documents on China illustrate important aspects of modern Chinese history. The collection is regularly used by scholars, including in recent years scholars from China, who have written many articles and several Ph.D. dissertations based upon the material.

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