

Professional Opportunities for Women in Peking Union Medical College in the 1920s and 1930s

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The famous dedication ceremonies of the Peking Union Medical College in September 1921 have attracted much attention, and their significant historical implications have been well studied.¹ However, one revealing detail has not received proper attention: the dignitaries invited to the ceremonies ranged from leading medical scientists from all over the world to Chinese high officials, yet only one woman was among them. This woman was invited due to an interesting incident. In an interview decades later, another woman recalled:

I shall never forget the Administrative Board Meeting . . . we were discussing people who should be invited for the Dedication . . . They mentioned this man and that man, no woman – you see, it was quite extraordinary to see that they were establishing a medical school for men and women – it was to be coeducational from the very beginning, and they were emphasizing that – the whole thing became quite a deal in

¹ See Ferguson, Mary E. *China Medical Board and Peking Union Medical College: A Chronicle of Fruitful Collaboration, 1914-1951*. New York: China Medical Board of New York, Inc., 1970, (pp. 50-55); Bullock, Mary B. *An American Transplant: the Rockefeller Foundation and Peking Union Medical College*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, (pp. 1-23).

medicine circles. I said, facetiously, “Gentlemen, we are talking so much about a coeducational school, but you haven’t even a woman to ask over here for any of these meetings. Franklin J. said, “Well we certainly should.” ... as the outcome of our chit-chat, they invited [Florence Sabin]. And she was the only woman who came.²

Similar to Florence Sabin, who was the first woman faculty member at the John Hopkins University and later the first woman to become a full member at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, many women made breakthroughs in their careers at Peking Union Medical College. They helped to build the first nursing school in China, the first medical social service department, and they broke ground for medical research as faculty members. My research report will focus on these women’s professional development at the PUMC in the formative years of the 1920s and 1930s.

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center provides materials for my dissertation, “Expression of the Life Within Us: Epistolary Practice of American Women in Republican China (1912-1949).” This project examines the communities that American women in China developed as writers, professional women, and missionary workers. It explores how middle-class American women in China exerted their influence on large territorial powers through their international correspondence. In particular, the questions I discuss in this report concern my chapter on the professional women’s community, represented by Ida Pruitt, chief of the Social Service Department from 1920 to 1939, and her female colleagues at the PUMC.

In 1939, the Secretariat of the Institute of Pacific Relations, W. L. Holland, and Dr. K. A. Wittfogel of the International Institute of Social Research at Columbia University wrote a letter to Dr. Henry S. Houghton of the China Medical Board, asking Houghton to

² “Group in St. Petersburg,” interview by Mary E. Ferguson, n.d., transcript, Mary E. Ferguson Collection, Box 3, Folder 33, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York. The transcript does not record the name of this speaker.

preserve the sociological material which Ida Pruitt's Department of Social Service had accumulated. They deemed the case record of the Chinese third-class patients of the PUMC as "invaluable."³ In her study of the PUMC, Mary E. Ferguson also described Pruitt's work as "[breaking] the ground for medical social service in China and [organizing] a highly efficient department in the PUMC where she not only trained her own staff but sent out workers who had important influence on the development of social service throughout the country."⁴ Evidently, Ida Pruitt has been seen historically as an outstanding forerunner in the field of medical social service in China. However, the documents at the Rockefeller Archive Center show that Pruitt's career at a male-dominated medical institution involved serious doubts and setbacks as well as hard-earned progress.

Just as medical social workers had been viewed with skepticism at American hospitals while they were trying to establish their new profession,⁵ Ida Pruitt's status as the first medical social worker in China had been controversial from the start. Although Roger S. Greene and Henry Houghton recognized the significance of medical social work to the hospital and advocated an independent social service department which would report directly to the superintendent, Franklin C. McLean of the China Medical Board in New York was against the separation of social service work from the Department of Religious and Social Work. Philip A. Swartz, then Director of Religious Work at the PUMC, insisted in combining social and religious work together under his department. The debate eventually leaned toward Ida Pruitt having her own department. Upon her arrival at the PUMC in May 1921, Pruitt started to build the first

³ W.L. Holland to H. S. Houghton, 28 March 1939, CMB, Inc. Collection, Box 143, Folder 1034, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ Ferguson, Mary E. *China Medical Board and Peking Union Medical College: A Chronicle of Fruitful Collaboration, 1914-1951*. New York: China Medical Board of New York, Inc., 1970, (p. 91).

⁵ See Cannon, Ida M. *On the Social Frontier of Medicine: Pioneering in Medical Social Service*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952, (pp 63-71).

medical social service department in China.

Pruitt spent the first three or four years at the PUMC trying to prove the necessity of her independent social service department.⁶ In 1923, close to the end of Pruitt's first term of appointment, the performance of the Medical Social Service Department was evaluated by a detailed written survey conducted among all the clinical chiefs of the hospital. Despite minor defects, Pruitt's department was seen as valuable to all clinical departments except for the eye department. Some departments, such as Obstetrics and Gynecology and the Orthopedic Department, even saw medical social work as essential and indispensable to their work. Despite the almost unanimous recognition of social service work at the hospital, Pruitt's executive ability was still a big question for the PUMC's general management team.

In 1925, during Pruitt's furlough in the United States, the PUMC administrators even started to seriously consider nominating someone else for Pruitt's position and terminating her contract. In 1920 when she was hired, Ida Pruitt was described as having a charming personality, excellent training in social work, and as a welcome figure among her Chinese patients. But in 1925 this same employee was derogated as uncooperative, bad tempered, and even "a menace to the good name" of the PUMC.⁷ She was also accused of antagonizing the wives of faculty members instead of using their volunteer help in her work.⁸ This accusation, together with the standards the PUMC used to consider possible candidates for Pruitt's position, reveals the conflicts between a woman's career choices and her married life at that period.

One of the candidates, Isabel Ingram, left a good impression, but in Henry Houghton's

⁶ Pruitt, Ida. *Two Year' Report 1927-1929 of the Hospital Social Service Peiping Union Medical College*. Peiping, China: PUMC Press, 1930.

⁷ J. Barchet to Mary K. Eggleston, 13 November 1925, CMB, Inc. Collection, Box 143, Folder 1034, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁸ Mary K. Eggleston to Henry Houghton, 9 December 1925, CMB, Inc. Collection, Box 143, Folder 1034, Rockefeller Archive Center.

words, “she is young and a person of more than ordinary pulchritude and charm so that our chances of finding in her a permanent worker seem small.”⁹ Another candidate with good training and mature personality, however, was recently married. As a result, Ida Pruitt, as a single woman, remained as chief of Social Service, the frictions between her and her colleagues apparently resolved. No other negative records are found in the PUMC’s official records at the RAC, and Pruitt remained in charge of the department through her last term, which ended in 1939. In addition, her department kept expanding, numbering over thirty social workers in the 1930s.

While there were a couple of male social workers in the Medical Social Service Department, the majority of Pruitt’s social workers were female. Similar to the medical social service work in the United States, the PUMC’s social service work created new opportunities for the emerging professional Chinese women. According to the employment records of social workers in the Social Service Department, many of the women workers graduated from Yenching University, then one of the most prestigious universities in China; some went to American universities for master’s degrees, such as Wellesley College or Teacher’s College at Columbia. They commonly either worked for the YWCA or taught at middle schools before they joined the Social Service Department.

Apparently, medical social work expanded opportunities for improvement in their career, from financial as well as personal aspects. Quite a few medical social workers received fellowships from either the PUMC or the China Medical Board to study in the United States for training or for graduate degrees. Ida Pruitt was very supportive of her social workers’ pursuit of further study and career-improving opportunities, writing letters of recommendation and fighting

⁹ Henry Houghton to Mary K. Eggleston, 11 December 1925. CMB, Inc. Collection.

for training and study grants for her department. Among her social workers were Yu Ju-Chi, the second Chief of Social Service after Pruitt; Zhou Liqiu, later professor of sociology at Yenching University; and Wu Zhen, professor of sociology at Beijing University.

Apart from the Medical Social Service Department, another division of the PUMC that opened a new field for professional women in China was the Nursing School. Just as the field of medical social service, nursing also had much to overcome in order to establish itself as a reputable profession.

As early as 1916, when Franklin C. McLean, Roger Greene and Henry Houghton were working together to plan the PUMC, an important issue which reappeared in McLean's diary was the question of the nursing school and the feasibility of female nurses only at the school.¹⁰ During his trip around China, he visited hospitals and consulted doctors and medical educators about this issue. Most people whom he consulted seemed to think it was possible to establish a female nursing school at the PUMC. The three early planners of the PUMC then stressed the importance of establishing professional nursing on the highest level and hoped it might interest Chinese women in becoming nurses. Other medical schools in China had offered nursing education, but the PUMC intended to give nurses a better educational background so as to improve the status of nursing students.¹¹

In 1918, at the Biennial Conference of the Nurses' Association of China, Edith J. Haward presented a talk titled "Is China Ready for Women Nurses in Men's Hospitals?" She argued in general that China was not ready yet, because women have not been taught to realize the dignity and importance of nurses' work. But in larger cities where people understood Western

¹⁰ Franklin C. McLean, *Diary and Notebook, China, August 14-October 5, 1916*. Mary E. Ferguson Collection, Box 1, Folder 11, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹¹ Interview with Anna D. Wolf by Mary Ferguson, n.d., Mary E. Ferguson Collection, Box 3, Folder 32, Rockefeller Archive Center.

civilization better, it might have already been possible. Haward's analysis of the situation is problematic at places, such as her claim that male nurses lacked the "nursing instinct," making it impossible for them to become "ideal nurses," and her generalization that Chinese female nurses "lack . . . physical strength, endurance, self-control, and dignity."¹² But her paper did reveal the great difficulties Western nurses encountered in introducing nursing as a profession into China.

Anna D. Wolf, the first Superintendent of Nurses and Dean of the Nursing School of the PUMC, recalled the difficulties of recruiting students for her school in the beginning. They only went to mission schools because no other kinds of schools were ready for nursing education yet. Their missionary friends helped to recommend and select "fine young women who had a sense of professionalism . . . we were working against some pretty hard prejudices there in China . . . and if it hadn't been for these women in these schools, sending us their students according to plan, we never could have gotten started."¹³

From a school which needed to fight really hard for recruitment to the leading nursing school in China nowadays, with about 600 undergraduates and 40 graduate students, the Nursing School of the PUMC has come a long way. Nursing has become such a gendered profession for women that it might be easy to forget that the harbingers of nursing education in China took such pains to introduce this once novel profession.

Despite the great progress which the PUMC offered to professional women, social service and nursing also reveal some of the limitations of the development of women's professions in history in general. As Jill K. Conway puts it, they fall into "a conservative trend by which . . . women's intellectual energies were channeled into perpetuating women's service

¹² Haward, Edith J. "Is China Ready for Women Nurses in Men's Hospitals?" *The China Medical Journal* 33: 2 (1919), pp. 174-177.

¹³ Interview with Anna D. Wolf by Mary Ferguson, n.d., Mary E. Ferguson Collection, Box 3, Folder 32, Rockefeller Archive Center.

role in society rather than into independent and self-justifying intellectual endeavor.”¹⁴

Compared with social service and nursing other faculty positions in medical science at the PUMC offered more radical change in women’s careers.

Among the first group of women who arrived in Peking for positions at the PUMC were Alice Boring, Emily Gilfillan and Eva Macmillan. While Gilfillan was the librarian and Macmillan the registrar, Alice Boring chaired the biology department of the premedical school. Then there was the first Chinese female doctor at the PUMC, Lin Qiaozhi, graduate of 1929, founder of Chinese obstetrics and gynecology. The list becomes quite extensive if today’s famous women doctors in China are included.

Florence Sabin, Ida Pruitt, Anna Wolf and Alice Boring represent how different women making diverse career choices, but each of them left a remarkable legacy in her field. Their experiences illustrate the professional progress of women. Research at the Rockefeller Archive Center allowed me to see the patterns of women’s career development through these important figures and their colleagues in China and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.

¹⁴ Conway, Jill K. “Perspectives on the History of Women’s Education in the United States.” *History of Education Quarterly* 14: 1 (1974), pp. 1-12.