

## In the name of the Red Cross Society of China

### Women's activism and humanitarian aid during the war (1937-1945)

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The participation of Chinese women in humanitarian aid from the War of Resistance to the Second World War is an issue that remains to be thoroughly investigated. What role did women play in humanitarian work during the turbulent years of the war? By analyzing the power relations and humanitarian activities in the Red Cross, the paper intertwines with issues concerning the meaning of gender and state in modern China, assessing women's role within the Chinese Red Cross, particularly nurses in designing aid programs, and how significant it was. One woman played a special role in the growth of military nursing assistance for Chinese troops: Zhou Meiyu. Specifically, the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps had a major task in supporting the training of military medical personnel and Zhou was particularly successful in establishing a valid medical expert in the new education programs. Women in the Red Cross not only tended to the wounded and comforted soldiers but also helped in the logistical coordination of relief work, raising support for the Chinese war effort through their propaganda and fundraising initiatives. The paper draws on different examples to illustrate how, breaking down gender boundaries, humanitarian war services in wartime were promoted, and how women's work and relationships with Western women served as a window on which gender shaped the meanings of humanitarianism, war and nation-building in modern China, while offering the opportunity to re-discuss the social values and traditional roles of women.

**Keywords:** Red Cross; RCSC; China; humanitarian aid; women; gender; war.

#### 1. Introduction

The War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945)<sup>1</sup> has been a subject of extensive literature, primarily focusing on military battles, revolutionary movements, victims, and victories. Yet, the crucial role that

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<sup>1</sup> The war that impacted China during the period between 1937 and 1945 has been presented with numerous designations. On the Chinese mainland as well as in Taiwan, the armed hostilities of 1937-1945 are referred to as the *Kangri zhanzheng* 抗日战争 "War of Resistance to Japan," abbreviated as *Kangzhan* 抗战 "Resistance War." In Japan and the Western world, this

Chinese women played in offering humanitarian aid during this period remains largely neglected. Nonetheless, the Red Cross Society of China fervently advocated for women's involvement, recognizing their critical contributions in providing assistance throughout the war. From the early 1930s, indeed, one distinctiveness of the Red Cross was the active presence of women in relief efforts. For instance, He Xiangning 何香凝 (1878-1972), the widow of an early member of the Nationalist Party, Liao Zhongkai 廖仲愷 (1877-1925), and supporter of the anti-Japanese resistance, organized a unit led by women. With the help of the Red Cross in Shanghai, He established the National Calamity Women's Training Class that mobilized sixty workers who provided emergency assistance, helped establish emergency hospitals, and comforted wounded soldiers (Chi 2004: 270). He Xiangning was not the only one. The mobilization of both nationalist and communist women was decisive in the Chinese Army's victory over the Japanese Empire.

Despite the extensive body of literature available on the events of the war in China,<sup>2</sup> some questions have not been adequately examined by scholars: what role did women play in humanitarian work during the turbulent years of the war? How does the examination of the female relief activities within the Red Cross during this period contribute to enhancing our understanding of the various strategies that women and the organization employed to achieve significant goals through their humanitarian aid initiatives?

This paper builds upon recent studies that examine the experiences of women worldwide during World War II. Anna Krylova's study on how Soviet women during wartime embodied a gender identity that combined femininity and masculinity sheds light on the various ways Chinese women endeavored to participate in multiple public domains during wartime (Krylova 2010). Hence, the activism of women in the conflict strongly challenged the traditional paradigm that saw the war between the spheres of exclusively male competence. Their participation had a significant impact on the role of women in

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conflict is frequently identified by the appellation of the Second Sino-Japanese War. On a broader scale, the conflict that spanned from 1937 to 1945 is frequently intertwined with the global turmoil of the Second World War (1937-1945). As applied by Diana Lary, Rana Mitter and many other historians, I will use this term in reference to the Resistance War against the Japanese aggression. See Lary (2015); Mitter (2004; 2014); Li (2010); Barnes (2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on wartime China and its events, see Ch'i (1982); Arbor (2008); Goodman (2000) Hung (1994); Lary (2001; 2010); MacKinnon (2008); Mitter (2013); Schoppa (2011); Van de Ven (2003).

society, challenging traditional gender roles and opening up new opportunities for women in education, employment, and public life.<sup>3</sup>

When considering the Red Cross in China during the war, there is a significant impact on the level of women's representation, and also a re-evaluation of the role of women in the war years thanks to the latest literature in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> Through political and social mobilization, Chinese women in the resistance movement created a multi-dimensional identity that allowed them to assume numerous roles during the war, departing from the conservative functions prescribed by Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing government. In doing so, they adopted a subjective position and expanded the definition of femininity during the war period (Xia Rong 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Beyond their participation in the workforce and military, women also made a critical contribution to the war effort through their involvement in humanitarian aid. Hence, organizations like the Red Cross relied heavily on women to provide support to soldiers and civilians affected by the war. By bringing together the humanitarian relief work of women within the Red Cross from the War of Resistance against Japan to the Second World War, the paper broadens our knowledge related to the complex ways in which women and the organization sought to achieve significant goals through humanitarian aid as political and social rights, medical relief and the construction of a modern Chinese state. Particularly focusing on the nursing field, I analyse how nursing assistance born spontaneously at the beginning of the conflict helped to denounce the serious medical problems that the Chinese Army had to face, turning into real professional assistance during the long years of the war. Nurses, in turn, wielded great power in the establishment and direction of nursing, as in the case of Zhou Meiyu 周美玉 (1910-2001), an experienced patriotic nurse who advanced her career through the Red Cross, by instituting nursing education programs in the army. Zhou and her fellow trainee nurses taught about the principles of diet and sterilization, personal hygiene, and how to prepare operating rooms.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of women's role during wartime in other contexts, see Weatherford (1990) on the role of American women in the workforce during the war. For further references on this discussion, see Summers (2015); Hinton (2002) Thomas (1943); Pennington (2001); Summerfield (2013).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on women and wartime studies in China, see Han Hanan 韩贺南, Wang Xiangmei 王向梅, and Li Huibo 李慧波 (2015); Zhang (2015). For an oral account of women's experiences in the wartime city of Chongqing, see Li (2008). Norman Smith also examines the literary works of women writers in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation, revealing the intricate narrative of Chinese female writers and the cultural productions of the Japanese colonial regime. Both Smith and Li's studies illustrate how Chinese women expressed different facets of femininity in distinct regions during the War of Resistance, see Smith (2007).

<sup>5</sup> To analyze the Nanjing government's political agenda in order to shape a traditionalist image of women as the paradigmatic embodiment of the ideal female identity for Chinese women, see Xia Rong 夏蓉 (2010).

Women in the Red Cross not only tended to the wounded and comforted soldiers but also wrote letters for them and helped in the logistical coordination of relief work, raising support for the Chinese war effort through their propaganda and fundraising endeavors.

The paper examines the various prospects that were opened up for women through their involvement in the medical aspects of the wartime effort and in charitable fundraising campaigns, as facilitated by organizations such as the Red Cross. It also sheds light on the constraints that circumscribed the nature and scope of these possibilities. Specifically, nursing emerged as a means for women to participate in the public, national, and patriotic domains, by accentuating their perceived feminine qualities. They emerged as figures of synthesis between tradition and innovation: if on the one hand, they performed their work in military contexts among hundreds of men, on the other, they preserved the supposedly typically feminine traits of mothers and sisters, providing support and encouragement for all the people in need. These roles were viewed as ideally suited for women’s engagement in humanitarian efforts. The endorsement of such principles by female volunteers facilitated their involvement in activities that required compassion, empathy, and caregiving skills.

Using a variety of sources, including wartime magazines and newspapers, autobiographies, and biographies, archive history materials, and pictures of the time, the paper documents the autonomy and audacity of women like Zhou Meiyu, who put their medical expertise at the service of the nation and dedicate their efforts to the Chinese resistance cause. Through a critical analysis of these documents, the methodology reflects the multiple approaches women adopted in the organization in order to make their political rights in a framework where international connections were quickly increasing (Sluga 2013). My research is concerned with exploring the transnational connections that provided women with opportunities to participate in relief activities, specifically within the context of the Chinese Red Cross. A central aspect of my inquiry involves examining how these initiatives drew upon and reinforced the idea of feminine virtue, linking it with the nursing profession to create a powerful association between women, caregiving and fundraising campaigns. Through a detailed analysis of the strategies employed by both organizations and individuals operating within the specific national and local contexts of China, my aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the principal motivations and outcomes of the women within the Red Cross humanitarian efforts. This investigation holds significant potential for enhancing our comprehension of the complex and multifaceted interplay between gender and humanitarianism.

## 2. Nursing and caring for wounded: women's relief efforts at war

Despite considerable advancements in medical education and public health development during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937), the inadequacy of both the quantity and quality of trained medical personnel persisted. The Nanjing Central Military Medical School, for instance, had only a dozen female nurse training students on the eve of the conflict (Shan 1936). There were an estimated nine thousand doctors and five thousand nurses, many of whom were stuck in occupied areas with numerous schools and qualified hospitals.<sup>6</sup> Only five hundred doctors were available for the Red Cross medical relief initiative, and a mere fifty-four military hospitals were available, equipped with a limited number of beds. This posed a huge challenge to the Army Medical Service, which was tasked with providing healthcare to approximately five million soldiers (Zhang 2015: 51).

With the outbreak of the war in 1937, public discussions appearing in all the newspapers recognized that the hostilities between China and Japan had also special significance for women. *Funü shenghuo* 妇女生活 (“Women's life”), *Funü gongming* 妇女共鸣 (“Women's voices”) and *Zhanshi funü* 战时妇女 (“Wartime women”) invited them to join the war efforts, particularly in the sector of nursing and care of the wounded, where they acquired further scientific, social and cultural knowledge relating to this profession (*Zhazheng Yu Funü* 1940: 12). Nursing not only served as a vehicle to make women more professional, but it was also the channel through which they could fulfill their aspirations and contribute to the history of China. The high number of nurses consolidated this field as an almost exclusively female sector, at the same time the war was an opportunity to affirm and reconsider some assumptions about gender associated with this profession.

Individually or in local and provincial groups, women organized small female teams headed to the front to serve and educate soldiers. They provided first aid to the war wounded and taught the rural population the meaning of the war against Japan. These groups were formed by women activists such as He Xiangning 何香凝 (1878-1972), as mentioned before, but also Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1902-2000) and Hu Lanqi 胡兰畦 (1901-1994), among others, who mobilized civilian resources and gained support from ordinary Chinese.<sup>7</sup> As Eva Dykes Spicer reveals, the Women's Army “had great success in directly

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<sup>6</sup>For instance, preeminent medical establishments such as the Peking Union Medical School sustained operations in Beijing until the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. Despite the presence of a substantial number of PUMC medical personnel in the occupied areas, only a paltry thirty-six members affiliated with the institution were situated in Nationalist China. However, some of these individuals played an instrumental role in the provision of medical relief during the wartime period.

<sup>7</sup>Xie Bingying and Hu Lanqi organized small female teams to serve soldiers at the front and educate Chinese peasants in the rear. They led respectively the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps (*Hunan funü zhandi fuwutuan* 湖南妇女战地服务团) and the Shanghai Women's War Zone Service Corps (*Shanghai laodong funü zhandi fuwutuan* 上海劳动妇女战地服务团). They

connecting the soldiers and the people” (Spicer 1938: 8). These women demonstrated effective leadership in coordinating the peasant workforce to transport wounded soldiers to the receiving stations and undertook the task of mobilizing local communities to provide necessary resources such as food, water, and intelligence to the army. Xie Bingying, for instance, composed an essay titled “A Petition from the Wounded Soldiers” wherein she called on able-bodied medical personnel to offer their services to the army and implored women to procure necessary medical supplies like cloth dressings, cotton, iodine, and emergency kits for the wounded. Through her mobilization efforts, Xie aimed to cultivate a shared sense of national sentiment. She underscored the significance of collective action by stating:

The act of aiding the soldiers is tantamount to aiding the nation. The eradication of our nation would leave no room for individual existence. To protect our nation is to protect ourselves. Let us unite, my compatriots! We must stand up to safeguard the Chinese nation, which has a 5,000-year-old history (Xie 1981: 282).

Through the press, educated women discussed their duties as national citizens in the war. In her essay “This is What Women Should Prepare for the War” (*Funü de zhanshi zhunbei renwu* 妇女的战士准备人物), Cheng Cui specified that university scholars and female students, in particular, had to appeal to curriculum committees to include courses on warfare. Furthermore, schools had to organize rescue teams consisting of college students and send them to the front. Educated women were expected to contribute to national salvation by conducting propaganda work among civilians and in the army (Zhang 2015, 54). Volunteer nurses provided more than just bedside care, writing, for example, letters to family members in place of soldiers. Even the press repeatedly reported the phenomenon of educated women writing letters for illiterate soldiers. In addition, girl scouts brought food to soldiers when battles took place in the city, transporting the wounded back, while female students were called upon to make bandages for military hospitals. Charlie Zhang, who worked as a doctor for the Qilu Medical School and also for the Central School of the Medical Relief Corps recounted the roles women played in providing medical supplies for wounded soldiers during the Battle of Baoding (Zhang 1938, 468-69). He revealed women’s peculiar skills in performing this nursing and care work. The success of volunteer nursing at the outbreak of the war reflected a rapid response by civilian society in the face

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established a strong connection between the various women's groups and the army, mobilizing the support of the entire community. Their contribution proved to be indispensable in sustaining the army's wartime operations. See Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1985; 2001); Hu Lanqi 胡兰畦 (1987).

of the army's sacrifices and losses. Women's involvement in volunteer nursing during wartime was a form of collective action, which was made possible through the support and coordination of community organizations and government agencies. It also allowed them to contribute to the war effort while also challenging gender norms and stereotypes which considered them confined to the domestic sphere.

Despite the outstanding dedication of Chinese women in the nursing field, the medical care of the Chinese Army continued to suffer from inadequate medical care and scarce personnel reserves. The quantity and quality of their services remained meager and failed to meet the needs of the Army. The Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps (MRC) (*Zhongguo hong shizi hui jiuhu zong hui* 中国红十字会救护总会) was the most significant organization in sustaining military medical personnel preparation and in terms of medical assistance to Chinese troops (Watt 2004: 78). It was led by Dr. Lin Kesheng 林可勝 (1897-1969), a Singaporean medical doctor who coordinated the work of Chinese nurses and volunteer doctors (Zhang 2015: 65). MRC attracted the attention of many professional civilian specialists who perceived an opportunity to dedicate themselves to the Chinese resistance's cause through their medical expertise. Among them, women played the most important role in the face of Japanese war threats: they were hired from various areas to deal with numerous medical emergencies and were mainly sorted into Chinese garment stations, military hospitals and blood units. Nursing school graduates were involved in a nationally coordinated medical and rescue work program, but, in addition to government recruitment, the MRC attracted volunteers from middle and high schools. In addition, the Nationalist government's wartime conscription policy for medical personnel was a strategic measure aimed at optimizing the nation's healthcare resources to support the war effort. By mandating that medical and nursing graduates join either the army or civil medical service, the government sought to leverage their skills and expertise in the service of the nation. The policy granted a small percentage of exemptions to those who worked at their respective schools, however, the majority of graduates were deployed to the army's medical administration, the National Health Administration (NHA), or the Red Cross Relief Commission.<sup>8</sup> This allocation was determined based on the prevailing medical needs of the nation during the wartime period. For instance, the army's medical administration received the highest proportion of medical graduates, given the military's crucial role

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<sup>8</sup>The government's maintenance of records pertaining to high school students who underwent paramilitary nursing training in Nanjing demonstrates an interest in ensuring a steady supply of medical personnel for conscription purposes. However, the outbreak of war and resultant population displacement created significant challenges to enforcing conscription measures, as many individuals fled the city. This highlights the complex and fluid nature of wartime mobilization efforts, which require ongoing adaptation and flexibility in response to changing circumstances. See Zhang (2015).

in defending the nation against external threats. The distribution of midwifery school graduates to the National Health Administration was reflective of the pressing need for maternal and child health services (Tong 1943: 680).

Nursing school graduates were involved in a nationally coordinated medical and relief work program. In addition to government recruitment, the young students voluntarily responded to the call to join the medical staff. Zhou Meiyu 周美玉 (1910-2001), one of the most influential Chinese nurses of the early twentieth century, observed that female nurse students were even more excited to participate than male students (Pfeiff 2018: 157). Zhou was not the only one to notice the spontaneous participation of the students. On the eve of the fall of Changsha, on October 29, 1938, Phil Greene, a professor of the Yale-China Association at the Hsiang-Ya Medical School, wrote:

The city is moving fast. Our nurse students panicked and attacked for a few hours. The graduate nurses worked hard and the students came back [...] We are moving all those who want to go (Greene 1977: 111-112).

Zhou Meiyu joined the Medical Relief Corps and dedicated her life to serving the country as a nurse. She was notable for her lifelong dedication to public health and military assistance. As for her choice to become involved in public welfare, she explained that she was encouraged by Yan Yangchu's speech on the role rural people should play in strengthening China.<sup>9</sup> Yan believed that China's progress depended primarily on the improvement of rural society. Zhou “was deeply moved by Yan's ideals” and recognized the significant value of using her nursing training to work in the service of society through the establishment of public health programs in rural China (Zhang and Luo 1993: 11). During her service, she travelled extensively in the war zones of Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guanxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces, offering her expertise in preventive health care and nursing to the army medical services. She believed that by adopting adequate and preventive measures the Chinese Army would at least be protected from communicable diseases, a widespread problem among the troops at that time. Zhou, therefore, established a program in which nurses taught how to maintain hygiene and prepare food properly to prevent these infections. Throughout her extended tenure across multiple army divisions, she was astounded by the ineptitude and insufficiency displayed by the medical service and its personnel:

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<sup>9</sup> Yan Yangchu 晏陽初 (1893-1990), also known as James Yan, was an educator and social activist famous for his programs on mass education and rural reconstruction work in China and other several nations. See Hayford (1990).



Patients were lying on the ground in the Qianjiang camp hospital in Guangxi. We were told that more than a hundred patients died daily from dysentery and malaria [...] The patients did not receive proper attention or proper cleaning, some of them were lying on the excrement [...] (Zhang and Luo: 54-59)

Against this problematic background, the War Medical Office launched a series of training programs. The Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps played a significant role in supporting the training of military medical staff (Watt 2004: 78). It was particularly effective in establishing valuable experienced medical personnel as teachers or administrators in the new training programs (Zhang and Luo 1993: 43). Furthermore, the Emergency Medical Service Training School (EMSTS) was established as a collaboration between the Ministries of Military Affairs and the Department of the Interior in 1938, in response to the pressing need for a medical team during wartime. The school aimed to provide advanced technical training to the current medical staff in the army and to offer rapid training to newly recruited workers, in order to enhance their capacity to provide care in the war zone and Zhou Meiyu was appointed director of the Nursing Division (Tong 1943: 672). In Tuyunguan, Guizhou Province, the EMSTS provided an intensive training program for nurses, consisting of a comprehensive curriculum of 194 hours of instruction. The curriculum included various subjects such as sanitation, medicine, war nursing, military training, surgery, and organization of the medical Army and the Red Cross. The objective of this accelerated training program was to equip nurses with the essential technical skills necessary for their role in wartime medical relief efforts (Zhang 2015: 70). Nursing students who received this additional preparation were provided with employment positions affiliated to the National Health Administration as supervisors and directors of nurses in hospitals or operatives in Red Cross nursing, care, and prevention units. The teaching programs of this School were known for their emphasis on practical rather than theoretical courses. Zhou Meiyu and other nurses provided education on several crucial topics, including principles of diet, disinfection, sterilization, and isolation techniques for the treatment of communicable diseases. Additionally, they instructed their students on how to prepare operating rooms and emphasized the significance of maintaining personal hygiene. Upon completion of these classes, students were sent to wards and clinic specialists to practice professionally (Zhang and Luo 1993: 70-74).

Zhou was known for her determination and strong commitment to nursing education, recognizing the significant value of using her education to serve Chinese society through the establishment of public health programs in rural China. She was convinced that it was not only an affiliated field of medicine; instead, she sought to promote it as an important and fundamental element of a modern nation-state. Much of her efforts were devoted to improving the conditions of wartime nursing. She believed that nursing should not be considered a minor profession only for the female

majority working in it and, through her service, she defined a new identity for nurses. Her experience demonstrated how a Chinese woman could also become a member of the coordinating committee of the nursing department, which was subsidized by the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China, establishing a valid medical expert in the new education programs. After the war, in 1946, Zhou travelled with the help of the British United Aid to China to Britain and the United States and worked among the Chinese migrants to donate to the Red Cross Society of China. In 1947, she returned to Shanghai and became the commandant at the Army Nursing School in Shanghai. She moved with the Nationalist Party to Taiwan in 1949, where she became the director of the National Military Nursing Academy (Pfeiff 2018: 158). Zhou’s commitment to nursing administration and education in the army shows the attempt to establish authentic military nursing care. Her contributions highlight the importance of transcending gender barriers by actively engaging in humanitarian efforts for the Chinese resistance, despite the numerous obstacles that arose due to prevalent social prejudices and pervasive poverty during the war.

### 3. A call to action: supporting China through membership and collective donations

As the hostilities progressed, women in the Chinese Red Cross had already developed a considerably well-organized network and activities. Red Cross fundraising campaigns combined with the increase of new members who joined the organization were successful elements. This can be seen from the total amount of donations collected for the rescue operations; they were collected among the national and international population, thanks also to the efficient propaganda of Chinese newspapers, which periodically published the names of donors. Even in the editorial field, the Red Cross tried to increase donations and members. A series of publications, focusing on the themes of charity, blood donations, and the principles of the Red Cross, were printed by the major publishing houses of the time (Wang, Jiang and Sun 2004: 39). From now on, agencies started to use the media and advertising to leverage donors to expand their fundraising capacity. Women, in this context, became a means of mobilizing sympathy, thanks to which it was possible to increase the generosity of donors.



Figure 1. Donations from a foreigner (Guowen Zhoubao 1937: 14/48, 1937. <https://www.cnbksy.com/>).



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Several fundraising projects were established in those years in order to meet the critical medical emergencies and the unprecedented refugee problem. It was the case of the China Defense League (*Zhongguo fuli hui* 中国福利会), for instance, particularly important because it was chaired by one of the most influential women of the time, Song Qingling 宋庆龄 (1893-1981), widow of Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866-1925) and sister of Song Meiling 宋美龄 (1898-2003), wife of Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887-1975) (Epstein 1993, 437). The original Central Committee was Sino-British in composition, with Song Qingling as Chairman, Mrs. Hilda Selwyn-Clarke as Hon. Secretary, Mr. Norman France of Hong Kong

University as Hon. Treasurer, and Mr. John Leaning in charge of publicity. The two formulas which summarized the aims of the League were: “Aid to the areas of greatest need” and “Help China to help herself” (*Medical and Red Cross Relief*: 1942). It was established in Hong Kong in 1938 with the purpose of coordinating financial aid and helping refugees, orphans, and soldiers. The League's selection of fundraising projects aimed at soliciting funds from diverse sources such as Chinese communities overseas and within Hong Kong, was determined by this specific criterion. These projects included the Canadian-American Medical Unit under Dr. Norman Bethune; the Emergency Medical Training School of the Chinese Red Cross, under Dr. Robert Lim, which was recognized as the best Chinese effort in the field of medical relief and the most promising for the future; the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, with the hope they offered of a really permanent solution of the refugee problem by turning refugees into producers for the war effort; a series of Children’s Homes and educational institutions. At various times the China Defense League also organized its own transport of relief supplies, organizing convoys of truck-ambulances donated from abroad, chartering airplanes for urgent deliveries, such as vaccines, and so forth. In its fortnightly newsletters, annual reports, and occasional special pamphlets, the publications section of the Central Committee not only strove to give an up-to-date picture of China’s relief needs but constantly stressed the meaning of China’s fight against the world’s cause of resistance to tyranny and aggression (*Medical and Red Cross Relief* 1942).

Due to the considerable challenges encountered by Chinese Army medical services, such as a shortage of medical personnel and supplies, unsanitary conditions, and the prevalence of epidemics among soldiers, cooperation with Western supporters played an indispensable role in the delivery of medical assistance to the front line. In a letter from Hong Kong on September 4, 1941, retrieved in the *Foreign Office Files for China*, Song Qingling expressed her pleasant thoughts about establishing a British relief branch in Hong Kong to Sir Geoffry Northcote. At that time, he was the Governor of Hong Kong and together with Song Meiling, they were the patrons of the National Red Cross Society of China. Song Qingling wrote:

[...] All of us who are in the field of relief work for the cause of the Chinese people have admired the way in which British relief has continued in spite of the new situation brought about by the war in Europe. But from the viewpoint of organization, I heartily welcome the idea of co-ordinating and co-solidating the present British committees for China relief, as so admirably suggested by yourself and Sir Archibald lark Kerr. When the British Relief Council in Hong Kong is organized, I feel sure

that there will be a decided improvement in relief administration, which will further promote the friendship between our two countries (Song Qingling 04/09/1941) <sup>10</sup>

Song Qingling's endorsement of British relief efforts and call for improved relief administration adds an important perspective to the discourse on relief work during the Second World War. Her recognition of the potential for improved bilateral relations between Britain and China as a result of coordinated relief efforts underscores the broader significance of humanitarian aid in promoting diplomatic relations and cross-cultural exchange. Given Song Qingling's prominent role in advancing women's rights and social justice in China, her views on relief work and international cooperation also reflected a broader perspective on the importance of addressing social and economic inequalities through coordinated action and cooperation among nations. As such, her archival source provides a valuable historical record not only of relief activities during the Second World War but also of the broader social and political context in which such work took place.

Again, the news reported in *The Shanghai Times* in 1939 provides valuable historical insight into the international cooperation that took place during the Second World War to support relief efforts in China:

Chungking (Chongqing), Oct.27.- The Chinese Overseas Affairs Commission has received information that 11 British and French men and women doctors are arriving shortly to join the Chinese Red Cross. The report states that the British party left England from Liverpool while the French party boarded a steamer for China at Marseilles. The Commission has notified the headquarters of the Chinese Red Cross, which is at present located in Kweiyang (Guiyang), of the arrival of the party (*The Shanghai Times* 28/10/1939).

The report highlights the importance of medical expertise and support in relief efforts during the Second World War. The arrival of British and French doctors to join the Chinese Red Cross underlined the importance of international cooperation in the provision of aid and support in relief activities, emphasizing the global impact of the war. It suggested a recognition of the need for specialized medical skills and knowledge to address the unique challenges posed by the war in China. It also spoke to the important role of the Chinese Overseas Affairs Commission in facilitating international cooperation and coordination of relief work. By notifying the headquarters of the Chinese Red Cross of the arrival of the British and French doctors, the Commission helped to ensure that aid was effectively distributed and coordinated to meet the needs of those affected by the war. It was significant to consider the

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<sup>10</sup> See the letter from Song Qingling, Hong Kong, to Geoffry Northcote, Sept.4, 1941, "Red Cross Activities in China," 1941. Foreign Office Files for China, 1938-1948, FO/676/301. The National Archives, UK.

potential consequences of relying on foreign aid and support in situations such as this. Efforts were made to promote local capacity-building and empower communities to take charge of their own relief and recovery efforts, in line with the principles of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, it is worth noting that British women residing in Shanghai played a crucial role in the production of essential medical supplies such as wound dressings, bandages, garments, and quilts for the allied troops and war refugees. This contribution of British women to the war effort served as a testament to the transnational cooperation established throughout the war by women.



Figure 3. British Women at Work for the Red Cross (*The North-China Daily News*, October 6, 1939.

<https://www.cnbksy.com/>).

These pictures were taken on Wednesday at the British Women’s Association’s Headquarters where work was carried on by the Red Cross Section of the Hospital Aid Department from 9 am to 8 pm, the later session enabling business women to give their personal service. In the upper picture bandages are being measured out and cut. Below the women are seen using the special machines necessary to turn out the regulation roller bandages. In addition to the all-day-Wednesday work at Headquarters, the Red Cross Section has two parties working on Thursdays and Fridays at 1288 Bubbling Well Road, the residence of Mrs A.S. Henchman. Membership of these Western District working parties is now full, accommodation being limited. A further branching out is contemplated as necessity arises. (*The North-China Daily News*, 06/10/1939)

The upper picture shows individuals measuring and cutting bandages, while the lower picture depicts women using machines to create roller bandages that meet regulation standards. The caption provides a brief overview of the volunteer effort at the British Women's Association's Headquarters, indicating

that further expansion of the volunteer effort may be planned as needed. Indeed, the meticulous, accurate, and detailed work of women during times of war highlights their ability to actively participate and experience historical moments. Although this type of work may have echoed traditional gender roles, it was essential in providing the necessary support for continued survival. What is particularly noteworthy is the extent to which women were directly involved in the war effort; the recognition of the agency and autonomy of women in war challenged patriarchal narratives and uphold the importance of women's empowerment. As such, the documentation and recognition of their contributions to war efforts served as an important reminder of the need to broaden our understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the role that gender played in shaping historical narratives.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

When the war broke out, the Army Medical Service had to take care of about five million soldiers. In light of the challenging wartime conditions, the intervention of volunteers from humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross Society of China, was indispensable in ensuring the provision of aid to both soldiers and civilians alike. Notably, the involvement of women in humanitarian aid efforts such as nursing, caregiving, and fundraising campaigns during this period was instrumental in addressing the pressing needs of those affected by the war.

The period of the War of Resistance against Japan and the Second World War not only signed the main growth of global humanitarian initiatives but also witnessed important changes in gender relations, highlighting the slow increase of gender-sensitive policies in the Red Cross. The humanitarian work combined gendered dimensions on local, regional, national, and global scales. The cases shown in the paper are examples of how women's relief work, also inspired by the Western model of activism, served as a window through which gender shaped the meanings of emancipation, humanitarian aid, and nation-building in modern China while offering the opportunity to re-discuss the social values and traditional roles of women. It was not so much the ideological difference between the two regimes that exerted a great influence on women's war work, rather it was the cause of the resistance that drew them into relief activities. In accordance with Barnes' evaluation, the war obstructed the already-started careers of women, exemplified by the situation of unskilled voluntary nurses who joined the Red Cross to help their nation, without support from directors (Barnes 2012: 264). Restrictions imposed by traditions of Chinese society were reflected in the obstacles women encountered working as nurses or other supporting agents of the Red Cross. Following international

practices, the organization encouraged Chinese women’s participation and, some of them, as the story of Zhou Meiyu demonstrates, succeeded in obtaining high professional positions. However, their involvement in modern nursing remained low, although the history of the Chinese Red Cross depended on the contribution of women. Further comprehension of gender in the organization during wartime clarifies the multiple and complicated ways in which humanitarian aid contributed to reshaping social relations and gender representations on national, international, and transnational levels.

Women were pathbreakers in working alongside men in a military setting, as the paper highlights, but were also to some extent restricted by the traditional doctrine of femininity based on essentialist ideas about women’s caring roles. As such, these roles were viewed as ideally suited for women's engagement in humanitarian efforts. The endorsement of such principles by female volunteers facilitated their involvement in activities that required compassion, empathy, and caregiving skills. Moreover, the participation of women in humanitarian aid efforts was a reflection of their commitment to the cause and their ability to contribute to the war effort beyond traditional gender roles. However, this language of “motherhood” and “feminine care” only took them so far and was ultimately limited in the push for Chinese women’s gender equality, since it was deeply embedded in the notion that women have specific gendered attributes and responsibilities. Indeed, this was used as a double-edged sword, as it allowed for their participation as a reflection of their commitment to the cause while concurrently reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Whether their relative participation contributed to the emancipation process is an issue that still cannot be fully resolved. Humanitarian work provided women with a platform to challenge deeply ingrained gender norms and prejudices that impeded the progress of women's emancipation, resulting in several positive outcomes. However, despite their entry into the Red Cross and their active participation throughout the twentieth century, Chinese women remained subordinate to their male counterparts, adhering to the traditional Confucian gender roles and the prevailing male hierarchy of the time. Thus, stories of humanitarian organizations as depicted in the paper reflect how international policies and organizational structures of the time were by no means impartial, but rather relied heavily on gender and sexual distinctions. In an issue of *Shanghai Funü* 上海妇女 (Shanghai Women), Sun Li said that women's liberation would be achieved only after national liberation, and it was therefore essential to mobilize all the Chinese women not only for the common goal of winning the war but more importantly for the reconstruction of a modern nation-state (Sun 1938). The patriotic sentiment that arose with the beginning of the conflict mingled with women's demands from the various movements and associations instituted at that time. It became of greater importance than demands for emancipation and equal rights since national liberation was the common goal to be pursued. As a result,



claims on the part of women continued to be made and published in the newspapers, but always in second place to the national cause. Realizing that without achieving national salvation even women would never obtain those equal opportunities and emancipation, they put aside their interests to devote themselves completely to the cause of the resistance.

Despite the male-dominated culture during times of war, the women's lives stories narrated in the paper prove how they efficiently integrated into humanitarian efforts, going beyond traditional gender roles and challenging gender stereotypes and social norms that had traditionally restricted their participation in public life. Acknowledging the role of women in humanitarian aid during the wartime period is essential in gaining a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the critical role that gender plays in shaping historical narratives. The contribution they made certainly determined a social and cultural rebirth at the end of the conflict whose effects were multiplied up to the present day and can offer infinite opportunities for a rediscovery of any anthropological and sociological study.

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