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# AMERICAN WOMEN REFORMERS IN CHINA

and the Paradox of Internationalism,  
1910s-1930s

Louise Farnam, a graduate of Vassar and a PhD/MD from Yale, landed in China in the Autumn of 1921 filled with the idea that ‘a great and ancient cultured people were looking to me and my likes for instruction in some of the branches of Science which they had not happened to develop’ on their own.<sup>1</sup> From the mid 1910s on, and in particular after World War I, young college-educated women like Farnam took up careers in education and set sail for foreign countries under the auspices of organizations such as women’s foreign missionary societies and the YWCA.<sup>2</sup> The most popular destination for these women was China. Although they supposed China was out of step with the modern world, as such, they did have high hopes for China, its people, and its culture. Women like Farnham, in general, held fast to an internationalism based on the emerging then ideas of cultural relativism—a view that cultures should be understood on their own terms, rather than by the standards of others. These women thus saw their mission in China to be the enhancing of internationalism—a basis for the cross-fertilization of different cultures—by spreading democratic ideals through their educational projects there.

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1. Louise Farnam, ‘Memo in 1926,’ folder 132, box 66, Series 3, Record Unit 232, YRG 37, Yale-China Association Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

2. By the 1920s, the women’s missionary movement replaced the old slogan ‘Woman’s Work for Woman’ with that of ‘World Friendship.’ The ideas such as ‘World Friendship’ rooted in cultural relativism became influential in various women’s movements including the missionary movement (Robert, 1997: 273).

Such reform-minded female apostles of internationalism were often affiliated with schools of higher and professional learning for women, which had been established through the efforts of missionary women, many of whom had come to China in the late nineteenth century through the Student Volunteer Movement for the Foreign Mission (SVM).<sup>3</sup> With the increasing influence of the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the century, the SVM, along with other liberal Protestant groups, put emphasis on offering 'salvation through social, medical, and educational agencies' (Hutchinson, 1987: 111).<sup>4</sup> As part of this project, missionary women established educational institutions for women in China, most of which were modeled after schools in the US.<sup>5</sup> Reform-minded young American women joined these institutions as teachers and took part in educational enterprises to create the so-called 'New Chinese Women' who would venture out from the domestic sphere to become modern and independent, just like them.

Before setting sail, most of these American women reformers thought that China was a virgin land awaiting their modernizing touch. Yet, shortly after arriving in China, they discovered that the concept and the term of the New Woman (*xin nüxing*) had already made its way onto Chinese soil. For non-Western countries

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3. The Student Volunteer Movement for the Foreign Mission originated with the formation of the 'Mount Hermon Hundred,' under the influence of Dwight L. Moody in 1886. In cooperation with the college YMCA and YWCA, it went into full swing at the turn of the century. For the period 1886–1919, the Student Volunteer Movement had sent 8140 missionaries abroad and among them 2524 sailed for China (Philips, 1974; Lautz, 2009). About the activities by American missionary women in China, see Jane Hunter (1984); Gael Graham (1995); Kathleen L. Lodwick (1995); Carol C. Chin (2003: 327–52).

4. The SVM and Social Gospel movement differed in their views on millennialism—the former took premillennialism and the latter took postmillennialism—however, the lines between the two were blurred when the SVM shifted its emphasis on education and other human services (see: Tyrrell, 2010: 64).

5. Ginling College (Nanjing, 1915); Yenching Women's College (Beijing, 1920). It started as North China Women's College which began to offer college level courses from 1905; Hwa Nan College (Fozhou, 1909, Full college course was adopted in 1907); The North China Union Medical College for Women (Beijing, 1908); The Hackett Medical College for Women (Guangzhou, 1900); The Shanghai Christian Medical College for Women (Shanghai, 1924. It was established by uniting Mary Black Hospital in Suzhou and Margaret Williamson Hospital).

like China, the New Woman was a significant element in the drive toward modernization and, by absorbing and vernacularizing Western knowledge and ideas, Chinese intellectuals, students, and revolutionaries in fact sought to strengthen their country to thwart the encroaching Euro-American-Japanese imperial powers. With the ascent of anti-imperial movements in China, which led to the nationalist revolution in the mid-1920s, American women reformers went through events that shook their belief in the ideals of internationalism and subsequently altered the way they viewed their own country. This paper explores how they initially envisioned their role in China and how their views were connected to ideas of internationalism. It also investigates the ways their internationalism was linked to efforts at Americanization within the borders of the US, as well as the idea of 'progress' based on the notion of unilinear historical development. It was, by the way, the women reformers who held that the US was then in the vanguard of this development. The paper then shows how the basics of their educational projects were challenged by young Chinese people through movements of anti-imperialism and national salvation. It finally shows how American women reformers interpreted and articulated what was a historical turning point in US-China relations, as well as how their time in China transformed their understanding of the mission they were assigning to themselves along with their personalities.

#### INTERNATIONALISM, AMERICANIZATION, AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

After World War I, more and more college-educated American women set sail for China as teachers. One such figure, Margaret Speer, a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and a faculty member at Yenching Women's College, recalls that at the time '[g]oing to China was no big deal. I'd known many people who had gone. [China was a country] that was opening up, people coming and going, more contacts, so that it was far away but never struck me as being dangerous.' Speer also recalls that women like herself who went to China after the War grew up by inhaling 'a great feeling of internationalism' while at college (Bailey Speer, 1994: 5-6). After WWI broke out in Europe, internationalism was advocated more ardently as a peace-

ful means to make the world 'safe for democracy.' Accordingly, internationalism became a vogue among female college students, in particular at campuses of women's colleges in the Northeast. College educators like Ellen Pendleton, president of Wellesley college, took the lead in fostering the spirit of internationalism among students by linking promotion of higher education for women in the less 'advanced' countries and enhancement of internationalism in the world. She maintained: 'No American should fail to realize that a nation cannot rise above the level of its women and if, therefore, Japan, China, and India, are to take their proper places in the world fellowship of nations, their women must receive a higher education' (Pendleton, 1922: 4). Pendleton's comments here suggest that she supported the post World War I idea of educating women in the non-West, particularly Asia, which was very much in accord with the Wilsonian idea of national self-determination and internationalism.

Owing much to college educators like Pendleton, who declared 'Wellesley must not be provincial! Wellesley must develop citizens of the world,' many young women entertained high hopes of practicing internationalism by fulfilling the new role of the American woman in the world.<sup>6</sup> Some took careers in education and sailed for far-flung countries like China. For these reform-minded college-educated women, internationalism was an ideal for promoting world peace and friendship through mutual understanding. In this vein, Leila J. Rupp argues that internationalism championed in women's movements at that time was more 'a spirit rather than a formal ideology' (Rupp, 1997: 108). As suffrage movement leader Carrie Chapman Catt likewise points out, internationalism was 'a sentiment like love, or religion, or patriotism, which is to be experienced rather than defined in words.'<sup>7</sup> No matter if their internationalism appeared more existential than ideological, however, this kind of 'spirit' did not exist in a discursive vacuum. Instead, it shared the same discursive space with the dominant 'formal ideology,' and comprised a part of the new tenets of American national-

6. Louise Moore to Helen Davis, March 13, 1947, folder 3939, box 280A, RG11A, UBCHEA, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

7. Carrie Chapman Catt, 'Address,' IWSA 1909 Congress report, quoted in Leila J. Rupp (1997: 108).

ism to reorganize the United States and make its presence felt on the world stage at once. What might otherwise have seemed a form of innocent and 'unproblematic internationalism,' as Ian Tyrrell reminds us, also functioned as an 'extension of Anglo-American cultural hegemony' (Tyrrell, 1991: 7).

Within the circle of Progressive reformers in the United States, internationalism was conceived as the ideal of Americanization binding increasingly diverse constituents created by the continuous influx of immigrants into America. Those reformers who John Higham categorizes as 'international nationalists,' believed the immigrants' cultural heritage was a beneficial 'gift' through which the United States might enlarge and enrich its national character (Higham, 1988: 251). They thought that the tension between different nationalities within the immigrant community would be dissolved as the country moved to establish a new 'international nationality' of America (Shpak Lissak, 1989: 144).<sup>8</sup>

One such 'international nationalist,' Grace Abbot—a prominent social worker who began her career as a resident of Jane Adams' Hull House in Chicago—argued: 'We are many nationalities scattered across a continent...we are of many races and are related by the closest of human ties to all the world...here in the United States we have the opportunity of working out a democracy founded on internationalism.'<sup>9</sup> This domestic form of Americanization, which represented the reverse side of Americanizing the world through internationalism, for people like Abbott was a way to help achieve internationalism within the boundaries of the nation. In the words of John Higham, for liberal progressives Americanization was 'the domestic equivalent of a federated world' (Higham, 1988: 252).

The bond between Americanization and internationalism was the US's collective image of itself as an exceptional nation.<sup>10</sup> Since the early nineteenth century, according to Dorothy Ross, American

8. Their main concerns were, however, the immigrants from Europe and oftentimes the immigrants from non-European countries were left out from their perspective.

9. Grace Abbott, *Immigrant and the Community* (1917), quoted in Rivka Shpak Lissak (1989: 141–2).

10. For the connection between internationalism and American exceptionalism, see Ian Tyrrell (1991: 1052).

exceptionalism provided the logic for Americans to imagine their country as pursuing a utopian democratic course that was both different from Europe's ways and exemplary for the world (Ross, 1997: 42). By the turn of the twentieth century, however, a growing number of American intellectuals were forced to recognize that they were subject to the same historical forces that were contouring European liberal modernity. Progressive reformers thus revised the exceptionalist creed to reflect the idea that the United States was now spearheading world development at 'the modern forefront (or the quintessential center) of liberal change' so that 'universal progress was cast in specifically American shapes.' The advantage of this innovative viewpoint was that the United States could retain 'its exemplary or vanguard role in world history' (1997: 43). This sense of 'international nationalism' made the US 'uniquely qualified to realize both goals,' namely Americanization and increasing international influence. The US's 'universal ideals could be realized only through participation in the world community' (Higham, 1988: 252). In this sense, the enterprise of disentangling the chaos within its own borders and reorganizing American society was tied to US's vigorous engagement with the world.

It was in countries like China that the US's 'universal' ideals and culture as somehow beyond time and space were put to the test. In order to prove this 'universal' applicability of American ideals, internationally-minded women reformers took part in the project of transforming the world through the spreading of the social and cultural influence of the United States. They sought to create independent professional women like themselves, suggesting that what they envisioned as 'universal' ideals were in reality the values and standards of urban, middle-class America. Spontaneously and almost unconsciously, they shrouded the particular interests held among the socioeconomic group they belonged to under the cover of a 'universal' model applicable to the entire world, China included. Owing to this tacit identification of a 'universal' model with the ideals of middle-class liberal Americans, American women reformers could pursue their mission of spreading internationalism as a project based on humanitarian universalism. Moreover, their internationalism was not incompatible with nationalism. In fact, many of them saw nationalism

as a modern and healthy idea for all nations to earnestly embrace and develop. Margaret Moninger, a teacher in Hainan, for instance, insisted that 'China surely does need to educate her young [people] in the sprit of patriotism for its own sake.'<sup>11</sup> What Moninger and women like her did not realize was the fact that China already had developed a strong nationalism and was now moving onto a new phase which would expose the contradictions and hidden agenda of American internationalism.

#### AMERICAN WOMEN REFORMERS DURING THE NATIONALIST REVOLUTION IN CHINA

The momentum for the rise of anti-imperial nationalism in China emerged from the disillusionment with Wilsonian internationalism among Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries. The Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended World War I, acknowledged the independence of European nations only and denied independence to Asian and African nations. Such an arbitrary settlement revealed the unjust and racially discriminatory nature of the principle of self-determination—the foundation of Wilsonian internationalism. It was also out of disenchantment with the duplicity of the US and other western countries' diplomacy that anti-imperialistic movements rapidly spread throughout China, tackling also issues of cultural exploitation in addition to those of economic exploitation. For example, the Recovery of Educational Rights Movement took shape during the mid-1920s, a time when education came to be seen as a fundamental right in the new nation-state and a crucial means of spreading a national culture that could be shared by millions of Chinese. Aware of the importance of education, Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries began to criticize schools run by foreigners for inculcating characteristics and ideals of other nations into the youth of China and thereby depriving Chinese of their educational rights. Students, teachers, provincial officials, local leaders, and those concerned over the educational situation in China gathered in meetings and conferences dealing with educational issues. They discussed 'the educational work done by foreigners in China' and concluded it was 'a form of "coloniza-

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11. Quoted in Kathleen L. Lodwick (1995: 50–51).

tion” no matter how it might otherwise seem a form of ‘Charity.’<sup>12</sup> They expressed particular concern over the ‘de-nationalizing’ effect of education conducted by foreigners on Chinese students, by claiming that ‘students who have received education from the Japanese, British, Americans, French or Germans, will learn to love those nations and so will lose the spirit of national independence.’ They went on to condemn the educational work done by foreigners as ‘an interference with the educational rights of the nation’ and adopted resolutions calling for the return of control of education to Chinese hands.<sup>13</sup> Under such circumstances, American women’s educational enterprises, along with other foreign schools, came to be accused of operating in China as local branches of Western imperialism.

This development was, for many American women reformers, beyond credulity because they believed that their projects were helping to spread American democratic ideals and internationalism and were, as such, anything but tools of western imperialism. They even took critical positions toward some Westerners who had derogatory views of the Chinese people and their culture. For instance, Hyla Watters, a graduate of Smith College and an MD from Cornell, wrote that ‘[t]here is sometimes something to make one disgruntled, [and] here it often comes from the attitude of Westerns.’<sup>14</sup> She showed her disagreement with the views of some missionaries by observing that ‘[i]t astonished me how the very people who battled so valiantly against “idolatry” of unfamiliar Oriental kinds failed to see the incongruity when they set up other gods, in the shape of traditional dogmas.’<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Ruth Hemenway (b. 1894), an MD from Tufts Medical School, noted that ‘religion [in China] might be as good as mine in many ways, and even better for’ the Chinese people (Hemenway, 1977: 14–16). Women like Watters and Hemenway espoused the relativistic view of culture and though their interests were often

12. Resolutions of the National Federation of Provincial Education Associations of China (Gaiheng, Henan, 1924), listed in Xiao Hong Shen (1993: 277).

13. Resolutions of the National Federation of Provincial Education Associations of China (Gaiheng, Henan, 1924).

14. Hyla Watters to Family, October 4, 1925, folder 9, box 1, Hyla S Watters papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

15. Hyla Watters, Elsie H. Landstrom ed., *Hyla Doc*, 25.

limited to traditional arts and religion, they showed much respect for Chinese culture. In their eyes, the current situation appeared unreasonable and they thought Chinese people misunderstood the purpose and the character of their project. Margaret Speer, a teacher of Yenching Women's College, thus urged her peers in China to make clear to the Chinese public that 'our work is not in any way an agent of imperialism or an attempt to substitute Western religious superstitions for Chinese superstitions.'<sup>16</sup>

The problem was, however, more complicated than the simple issues of ethnocentricity or cultural relativism. Along with the rise of anti-imperialist movements, nationalist sentiment began to surge in China. As Anne McClintock argues, nationalism is 'radically constitutive of people's identities through social contests that are frequently violent and always gendered' (McClintock, 1995: 353). The identity of male Chinese, considered to have been emasculated by foreign imperial powers, came to increasingly assume a masculine tone so that a gender hierarchy could be preserved and sustained. Although many male intellectuals, revolutionaries, and students championed equality between men and women, often such claims were made in the context of national salvation. In spite of their public stance defending gender equality, Chinese men still required women to remain under their direct control; this helped ease their sense of inferiority provoked by the imperial powers and allowed them to create masculine identities focused on 'saving' their country and their women.

Under such conditions, American women teachers became the target of criticism by male Chinese students from nearby schools. Believing that American women teachers held Chinese female students in bondage and had estranged them from young Chinese men by discouraging marriage, some male students denounced American women teachers as foreign imperialists and feudal masters. At that time, there was a tendency among Chinese women to remain single because they saw the patriarchal family system as central to be changed so as for the old feudal way of life in China to be destroyed. A young female student, Zhang Ruoming, declared that 'in view of China's current situa-

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16. Margaret Speer to Family, December 20, 1925.

tion, the best thing for women intending to be at the vanguard of “women’s emancipation” is to stay single.’ She continued to say that the ‘crucial issue for “women’s emancipation” is obtaining education and achieving economic independence’ (Ruoming, 1981: 54).

American women teachers became role models for those Chinese women who sought independence. For example, Deng Yuzhi, a student at Ginling College who later became an industrial worker affiliated with the Shanghai YWCA, recalled that American teachers ‘earned their own salary and...were not married. [Yet] no one thought it was odd that they were single. People respected them because they could earn their own living....People wanted to be independent, and so did I’ (Honig, 1992: 128). In fact, members of the entire first class at Ginling College even made a group pledge to remain single. Xu Yizhen, one of the pledge members, recalled that ‘I loved to be alone. It was in general, the attitude of modern woman of our time. We called it singleness of purpose.’<sup>17</sup>

Such tendencies among female students were problematic for male Chinese students because celibacy became far more popular, especially among well-educated women, the very same kind of women who (by virtue of their class and upbringing) were supposed to be their prospective brides. For these young men, the probe of their wives was essential for their self-identification as modern enlightened men with an independent personhood. Their preference for equality on educational grounds was rooted in their aspiration to acquire a new identity as Chinese men no longer shackled by feudalism and able to serve and to save China (Glossner, 2002: 135, 139). Given their desire to have educated wives as proof of their own modern subjectivity as ‘enlightened’ Chinese men, they had a considerable stake in the character of education at the schools run by reform-minded American women reformers since at that time not many Chinese universities accepted female students. Even though female students at the institutions of American women reformers were perfect marriage candidates, their interest was directed at sights other than marriage. Male students often complained that the female students at the colleges like Ginling ‘were...too scholarly, too much

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17. Y. T. Zee (Xiu Yizhen) to Mary Lou, March 10, 1974, folder 3, box 145, RG8, China Record Project, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

interested in study' and 'were foreignized and not trained to make good wives.'<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in the eyes of male students, female students at the institutions of American women reformers did not appear keenly involved in pressing political issues that related to the strengthening of the nation and suspected that college authorities had forced Chinese female students into a kind of servitude. Yet, contrary to their suspicion, female students were as much concerned about the situation of their country as their male counterparts and were searching for ways to express their patriotism on their own terms.

At the educational institutions of American women reformers, students became increasingly sympathetic to the plight of the poor and the idea of socialism. Although as one faculty member of Yenching Women's College reported, the active communist members were 'not more than 2 or 3 percent of the whole,' more and more female students came to show serious concern about the lives of the poor, especially those in the countryside.<sup>19</sup> For instance, one student at Yenching asked the college for permission to live in a local village. The reason she gave was that she 'had no right to live in all the comforts which the College afforded the students [including herself] when the common people all about had so little.' In addition, she claimed that she wanted 'to share the life of the villagers' so as to prepare herself to work among them and understand the problems they were facing.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Chen Yachun from Shenyang expressed her eagerness to work with people in rural areas, pointing out that '[t]here are many ways to help China, but...the country people constitute more than 80% of the Chinese nation' and '[t]herefore rural service for country women is the work I am most interested in.'<sup>21</sup>

The enterprise of American women reformers was, however, not designed to train students for improving the lives of the deprived population in rural areas. Since their conscious goal was to create

18. Mrs Lawrence Thurston and Ruth M. Chester, *Ginling College*, 71.

19. Margaret Speer to Family, July 5, 1936, (1994: 186).

20. Lelia Hinckly, 'The Abolition of Concubinage,' May 30, 1930, China, World YWCA archives, Geneva.

21. Chen Yachun, Short autobiographical note, June 1937, folder 585, box 24, RG 11, UBCHEA, Special Collection, Yale Divinity Library.

urban middle-class professionals like themselves, it is no wonder that the kind of work carried out by American women reformers' institutions came under criticism. As one Chinese staff member at the YWCA national conference implored, they must now 'stop being a middle class organization!'<sup>22</sup> Naturally, this was not an opinion limited to this one voice but was also shared by other Chinese members. The characteristics of the institutions run by American women reformers, which they believed were promoting internationalism, now appeared to Chinese women as promoting not 'universal' but 'particular' interests.

#### AMERICAN WOMEN REFORMERS IN A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY

American women reformers ultimately had to confront the fact that young Chinese women were no longer tracing the path that they had carved out for them. This reality, coupled with the collapse of American capitalism by the Great Depression, gave rise to a deeper awareness as to the complexity of issues concerning women and helped influence the historical consciousness of many American women reformers in China. Lydia Johnson, a YWCA worker in Tianjin, noted that in general Americans were now experiencing 'a transition period, a time of profound and far-reaching change.' The change she perceived was the failure of the American creed, one significant backbone on which American women in China and their enterprises had been relying:

Gone is the frontier, with its traditions of independence and of individual freedom. Inadequate for the present day are old patterns of thought, built out of this individualistic frontier civilization. We are much less sure of our traditional convictions. Not only is the atom proving capable of being split, and time itself challenged by Mr. Einstein, but we are beginning to question seriously the time-honored bulwark of our economic structure, the capitalistic system and 'rights' of private property. Our 'rugged American individualism'...is being held up for critical examination.

In this age of confusion and disenchantment, Johnson also observed that 'Russia has ceased to be the nightmarish bogey...and [come

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22. *Green Year, Supplement*, YWCA of China, no. 13, October 20, 1927, 14.

instead to be] regarded more in her true role as a laboratory for a new economic system.' Johnson argued that this experiment in Russia was 'being watched, furtively or admiringly' and became a site to search for a remedy to US's blundered system.<sup>23</sup>

A few American women reformers in China even went to Russia to witness the experiment themselves. Among these was Minnie Vautrin, a sociology teacher at Ginling College. In Moscow she toured Russian educational institutions and a large silk factory which was managed by a woman. At this factory, she ate a meal in the common dining room with workers and saw a propaganda movie with them. She thought the movie was better than the crass movies she had seen in Shanghai (Hu, 2000: 48). In general Vautrin's impression of the ongoing experimentation in Russia was favorable. Likewise, Maud Russell, a YWCA worker, managed to come away with a favorable impression when she visited Moscow in 1932. Russians seemed to be filled with hope and freshness, compared with the somewhat disillusioned Americans who were not that 'new' any more. Accordingly, she wrote that 'Socialism is creating a new people here. I sometimes wonder if the early immigrants to the United States had this same feeling of hope for the world that one experiences living here.'<sup>24</sup> Her visit to Soviet Russia was, however, not for educational purposes only. Ding Shujing, general secretary of YWCA of China, asked Russell to observe the situation developing in Russia carefully. In her letter to Russell, Ding wrote that:

Your plan of the trip into Russia is exceedingly timely...I hope that during your stay you may find points of weakness and of strength in the Russian experiment so that China may perhaps avoid making similar ones in the inevitable and fundamental period of change in our economic structure which is already long over due. Our group is already deeply interested in this economic experiment in Russia and you may be assured of a very eager reception for any discoveries which you may make during your stay there.<sup>25</sup>

23. Lydia Johnson, 'A Letter from America,' May 30, 1932, Lydia Johnson Papers, China Country Files, World YWCA archives, Geneva. During the 1930s not a few Americans came to have an interest in Soviet Russia's experiment and Russia. For American intellectuals views toward Russia from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the World War Two, see David C. Engerman (2003).

24. Maud Russell to the Asilomar Division, May 31, 1932, box 3, Maud Russell Papers, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.

25. Letter of Maud Russell, June 1932, box 3, Maud Russell Papers, Manuscript

Russell faithfully carried out this mission, aware that the United States was no longer a beacon for the progress of the modern world or a desirable model for China's future. American women reformers were instead expected to bring into China 'new' ideas and practices not from their home country but from Russia.

Such a reality furthermore disturbed their own understanding of the United States, its place in the world, and their roles in China. Although American women reformers had earlier seen themselves as champions of internationalism and cultural relativism, they gradually became cognizant of the cultural divide between themselves and the Chinese. In this sense, Margaret Speer expressed her sense of distance between cultures and what she now saw as the futility of trying to bridge it:

I have realized more profoundly [now]...than at any time since my first months in China the waste that is inevitable because of the tremendous psychological barrier between the East and the West. The waste, I mean, in what any one Westerner can accomplish in China compared with what he could do in his own country. It is not simply a matter of language .... it is a yawning psychological gulf, so deep that it can never be filled up, so wide in parts that one cannot get over it at all.<sup>26</sup>

For Speer and others, this sense of being unable to bridge the cultural divide meant that China had not followed the American model. The idea of linear historical progress, which assumed China and others would simply follow the example put forth by the US came into question. In place of earlier narratives, conceptions of divergent civilizations and multiple roads of historical progress now came into vogue as young Chinese men and women struggled to define what kind of modernity their nation needed.

After World War I, along with intellectuals such as Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, many thinkers and writers in non-Western countries began to discuss and expand the concept of a plurality of civilizations as part of the larger critique of European (Western) civilization. These views regarded 'other civilizations...as (or nearly as) legitimate' as European civilization and undermined the basis of colonization by opening up new perspectives on the plurality

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Division, New York Public Library.

26. Margaret Speer to Family, December 29, 1935 (1994: 184).

of civilizations and historical development.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, these new standpoints captivated the minds of anti-imperialist nationalists in the non-Western countries. In China, the ideas of the plurality of civilizations were largely championed by male intellectuals. In the efforts of searching for a different course of historical progress grounded on China's particular culture and civilization, those intellectuals came to pronounce the demarcation between public and domestic spheres more clearly and advocate the innovated version of China's time-honored gender roles.<sup>28</sup> Such an attempt to restore the 'traditional' gender division helped to bolster confidence among China's male citizens on the one hand, but also raised the specter of Chinese women who wanted to become 'New Women' (*xin nǚxing*), that is, active female citizens of China who could contribute to their country through work and labor outside the domestic sphere. These women were thrust into a situation whereby they had to make the tough choice between the pursuit of their own liberation and dedication to national salvation. Ironically, they tried to resolve this dilemma by resorting to the male discourse of alternative civilizations, which put them in a tight spot.

Women like Zeng Baosun, founder and principal of Yifang girls' school in Changsha, insisted that 'it is necessary for the modern Chinese woman not to be de-nationalized but to have...a thorough knowledge of the culture and civilization of her own country' (Baosun, 1931: 243). The answer Zeng worked out stuck to the anchor of national culture put down by nationalist Chinese men. Chinese women needed to be moored in national culture in order not to drift about aimlessly. This emphasis on national culture furthermore encouraged Chinese women to lay stress upon the distinction between Chinese women and Western women. Wu Yifang,

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27. The new discourse of civilization, as Prasenjit Duara argues, was a transnational intellectual project. Prasenjit Duara, 'Introduction,' (2004: 11).

28. Chinese nationalists, much like the Indian nationalists Partha Chatterjee analyses, emphasized the distinction between 'the outer' (Western materialism, capitalism/modernity/male, and the public sphere) and 'the inner' (vernacular, spiritualism/tradition/female, and the domestic sphere). The discourse of alternative civilizations helped in countries like China to reconstruct masculine subjectivity in public space by reworking domestic/public dichotomy. See Partha Chatterjee (1993: 116–34).

the first Chinese president of Ginling College, declared that ‘unlike her American and European sisters, she [the Chinese woman] does not have to battle against opposition from members of the other sex’ (Ayscough, 1924: 99). While gender antagonism between Chinese men and women was put aside, differences between Western women and Chinese women became more discursively important, ultimately submerging women’s independence into national identity and creating a psychological gap between American women and Chinese women. Accordingly, in the eyes of Chinese women, American women no longer appeared as models to emulate or as a group that had a particular understanding of the Chinese people and their culture.

This view as to the limitations of American women in their capacity to have a true understanding of China, was held by Chen Hengzhe, a graduate of Vassar who served as a faculty member of Beijing University. In her critique of Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931), a Pulitzer prize-winning novel which stirred up controversy in China soon after its appearance, Chen maintained that ‘Mrs. Buck’s knowledge of the Chinese life is only the product of her own imagination,’ despite the fact that she grew up in China as a missionary’s daughter and was quite familiar with the language and customs of the land. Chen insisted that ‘[i]n spite of her long residence in China, Mrs. Buck seems to have held faithfully to her Teutonic tradition: she always keeps herself apart from the nation of which she writes, and never becomes a part of it.’ Chen concluded that regardless of ‘her abundant sympathy...the author of *The Good Earth* is, after all, a foreigner’ (Chen, 1931: 914–915).

Young Chinese women like Chen now saw how the West’s scheme of ‘imaginative geography’—in Edward Said’s term, the basic discursive mechanism of separating the Orient from the Occident—manufactured an image of China that justified the West’s dominance. Yet, this device, which westerners utilized to justify their *raison d’être* in China as tutors for China’s modern progress, could also be utilized by Chinese to delegitimize the Occident. The emerging ‘imaginative geography’ in China accentuated the differences between China and the West in order to highlight the inability of ‘foreigners’ to truly understand and solve the problems of China. Given this situation, American women reformers

in China increasingly felt the boundaries between China and the US getting tighter, and were no longer certain that internationalism could support their enterprises and activities in China. Ultimately, they began doubting whether it was worthwhile for them to stay in China and continue their enterprises.

Under such conditions, American women reformers lost their sense of mission in China. For them, the initial aspirations to promote internationalism now appeared to have been little more than a pipe dream. Along with the shattered dreams came also shattered views of their own country; they had once held that the United States was an exceptional nation which was exempt from both feudalism and imperialism and was at the vanguard of modern progress in the world. Based on this outlook, American women reformers had assumed the position of liberators by spreading American middle-class ideals under the guise of universal standards for modernity. This subject position of emancipatory agency was also tied closely to ideas of liberal progress: their views of history as linear progress undergirded their belief in American ideals as universal and underpinned the legitimacy of imperialism as a part of a worldwide 'civilizing mission.' What anti-imperialism movements in China challenged was this linear view of historical progress. Disillusioned by the moral superiority of the West and its model of progress and civilization, Chinese people began to seek the possibility of alternative paths of progress. As they began to turn away from the American model of modern progress, American women's enterprises became irrelevant to the future of China. Their enterprises were lost in oblivion and left out of the narratives of the national histories in both the United States and China. Although their experiences were not in any sense connected to the glorious declaration of the 'American century' in the mid-twentieth century, they illustrate some problematic aspects of American internationalism based on the concept of the United States as an exceptional country that leads historical progress toward a more peaceful and democratic world order.

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