Shaping modern nursing development in China before 1949

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Abstract

Nursing becoming a respectable, decent profession for educated Chinese women was a challenging undertaking. The early advancement of nursing in China was a collective effort of the missionary medicine, the private foundations, and the endurunce, dedication and hardworking of the Chinese as well as foreign nurses. Western missionary introduced modern nursing in China and laid the preliminary foundation for its development, while the upgrading of nursing education from training to higher learning was a contribution by the School of Nursing Peking Union Medical College (PUMC), envisioned and supported by the China Medical Board. Its state-of-the-art and visionary education model, the high standard and the initiatives in public health nursing, and the heroic and patriotic military nursing created by the PUMC’s outstanding graduates produced a cohort of leaders in nursing education and profession in China before 1949. All these efforts acting together shaped the modern nursing in China, leaving a great heritage to nursing education and practice to New China.

1. Emerging: missionary nurses, training schools, and the NAC

Nurse, as a profession in China, emerged much late than physicians. Western medicine was introduced into China by “the Jesuits in the sixteenth century and Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century” [1]. Missionaries brought modern western medicine to China as well as the facilities in which to practice medicine - mainly the hospitals. Peter Parker - “the first Protestant medical missionary, established his ophthalmology clinic in Canton in 1835. Western medicine has been practiced on these grounds continuously ever since …” [1] Since there was no such equivalence to hospitals in premodern period in China, the hospital - a foreign product that was novel to the Chinese culture, provided an arena for the practice of medicine and the care of the sick outside the family. The facilities - hospitals and clinics had tremendous impact on the emerging and evolution of the nurses and the profession in China.

On March 24, 1884, Elizabeth Mckechnie of the United States began to practice the Florence Nightingale systems of nursing at the West Gate Red House Hospital in Shanghai (later as Margaret Williamson Hospital西门妇婴医院), which marked the beginning of modern nursing in China [2]. Evelyn Lin (林斯馨) regarded the period from 1884 to 1904 to be the first period of nursing in China. In this infant period, many western missionary nurses played the predominant role in promoting the profession in China. Ella Johnson from Britain established the first training school for nurses in
connection with Liang Au Hospital Fukien in 1888, with two nurses in the first class [2]. Added to list of early contributors were Nina Gage, Cora E. Simpson, Alice Powell, Mary Hood, Jennie Magnet Logan, and etc. Missionary nurses from western countries were very dedicated to their nursing practice and in religious service; however, they were very small in number.

Therefore, in this first period, in order to obtain better service, missionary hospitals began to train poor Chinese to help the caring of the sick — usually the poor with limited education or even the illiterate, which made up of the majority of missionary doctors' clientele at their hospitals. A number of missionary hospitals developed affiliated training programs. In 1884, William Lockhart opened probably the first nursing training program at the Chinese Hospital in Shanghai. H.W. Bonne, director of the medical department at St. John's University in Shanghai, established another training program for nurses in 1887, with only two students in the first class, and one was a male student. At the turn of the 19th century, several other programs were established - in Shanghai in 1901, and in Canton, Hankow, and Chungking in 1902 respectively. The Union School of Nurses, which opened with a three-year training program in October 1906 as part of the Union Medical College (UMC) Peking - the predecessor of PUMC, enrolled only male students till July 1, 1915 when the China Medical Board (CMB) took over UMC.

Thanks to the vision and dedication from the foreign nurses and some leading medical figures in China, nursing kept moving steadily forward from 1904 to 1924, which Evelyn Lin regarded it as the second period in nursing development [2]. The programs during this period included such important ones as a three-year curriculum program at the Red Cross Hospital in Shanghai by Henry S. Houghton (later the director of PUMC in 1920) in 1914; a four-year program in Hsiang-ya (Yale -China) in 1911 by Edward H. Hume (胡美), as well as Sleeper Davis Hospital in Peking (北平美以美会妇婴医院).

The milestone in the advancement in this period was the establishment of the Nurses' Association of China (NAC, 中华护士会, the predecessor of Chinese Nursing Association) in 1909. Its establishment was of vital significance in scaling up the profession and standardizing the practice and education, as well as opening up the possibilities for Chinese women to become nurses. Cora E. Simpson (僧宝珠), superintendent at the Union Hospital of Christian University in Foochow (福州基督教协和医院) with great passion and devotion to nursing, was a key contributor to modern nursing in China, particularly to the establishment of NAC. In the first 20 years of NAC, the presidents of NAC were all foreign missionaresses, including Nina Gage (嘉氏周), the director from Hsiang-ya Nursing School (雅礼护病学校) who served as the president of NAC from 1912 to 1914 and president of the International Council of Nurses in 1925.

Before modern nursing practice was introduced, the care of the sick in China was the responsibilities of the family members or servants. Traditionally, it was not acceptable for females taking care of the male patients, because of the convention of no physical contact between men and women, women were not supposed to touch a man's body other than their husbands. This is one of the reasons why few nursing training schools of the first period recruited female nurses. In the fourth meeting of NAC held in Foochow in 1918, the issue that women could not care male patients were particularly discussed, and it was resolved that a foreign female nurse accompanied a Chinese women nurse to practice nursing in the male wards. This was a revolutionary historical breakthrough in modern nursing profession in China.

As the only national professional society for nurses, the functions of NAC included registration of nurses and nursing schools; organizing national examinations to nurses; compiling, translating, and revising textbooks for schools of nursing in China, and etc. In 1915, it gave the first examinations for nurses, developed curriculum standard and regulations of national examinations, and granted the first NAC diplomas to three students - two men and one woman who had passed the NAC examinations. Five years later, by 1920, 150 Chinese nurses had passed the examinations and received the diploma issued by NAC, and 183 foreign and Chinese nurses registered in 1920 [3]. In the same year, NAC supported the publication of the quarterly English and Chinese bilingual journal - Nursing Journal of China (《护士李报》).

2. Upgrading: the role of the Rockefeller Foundation and PUMC

The training schools for nurses in both periods were impossible to aim high at admission requirements, partly because nursing was too new for the Chinese at that time; partly because nursing was not considered a respectable job. It was very difficult to attract educated women from good families to become nurses. An article entitled “Living in Union Nursing School” published in 1944 [4] stated that the work of nurses was “cheap and is the servant work, and that a lively young woman should not bury her promising prospect in this kind of job.” Another article published on New Chongqing in 1948 claimed that “Few of us Chinese know the importance of nurses’ work, parents don’t want their children to study nursing, so every year nurses are produced, but only a couple are qualified.” [5].

The social background in China in the 1920s was not in favor of making nursing a respectable profession. In spite of the concurrent dramatic intellectual and social changes, as well as the efforts by the NAC and foreign nurses, the cultural norms, customs, women’s inferior social status, and the Chinese deep-rooted gender expectations for women narrowly confined their activities to the domestic lives and women had little chance to access to education. Therefore, it posed great challenges to the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and its affiliate - the China Medical Board (CMB), which aimed at advancing modern medicine in China and making nursing a profession for educated women from good families.

In 1914, the Rockefeller Foundation sent the First China Medical Commission to investigate medical practice and education in China. Three distinguished commissioners - Francis W. Peabody from Harvard University and Harry P. Judson - President of the University of Chicago and Roger S. Greene - Consul-General of the US at Hankow (汉口) wrote a report on medicine in China after they came back to the US. It included the following advice on nursing: first, providing dormitories in connection with schools for nurses; second, establishing scholarships for selected Chinese women to receive nurses’ training in the US who are “highly trained” and “become teachers of nursing and superintendents of hospitals”; third, translating textbooks on nursing into Chinese [6]. This report served as guideline and the roadmap to the Rockefeller Foundation’s medical philanthropic undertaking in China, which led to the establishment of the CMB which was specifically responsible for the establishment, funding and operation of PUMC including its nursing school.

Comparatively speaking, up till 1916, modern nursing had existed in China only for three decades, but the landscape of nursing had been formed which was not so far behind. According to John Bower, “The first preparatory course in the United States was developed at the Johns Hopkins Hospital School of Nursing in 1901. The first school of nursing in a university was established at Minnesota in 1909 with a three-year basic program. It was not until 1916, however, that a five-year degree program was introduced that placed equal emphasis on general and nursing education.” [7]

Thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation’s vision and support, just
four years later - on September 28th, 1920, China's first nursing program of higher learning - The Training School of Nurses of PUMC started to enroll its first students.

PUMC's nursing school shaped China's nursing development in different ways. The significance is more than the first college-level nursing program in China, its insistence on high standard and elite education for nursing teachers and leaders had far-reaching influence on the nursing profession and education in China. The Rockefeller Foundation and CMB were aiming very high - to build the best medical school with a teaching hospital and a nursing school, not only the best in China, but also comparable to the top European and American institutions. In 1917, the corner stone laying ceremony of PUMC was held, which marked the beginning of a brand new medical college, completely different from its predecessor - the UMC in Peking, which was a Christian medical school.

The high standard set up by the founder made it very difficult to find the suitable leaders and faculty with the caliber or qualifications that CMB envisioned for PUMC, even in the missionary hospitals or nursing schools in China. Aiming at building PUMC the Johns Hopkins in China, the CMB started to look for the right nurses in the US, targeting their eyes at the Johns Hopkins University. In June 1919, Anna Dryden Wolf, alumnae from Johns Hopkins University, was appointed by CMB as the first dean of the nursing school of PUMC. Together with 12 nurses from the US [8], she came to Peking and started a new episode in their career development and in nursing education in China.

It was PUMC that upgraded nursing education in China from training to the collegiate education. The school offered two programs: the three-year program with a diploma in nursing and a five-year one with a bachelor degree in science from Yenching University established in 1922. The program and the requirement for the nursing students stuck fast to the high standard, not inferior to that of the medical students of PUMC. The admission required 6 years of middle school and one-year prenursing course in the College of Natural Sciences at Yenching for the diploma program. For the degree program, the first two academic years were spent at Yenching in general education and selected courses in the physical and social sciences, followed by the basic sciences and clinical nursing in the third and fourth years at PUMC with a similar program structure to that of the medical school of PUMC. Later, the school began to enroll students from three other famous institutions: Ginling College in Nanking, Lingnan University in Canton, and Soochow University after the students finished the prenursing education there.

The high standard for enrolling the best nursing students guaranteed the quality of the program, living up to the expectation of the CMB - producing the cohort of nursing elite to lead nursing in China. In this aspect, the school was even more visionary than most of its contemporary counterparts in the US while they usually aimed at providing nursing service within hospitals. As John Bower wrote in his book: "Nursing at PUMC equaled or surpassed its leadership in the advancement of the profession of medicine." "The caliber of the nursing students matched that of the medical students; “excellent, conscientious, hardworking - so very bright.” “Self-discipline, strength of character, and total devotion to the call of nursing were other qualities inculcated in the students. The mutual admiration and respect generated between teachers and students, the excellence of the educational program, as well as the stimulating ambience of PUMC, made the nursing alumnae as devoted to the college as were the graduates in medicine." [7].

In 1924, the Training School of Nurses changed its name to the School of Nursing, and the leader was designated as “dean” as well as “superintendent of nurses” in the PUMC Hospital. The title change matched the collegiate level education of the nursing program. It also reflected PUMC's vision of keeping abreast with top standard in the world and upgrading nursing to a respectable profession for educated women. As with the medical program at PUMC, the nursing program was a truly international one in China. The first three deans and a cohort of outstanding faculty were from the United States. In PUMC's archive, there is a name list with 41 Chinese names for the foreign faculty in 1930. The high quality also attracted foreign students from Thailand, America, and other countries. Class 1926 had two foreign students: Svea A. Lindberg (りました雅), a Swedish by origin and Civilin Sinhanatra (沈德馨) from Thailand who, after graduated from PUMC, later became the director of McCormick Nursing School in Chiangmai, Thailand.

According to Mary B. Bullock, PUMC was the “American transplant of Johns Hopkins University”, however, the public health nursing program initiated by John Grant (兰安生) of Department of Hygiene and Public Health of PUMC in the Special Health Station at Nei Wu Bu Jie (内科鄙街) in 1925 was an innovative pioneer program in the world. At PUMC, public health nursing had always been the compulsory course for nursing students, and the fifth (degree program) and final year (diploma program) of the nursing program was divided between clinical practice, public health nursing, and electives. At the Health Station, the students engaged in health education and promotion for communities, schools, and nearby factories. They also provided preventive inoculation; educated pregnant women the knowledge about prenatal care, delivery and child rearing; taught children about hygiene, and etc. They went into household by household advocating hygiene and public health knowledge; gave lectures, and etc. The two distinguished nursing leaders Nieh Yu-chan (Vera, 胤禎) and Wang Xiuying (Servi-xing) were very active in public health nursing at the station when they were students. In 1924, the school had only one graduate, but in 1932, 17 of its total 39 graduates engaged in public health or midwifery [7]. Also, before 1949, PUMC offered post-graduate training in nursing, especially for public health nursing. From 1943 to 1948, the school admitted 55 postgraduate students to study at PUMC under the obligation that they must return to home institutions for service after they completed the 2 to 3 years courses at PUMC. 46 of the 55 trainees admitted to PUMC graduate training were in graduate public health nursing program. Additionally, from 1925 till 1951, the school enrolled over 1000 trainees of different level from different parts of the country and offered them training courses ranging from hospital nursing, nursing education, public health nursing, hospital dietary nursing to advanced courses for hospital nursing and public health specialized nursing [9].

The public health nursing program also yielded an unexpected result. While PUMC was widely criticized for its detached elite medical education, public health initiatives gave the students a chance to access to the grassroots of the society and to their daily lives; at the same time, the average urban community population in Peking was able to have access to the modern health knowledge and medical care targeted on them. In this way, it helped to counterbalance the accusation on PUMC's elite education.

PUMC's School of Nursing proved itself to be a top nursing school at that time, by keeping abreast with the state-of-the-art model and practice of nursing in the world, sticking to academic excellence and high standard, and by taking the advantage of the financial freedom backed up by the CMB (The budget for the School at its own disposal in 1935 amounted to U.S. $ 18,000) [10] as well as the best medical school that it affiliated to, it initiated innovative nursing programs in urban and rural community health care, engaged its faculty and students to training programs overseas, and created the international influence it envisioned that no other schools in China then had ever succeeded in obtaining.
3. Advancing and leading: the shift to the Chinese leadership

From 1920s, Chinese women began to be increasingly visible in leading the nursing profession and education in China, advancing the nursing undertaking in China by meeting the needs of the nation. The establishment of the Red Cross Society in 1904 and its relief work in famine, flood, and civil war necessitated the need for nurses. Wu Zheyi (Lilian Wu,伍哲英) became the first principal of school of nursing affiliated to the Red Cross Hospital opened in Shanghai in 1921. In 1928, she became the first Chinese President of NAC. From then on, NAC was headed by the Chinese nurses. Three PUMC alumni became the president for NAC before 1949: Evelyn Lin (class 1926) - president from 1936 to 1942, Hsu Ai-chu (徐蔼如 class 1930) - president from 1942 to 1946, and Nieh Yu-chan - president from 1946 to 1948. They headed NAC for a decade, which was conducive for the dissemination of PUMC model and high standard to all over China. In 1932, NAC joined the International Council of Nursing (ICN) and sent delegates to its each quadrennial meeting, where more and more Chinese nurses presented themselves in front of the international counterparts of the nursing society.

Influenced by PUMC people, the health administration leaders, represented by J. Heng Liu (刘瑞菊) of the Republic government gradually paid more attention on nursing and maternal health. In 1932, Central School of Nursing, Nanking (国立中央高级护士学校) was set up - the first nursing school established and run by the Chinese government. It was a first class school in China with an outstanding reputation for good teaching and living facilities and strong teaching faculty [11]. Besides, the Ministry of Health of the Republic government offered ten to fifteen scholarships each term to graduate nurses who studied the postgraduate course at the Central Public Health Station of Nanking.

In 1934, the Ministry of Education organized the Central Board of Nursing Education aiming at centralizing the nursing education and standardizing the national curriculum, and Nieh Yu-chuan was the first secretary to the Board [12]. The board replaced NAC’s function of setting the curriculum standard and compiling textbooks and syllabus. It sent out commissioners to each nursing school and facilitated the schools registration at the government. Also, the students had to pass the national qualification examinations given by the board when they graduated. By 1936, over 5000 nurses were granted diploma after they passed the national examinations and over 160 nursing schools were in the process of registration at Ministry of Education. This shows that the role of leading nursing training and education handed over to the Chinese and the professionalism of nursing was acknowledged on the national level.

Another example of the Chinese nurses leadership was demonstrated by the nursing programs in China’s rural areas. While PUMC enjoyed a superior and comfortable living and learning facilities supported by the CMB, its nursing program did not isolate itself in the ivory tower; on the contrary, it was actively involved in public health in urban and rural areas. The Dingxian rural health care program was established by a PUMC alumna C. C. Chen (陈志辉) and John Grant in Dingxian County, 258 km away from Beijing. Chou Mei-ju (周美玉), after graduated from PUMC in 1930, headed the public health nursing program at Dingxian, working with the Mass Education Movement, to which PUMC sent medical and nursing students to practice there. With the breakout of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, this program discontinued, but the Chinese nursing leaders’ strong sense of responsibilities in contributing to the nation continued.

As a representative, Chou also demonstrated her leadership and dedication to the establishment of military nursing in China. She joined the Emergency Medical Service Training School at Guiyang formed by PUMC faculty Lim Khosheng (Robert Lim林可胜), where she “trained all levels of health students, from ambulance workers to hospital orderlies to nurses.” In 1942, in order to meet the great need for emergency care, the alumni of PUMC school of nursing: Chou Meiyu, Hsu Ai-chu, and Chu Pi-hui (Bernice Chen-Chu朱碧辉, class 1926), “together with missionary nurse Cora Simpson, was struck to administer an NAC program to establish three new schools and to offer graduate studies ... On July 1, 1943, Chou helped to establish the first National Army Nursing School in Guiyang,...” [13]. She helped to train over 8000 emergency paramedics [14] during the war and was always respected and remembered as the “Mother of Army Nursing” in China.

During the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese nurse leaders, such as Chou Meiyu, Ai-ching Pao (Gertrude, 包艾晴 class 1929) and many other nurses began to stand at the frontline of serving the nation, and demonstrated their sacrifice and dedication to the emergency medical care, starting and shaping a new era in nursing history. In the fiercest Songhu battle (淞沪会战) in Shanghai between the Japanese and Chinese army, Chinese nurses played an important role in the most arduous emergency care, engaging in the nursing care for over 100,000 wounded in the 24 field hospitals. The wartime and public health initiatives gave the Chinese nurses a chance to demonstrate their capabilities in leading and innovating nursing in China. Leading by examples, they showed their devotion to the nation, their heroic efforts, their persistence, and fortitude, making great contribution to the Chinese nation.

4. Conclusion

Though started from scratch, modern nursing in China advanced steadily forward in the first half of the 20th century. The evolution of nursing profession was shaped and influenced by different contributors and factors at different stages. In the trajectory, the missionary western nurses introduced modern nursing into China and training Chinese to become nurses in Hospitals. They also established the professional society for nursing — the Nurses’ Association of China, so that the original landscape of nursing profession emerged and integrated into the modern medicine system in China.

The term “nursing” given to this profession reflected the adaptation of the modern medicine in China. The Chinese term “hu shi” (护理) was different from that of English concept of “nurse” which originated from Latin. The word “nurse” was introduced into the English language world in 1580, and was used to refer to “person who takes care of sick”. The Chinese term “hu shi” is also different from the Japanese translation of the English term (看護, かんごし Kangoshi), even though in some occasions the Japanese translation of it – Kango was used, as in the first translation of the title of NAC in Chinese (中国看護組織聯合会). In 1908, the NAC coined the term “hu shi”, using “shi” - a respectable term referring to a learned person in Chinese to name the practitioner in nursing [15].

Various efforts were made to upgrade nursing to a noble and respectable profession for educated Chinese women. The important contributions in shaping this noble and respectable profession at the critical period was made by the Rockefeller Foundation and its affiliate - the CMB, through the nursing program at PUMC and by upgrading the education to college level, insisting on the top standard of the School of Nursing – the programs, the facilities, the faculty and the students. The vision and mission of the school founder – producing teachers and leaders for China’s nursing education and service were realized. The most outstanding Chinese nursing leaders led and shaped nursing education, public health nursing and military nursing in China.

Nursing is very demanding profession for women, for its practice requires the practitioner to be competitive physically,
intellectually, emotionally with a sound training and education background in medical care. In the past century, modern nursing has been shaped by the dramatic changes of the Chinese society, while at the same time, as a profession predominantly for women, nursing has been shaping and influencing the Chinese perception on women’s role in the society, and contributed to uplifting the social status of women in China. In its over 100 years of history in China, the passion, dedication, leadership, endurance and hard-working of the foreign and the Chinese nurses made a history. Gertrude E. Hodgman - the third dean of the school “was uncompromising in her conviction that the education of nurses at PUMC must always stick to the highest standards.” She energetically continued the campaign initiated by Ann Wolf and Ruth Ingram (the second dean) to alter the Chinese concept of nursing as an impossible profession for women; she recalls it as her “greatest challenge” [16].

During the wartime, after the Japanese army occupied PUMC and the School closed, the first Chinese dean of the school - Nieh Yu-chan led ten PUMC nursing faculty members, marched 1000 miles and after two months’ journal of hardship and perilousness, arrived in Free China – Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and reopened the School of Nursing of PUMC there in fall 1943. As John Bower reflected on the underlining cause for this patriotic and heroic journey and discussed the reason why it did not happen to the medical school, he draw the conclusions as follows: “The medical staff was as patriotic and held an equal pride in the reputation of the college (PUMC). Some of the possible answers that have been suggested are: that the nurses were a more cohesive group; that Chinese women have an unusually strong character and strong will; and that there was no Vera Nieh to lead the medical faculty. Probably all three factors contributed to the brilliant performance of the School of Nursing during World War II” [16].

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2016.12.009.

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