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The “New Woman” in the Periodical Press: Portraying Usefulness at St. Stephen’s Girls’ College in Hong Kong, 1921-1941

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Abstract

This paper uses the writings of European teachers and Chinese students at St. Stephen’s Girls’ College in Hong Kong—published in English periodicals of its school magazine and local English newspapers—to examine how the school tactically positioned itself as an educational site for the “useful women of China” during a period in Republican China that was simultaneously defined as a time of “cosmopolitan modernity” and “national rebuilding.” St. Stephen’s brand of usefulness responded to the “New Woman” phenomenon in Republican China, and it was defined through the narrative of science learning and a sense of service. Through its progressive science curriculum and social service branch, the school helped prepare a class of “career women” for China. It was in educating this class that St. Stephen’s, in resonance with the colonial state, envisioned its role in the shaping of modern China.

Keywords: colonial Hong Kong; gender; girls’ education; periodicals; New Woman; Republican China

In 1929, a graduate of St. Stephen’s Girls’ College, working as a dental practitioner in Hong Kong, reflected on her experience in the profession:

I have had people who asked me the following questions often, through sheer curiosity I suppose, because lady dentists were practically unheard of before in China and I hope it was not with the intention to insult. “Can you ‘pull’ teeth with a small hand like yours?” I simply laughed and replied saying “oh, no I have got to use my feet besides!” and they knew that I was making fun of them and they could not help laughing. Then I explain to them that it is not so much the strength but the proper technic which accounts for the success in extraction... . It seems to me that there is a great field for women in dentistry, I mean to those who are inclined, as women are naturally gifted with a deeper sympathy and a

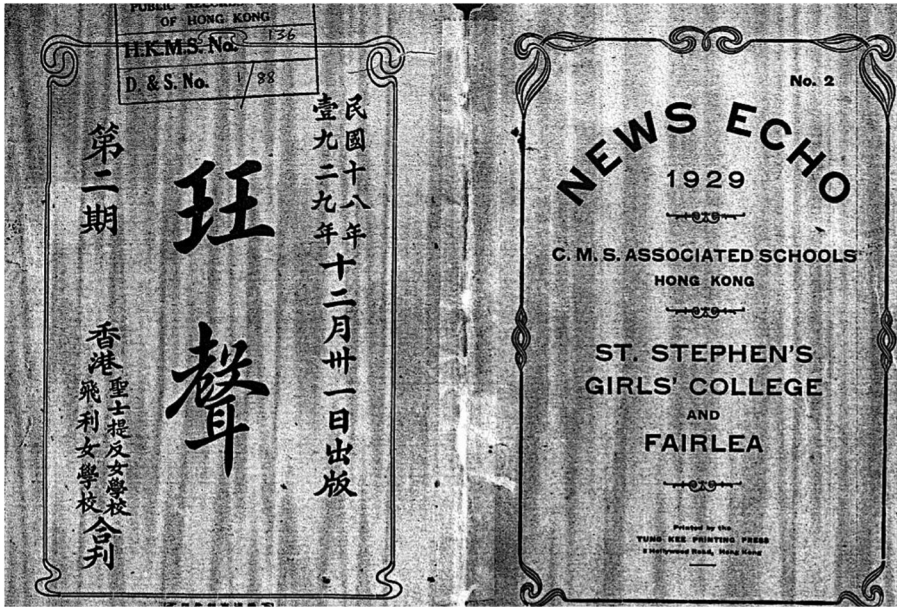


Figure 1. Cover of school magazine *News Echo*, 1929. Courtesy of St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hong Kong.

keener sense of touch, which qualities are so essential to a successful operator at the dental chair and especially when working with children.¹

School magazines and the public press were effective outlets that Chinese and European female professionals used to articulate new ideas regarding gendered professional and public engagement in interwar Hong Kong. In a period of burgeoning urban print culture where magazines, periodicals, and newspaper columns were increasingly created by and for Chinese girls and women, the literary space of print press circulated new ideas about women's urban lifestyle, social activities, public initiatives, professional aspirations, and educational possibilities.² In printing this extract, the school magazine provided a space in which a Chinese female dentist could define her own professional identity and respond to public stereotypes against female health care professionals (see figure 1).³ Writing for magazines and the public press thus became a means by which women could voice their perspectives and reflect on their broader roles in society. By

¹The reflection was published in the "Alumni Section" of the bilingual school magazine *News Echo*. "My Experience in Dentistry," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 8, file HKMS 136-1-88, Public Records Office of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Public Records Building, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China (hereafter PROHK).

²While historical studies on women and print media in colonial Hong Kong are rather scarce, a recent strand of scholarship exploring Chinese women and the print media in Republican China (1911-1949) offers useful insights on the circulation of women's magazines and periodicals in the treaty ports of China in the interwar period. See, for example, Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Oakland: California University Press, 2015).

³For a further discussion on the function of print in articulating new female professional identities, see Kristin E. Kondrlik, "Fractured Femininity and 'Fellow Feeling': Professional Identity in the *Magazine* of

expressing their viewpoints on women's social and professional engagement, female writers helped define and shape new ideas on women's usefulness in the public domain. As well, print offered a platform for its female writers to forge connections beyond the colonial territories. It allowed them to imagine new forms of usefulness.

This paper is focused on the literary space of English-language periodicals, examining how European female teachers and Chinese schoolgirls at St. Stephen's Girls' College deployed the bilingual school magazine *News Echo* and other local English newspapers such as the *China Mail*, *South China Morning Post*, *Hong Kong Telegraph*, and *Hong Kong Daily Press* (which routinely published school annual reports by government and grant-in-aid schools) to articulate in print new ideals of female usefulness in interwar Hong Kong that connected with the rebuilding of China.⁴ These ideals are discussed in relation to Chinese women's presence in higher education and their contribution to public affairs. The writings by teachers and students of St. Stephen's are read both as documents of everyday school life and changing schooling practices, and as sources of cultural imagining that actively constructed new forms and ideals of modern womanhood. Through the narration of European teachers and Chinese students in accounts of school events and daily activities, these writings portrayed the students as the "really healthy, sound minded, useful women of China."⁵ The medium of print served as a site of deliberate articulation of a branded image, an "ideal Chinese woman" that St. Stephen's sought to produce. It was a way to circulate new ideals of womanhood to middle- and upper-class English-speaking readers in Hong Kong, and thus gain broader resonance among the elite professional and intellectual classes of European and Chinese communities.

St. Stephen's brand of usefulness was in part an explicit response to the "New Woman" phenomenon in Republican China (1911-1949). As the historian Madeleine Y. Dong illustrates, Republican China was a site of cosmopolitan modernity marked by, among other trends, the establishment of the nuclear family as the norm; the advent of young women and men receiving education or joining the workforce in integrated public spaces away from their parents' homes; and the emergence of an urban culture targeting the young. It was the age of the "Modern Girl" and "New Woman," defined by mobility, adventure, openness, and experimentation. The modern feminine look was widely adopted by diverse groups of women, including high school and college students, professionals, and the young wives of the upper- and middle-classes. The image

the London School of Medicine for Women, 1895-1914," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2017), 488-516.

⁴A grant-in-aid school was one that received funding from the government in support of its operation and the construction of new school buildings. The grant-in-aid scheme in Hong Kong was first implemented in 1872, when a Grant Code was drawn up that offered funding support to missionary schools. In 1894, the Grant Code was further amended with a provision allowing building grants. "Education Department Hong Kong, Annual Report for 1938," 2, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, Hong Kong Government Reports Online (1842-1941), <https://sunzi.lib.hku.hk/hkgro/index.jsp> (hereafter HKGRO). HKGRO is a full-text image database providing online access to pre-World War II issues of four major government publications, namely Administrative Reports, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, the Hong Kong Hansard, and the Hong Kong Government Gazette. The grand-in-aid scheme is still in operation in Hong Kong in the present day.

⁵"A New Girls' School, Announcement at St. Stephen's Girls' Speech Day," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 28, 1919, 10.

was so prevalent that by the 1930s, the Modern Girl look had become a passport to opportunity and a requisite dress code for young female city dwellers.⁶ However, in a slight twist to the Modern Girl phenomenon that emerged in the heyday of interwar feminism and later gained global resonance in cities like Bombay, Tokyo, New York, and London (along with the rise of feminist civil society and women's suffrage movements, as well as the increasing participation of women in nationalist movements), the New Woman in the Republican China context was instead an invention of the male intellectual class.⁷ As Louise Edwards suggests, in the context of Republican China, the New Woman discourse revealed the reformist intellectual class's concerns about power and governance in modern China at a time when intellectuals were increasingly repressed and politically marginalized. Engagement and preoccupation with the attributes of modern women was in part an attempt by some reformist intellectuals to reclaim their roles as moral guardians and leading advisers for the nation.⁸ As a creature of the progressive intellectual class's political aspirations, the symbol of the New Woman was "part of a modernizing discourse that made possible the imagining of a new nation."⁹ She was to be politically aware, educated, independent, and patriotic.¹⁰ The historian Tani Barlow argues that as an invention of the male-dominated intellectual class, the Chinese New Woman had less potency for the women's rights' movement than she did with the nationalist project of state-building.¹¹

Social change had begun even prior to the mass circulation of the image of the New Woman in print media such as novels, magazines, periodicals, and newspapers. In the late decades of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), public engagement of Chinese women was already prominent.¹² This new public realm drew in the "new women"—students, teachers, suffragists, revolutionaries, writers, doctors, and other modern-educated professionals who emerged during this period. The spheres of their professional and public engagement included public schools, hospitals, feminist and patriotic associations, and business firms.¹³ Female professionalism played an important role in enabling Chinese women to reposition themselves and become effective public actors. Further, against

⁶Madeleine Y. Dong, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?," in *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 194–219.

⁷Rachel Leow, "Age as a Category of Gender Analysis: Servant Girls, Modern Girls, and Gender in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (Dec. 2012), 975–90.

⁸Louise Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," *Modern China* 26, no. 2 (April 2000), 115–47.

⁹Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman," 117.

¹⁰Sarah E. Stevens, "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China," *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 82–103.

¹¹Tani Barlow, "Theorizing Woman," in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 37–64.

¹²For a discussion on the New Woman in print media in Republican China, see Nanxiu Qian, Grace S. Fong, and Richard J. Smith, introduction to *Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China*, ed. Nanxiu Qian, Grace S. Fong, and Richard J. Smith (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 1–29.

¹³Xia Shi, *At Home in the World: Women and Charity in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2–4.

this backdrop of women's professional advancement, the public, private, and domestic spaces were being remade and rethought in early twentieth-century China.¹⁴

In Hong Kong, the interwar period was also marked by the rupture of the spatial divide between the domestic and the public that had traditionally defined women's usefulness. Resonating with the transnational wave of the women's movement, interwar Hong Kong witnessed the rise of Chinese women's associations, notably the Hong Kong Chinese Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), established in 1920.¹⁵ In the same year, the Girl Guide movement also started in Hong Kong.¹⁶ Just as these youth and women's associations increasingly brought Chinese girls and women into the public sphere, Chinese females also made their way into the professional realm. According to the 1921 Census, which documented the professional occupations of Chinese females in Hong Kong, there were 10 practicing dentists along with 20 doctors (specializing in Chinese medicine), 59 midwives, and 61 nurses. In addition, 67 women worked in the religious field, 73 were hospital attendants, and 324 were teachers.¹⁷ By 1931, numbers had increased: 7 were practicing physicians, with 27 dentists, 56 doctors (specializing in Chinese medicine), 177 midwives, 235 nurses, 435 in religion, and 866 teachers.¹⁸ The entry of Chinese women into professional careers was intricately connected with a colonial educational system that provided females with professional pathways in the form of higher education and specialized training.¹⁹ During this period, secondary girls' schooling and higher education forged a tighter connection as they responded to a shifting social demography of urban working women.

It is within the context of these new gender dynamics, both in Hong Kong and broadly in Republican China, that this paper examines the schooling practices at St. Stephen's and the new ideals of "useful woman" it produced. Staffed by a group of European professional women—many of whom were educated within the British Empire in places such as England and Australia—the mission school was undoubtedly influenced by women's activism and the progressive ideas of its English

¹⁴Shi, *At Home in the World*, 8.

¹⁵"Chinese YWCA, First Annual Meeting," *China Mail*, March 12, 1921, 1.

¹⁶"Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1920," 10, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO. The Girl Guide movement was officially started in England in 1909 by Boy Scouts' founder and imperial war hero Robert Baden-Powell, in a landscape of fear and frustration among the middle- and upper- classes concerning the blurring of gender ideals. The outbreak of the First World War opened up new spaces for Guides to perform their trained "character, handicraft, service for others, health and hygiene" in the outer sphere. By 1915, news of Girl Guides' active participation in the war relief scene travelled to Hong Kong when the newspaper the *China Mail* reported on the growth of the movement in the British empire, praising its "usefulness" in inculcating a sense of service. In 1920, Lady Stubbs (wife of Governor Sir Reginald Stubbs) accepted the Commissionership to lead the Girl Guide movement in Hong Kong. See "Girl Guide," *The China Mail*, Jan. 6, 1915, 5; "Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1923," 27, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO. For a history on the Girl Guide Movement in the British Empire, see Kristine Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

¹⁷"Report on the Census of the Colony of Hong Kong 1921," 216, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, HKGRO.

¹⁸"Report on the Census of the Colony of Hong Kong 1931," 183, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, HKGRO.

¹⁹For a discussion on gender, education, and professional development, see, for example, Ruth Watts, "Society, Education and the State: Gender Perspectives on an Old Debate," *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 1 (2013), 17–33.

and Australasian teaching staff.²⁰ However, as a Chinese elite-sponsored school, St. Stephen's also tactically reframed its purpose and function in the face of burgeoning Chinese nationalism in interwar Hong Kong.²¹ It is precisely because Hong Kong at this historical moment was sitting between two empires—each asserting a new identity—that St. Stephen's assumed a culturally fluid stance. One former empire, Republican China, had a weak central government and was multiply colonized, and in this period of weak political unity after the fall of the Qing Empire, nationalism or “national awakening” emerged as the primary construct around which people rebuilt their identity.²² The other empire, Great Britain, had just suffered a disastrous loss in the Boer War (1899–1902), which shook the confidence of the English urban elites and the middle classes about the empire's future. They feared and lamented that the once invincible empire was in decline.²³ In this turbulent context, the purpose and function of girls' education were reinvented to shore up nationalist and imperial agendas. St. Stephen's believed it was making a special contribution to the education of women in China, portraying its pupils as “girls of China” rather than “girls of the colony.” This framing also offers a tantalizing glimpse of the imperial moment of mission-run girls' schools in Hong Kong when missionaries—resonating with the colonial state—envisioned having a role in Republican China's modernization.

Hong Kong Chinese women's history is marginalized by both the “masculinist field of Chinese history” and the Euro-American-dominated fields of women's history and imperial history.²⁴ Living on the far edge of the British and the Chinese empires, Chinese women in colonial Hong Kong suffered from a multi-layered “regime of silence” that so often overlooked their existence and experience in, and contribution to, public affairs in Hong Kong, China, and the British Empire. In the field of education, the historian Patricia Chiu has examined girls' schooling in the early colonial decades of Hong Kong through the Victorian gender paradigm. Chiu shows that for an extended period in the nineteenth century, schooling practices in mission girls' schools were informed by the Victorian social understanding of gender that denoted a separate sphere for women.²⁵ The “accomplishments curriculum” was a common practice in state and grant-in-aid English girls' schools that ensured middle-class Chinese girls were educated in the skills that they could perform in the domestic sphere.

²⁰“School's Speech Day, Lady Caldecott Presents Prizes to St. Stephen's Girls,” *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 9, 1936, 10.

²¹For a discussion on interwar Hong Kong-China interaction, see John M. Carroll, *The Hong Kong-China Nexus: A Brief History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

²²Elizabeth LaCouture, *Dwelling in the World: Family, House, and Home in Tianjin, China, 1860–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 7.

²³As the historian Anna Davin suggests, the poor military performance of the British army in the Boer War dramatized fears of national inadequacy and exposed the poor health of the working class in Britain, from which were drawn both soldiers and sailors to defend the empire. The incident served as a catalyst for subsequent social reforms, launched in the name of national fitness, to revive a “wounded” empire. Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87–152.

²⁴For a discussion on the historiography of Chinese women's history, see LaCouture, *Dwelling in the World*, 8.

²⁵Patricia Pok-kwan Chiu, “A Position of Usefulness: Gendering History of Girls' Education in Colonial Hong Kong (1850s–1890s),” *History of Education* 37, no. 6 (2008), 789–805.

Performativity was an important aspect of gender, because refined femininity was considered performative of middle-class social status.²⁶ Training in feminine accomplishments was also instrumental in producing a particular form of urban domestic culture that marked colonial civility and respectability.²⁷ Despite the influence of the discourse of colonial domesticity on girls' education in Hong Kong, little study has focused on the impact of the nationalist discourse in shaping Chinese girls' schooling experience and career aspirations in interwar Hong Kong. Through a site-specific case study of one elite girls' school, this paper addresses the lacuna by examining how St. Stephen's strategically positioned itself as an educational site for the New Woman of China. St. Stephen's brand of usefulness was defined through the narrative of science learning and a sense of service. In framing St. Stephen's girls as the "useful women of China," the school simultaneously tapped into the nationalist sentiment of its elite Chinese sponsors and the imperial sentiment of the colonial state. English education for Chinese girls, this paper shows, was framed by the colonial authorities as an imperial project for the benefit of China. Such framing, in turn, allowed St. Stephen's to forge layered connections with the transnational women's networks in Republican China and the Church Missionary Society's South China Mission, as well as the educational network within the British Empire.²⁸ It is in the intersecting worlds of empires, transnational women's networks, and missions that St. Stephen's envisioned its role in the shaping of modern China.

A School to Educate the "Useful Women of China": The Founding of St. Stephen's Girls' College

At the turn of the twentieth century, after six decades under colonial rule, English schools for Chinese girls in Hong Kong emerged through a healthy collaboration between missionaries and the colonial state. The first government school for Chinese girls, the Central School for Girls (later renamed Belilios Public School), had been established on March 1, 1890. This marked the systematic involvement of the colonial state in girls' education. As the inspector of schools E. J. Eitel suggested, the curriculum at this school followed that of the public schools in England: course subjects included reading, arithmetic, English composition, grammar and analysis, geography, map drawing, history, and needlework.²⁹ Other influential missionary girls' schools

²⁶ A middle-class notion, domestic femininity in the Victorian period connected with industrial capitalism, which produced a new urban middle class and, subsequently, new gendered bodies. For further discussion, see, for example, Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

²⁷ For a detailed discussion on femininity and the accomplishment curriculum in a British colonial context, see Tim Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016).

²⁸ For a discussion on the place of Hong Kong in the CMS's South China Mission, see Peter Cunich, "Love and Revolution in South China: The Church Missionary Society and the 1911 Revolution," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 51 (2011), 143–69.

²⁹ In English schools, the instruction was in English. "Report of the Government Central School for Girls, 1890," 254, Hong Kong Government Gazette, HKGRO. As the first Headmistress of the Central School for Girls Miss Mary E. Ward suggested, the school was opened "for the purpose of providing an ordinary middle class English education for the daughters of European, Indian and Chinese residents in this Colony."

active in this period included the Diocesan Girls' School, the French Convent, and the Italian Convent. The Diocesan Girls' School, founded by the Anglican Church in 1860 for the care of girls of mixed parentage, later had a multiracial enrollment.³⁰ Similarly, the French Convent, founded by Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres in 1847 for European children, also later extended admission to multiple racial groups.³¹ In contrast, the pupils enrolled in the Italian Convent, founded by the Canossian Sisters of Charity in 1860, were chiefly Chinese and Portuguese.³² These English girls' schools (where the medium of instruction was English) educated a racially diverse but predominantly Chinese middle-class cohort.³³ By the early twentieth century, these schools featured a line of vocational training, preparing the future professional class by providing instruction in subjects such as typewriting, shorthand, accounting, and stenography, as well as first aid and home nursing.³⁴

The curriculum and the "socially mixed" character of these English girls' schools gradually dissatisfied the expectations of the Chinese elites. In 1901, a group of elites—led by Ho Kai (lawyer and merchant, key promoter of Western medicine and Western education among the Chinese), Wei Ayuk, Fung Wa Chun, Chan Tung Shang, Uen Lai Chun, Lo Kun Teng, S. W. Tso, and Wei On—petitioned the colonial state to establish a separate strand of upper-class English schools for their sons and daughters, stating that the English education offered by the state was insufficient and undesirable in its "intermingling of students from all social classes."³⁵ After the secretary of state for the colonies rejected the petition on the ground that such an institution would be "exclusionary" in character, the group approached the Church Missionary Society of England (CMS).³⁶ With the promise of financial backing from the Chinese elites (who played a prominent part in the official and business life of Hong Kong), in 1903, the CMS founded St. Stephen's College (for boys), and in 1906, St. Stephen's Girls' College.³⁷

The staff in 1890 consisted of an English trained certified mistress, an assistant mistress (Chinese), and a teacher of Chinese. In the first month 34 pupils were enrolled, and at the end of December, 1890 there were 45 children in regular attendance. "Report of the Government Central School for Girls, 1890," 147, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO. By 1899, the school had an average daily attendance of 591. "Report of the Inspector of Schools for 1899," 495, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO.

³⁰"Diocesan Girls' School, Lady Caldecott Distributes Prizes," *China Mail*, Jan. 16, 1937, 4.

³¹"French Convent School, Prize Distribution," *China Mail*, Jan. 31, 1917, 4.

³²"Italian Convent Prize Giving," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Feb. 28, 1933, 7.

³³For a discussion on the multicultural experience at urban English girls' schools in colonial Hong Kong, see Patricia P. K. Chiu, "The Making of Accomplished Women: English Education for Girls in Colonial Hong Kong, 1890s-1940s," in *Meeting Place: Encounters across Cultures in Hong Kong, 1841-1984*, ed. Elizabeth Sinn and Christopher Munn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 64-86.

³⁴For a discussion on girls' vocational education in interwar Hong Kong, see Stella Meng Wang, "Shifting Spaces of Femininity: Everyday Life of Girl Guides in Hong Kong, 1921-1941," in *Femininity and the History of Women's Education: Shifting the Frame*, ed. Tim Allender and Stephanie Spencer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 119-49.

³⁵"A Petition for the Establishment of a High School for Chinese," Appendix A, in "Report of the Committee on Education, 1902," 519-27, *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, HKGRO.

³⁶Chiu, "The Making of Accomplished Women."

³⁷For the promise of financial backing, see "St. Stephen's Girls' College, Laying the Foundation Stone," *South China Morning Post*, April 8, 1922, 10. For the founding dates mentioned above, see "St. Stephen's

From its inception, St. Stephen's Girls' College was branded by the CMS as a site to inculcate "morality, modesty, and true womanliness" through its unique approach of instilling Western civility in the students while simultaneously preserving their Chinese cultural character. The aim of the college was to "conserve and stimulate all that is noblest and best in the character of Chinese young ladies, and at the same time to provide for them an excellent modern education under the direction of experienced English ladies. Hence while they are instructed in Western science and arts they are required to hold on to their own national good manners and propriety."³⁸

This emphasis on "holding on" to Chinese culture was in stark contrast with other English girls' schools that discounted Chinese traditions of learning.³⁹ Referring to St. Stephen's, Gerard Heath Lander, the bishop of Victoria from 1907 to 1920, further stated that Chinese girls "would be given a first-class education, based upon a Christian morality. It would conserve their Chinese good manners and propriety. Although the society [CMS] taught English, it did not desire to Anglicise the pupils, or to unfit them for any society in the Empire of China to which, in the days to come, they might be called."⁴⁰

The purpose of the school, as it was framed by the CMS and the bishop of Victoria, was to prepare Chinese girls to serve in China. In so doing, St. Stephen's became a site where the CMS envisioned and exercised its broader role in the modernization of Republican China. The school consisted of three divisions: kindergarten, preparatory school, and the girls' college. In the girls' college, according to a prospectus for the school from 1913, subjects taught in the morning classes included scripture, English, reading and recitation, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, history, geography, hygiene, nature study, singing, Swedish drill, and drawing. In the afternoon, lessons were given in Chinese language and literature, needlework, music, and extra English for pupils preparing for the Oxford Local Examination (the official school-leaving examination before 1915).⁴¹ To accommodate the students coming from various parts of China and from overseas (such as the Straits Settlements), boarding quarters were established and managed by four English ladies and one Chinese matron.⁴² The first girl boarder came from Canton.⁴³ Later, the school also attracted boarders from Swatow, Amoy,

Girls' School, Annual Prize Distribution," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Jan. 13, 1909, 2. St. Stephen's Girls' College remains active today.

³⁸"Prospectus of St. Stephen's Girls' College, 1909," 1, CMS source file, G1/CH 1/O 1909/72. Published on *Hong Kong Memory*, https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/education/All_Items/PreWarEdu_Prints/201303/t20130311_57555.html.

³⁹At the Diocesan Girls' School, for example, no teaching was given in Chinese until the 1930s, and the school was "as like an English school as possible." Chiu, "The Making of Accomplished Women," 75.

⁴⁰"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Prize Distribution," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 13, 1909, 10.

⁴¹"Prospectus of St. Stephen's Girls' College, 1913," 2, CMS source file, G1_X_g1_3Prospectus. Published on *Hong Kong Memory*, https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/education/All_Items/PreWarEdu_Prints/201303/t20130311_57539.html?f=classinfo&cp=章程&ep=Prospectus&path=../All_Items/.8178/8844/8854/8856/index.html. For details on the change to the school-leaving exam, see "Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1915," 21, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO.

⁴²"Alumni News," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 11, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

⁴³"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Opening of New Building, Education in China," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 26, 1924, 9.

and Foochow, as well as from far distances such as Formosa, Peking, and Tientsin.⁴⁴ By 1913, the college already had seventeen boarders and eighty-eight day pupils.⁴⁵

Before being added to the grant-in-aid school list in 1924, the college was a self-supporting mission school fully funded by Chinese elites (who were also parents of the school pupils).⁴⁶ The CMS provided the school principal, while the daily operation of the school fell under the management of a local council (also being referred to as the “college council” or “school council”). The council was composed of both Chinese and European members, drawn from the educational sphere of Hong Kong or as prominent public figures.⁴⁷ Past school council members included, for example, the bishop of Victoria, Rt. Rev. C. R. Duppy (serving as bishop 1920-1932 and acting as council chairman 1926-1932), the governor’s wife, Lady Clementi (a member in the late 1920s), and Dr. S. W. T’so, a distinguished Hong Kong lawyer and advocate for modern education. Dr. T’so was one of the founders of St. Stephen’s Boys’ College and St. Stephen’s Girls’ College and a member of the Board of Education, among his other educational positions. He served on St. Stephen’s school council between 1906 and 1945.⁴⁸

The teaching force comprised both English and Chinese staff.⁴⁹ The school principal served in the traveling network of teachers in the CMS South China Mission, and often would go on to teach in South China after Hong Kong. For example, Miss Griffin, who served as principal of St. Stephen’s between 1915 and 1921, later acted as principal of St. Hilda’s School, Canton.⁵⁰ The English teaching staff were recruited upon graduating from college. In 1925, for example, the school welcomed the arrival of Miss Pope, “who brings with her the healthy traditions of Roedean School and English University life.” Miss Vincent who received her B. A. from Westfield College, University of London, and Miss Wise, who received her B.A. from Sydney University, also joined the staff.⁵¹ On the side of the Chinese staff, many were “old girls” (alumnae) of St. Stephen’s returning to teach after their university studies.⁵² Additionally, the school had a Director of Chinese Studies who oversaw the classes in Chinese language and literature from kindergarten

⁴⁴For boarders from Swatow, see “St. Stephen’s Girls’ College, Annual Prize Distribution,” *South China Morning Post*, Dec. 23, 1913, 7. For boarders from Amoy and Foochow, see “My School Days at St. Stephen’s,” *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 4, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK. For boarders from far distances such as Formosa, Peking, and Tientsin, see “Speech Day, St. Stephen’s Girls’ College Function,” *South China Morning Post*, March 17, 1926, 3.

⁴⁵“St. Stephen’s Girls’ College, Annual Prize Distribution,” 7.

⁴⁶Details in “St. Stephen’s Girls School, Annual Prize Distribution,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Jan. 13, 1909, 2; “Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1924,” 5, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO.

⁴⁷“Hong Kong Schools,” *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 31, 1921, 12.

⁴⁸For a detailed list of St. Stephen’s school council members, see Kathleen E. Barker, *Change and Continuity: A History of St. Stephen’s Girls’ College, 1906-1996* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2021), 356–59.

⁴⁹Details in “St. Stephen’s Girls School, Annual Prize Distribution,” 2; “Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1924,” 5.

⁵⁰“St. Stephen’s Girls’ College, Opening of New Building, Education in China,” 9.

⁵¹“St. Stephen’s Girls’ School, Presentation to Archdeacon Barnett, Annual Distribution of Prize,” *South China Morning Post*, March 2, 1925, 9.

⁵²“St. Stephen’s Year, Mrs. Borrett Presents Certificates,” *South China Morning Post*, Feb. 10, 1934, 10.

to matriculation standard, which for an extended period over the interwar years was supervised by Mr. Lo Kwan-sheung.⁵³ The teaching staff were part of the wider professional network of European and Chinese teachers working in China and the Far East. Many of the staff who worked at St. Stephen's would have working experience in other parts of China. For example, in 1928, during a staff shortage, Miss Pim from the Kwangsi-Hunan Mission (in South China) assisted at the school.⁵⁴ The following year, Miss Mannett came to work at St. Stephen's from Shanghai, but was all too quickly recalled back to her important work in Chengtu University, Szechuan.⁵⁵

As women's professional and educational mobility rose as a transnational and global phenomenon in the interwar period, St. Stephen's was further integrated into this broader educational and professional exchange.⁵⁶ By recruiting the "new women" educated in the universities in Hong Kong, China, and overseas, and working through them to devise a progressive science curriculum that connected St. Stephen's with higher education, the school helped prepare a generation of accomplished Chinese women who later ventured into the interior of China, building careers in modern education, medicine, commerce, and transportation.⁵⁷ The "career women" that St. Stephen's helped to produce, in turn, allowed the school to define its role in the shaping of modern China.

Chinese Women in Higher Education: Curriculum Changes and Alumnae Activities at St. Stephen's, 1921-1941

As educational exchange and mobility became a global phenomenon in the early twentieth century, the education of Chinese girls in interwar Hong Kong came in constant dialogue with women's education in Republican China. With regard to higher education, as the historian Paul Bailey shows, the May Fourth Movement (emerging in 1919 and extending into the early 1920s) was a landmark moment that shaped the educational landscape of Chinese women. In May 1919, the first official higher education institution for Chinese women, the Peking Women's Higher Normal School, was established. This supplemented the previous Euro-American mission-run universities such as Yenching Women's University in Peking (established in 1908), Huanan Women's University in Foochow (1914), and Ginling Women's University in Nanking (1915).⁵⁸ While the attendance of women constituted less than 10 percent of the total enrollment of university students in the Republican period,⁵⁹ it was the gradual

⁵³"St. Stephen's Girls' College, A Year of Progress despite Great Difficulties," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 18, 1928, 12; "Greetings," *News Echo*, no. 5 (1932), 1, file HKMS 136-1-9, PROHK.

⁵⁴"St. Stephen's Girls' College, A Year of Progress Despite Great Difficulties," 12.

⁵⁵"Good Year's Work, Speech Day at St. Stephen's Girls' College," *South China Morning Post*, Feb. 2, 1929, 9.

⁵⁶For a discussion on women's transnational mobility in the early twentieth century, see Ulrike Lindner and Dörte Ler, eds., *New Perspectives on the History of Gender and Empire: Comparative and Global Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁵⁷"Alumni News," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 9-11, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

⁵⁸Paul J. Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women's Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 108.

⁵⁹Bailey, *Gender and Education in China*, 109.

growth in enrollment that indicated the expansion of their education, as well their own changing attitudes toward higher education. Following the May Fourth Movement in 1920, a group of female students became the first to attend a state co-ed university in Republican China, with nine students from cities across the country enrolling at Peking University to audit a number of courses.⁶⁰

Also in 1920, St. Stephen's Girls' College made its first appeal to Hong Kong University (HKU, established in 1912) to open its doors to women.⁶¹ The following year, HKU began to officially admit women students.⁶² By 1922, HKU had received its first woman undergraduate from China, who received accommodations at St. Stephen's.⁶³ Altogether, the university admitted four women students that year.⁶⁴ In a commencement address the vice-chancellor of HKU, Sir William Brunyate, declared that women university graduates would be an asset to China, and that "there can be no doubt that China offers almost limitless scope for women doctors."⁶⁵ This imperial mindset, that HKU was educating a stream of doctors and engineers for the benefit of China, was indeed inscribed in the founding logic of the university. As the historian Peter Cunich suggests, HKU was born out of the "pragmatic desires of the Chinese elite and the informal imperial ideals of the governor [Sir Frederick Lugard]." Lugard framed the university as an "imperial" project for the benefit of China.⁶⁶ The comments by the director of education, E. Irving, upon the opening of the university also aligned with this view: "As the University is only just founded we cannot tell where the students will go after graduating, but it is expected that they will become engineers and doctors on the Coast and later in China itself. The Arts students will most probably enter the Chinese Government Service."⁶⁷

In fact, even before the founding of HKU, Hong Kong had been educating a stream of students who showed promise of becoming the "architects" of modern China. As the historian Ng Lun Ngai-Ha demonstrates, the English education offered in Anglo-Chinese schools in Hong Kong produced not only the leading citizens of the local community but also a generation of Western-educated young men who went to China to work in civil services. They were instrumental in establishing modern welfare, engineering, and medicine, as well as modern communication and transportation (such as rail transport) in China.⁶⁸ This is in part why the historian John Carroll suggests Hong Kong played a crucial role in China's nation-building from the late Qing dynasty and throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to working in China

⁶⁰Bailey, *Gender and Education in China*, 106.

⁶¹"Need for a Women's Hostel," *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 30, 1928, 9.

⁶²"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Speech Day," *China Mail*, Jan. 19, 1922, 8.

⁶³"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Laying the Foundation Stone," *South China Morning Post*, April 8, 1922, 10.

⁶⁴"University of Hong Kong, Conferring of Degree," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 12, 1922, 7.

⁶⁵"University of Hong Kong, Conferring of Degree."

⁶⁶Peter Cunich, "Making Space for Higher Education in Colonial Hong Kong, 1887-1913," in *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940*, ed. Laura Victoir and Victor Zatssepine (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 181–205; quote on p. 199.

⁶⁷"Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1912," 14, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO.

⁶⁸Ng Lun Ngai-Ha, "The Role of Hong Kong Educated Chinese in the Shaping of Modern China," *Modern Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 (1983), 137–63.

as lawyers, teachers, doctors, scientists, and engineers that helped to build China's modern infrastructure, Hong Kong-educated Chinese also donated heavily to philanthropic, educational, medical, and public works projects in their native districts. By the early 1900s, Hong Kong was also the principal connecting point and remittance center for overseas Chinese, mobilizing the flow of funds, goods, and people between South China and North America, Australia, South America, and other parts of the world.⁶⁹

Just as the male intellectuals and professionals educated in Hong Kong took up a larger role in the shaping of modern China, the unprecedented attention to women's education in Republican China also sparked new conversations and exchange between Hong Kong and mainland China. It opened up a space for new imperial imaginings. On April 7, 1922, while laying the foundation stone of the new college site of St. Stephen's, the prince of Wales made a public speech about girls' education in Hong Kong, stating, "In the present day there is doubtless a call on educated women to play a larger part in the life of China. They can do much to develop the position of women, and I trust the aims of the College may receive a full measure of success... It is hoped that many of the girls will subsequently enter upon the University career."⁷⁰

Women's education in Hong Kong, as it was framed by the prince of Wales and other colonial authorities, functioned as a means to help China to progress. By invoking women's role in the national project of the rebuilding of China, such framing resonated with the New Woman discourse. As the historian Sarah E. Stevens suggests, the New Woman, as a cultural figure, highlights the transformation of "a backward or bourgeoisie woman into a New Woman, who stands for the nation and its quest for modernity," thus representing the necessary transformation of the Chinese nation. The vision for this transformation to modernity was essentially that it would occur through Western science.⁷¹ At St. Stephen's, it was the school's progressive science curriculum that marked it as a pioneering site for the modern education of Chinese women.

St. Stephen's School Curriculum and Higher Education

Women in China had already begun to study overseas during the final years of the Qing dynasty. Between the 1880s and 1890s, under the sponsorship of missionaries, four Chinese women went to the United States to train as doctors. By 1911, there were a reported fifty Chinese female students in the US.⁷² In Hong Kong, it was also around this period that St. Stephen's sent its first candidate, Wan Suk Ching, daughter

⁶⁹John M. Carroll, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Difference: Reassessing the Role of Hong Kong in Modern Chinese History," *Chinese Historical Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 92–104. For a discussion on Hong Kong as a connecting point between South China and the wider world, see, for example, Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Sinn, "Hong Kong as an In-Between Place in the Chinese Diaspora, 1849–1939," in *Connecting Seas and Connected Ocean Rims: Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migrations from the 1830s to the 1930s*, ed. Donna R. Gabaccia and Dirk Hoerder (Boston: Brill, 2011), 225–47.

⁷⁰The full speech was published in *News Echo*, no. 8 (1936), 1, file HKMS-136-1-90, PROHK; "St. Stephen's Girls' College, Laying the Foundation Stone, Prince of Wales Performs the Ceremony," *South China Morning Post*, April, 10, 1922, 21.

⁷¹Stevens, "Figuring Modernity."

⁷²Bailey, *Gender and Education in China*, 35.

of Dr. Wan Tuen Mo, for the Oxford Local Examination. Miss Wan succeeded as the first Chinese girl to pass the Oxford examination in Hong Kong, and was awarded an Associate of Arts degree at Oxford.⁷³ This early instance of higher education exchange, in which Chinese girls pursued university studies in the US and England, was partly the result of the restrictive admission of women at local universities in Hong Kong and China. After the opening of HKU and its subsequent decision to begin admitting women students, schools in Hong Kong began to undergo curriculum changes that prepared Chinese girls for the Hong Kong Matriculation exam, which had replaced the Oxford Local Examination.⁷⁴ At St. Stephen's, a year after HKU began officially admitting women students, the headmistress, Miss Middleton-Smith, added a matriculation class to the courses after noticing the curriculum had not been systematically changed.⁷⁵ While these curriculum changes were incremental at first, it nonetheless made St. Stephen's the main feeder of women students to HKU. By 1924, the school had already sent five pupils to HKU: three were studying medicine, one was studying education, and one engineering.⁷⁶ Partly owing to its geographic proximity to the university, St. Stephen's also established a women's hostel for female university students.⁷⁷ By 1928, with more and more St. Stephen's pupils moving on to the university to study medicine, Miss Atkins, the new headmistress, indicated the school was planning to build a new wing that would include a science laboratory to prepare pupils "more adequately for the higher work they must undertake" at the university.⁷⁸ In 1929, the new wing was completed, with an art room, a covered playground, and a science laboratory for physics and chemistry.⁷⁹ The project was funded by Chinese elites (as early as 1919, a Chinese Building Fund Committee, led by Sir Robert Ho Tung as chairman, Dr. S. W. Ts'o as secretary, and Mr. Kwok Siu Lau as treasurer, was established to take care of funding St. Stephen's new buildings).⁸⁰ The following year, the school secured the service of Miss F. B. Wood, BSc, who traveled from England to teach botany, physics, and chemistry.⁸¹ Later, the school recruited two more female science teachers from Australia: Miss Blanchett and Miss Macindoe.⁸² St. Stephen's science teachers were well-qualified university graduates. For example, the science teaching staff during the interwar years included Mrs. Chung, an HKU graduate, and Dr. Feng of Foochow University.⁸³

During this period, the St. Stephen's administration framed the teaching of science as a building block for modern learning that would serve the goal of rebuilding China.

⁷³"St. Stephen's Girls School, Annual Prize Distribution," 2; "My School Days at St. Stephen's," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 4, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

⁷⁴"Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1915," 21.

⁷⁵"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Speech Day," 8.

⁷⁶"Interesting Ceremony at St. Stephen's Girls' College," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Jan. 26, 1924, 5.

⁷⁷"My School Days at St. Stephen's," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 4, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

⁷⁸"St. Stephen's, Speech Day at Girls' School," *China Mail*, Jan. 18, 1928, 3; "St. Stephen's Girls' School, Annual Prize Giving," *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 18, 1928, 12.

⁷⁹"Good Year's Work, Speech Day at St. Stephen's Girls' College," 24.

⁸⁰"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Opening of New Building, Education in China," 9.

⁸¹"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Distribution of Cups and Certificates," *China Mail*, Feb. 5, 1931, 7.

⁸²"School's Speech Day, Lady Caldecott Presents Prizes to St. Stephen's Girls," 10.

⁸³"Reminder to Students, Must Prepare to Withstand Modern Barbarism," *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 7, 1937, 7.

As the headmistress Miss Atkins suggested in 1931, “New China has been passing through the destructive stage of her progress and is still in need of constructive thought and ability. In the casting away of the old and the putting on of the new, what standards ought to be used? Surely those of truth and reason, and it is in the experimental work of the laboratory and in the hours of communion with God of truth that those standards will be tested and proved.”⁸⁴

Although St. Stephen’s emphasized the role of missionaries, at the same time it nonetheless strategically positioned the science curriculum and the experimental work of the laboratory as the key to modern learning. The school magazine *News Echo* also published articles on the value of science subjects during this period. As early as 1929, the magazine published an article by HKU lecturer G. A. C. Herklots advocating for the learning of botany at girls’ schools. The article promoted botany as a subject for boys and girls in all schools because it would train pupils to “perceive the essentials of a problem ... to arrange thoughts and actions in a logical manner.”⁸⁵ By 1934, a more progressive division of science learning had emerged at St. Stephen’s. In the upper school (for senior students), the morning classes included scripture, arithmetic, mathematics, English literature, history, geography, physics, chemistry, botany, hygiene, drawing, and singing. In the lower school (for junior students), the morning subjects included scripture, arithmetic, English (conversation, composition, and grammar), science, history, geography, drawing, reading, gymnastics, and nature study.⁸⁶ For purposes of observation and experiment and as part of the science curriculum, St. Stephen’s pupils also visited sites of scientific and engineering interest, including the dairy farm at Pokfulam, the commercial press printing works at North Point, the water works, the Kai Tak aerodrome, and the observatory.⁸⁷

In adapting the school curriculum for higher education purposes, St. Stephen’s helped prepare a generation of women for universities throughout China. Apart from St. Stephen’s being the main feeder of HKU (by 1930, twenty-four girls from St. Stephen’s had entered HKU), its pupils were found studying in universities in all parts of China.⁸⁸ In 1937, for example, three St. Stephen’s girls passed the admission examination to St. John’s University, Shanghai; one pupil went on to take a special physical training course in Ginling College, Nanking; and three others enrolled at Lingnam University, Canton.⁸⁹ The following year, St. Stephen’s pupils entered Lingnam, Yenching (a university in Peking), and Ginling.⁹⁰ The year after that, St. Stephen’s pupils also entered the National Southwest Associated University

⁸⁴“Girls’ College Prize Day, St. Stephen’s Students Receives Awards from Lady Peel,” *South China Morning Post*, Feb. 5, 1931, 14.

⁸⁵“The Value of Botany as a School Subject,” *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 15, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

⁸⁶“Prospectus of St Stephen’s Girls’ College and Fairlea School, 1934,” 6, file HKMS 138/1/151, PROHK. The afternoon session was devoted to the study of classical and modern Chinese literature, history, and composition.

⁸⁷“School’s Speech Day, Lady Caldecott Presents Prizes to St. Stephen’s Girls,” 10.

⁸⁸“Advice to Girl Student, Lady Clementi Extols Nursing Work at College Function,” *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 17, 1930, 11.

⁸⁹“Reminder to Students, Must Prepare to Withstand Modern Barbarism,” 7.

⁹⁰“St. Stephen’s Girls’ College Speech Day,” *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Oct. 19, 1938, 8.



Figure 2. Miss Baxter (center) and students at St. Stephen's Hostel, Hong Kong, 1936-1938, which since 1922 had been an off-campus residence provided by St. Stephen's Girls' College for women students at the University of Hong Kong. Courtesy of St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hong Kong.

in Kunming.⁹¹ Ultimately, this generation of university women would become the “career women” in Hong Kong and China. They immersed themselves in medical and health work, in social work (taking positions in the Society for the Protection of Children and the YWCA), and in education.⁹² As they became headmistresses, teachers, doctors, engineers, clerks, nurses, and social workers, working and living throughout China and in many other parts of the world, they helped interweave St. Stephen's into the broader educational and professional networks of women who contributed to the modern enterprises of education, medicine, commerce, and philanthropy (see figure 2).⁹³

Alumnae Activities at St. Stephen's: Careers in Hong Kong and China

The Modern Girl phenomenon brought women's presence into cosmopolitan professional and public space.⁹⁴ In the eyes of their Republican contemporaries, women's professional aspirations were signs of their desire for financial independence, adventure, greater autonomy over their own lives, and increased mobility in both urban and rural areas.⁹⁵ As the modernization of China was increasingly imagined through the

⁹¹“St. Stephen's School, Fine Record Outlined at Annual Speech Day,” *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 20, 1939, 14.

⁹²“St. Stephen's School, Fine Record Outlined at Annual Speech Day.”

⁹³“St. Stephen's Girls' School, Presentation to Archdeacon Barnett, Annual Distribution of Prize,” 9.

⁹⁴For a discussion on debates regarding gender and women in Republican China, see Paul J. Bailey, *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).”

⁹⁵Dong, “Who is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?”

cultural figure of the modern woman, women's professional choices began to operate as a matter of political significance and public interest.⁹⁶ This broader context also affected the career aspirations of Chinese women outside China.

As hopes for national progress came to be increasingly centered on “properly” educated Chinese women, a generation of St. Stephen's alumnae took girls' education into their own hands.⁹⁷ Acting as headmistresses and teachers in girls' schools in Hong Kong and China, they saw themselves as both guardians and pioneers of modern education for Chinese girls. As early as 1922, the headmistress Miss Middleton-Smith shared that “quite a large number [of students] are continuing their studies in America,” and that a few would be returning to Hong Kong upon graduation to open schools for girls.⁹⁸ This early generation of Chinese women university graduates returning from overseas were instrumental in bringing progressive educational ideas as well as new forms of women's public engagement back to China. As the historian Marie Sandell shows, in the early twentieth century, a class of highly educated elite Chinese girls pursued their higher education in the West. Influenced by the women's movement during their university study, this cohort started and led women's organizations upon their return to China.⁹⁹ Higher education for Chinese women, both overseas and domestic, thus allowed women to reposition themselves and become effective public actors. Equipping the next generation of Chinese girls for their larger role in the nation-rebuilding project was one of the women's goals. At St. Stephen's, Rose Hing Huen Tan, editor of the “Alumni Section” of the school magazine *News Echo*, reported in 1929 that Mrs. Chan Wing Shen, a graduate of St. Stephen's, had just founded the Lop Shuet Girls' School at Kai Tack Bund, Kowloon City. Miss Tan emphasized,

It has long been Mrs. Chan's cherished hope to establish an adequate institution for girls living on the mainland—adequate in meeting the needs of Chinese girls of today who, with the steady rise of women's influence and participation in the Nation's welfare, governmental, social, economic, and educational, must be adequately prepared for this change. With this in mind, the founder has carefully made up a curriculum that gives every pupil a sound foundation of general knowledge on the one hand and a thorough preparation for advanced education on the other.¹⁰⁰

For Mrs. Chan and her colleagues, education for Chinese girls needed to be pragmatic and adequate for preparing them for the newly reconfigured professional and public domain in Republican China. The modern and progressive educational ideas Chinese women received at St. Stephen's would find their usefulness in a diverse array of professions including modern education, medicine, telecommunication, and transportation. As the school magazine reported, that same year, in Hong Kong three

⁹⁶Sanjay Seth, “Nationalism, Modernity, and the ‘Woman Question’ in India and China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 2 (May 2013), 273–97.

⁹⁷Seth, “Nationalism, Modernity and the ‘Woman Question’ in India and China.”

⁹⁸“St. Stephen's Girls' College, Speech Day,” 8.

⁹⁹Marie Sandell, “Learning in and from the West: International Students and International Women's Organisations in the Interwar Period,” *History of Education* 44, no. 1 (2015), 5–24.

¹⁰⁰“Alumni Section,” *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 3, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

St. Stephen's alumnae (Doris Leung, Li Luk Wa, and Jean O'Hoy) had returned to the school as teachers. One alumna, Chinn Yee Ching, became the headmistress of Fairlea School (a CMS girls' school), and another alumna, Yue Yuk Fan, became the headmistress of Yeuk Chi School. One alumna, Yung Hei Wan, was working for the Canton-Kowloon Railway. In Shanghai, two St. Stephen's alumnae, Kwok Wing Yuen and Kwok Sheng Man, were practicing dentists. In Peking, alumna Winifred I Sheng Liang was acting as the chair of the Women Students' Self Government Association and chair of the Sociology Club at Yenching University.¹⁰¹

Throughout the 1920s, cosmopolitan Republican China absorbed a generation of Chinese women educated in Hong Kong into its educational and professional network. By the 1930s, the heightened political turbulence in Republican China, and particularly the struggle against Japanese imperial expansion, had served as another common context upon which St. Stephen's headmistresses drew to shape pupils' career aspirations. In 1930, for example, at School Prize Day, headmistress Miss Wise suggested, "A few of our old girls have decided to train as nurses, and we are hoping that as time goes on more will decide to take up this profession, for there is, perhaps, no greater need in China today than the need for helpers in medical work."¹⁰²

Much of the writings by European headmistresses in this period intended to provide moral and career guidance to middle- and upper-class Chinese schoolgirls who, in the face of national crisis, were exploring the possibilities of useful work outside the domestic sphere. The school explicitly and constantly invoked the national rebuilding of China, whereas that sentiment was commonly absent in the annual school reports of other government and grant-in-aid girls' schools, which tended to focus on changes in school curriculum, struggles over the medium of instruction, and girls' engagement with imperial youth organizations such as the Ministering Children's League and the Girl Guides.¹⁰³ Encouraged by the school's call to service, by 1932, in Hong Kong, St. Stephen's alumna Cheng Hung Yue was practicing in the Government Civil Hospital. Another alumna, Dr. Leung Chum Ha, was practicing at the Tung Wah Hospital. Twelve "old girls" were training as nurses in the Government Civil Hospital and the Nethersole Hospital.¹⁰⁴

Toward the late 1930s, in the wake of Japanese invasion (followed by the occupation of Hong Kong in 1941), St. Stephen's alumnae were further absorbed into the war relief network in mainland China. In 1938, one alumna, Helen Chung, was working with the YWCA in Kunming; another, Kwok Sheung Man, was doing refugee relief work in Tientsin. Yung Hei Wan was serving as president of the Canton Branch of the YWCA.¹⁰⁵ As well, alumnae provided aid to the war orphans and students at the

¹⁰¹"Alumni News," *News Echo*, no. 2 (1929), 9-11, file HKMS 136-1-88, PROHK.

¹⁰²"St. Stephen's Girls' College, Lady Clementi Distributes the Prizes," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Jan. 17, 1930, 6.

¹⁰³These aspects were evident through a reading of the report of the government girls' school Belilios Public School. In 1922, for example, Belilios Public School reported raising the sum of \$1,307 at a Ministering Children's League bazaar. "Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1922," 18, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO. See also "Report of the Director of Education for the Year 1926," 14-15, Hong Kong Government Administrative Reports, HKGRO.

¹⁰⁴"Alumnae News," *News Echo*, no. 5 (1932), 3-5, file HKMS 136-1-89, PROHK.

¹⁰⁵"News of Old Girls," *News Echo*, no. 10 (1938-1939), 33, file HKMS 136-1-91, PROHK.



Figure 3. A new university graduate (and former St. Stephen's student) with her friends, 1925. Courtesy of St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hong Kong.

YWCA and the Red Cross in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁶ Commenting on the role Chinese women outside China played in the war relief effort, Miss Ellen Tsao Li, St. Stephen's alumna and founder of the Hong Kong Chinese Women's Club, suggested that the women's club served as "a connecting link between similar clubs in Shanghai and other cities in China, Saigon, Singapore, Java, Australia and America, and also act as a liaison body with principal relief organizations in China like the Chinese Red Cross Society to which we have contributed not only medical supplies and ambulances but support of various kinds."¹⁰⁷

In collaboration with the Hong Kong branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Ellen Li established the South China Refugee Industrial Training Center for the training of refugee girls and women in the art of needlework, dressmaking, and other works of art by machine and by hand.¹⁰⁸ The associational work of St. Stephen's alumnae in support of war relief reflected not only how Chinese women educated in Hong Kong responded to the national crisis of the day, but also how they were able to utilize the transnational connections they had built up during their study at St. Stephen's and put it to philanthropic use (see [figure 3](#)).

¹⁰⁶"News of Old Girls," *News Echo*, no. 11 (1939-1940), 31-35.

¹⁰⁷"At the Alumni Reunion," *News Echo*, no. 10 (1938-1939), 37-38, file HKMS 136-1-91, PROHK.

¹⁰⁸"At the Alumni Reunion."

Chinese Women in Public Affairs: Philanthropic Activities at St. Stephen's, 1921-1941

Running parallel to the curriculum changes that prepared Chinese girls for the Hong Kong Matriculation exam—which in turn produced a class of “career women” for China—was St. Stephen’s branding of its “useful women,” constructed through the narrative and practice of social service. Building on its apparent connection with the CMS South China Mission, every year the schoolgirls participated in fundraising concerts and bazaars that collected funds for the CMS girls’ schools and leper hospitals in South China cities such as Yunnanfu and Pakhoi.¹⁰⁹ St. Stephen’s also functioned as the liaison center of the youth branch of Chinese women’s associations such as the YWCA (an “organization by means of which women could step from home to community life and service”).¹¹⁰ As early as 1917, a school branch of the YWCA was formed at St. Stephen’s. The school organizer and one of St. Stephen’s schoolgirls, Miss W. U. Kwok, writing in the *South China Morning Post* in 1919, discussed the training the branch offered in “how to organize and carry through work by their [schoolgirls’] own effort.” As she explained, under the direction of committee members (which included two school staff), the branch ran a literacy class for female domestic service workers every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon. If schoolgirls wished “to serve China in this time of crisis,” Kwok urged in closing, “we must all begin by learning to replace an independent, selfish spirit by a spirit of loving service.”¹¹¹ Similar to the writing of European headmistresses, the Chinese schoolgirls’ writing also had a clear purpose of guiding young girls during an era that was being defined simultaneously as a time of “cosmopolitan modernity” and “national rebuilding” in Republican China.

This broader context in Republican China shaped Chinese women’s active involvement in the philanthropic scene in interwar Hong Kong. Between 1925 and 1930, to support the young women’s education campaign launched by the National Committee of the YWCA in China, the Hong Kong YWCA formed the Wa Kwong Club (Light of China) for young women in junior and secondary schools and in Hong Kong factories.¹¹² St. Stephen’s was one of the first girls’ schools to establish a branch of the Wah Kwong Club, which routinely organized social gatherings, outdoor activities, and community services.¹¹³ In 1926, for example, to support educational work serving street children, St. Stephen’s pupils founded a free school that ran every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon for girls and boys from the neighborhood (see [figure 4](#)).¹¹⁴ One volunteer teacher and pupil of St. Stephen’s, Fung Fung Ting, reflected on her experience of teaching in the free school:

¹⁰⁹In 1925, for example, through a “Sale of Work” (where students contributed knitted goods and embroidered handcrafts) held at St. Stephen’s, schoolgirls raised a sum of 1,200 Hong Kong dollars that was sent to the Ministering Children’s League. Another substantial check was sent to the local hospitals and to hospitals in Yunnanfu (a city in Yunnan Province) and Pakhoi. “St. Stephen’s Girls School, Successful Sale of Work,” *Hong Kong Telegraph*, Nov. 17, 1925, 3.

¹¹⁰“The Y.W.C.A., Dr. Ernest Best Now in Hong Kong,” *Hong Kong Telegraph*, April. 9, 1930, 3.

¹¹¹“A New Girls’ School, Announcement at St. Stephen’s Girls’ Speech Day,” 10.

¹¹²“Y.W.C. A’s Work, Rapid Progress in Hong Kong,” *China Mail*, July 15, 1931, 6.

¹¹³“Chinese Women’s Y.W.C.A., Celebration of Twelfth Anniversary,” *China Mail*, March 11, 1932, 7.

¹¹⁴“St. Stephen’s Year, Mrs. Borrett Presents Certificates,” *South China Morning Post*, Feb. 10, 1934, 10.



Figure 4. Children from the Free School of St. Stephen's Girls' College in the 1930s. Courtesy of St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hong Kong.

The Free School is one of our best services for society. It is run with the aim of helping poor children to get more knowledge and to be useful to the country... . They were altogether seven teachers and more than sixty students. Time passes quickly, when we look back, we realize how little we have done. But anyway we have tried our best to bring up those poor children, so that they may be useful as they become bigger.¹¹⁵

Here, writing for the school magazine became a means for Chinese girls to reflect on their changing roles in society and to define their own usefulness. By teaching the street children to “be useful to the country,” the schoolgirls also exercised the usefulness that they themselves sought to achieve. By the late 1930s, in response to the war casualties piling up in South China in the fighting against the Japanese invasion, particularly in Fukien and Kwangtung, St. Stephen's pupils helped to make bandages, swabs, hospital gowns, and padded coats at the Hong Kong Women's Medical Association and the Hong Kong Chinese Women's War Relief Association.¹¹⁶ They also volunteered at the Women's Street Sleepers' Shelter during the winter, and at the food center in the old St. Peter's Church in the summer.¹¹⁷

St. Stephen's participation in war relief was part of the development of a transnational network of Chinese women's associations involved in humanitarian assistance. Just a year before the British colonial government in Hong Kong fought against the Japanese troops and were defeated on December 25, 1941, St. Stephen's pupils were making regular monthly collections for soldiers in Central China through the National

¹¹⁵“Report of the Free School,” *New Echo*, no. 5 (1932), 32, file HKMS 136-1-89, PROHK.

¹¹⁶“School Diary,” *News Echo*, no. 10 (1938-1939), 5, file HKMS 136-1-91, PROHK.

¹¹⁷“St. Stephen's Girls' College Speech Day,” 8.

Young Men's Christian Association Emergency Service and also raising funds to cover a stipend for a teacher's service at St. Peter's Soup Kitchen.¹¹⁸ As much as these war relief efforts assisted the national resistance against Japanese troops in China, they were also in aid of the British colonial state as it struggled to provide school, shelter, food, and care for the war refugees in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The writings of teachers and students at St. Stephen's can be read in myriad ways. They provide an account of everyday school life, but they can simultaneously be read as a source of cultural imagining of new forms and ideals of modern womanhood. The writing by the European headmistresses, in particular, was often deliberate in its effort to provide career and moral guidance, which can be read as a response and remedy on the part of the European intellectuals to an interwar cosmopolitan modernity that to a certain extent had triggered anxiety and an eagerness to guide the students. The writing by the Chinese girls and women, on the other hand, was both a document of school events and a reflection of their useful role in the immediate context of Hong Kong and the larger context of Republican China. With an explicit and constant reference to China, St. Stephen's brand of usefulness was in part a response to the New Woman phenomenon in Republican China. As the nation of modern China came to be increasingly imagined through the cultural figure of the modern woman, women's education, professional choices, and public activities became a matter of political significance and at times the center of public interest. St. Stephen's strategically tapped into this burgeoning interest in the New Woman. The school both imagined and exercised its role in the shaping of modern China. By branding St. Stephen's as a site that educated the "really healthy, sound-minded, and useful women of China," the school further opened up a space for new imperial imaginings for the British colonial government.¹¹⁹ In the minds of the CMS and the colonial state, English education for Chinese girls served as an imperial project for the benefit of China.

As women's increasing educational and professional mobility became a global phenomenon in the interwar period, it is not surprising that Chinese women educated in Hong Kong were absorbed into the broader professional networks of education, medicine, commerce, and transportation in Republican China. In the school magazine *News Echo*, alumnae and teachers of St. Stephen's wrote about their encounters and careers in all parts of China and various regions of the world. The political turbulence in the interior of China in the face of Japanese imperial expansion in the late 1930s, and the eventual occupation of Hong Kong in 1941, opened up new dialogue and exchange between Hong Kong and China. By that point, Chinese women's war relief and philanthropic activities in Hong Kong were concerned less with the expanding of the public sphere for the modern women than with the circumstantial struggle of a colonial city in the wake of the Pacific War (1941-1945). The writings of teachers

¹¹⁸"St. Stephen's Girls' College Carrying on Its Useful Labours," *Hong Kong Daily Press*, Nov. 8, 1940, 8.

¹¹⁹The "really healthy, sound-minded, and useful women of China," was a term used by headmistress Miss Griffin in the school speech day in 1919. "A New Girls' School, Announcement at St. Stephen's Girls' Speech Day," 10.

and students at St. Stephen's in interwar Hong Kong served as a document of schooling practice, a source of moral guidance, an account of cultural imagining, and, above all, a portrait of usefulness that the writers themselves sought to achieve.

Stella Meng Wang is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Education University of Hong Kong. The author would like to thank John Carroll, Elizabeth Sinn, and the journal's anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, as well as St. Stephen's Girls' College for permission to reproduce the images used in the paper. This research was supported by the Post-doctoral Fellowship Matching Fund Scheme at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Disclosure statement. The author reports no potential conflict of interest.