

Female nurses in China by Dr. Zhang Yun

Welcome to this episode of Exploring the Humanities, women's voices from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Our podcasts allow us to showcase the exciting and innovative work being done by our colleagues in the humanities, intersecting with fields as varied as aviation, mental and physical health, virtual reality, Gen AI design and neuroscience.

I am Renia Lopez from the Faculty of Humanities. And with us today, we are very privileged to have Dr Zhang Yun, Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese History and Culture of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Dr Zhang, please tell us briefly what are your areas of interest?

- Thank you so much, Renia, for having me today. So my research interests mainly lie in the history of gender and medicine. But my first book was also about gender in print media. I'm currently writing another book about women's reproductive health. So, I think broadly speaking, my research interests are just about histories of gender and medicine in healthcare.

One of the papers that I have come across, one of your papers, was on the role of women in healthcare. So, a little bit different from what you have just described to us. This was during the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan, from 1937 to 1945. How did you go from women's reproductive health to this specific paper? Thank you so much.

- That's a very good question, actually. I would, think of this paper about wartime nursing and wartime health care as both relevant to my doctoral research, which has now been published as a book, as well as my current book project on women's reproductive health. Because, it allows me to explore the intersection of gender and health care in the context of modern China. So in that sense, I think it's actually relevant. And also it aligns with my current research interests.

What are the main ideas that you discuss in the paper?

- When I look at the war time propaganda at that time, the Nationalist government, the government of that time, often positioned women as nurturing, self-sacrificing caregivers, aligning with traditional notions of femininity. However, if you look at those stories told by women themselves and also the representational works made by women themselves, you would find that, they actually had very different stories to tell. They painted a very different, picture as well. So what I try to illustrate is that they actually subverted these kind of prescribed gender roles and they established themselves as active participants in war. They also saw themselves as vocal critics instead of just being passive objects of state propaganda and the gender politics.

The title of the paper is actually quite interesting because you seem to make reference to nurses in the West. The title is "Among many Chinese Nightingales: Healthcare, gender, and popular print in Wartime China, 1937 to 1945". Why did you choose this title?

- I like this title a lot too, not because I came up with this title myself, this is actually taken from the title of an article written by one of the female nurses at that time. There was a Chinese title to that and I translated it into English. But of course, as you said, Florence Nightingale is a globally recognized figure. She was idealized as feminine carer during wartime, in the West and China.

So Chinese nurses were familiar with her.

- Definitely.

When was the nursing profession officially established in China?

- It started quite early, starting from the late 19th century, actually the second half of the 19th century. The profession of modern nursing was introduced to China first by missionaries. As you can see, a lot of missionary hospitals were established, in the 1890s, in Canton as well. And then there was this field of modern nursing established, they started to recruit both men and women as nurses.

And yet you only focus on the woman for this paper. What happened to men?

- That's what I was thinking when I was first doing the research. I thought it was because the war, but when the war broke out, it was the 1930s already. So it was almost 40 years after modern nursing was introduced to China.
- A lot had happened. First when missionary hospitals were established there was also very strict gender segregation according to Confucian sort of ideas. Missionaries also realized that they had to separate the patients. When it came to different nurses, for example, male patients would like to ask for male nurses, and the female patients would like to ask for female nurses. And they said, "okay". But they still had a program for men up to the 1920s. After the 1920s, starting from probably 1928, there was a national meeting about nursing, a group of female nurses gathered together and then they started to publicize and promote the program of modern nursing and more and more women joined nursing. So by the time the war broke out there were more female nurses nationally than male nurses. But at that time, there were still male nurses.

You've just told us a little bit of the beginning of nursing, in your paper you cover about a decade from 1937 to 45. How did the portrayal of women in wartime nursing evolve during this period?

- At first, of course, the state propaganda romanticized women's role. They always portrayed women as very gentle, caring, angelic creatures. There was this example about a female nurse, the image of a female nurse which appeared on the cover of one of the issues of "The Good Companion", one of the most popular women's magazines at that time (it didn't stop publication for a long time during war time). There was this nurse image who was more like a movie star or a model. She had this perfect makeup, she was wearing this pristine uniform, the modern nurse cap, which meant that she was a nurse.
- And then also she was really demure and she was very composed and had perfect poise. So basically, it's that kind of image. But, as the war dragged on, more and more

women joined nursing. And I think people at that time started to see different images or heard different stories about female nurses because those female nurses started to write about their own stories, their own experiences. And those experiences were quite different from what the state actually promoted.

Were women involved in that promotion? Were women part of that promotional effort? You mentioned that it was promoted in a very popular women's magazine. Was this done with the backup of the female nurses who had come together?

- Do you mean that female nurses themselves also probably enhanced or supported that kind of image? Well, yes and no, I mean, they knew that this was their particular way to contribute to the war effort and also to contribute to the nation state at that time. But at the same time, they were not very satisfied about those very rosy and romanticized portrayals about their actual experiences because they had endured much more. Their conditions were much more difficult. So they reflected these different experiences in their writing.

You've talked about propaganda and how the government pushed for this image. It happened in other places. We know that in the U.S., during the same period, they also used propaganda extensively to develop this new image for women with Rosie the Riveter symbolizing the transition of women into factory work. What role did the propaganda play in China in shaping the perception of female nurses?

- I want to say that propaganda, as I've just shared about the image about the female nurse, was quite powerful. It actually mobilized a lot of women into nursing in reality, but at the same time, the propaganda was a double-edged sword. It gave much more space and also gave much more visibility for women to enter the public sphere so they could walk and move right in the public sphere as nurses. But on the other hand, you see that they could only contribute to the nation by performing this very traditional role as very caring, feminine nurses.

Did women have opportunity to challenge those roles?

- Yes and no. I mean, in reality, they never rejected the role of female nurses because, for example, the first lady Soong Ching-ling at that time Madame Sun Yat-sen, she often gave a lot of speeches to mobilize women into nursing and contributing to the war. So nobody actually said anything publicly like "I wouldn't want to be a nurse", but they wouldn't want to be that kind of state prescribed very gender-typical nurse. They wanted to present themselves as- for example, the critics, when they were doing the nursing work, they still criticized the government. They also wanted to present themselves as moral exemplars, superior to their male counterparts. And sometimes they even sort of imagined themselves as surrogate soldiers.
- It was like "what we are doing in nursing is just as important as fighting on the battlefield". So this is what they did, I think is more like they tried to subvert through negotiation, modification, sometimes challenging but never outright rejection.

Were there many cases of female nurses who developed their expertise and became doctors or

acted as doctors?

- You mean after their nursing experiences? No. Because the number of professional nurses at that time was still very small, a lot of women went to the nursing field only after a very short time period of training. So most of them were actually voluntary female nurses.

So after the war, what impact did wartime nursing have in society?

- Most of them were volunteer female nurses. So, I haven't read about any after-war experience. I don't know if some of them actually chose nursing as a career afterwards.
- But, in general, I can say we saw two prominent phenomena after the war. The first one was the formalization of military nursing. That was a direct influence from women nurses who contributed to the war. They had that kind of influence on the institutionalization of military nursing.
- Another one was the feminization of nursing. So, as I said, during the war, there were still male nurses. But male nurses refused to serve as nurses because the pay was so low and the working conditions were so hard and they had more options than women. Some of them even pretended to be field medics and doctors, but nobody found out at that time. It didn't matter, because if you were a man people thought "okay, you are a male doctor". But then, because of the large number of women working in the field of nursing, after the war –especially after the Civil War– China underwent this process of nursing feminization as well. I think this also happened in the US, but much earlier.

What is the situation like today? Is it mostly female nurses or are we getting more of a mix?

- Even though my paper didn't touch on the contemporary era, I also did try to do some research and to see the percentage of female nurses in the medical profession, it is probably about 90%. Of course, there are still male nurses, but a large portion of medical attendants and nurses are female. This is probably a very similar situation to the US and Europe as well.

Although you do get to see more and more male nurse, especially in geriatric care, where strength is important

- That's right. They need the physical strength of male nurses, to perform certain tasks.

You mentioned that there were these two areas: The first area you mentioned was the militarization.

- Military or military nursing. Before the war that was not even a field, a profession. After the war the government started to realize they really need to institutionalize military nursing. So whenever there is a crisis again, they would have enough personnel, and also manpower in nursing.

At the very beginning you mentioned about the Nationalist and the Communist parties, and how they differed in their approach to the role of women in healthcare.

- Yeah, this is a very interesting question. Before I wrote this article, I thought, as most scholars do, that the Communist Party, the Chinese Communist Party, had a much more

progressive agenda towards women, especially when it came to women's liberation. They were more supportive. And women could also join the army as soldiers. They did recruit some women soldiers. But then as I, found out in my paper, I also noticed that they had a very similar agenda to gender and health care during war time. What does that mean? It means that they just used a very different strategy. For example, they also mobilized women into nursing but they didn't say that you should play this gentle, feminine role. But they said, "okay, you guys, this is very important because you serve as revolutionary nurses", which sounds gender neutral. However, you would think that as it is just a revolutionary nurse, then both a man and a woman can also perform that role. But, in reality, they mobilized female students and men into nursing and sometimes by using coercive methods.

- But, of course, you don't see those documents. You don't see any sort of personal narratives, actual narratives about that. But you can see this very strategic move from literary works at that time, especially the literary works by Ding Ling and Fang Ji who were based in England at that time.

Tell us more about them.

- Women's individual stories which were told by female nurses actually happened in Nationalist controlled areas or those occupied areas. During the war there were three areas, one area which was becoming less and less [extensive] and was controlled by the Nationalists, and occupied by the Japanese, and the north western region Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, which was controlled by the Communists. So, when it comes to the nurses, the revolutionary nurses in the border region, as we can see from Ding Ling' and Fang Ji's short stories, those women, those female nurses, they tried to fight against that kind of role as nurses.
- For example, in Ding Ling's story called 'In the Hospital', the female protagonist was a female nurse but she didn't like the emotional labor that she had to perform during the war time. She said "I really don't want to write letters anymore", because she wrote the letters for the soldiers, but she didn't receive any sort of emotional comfort from the soldiers. So she said "I want to do more challenging work. I want to do political work." And she did it. She just started to criticize the system. She started to criticize the inefficiencies of the hospital in the border region, which were disastrous, of course. And she was then lectured, criticized by the Communist Party. She had to shut up and she had to leave at the end.

So you've mentioned about the emotional work, aside from writing letters on behalf of the soldiers, what other emotional work did they have to do?

- Well they had to do a lot. Most of these nurses, they were from a middle class, modern middle class and educated families. So they had a modest education. They knew how to write and read. And most of the soldiers were illiterate, they didn't have the knowledge. . So [the nurses] had to perform the task of writing letters to home on behalf of the soldiers. And that was just basically one thing. The most important thing is that they had to comfort, probably using very soft skills, to encourage the soldiers back to the

battlefield as well, when the soldiers got injured they could be very hot tempered at the same time. So then those women nurses they were sort of mobilized to use their emotional labor, very caring, feminine qualities to talk to the soldiers and encouraged them back to fight again.

Did this mean being pretty and wearing makeup? Did they have to wear make-up?

- We are led to think that they probably had to use a sort of fake sexual appeal to just boost the soldiers' spirit to fight. However, in reality, according to one of the nurses, she did write a story, wrote a piece about how they were misunderstood as very frivolous female nurses, they didn't wear any makeup, so they said "we never did that". And we didn't wear any sort of very flashy clothes. All they wore actually were just uniforms. So I don't think that was the case. There is a discrepancy between what we saw, from the propaganda. Even for those women who actually served, no, they didn't do that, and they were not allowed to do that. They said "we used our skills to talk to them".

And what about the nurses in the Nationalist part? Did they also play similar roles?

- What I was just talking about was in the Nationalist part. In the area the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, the Communist based areas, the resources were much, much more limited.

So when you were talking about the female nurses, middle class educated, they were from the Nationalist areas.

- Yes, most of them.

And so then, what about in the Communist areas, do we have any information about them?

- Yes, most of them were female students as well. But the resources in the Communist based area were very limited. There wasn't much they could do with that. What I have come across about their situation was that they actually recruited a lot of female students from the schools in the central area. Of course, some of the students didn't want to be nurses and they didn't have any training, but they had to perform.
- They didn't have a choice. Most of them they didn't. But, you know, this was not seen. You won't read this kind of report from the newspaper at that time, especially the newspaper published by the CCP. So literary works are really important for us, to see those untold stories.

And where are those sources kept now? All of those stories. I think you got access to them?

- Thank you so much for this question. For Ding Ling's short story, it was a short story about a female nurse, which actually took place in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region. They were first published in the newspapers as well. You have heard about Ding Ling's, experience. She was severely criticized for this story in the hospital because she criticized, by using that female nurse's voice, the failings of the hospital and also the personnel, the medical personnel in the border region. So those stories were not hard to get.
- For personal narratives from the Nationalist controlled area, especially now, we have a

lot of online databases. It's easy to just get access to those stories. Although there's still a lot we don't have access to.

So what lessons can we learn today from these historical accounts?

- When I was writing the paper, I was really fascinated by the resilience these women had because they really had to negotiate. On the one hand, they wanted to contribute to the nation on the other hand, they managed to articulate their own experiences to show that they have the agency and autonomy, as very active actors.
- I think this kind of resilience is still relevant today, especially in global crisis, like the Covid 19 pandemic. You also see some continuity and change. I remember during Covid 19, I read stories about female physicians and female health workers. But the media always tended to portray women as loving mothers and devoted wives who had to leave for work. We never knew if they were, doctors or nurses or health workers. I don't know if you came across this report which went viral and also received a lot of criticism from netizens, about this woman who was waving goodbye to her husband and daughter. But this never happened to male doctors. They were never portrayed as loving fathers, they are professionals. They had to fight. I think it's still highly relevant today. As you can see, the propaganda, the media, when they come to portray the relationship between gender and health care.

Coming back to your original research on reproductive health. Do you think that these experiences that these women went through helped them in any way to understand their bodies better and to improve their own health?

- This is a very good question that I've never thought of. What I can say about this generation of women that came of age at this time period, in the 1920s or 1930s, they received a modest education. They were knowledge savvy. when it comes to, health and hygiene. Starting from the 1910s, knowledge about women's reproduction, health and hygiene became really, really widely available for urban women, for educated women. So you can see numerous health hygiene textbooks available on the market.
- If you can read, you can get access to knowledge. Yes. I would assume that they probably have some very basic information and also knowledge, scientific knowledge about their bodies already. That's why they could actually get ready so soon after a 2 or 3 months training. And they had the guts and they also had the courage to have the knowledge.

So if any of our listeners have the chance to read your paper, what do you hope readers will be able to take away from your paper.

- When I was writing paper, I actually didn't expect that I would have the chance to do a podcast, and that there would be more readers which is really great. But I want, probably if one thing I can hope for is that readers can really appreciate the complexity of women's stories, because we often hear how women were just mobilized as gentle caretakers, feminine, performing feminine roles. We often tend to forget their own agency, their own autonomy to shaping their own roles. So I think if we can look into those stories, I think we will know that, not only they contributed a lot to the war effort.

Their stories also help us to rethink wartime history and also wartime healthcare and also the narratives of war and gender.

Well, thank you very much. And to our listeners, if you do want to read the paper, it will be available in the link below this podcast. Hope you enjoy it. It is it is a good read. I have to tell you though, thank you so much, Dr Zhang.

- Thank you so much.

And thank you to all of our listeners for listening to us. And hopefully tune in next time to more interesting stories.