



Foreign Exchange: Counterculture behind the Walls of St. Hilda's School for Girls, 1929-1937 (Studies in Christianity in China)

Judith Liu

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Foreign Exchange is the story of Yeh Yuanshuang and Dorothea Kingsley Wakeman and their experiences at the American missionary school. Founded in 1875, the school that would become St. Hilda's School for Girls was intended to provide a strong, Christian education for its students. Daily student-teacher interactions, however, created an environment that allowed for a foreign exchange which led to the creation of a new culture that subverted both American and Chinese gender constructs. The walls that surrounded the St. Hilda's compound not only served to protect the school from outside danger, but to also create a space where new gender expectations could be nurtured away from the gaze of prying eyes. Thus, the American teachers as well as the Chinese students were acculturated and socialized in ways that liberated them from their respective patriarchal situations. For Dorothea, serving as a teacher allowed her to remain single yet still be engaged in a professional career that would not be as socially stigmatizing as it would be if she remained at home. As a teacher at St. Hilda's, not only was she educating a future generation of Chinese women, but as an independent woman who served in an important position, she was an example for the girls at St. Hilda's what women could do when given an education. For Yuanshuang, her education provide her with the means to aspire to roles outside the culturally prescribed positions as daughter, wife, and mother by giving her the intellectual tools that enabled her to find work as a teacher at the start of the War of Resistance against the Japanese. Her involvement in school activities developed self-reliance, independence, and leadership skills that served her both in China and eventually in the United States. Her education socialized her to American values and customs so that when she arrived in the United States, she was able to adapt readily. Yuanshuang and Dorothea's stories also reveal the impact of the modern world on their parents' generation.

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