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# Women at the Frontlines of Faith:

# Christian Service and Rural Reconstruction in Wartime Sichuan

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**Abstract**: This paper investigates how Ginling Women's College, one of China's leading Christian institutions for women, engaged in rural reconstruction during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Focusing on its rural service stations in Renshou and Zhonghechang, Sichuan, this paper examines how Christian women educators translated ideals of social service, citizenship, and domestic reform into local practice. Drawing on missionary archives, Guomindang (GMD) administrative documents, and local records, the paper reconstructs both the institutional design and the lived experience of these wartime experiments.

Ginling's initiatives reveal how Christian social work became intertwined with GMD programs of rural reconstruction and moral reform. Through literacy classes, nursery programs, and citizenship training courses, urban-educated women sought to improve rural women's lives while cultivating civic and moral order. Their efforts exposed tensions between their Christian, urban-informed visions of social improvement and the daily constraints of rural wartime life.

By foregrounding everyday encounters between reformers and villagers, this study highlights the social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of Christian women's activism. It argues that Ginling's wartime rural service redefined the relationships among Christian social engagement, gender roles, and the GMD-led reconstruction initiatives, offering new insights into how Chinese Christianity adapted to and participated in the transformation of rural society during the war.

**Keywords**: Christian social service, Ginling Women's College, wartime reconstruction, rural women, West China

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## Introduction and Historiography

In 1934, as China's Rural Reconstruction Movement (乡村建设运动) reached its peak, *Xiwang yuekan* 希望月刊 (*The Christian Hope*), a popular Christian journal in West China,[1] featured an article titled: "The Responsibility of Christianity toward Rural Women." Its author declared that the church itself bore an active duty to improve the social status of rural women, claiming that "Christianity is the only savior for rural women" and that "only Christianity values the spirit of service and charity" (He 1934, p. 5). Such assertions may sound sweeping today, yet they placed Christianity squarely within the era's broader search for national renewal and social reconstruction.[2]

More strikingly, the author voiced concern about who should carry out this work. While many assumed that educated urban women were best suited to guide their rural counterparts, he cautioned that true service required more than schooling or goodwill: "We do not oppose this approach, but we must carefully examine whether educated women are capable of taking on this responsibility" (He 1934, p. 4). His question, aimed at the secular "modern

1 *Xiwang yuekan* 希望月刊 (*The Christian Hope*) was founded in 1924 by the Canadian Methodist missionary R. O. Jalliffe. Initially created to facilitate communication among Methodist parishes, it soon developed into a non-denominational Christian periodical that reported on social and religious affairs, published essays on theology and scientific knowledge, and provided devotional materials. Its readership consisted largely of Chinese church members in West China, and by the mid-1930s its monthly circulation averaged around one thousand copies. For background on the journal, see Liu Jixi 刘吉西 et al., *Sichuan Jidujiao shi* 四川基督教史 [History of Christianity in Sichuan] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1992), 323; Chen Jianmin 陈建明, *Jindai Jidujiao zai huaxi diqü wenzi shigong yanjiu* 近代基督教在华西文字事工研究 [Research on modern Christian literature work in West China] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2013), 242. For more research on China's rural reconstruction movement, see Kate Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Liang Xin 梁心, *Chengyan guanxiang: nongye zhongguo de nongcun zenyang chengle guojia wenti, 1908-1937* 城眼观乡：农业中国的农村怎样成了国家问题 (1908—1937) [Observing the village from the urban perspective: how did the village in the agrarian China become a national problem, 1908-1937] (Xiamen: Xiamen daxue chubanshe, 2024), esp. Chapters 8 & 9.

2 For more on Christianity's role in China's nation-building and social reform, see Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Thomas H. Reilly, *Saving the Nation: Chinese Protestant Elites and the Quest to Build a New China, 1922-1952* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Daryl R. Ireland, ed., *Visions of Salvation: Chinese Christian Posters in an Age of Revolution* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022).

women," nevertheless opens a deeper query that would shape Christian social service for rural women throughout the 1930s and 1940s: How, in practice, could bridge the gap between educated Christian women and the villagers they sought to serve?

The unequal relationship, as well as the cultural and social distance, between educated Christian women and the rural women they sought to serve has preoccupied both historical actors and modern scholars. For several decades, historians of Christianity in China have explored how women, both foreign and Chinese, understood and practiced "women's work for women." Much of this scholarship has focused on how missionaries and educated Chinese Christians promoted ideals of Christian domesticity and moral reform. Jane Hunter's pioneering study, *The Gospel of Gentility* (1984), traced how single and married missionary women used education, medicine, and evangelism to expand women's roles within a gendered Christian framework at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet her work was largely situated within the history of Western missionary movements rather than Chinese Christianity itself.

Since the publication of Kwok Pui-lan's *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860–1927* (1992), scholars have increasingly turned to the perspectives of Chinese women themselves, situating their religious lives within broader currents of social reform, education, and the women's movement. More recent studies have highlighted how Chinese Christian women helped shape both the modern church and Chinese society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Lutz 2010; Littell-Lamb 2023; Stasson 2023; Bond 2024). Still, most of this work has centered on Christian efforts in urban settings—schools, hospitals, and churches in treaty ports—while the circulation of Christian ideas in the countryside, and the participation of rural women themselves, remain much less understood.

Building on this growing body of scholarship, recent works by Helen Schneider (2014) and Yun Zhou (2023) have further illuminated the role of Christian women in rural reform in Republican China. Yun Zhou's analysis of Christian print culture focuses on how urban Christian intellectuals in the 1930s imagined rural womanhood through narratives of domesticity and morality. Schneider's research on Ginling Women's College reveals how female missionaries and foreign-trained Chinese social workers translated these ideals of domesticity and womanhood into concrete social service programs, particularly during the college's wartime relocation to Sichuan. My research enters into dialogue with both of them by focusing on practice and encounter—how educated Christian women implemented social service programs in the wartime countryside, interacted with local officials, and negotiated relationships with village women. Through this lens, I seek to

understand not only how ideals of womanhood, domesticity, and citizenship were articulated, but also how they were received, adapted, and reshaped in everyday life.

While most studies of Christian "women's work for women" in China focus on the pre-1937 periods, the wartime decade remains comparatively understudied. Yet the War of Resistance profoundly reshaped the social and political landscape of China's interior, creating new conditions for reform and collaboration. Recent scholarship has reinterpreted the war not merely as a time of crisis but as a moment of far-reaching transformation, when state-building, social welfare, and rural reconstruction initiatives expanded under GMD governance (Greene 2022). Scholars such as Timothy Brook (1996) and Diana Junio (2017) have shown how Christian organizations adapted to wartime realities, forging complex partnerships with the state that blurred the boundaries between mission and government service. My research builds on these insights by examining how such collaboration unfolded at the grassroots level—how Christian women educators and reformers, working in cooperation with local officials, turned the call for wartime reconstruction into lived practice. Situating these efforts within the reconfiguration of women's public roles during the War of Resistance,[1] I argue that Christian women reformers became key mediators between state agendas and village life. Through their educational and social service work, they translated abstract ideals of citizenship and moral uplift into everyday acts of care and cooperation, revealing how Christian visions of service helped redefine women's participation in the making of wartime China.

To examine these questions, this paper turns to Ginling Women's College (金陵女子文理学院), one of the leading Christian institutions for women's higher education in Republican China. Founded in Nanjing in 1915, Ginling was renowned for cultivating educated women committed to public service. (Feng 2009, p. 13) During the War of Resistance, as the college evacuated to Chengdu, Sichuan, its faculty and students sought new ways to apply their Christian and professional training to national reconstruction. Between 1939 and 1945, they developed rural service projects in Renshou (Jenshow 仁寿)

1 For more research on the changing roles of Chinese women in public realms during the War of Resistance, see Lo Jiu-jung 羅久蓉, Yu Chien-ming 游鑑明, and Chiu Hei-yuan 瞿海源, eds., *Fenghuo suiyue xia de Zhongguo funu¨fangwen jilu* 烽火歲月下的中國婦女訪問紀錄 [Twentieth Century Wartime Experiences of Chinese Women: An Oral History] (Taipei: Academia Sinica Institute of Modern History, 2004); Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Nicole Elizabeth Barnes, *Intimate Communities Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

and later in Zhonghechang (Chung Ho Chang 中和场), combining social welfare, education, and moral reform. (Schneider 2014, pp. 123-124) These experiments were not isolated missionary ventures but part of a broader wartime movement in which Christian institutions reimagined their social mission within the frameworks of state-building and rural reconstruction. In *Keeping the Nation's House*, Schneider (2011) shows how Christian women's educational and social work complemented the GMD efforts in rural reconstruction. My study builds on this insight but focuses on the practices and relational dynamics of these wartime experiments, particularly the encounters between urban Christian reformers and rural women in Sichuan.

This study draws on a wide range of English and Chinese materials, including missionary correspondence, reports from Ginling and the National Christian Council (NCC), provincial and county government records, and local gazetteers preserved. It also consults local histories and oral accounts collected in Renshou and Zhonghechang, which illuminate how these programs were remembered at the village level. By combining missionary and official sources with local perspectives, I reconstruct both the program design and the lived experience of Christian rural reform. Methodologically, I approach these materials through a lens informed by social and cultural history, tracing not only organizational structures but also the interactions, emotions, and moral ideals that shaped everyday encounters between reformers and villagers.

By foregrounding the intimate, relational dimensions of reform, this paper shifts attention from the Christian rhetoric of "uplift" to the everyday labor of education and service.[1] The focus on Ginling's women reformers—urban, educated, and often outsiders in rural Sichuan—reveals how ideals of service, citizenship, and womanhood were interpreted and negotiated through relationships of trust, mentorship, and friendship. These small exchanges—listening, teaching, visiting, and sharing in village life—made

1 For discussions of Christian rhetorics of "uplift" in other geographical and cultural contexts, see Rajsekhar Basu, "Missionaries as Agricultural Pioneers: Protestant Missionaries and Agricultural Improvement in Twentieth-Century India," in *Tilling the Land: Agricultural Knowledge and Practices in Colonial India*, ed. Deepak Kumar and Bipasha Raha (Delhi, India: Primus Books, 2016); Nandini Chatterjee, "Education for 'Uplift': Christian Agricultural Colleges in India," in *The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830–1960* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Marwa Elshakry, "The Gospel of Science and American Evangelism in Late Ottoman Beirut," *Past & Present*, no. 196 (2007): 173–214; Todd H. Leedy, "The World the Students Made: Agriculture and Education at American Missions in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930-1960," *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2007): 447-469.

possible a kind of moral and civic education that neither the church nor the state could fully prescribe. The following sections trace Ginling's wartime experiments in Renshou and Zhonghechang, showing how Christian women educators redefined the meaning of rural service and expanded the boundaries of both religious and social life in wartime China.

## The Beginnings of Ginling's Wartime Rural Service: The Renshou Experiment

Ginling College opened its first rural service center in Sichuan at Renshou in the fall of 1939. ("Nongcun funü gongzuo zai Renshou" 1940) The choice of location was strategic. Renshou was the second most populous county in Sichuan, where a Canadian mission station had long operated there (Missionary Society of the Methodist Church 1920, pp. 178-190), and the University of Nanking was expanding its agricultural extension work in collaboration with government agencies there (Li 1940, p. 59).[1] The existing network of educational and technical institutions provided Ginling with an institutional base and official support for its social service projects. Missionaries in western China had long recognized the advantages of working in market towns, or *chang* (场), where they could reach large populations with limited personnel. These towns held regular markets that drew villagers from the surrounding countryside to trade, socialize, and often attend religious services.[2] By the 1930s, American Protestant missions had already built thousands of churches in such towns, which served as vital intermediaries

1 In September 1938, an agricultural extension bureau was established in Renshou, jointly run by the Agricultural College of University of Nanking and the Agricultural Production Promotion Commission 农产促进委员会—a government agency created after the outbreak of war to increase agricultural productivity and assist local governments in setting up extension programs. Li Lying 李力庸, "Zouchu shiyanshi: kangzhan shiqi nongcan cujin weiyuanhui de nonage tuiguang shiye (1938-1944)" 走出实验室——抗战时期农产促进委员会的农业推广事业(1938-1944) [Walking out of the Laboratory-Agricultural Extension Enterprises of the Agricultural Production Promotion Committee during the War of Resistance against Japan (1938-1944)], *Liangan fazhanshi yanjiu* 两岸发展史研究, no. 6 (2008): 25-70.

2 Anthropologist G. W. Skinner introduced the concept of the "standard market town" as a self-sufficient unit in economic, cultural, and social terms in late imperial and modern China. His theory was based on fieldwork conducted in the Chengtu (Chengdu) Plain in Szechwan (Sichuan) during the late 1940s, as well as a large collection of local gazetteers. For detailed discussion about peasant marketing in traditional Chinese society, see G. William Skinner, "Marketing and social structure in rural China, Part 1, 2," *Journal of Asian studies* 24, no. 1, 2 (1964, 1965): 3-43, 195-228.

between urban and rural life. (Megginson 1968) Renshou, a busy market center rather than a typical village, fit well into this pattern.

Before the center opened, Ginling College sent students and faculty members in the spring to survey local conditions, hoping to design a program rooted in everyday rural life. One student later described the survey as a form of "social engagement" (*chouying* 酬应). ("Nongcun funü gongzuo zai Renshou" 1940, p. 70) They met the county governor, leading families, and local bankers over shared meals and tea gatherings. Through these encounters, the Ginling survey team came to see Renshou's potential as a "social center" for outreach, where villagers regularly came to trade, socialize, and exchange news ("Ginling in Chengtu, Szechuan: Summer Service 1939 at Jenshow" n. d.).

The regional social structure offered particular advantages for women's work. Compared with many parts of North and East China, local women in Sichuan enjoyed greater mobility and economic participation. They often went to market and shared responsibility for farm work while men traveled for commercial activities. Ginling workers saw this as an opportunity to involve women in their programs and envisioned night classes for them at the new rural service center in the town. (Highbaugh 1941, p. 86)

The local government's reception further smoothed Ginling's entry into Renshou. Soon after their arrival, the county governor invited the team to breakfast at his home, where officials from the cooperative bank and members of the University of Nanking's agricultural station were also present. The governor thanked them for coming and promised his support. To the Ginling workers, his "energetic and enterprising" leadership embodied the spirit of the new wartime administration ("Ginling in Chengtu, Szechuan: Summer Service 1939 at Jenshow" n.d.). Their collaboration with local authorities reflected a broader trend under the GMD government's new county system (*xin xianzhi* 新县制), which expanded the administrative role of county magistrates and encouraged them to promote welfare and reconstruction projects.[1] Even though Ginling's immediate goals focused on rural women, its work was deeply embedded in these state-led initiatives that sought to reorganize village life around the demands of wartime mobilization.

1 For the development and effects of the GMD's new county system, see Guo Conglun 郭从伦, *Guomin zhengfu xinxianzhi xia de xiancanyihui yanjiu: yi Sichuan wei fenxi kuangjia* 国民政府新县制下的县参议会研究——以四川为分析框架 [Research on County Councils under New County System in the Nationalist Government Period] (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2013), 38; Wang Xianming 王先明, *Xianglu manman: 20 shiji zhi zhongguo xiangcun (1901-1949)* 乡路漫漫: 20 世纪之中国乡村 (1901-1949) [A Long Way to Go: Rural Changes in China, 1901-1949] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2017), 159-161.

During this survey trip, Ginling girls also met with village heads, who had been appointed under the new administrative system to oversee taxation, conflict mediation, and military recruitment. The government notified these leaders in advance of Ginling's visits, signaling official endorsement of the project. The students described their conversations with the heads as "satisfactory," remarking that "the country people looked frank, honest, and likeable" ("Ginling in Chengtu, Szechuan: Summer Service 1939 at Jenshow" n.d.). Such encounters reveal how rural service, religious outreach, and wartime governance overlapped at the local level, with Ginling's young women workers mediating between local male leaders and the agendas of church and state.

Ginling's rural service program was also buttressed by foreign expertise. One of the most influential figures was Dr. Irma Highbaugh, a veteran missionary educator and a leading advocate of the "Christianizing the Home" movement. In the late 1930s, she developed rural training programs in North China that combined literacy, nutrition, handicrafts, maternity care, and homemaking, aiming to help families improve their daily lives and cultivate Christian values in their relationships (Highbaugh 1936). Wu Yifang 吴贻芳, Ginling's president and chair of the NCC, eagerly invited Highbaugh to join the project (Wu 1939). Both women believed that the "uplift" of Chinese women should begin in the home and that rural education could renew the moral foundations of Chinese society (Stasson 2018, p. 265).

One of Ginling's earliest public activities was the organization of an agricultural fair, a popular form of wartime rural propaganda that combined demonstration, exhibition, and entertainment.[1] Soon after the rural service station opened, the team collaborated with the County Agricultural Extension Bureau (县农业推广所) to host a three-day fair during the Chinese New Year of 1940 ("Renshouxian nongye tuiguangsuo wei qing jialin zhidao shi zhi Sichuansheng weisheng shiyanchu gonghan" 1940). The town was filled with banners, songs, and crowds. Rooted in local festive traditions, the fair showed how Ginling's rural service quickly became woven into community life and the county's wartime campaign for production and reform. The county governor hosted the opening ceremony, and both the government and residents from surrounding areas provided strong support (Settlemeyer 1941, p. 122).

1 Such agricultural fairs, or "Agricultural Promotion Assemblies" (quannong dahui 劝农大会) were common in wartime Sichuan, where provincial agencies sought to raise productivity and morale. Zhang Jishi 张济时, "Renshou quannong dahui zhuiyi" 仁寿劝农大会追记 [Remembering the Agricultural Fair in Renshou], *Nongye tuiguang tongxun* 农业推广通讯 2, no. 6 (1940): 56.

The fair was meant to teach through participation. Thousands of farmers and shopkeepers, men and women, old and young came to see the exhibits. Under the supervision of Irma Highbaugh, Ginling students built exhibits on childcare, nutrition, and household hygiene, arranging model living rooms and hanging posters on health and domestic management. Groups of students guided visitors through each section, explaining their ideas in simple terms (Zhang 1940, p. 57). Local farmers and artisans also contributed their best vegetables, fruits, embroidery, and handmade clothes for competition. The result was something between an agricultural exposition and a lively county fair: a foreign teacher at Ginling observed that nearly eight thousand people came on the first day, "from town and hamlet" (Settlemeyer 1941, p. 122). For many rural visitors, it was their first chance to connect daily life with the broader war effort.[1] The entertainment mixed pleasure with patriotism: national songs were taught, and a display of the remains of Japanese soldiers was meant to stir pride in China's resistance (Zhang 1940, p. 57).

Though women's work was not the focal point of this event, the fair offered Ginling educators a crucial opportunity to engage the public and gain local trust. It revealed how social reconstruction depended on building cooperative relationships with local institutions, and it showed the reformers the value of appealing to everyday concerns, rather than abstract ideals. If the agricultural fair symbolized Ginling's first attempt to engage the community at large, their later initiatives in health and education sought to reach deeper—into the households and daily rhythms of women's lives.

Particularly, the idea of meeting the needs of the Chinese people, especially rural women, stood at the heart of the Ginling rural service programs (Schneider 2014, p. 129). The Ginling team believed that real social change depended on women's participation and leadership. Each project they launched aimed not only to serve villagers but also to train local women to carry on the work themselves (Highbaugh 1940, p. 144). Their efforts centered on four areas: health, economic development, education, and family life.

Ginling placed special emphasis on public health, working with the Provincial Health Bureau to improve maternal and child care—an area in which their efforts achieved some of the most visible results. When Ginling opened its clinic in Renshou, the county still lacked a public health center.[2]

1 According to the survey by the Ginling members, "Many people living just two *li* out of' Renshou did not know that China was fighting, and many others believed that it was a civil war." See "Ginling in Chengtu, Szechuan: Summer Service 1939 at Jenshow."

2 Renshou County's public health center was founded in 1941, but its facilities were rudimentary, medicines were in acute shortage, and funding was consistently inadequate. Sichuansheng Renshou xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 四川省仁寿县志

The clinic treated common illnesses such as trachoma, typhoid fever, and skin diseases, provided vaccinations (mainly against cholera), and offered prenatal and maternal examinations (Deng 1940). Most services were free for poor families (Xiao 1993, pp. 109-110). A local midwife, loaned by the Provincial Health Bureau, joined the team and helped bridge cultural gaps (Chen 1941). Renshou women often gave birth without medical assistance, but they soon welcomed the midwife's presence, and women from various social backgrounds began seeking prenatal care (Highbaugh 1941, p. 84). The Ginling station also launched a "little teachers" (*xiaoxiansheng* 小先生) program, training primary school students to promote hygiene and disease prevention among their peers and families (Deng 1941).

Alongside their health work, the Ginling team launched economic projects that enabled women to earn income while preserving local traditions. The handicraft division of the rural service station promoted embroidery and cross-stitch work, and the Ginling staff helped sell the products abroad to raise funds (Xiao 1993, p. 110). About forty women joined a cooperative that produced traditional Renshou patterns. The project aimed both to sustain a local art form and to provide income for women in need (Highbaugh 1940, p. 145). At first, some participants tried to increase their pay by exaggerating the amount of embroidery they had completed or by passing unfinished pieces to others. Through regular supervision and home visits, the staff encouraged fairness and cooperation, and the women gradually developed a stronger sense of shared responsibility. By 1942, they were working together for public causes, producing more than one hundred sachets for a charity sale during the Duanwu Festival to support soldiers' families (Highbaugh 1941, pp. 85-86).

Education was another focus of Ginling's work in Renshou. The staff worked with local normal and primary schools to run literacy classes for women ("Nongcun funü gongzuo zai Renshou" 1940, p. 71). Lessons on hygiene, sewing, and childcare continued outside formal classes through demonstrations, songs, and plays—methods used during the agricultural fair and now woven into everyday learning. While such programs were common in Christian and non-Christian rural reconstruction efforts, Ginling's approach stood out for its collaboration with county institutions and deep integration into local networks. The county government often invited Ginling workers to assist with educational projects. They taught courses at the County Teacher's Institute, and trained local leaders in basic administration and community service. They also led homemaking courses in local schools,

编纂委员会 [The compiling committee of Renshou County gazetter, Sichuan Province], *Renshou xianzhi* 仁寿县志 [Renshou County gazetter] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1990), 513.

advised on the establishment of a kindergarten, and demonstrated methods of preschool teaching. The use of the town's Ancestral Hall as classrooms showed how well their work was accepted in the community (Highbaugh 1941, p. 89; Wei 1944, p. 60).

Ginling's educational network involved church and mission schools as well. Sixth-grade girls from the Canadian Mission School volunteered as "Little Teachers," guiding nursery and summer groups under the supervision of Ginling students (Highbaugh 1940, p. 147; Highbaugh 1941, p. 89). By working closely with county officials, educators, and mission schools, Ginling's women reformers became part of Renshou's educational system. Their collaboration showed how Christian rural service could merge with local governance, advancing practical education and social reform through shared networks and goals.

Although the Renshou program did not center on overt evangelism, its workers framed their service as a form of Christian witness. Irma Highbaugh repeatedly stressed that the value of such work lay not in immediate results but in what she called the "slower values" of Christian service—patient presence and the cultivation of character in everyday life (Highbaugh 1940, p. 148). Meeting people's needs, she argued, did not mean offering charity "with pity," nor relying solely on schemes of economic improvement. Rather, it meant enabling villagers to serve themselves and one another. For Highbaugh, the ultimate goal of Ginling's work was the gradual development of local leadership: individuals who were physically capable, intellectually equipped, and willing to take responsibility for the welfare of their communities ("A plan for work in a college-sponsored rural service station" ca. 1941). In this sense, what distinguished Ginling's rural service was less the novelty of its programs than a Christian ethos that emphasized self-discipline, unselfishness, and long-term transformation through ordinary, repeated acts of service.

At the same time, Highbaugh was acutely aware of the limits imposed by wartime conditions, especially the pressure of time and the uneven preparation of personnel. In an English report, she identified the project's "greatest difficulties" as the slow process of learning local conditions in Sichuan, the need for new staff—many just out of school—to acquire practical skills before they could teach others, and the challenge of sustaining disciplined daily work outside the familiar rhythms of academic life. She cautioned her colleagues that people "do not grow like soybeans or bamboo but rather like banyan trees," a metaphor that underscored both her commitment to gradual change and her sober awareness of the demands for quick, visible results. Students echoed these concerns, noting that villagers often expected them to "know everything," even as the team struggled with limited expertise and constant turnover ("A plan for work in a college-

sponsored rural service station" ca. 1941). Highbaugh thus framed Renshou as an ongoing experiment rather than a finished model, one marked by the tension between a Christian vision of gradual moral growth and the wartime urgency for demonstrable outcomes.

## Moving to Zhonghechang: Caring for Children and Reforming Domestic Life

In 1943, amid rising costs, travel difficulties, and the departure of Irma Highbaugh due to poor health, Ginling College closed its rural service station in Renshou and relocated to Zhonghechang, a market town closer to Chengdu ("The Rural Service Program at Ginling College, Chengtu, Szechuen, China" n.d.; Stasson 2018, p. 265). The Zhonghechang project built upon the lessons of Renshou, but with a new level of government partnership. Unlike Renshou, where Ginling students worked alongside foreign advisers, the Zhonghechang station was fully staffed and directed by Chinese women, who carried forward the vision of Christian rural reform (Schneider 2014, p. 133).

Zhonghechang's social and geographic setting made it an ideal site for this experiment. Once a small village, it had grown rapidly after the construction of the Chengdu–Renshou highway, becoming a busy trading center for the surrounding countryside (Zhong 2012, p. 17; Treudley 2011, p. 156). Continuous air raids on Chengdu during the war also drew families, schools, and officials to settle in nearby market towns such as Zhonghechang, bringing population growth and new demands for social services ("Chengdushi shusan renkou banfa" 1939; Wu 2014, p. 123). Existing church connections also provided a foundation for the Zhonghechang project: before Ginling's rural service team arrived, students and a pastor from West China Union Theological College had run a small gospel school there ("Chengdu U. C. C. District" 1941, p. 51). Together, these factors made Zhonghechang a place where Ginling's Chinese staff could test how to integrate Christian social service into the state-led efforts to rebuild rural communities during wartime.

This convergence of Christian ideals and wartime welfare found a tangible expression in the realm of family life. The idea of initiating social change through the family had long shaped both Christian and the GMD visions of reform, and Ginling's work in Zhonghechang reflected this shared concern. Since the 1920s, the NCC had promoted the "Christianizing the Home" (*Jiduhua jiating* 基督化家庭), based on the belief that a self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting Chinese church must rest on the foundation of Christian family life (O'Keefe 2017, p. 9). This vision took institutional form in 1930 with the establishment of the Christian Home Committee (*Jiduhua jiating weiyuanhui* 基督化家庭委员会), which sought to raise the status of women and children, introduce domestic "science" to rural

households, and promote hygiene and moral reform (Kuan 1937, p. 139-141).

The GMD policymakers likewise embraced the home as a frontline for moral and civic reform. Drawing on the New Life Movement's emphasis on moral discipline, hygiene, and productivity, they developed wartime family education programs that encouraged cooperation between schools and families and highlighted mothers' roles in children's physical and moral development (Schneider 2013, p. 191). While NCC reformers viewed the Christian family as a moral and faith community and prioritized its role in evangelization, the GMD state educators defined it as a tool for wartime mobilization. Both, however, shared the belief that reshaping the home could strengthen the nation.

In this overlapping landscape of Christian and state-led reform, Ginling women translated these ideals into practice through early childhood education. As Xiong Yana (Hsiung Ya-na 熊亚拿), a 1941 Ginling sociology graduate who supervised child education work in Zhonghechang, explained, "Since the basis of personality is fixed during the first six years, preschool education is of the utmost importance" (Hsiung n.d.).[1] The Zhonghechang rural experimental nursery school (*xiangcun shiyan tuoersuo* 乡村实验托儿所), co-founded in 1943 by Ginling College and the Sichuan Provincial Social Bureau (*Sichuansheng zhengfu shehuichu* 四川省政府社会处), enrolled about forty children aged two to five (Xiong n.d.). It aimed to alleviate the burdens of village families, train child welfare workers, and cultivate good citizens ("The Rural Service Program at Ginling College, Chengtu, Szechuen, China" n.d.). These goals reflected a distinctive blend of Christian service and wartime nationalism. Lessons on hygiene, proper conduct, and cooperation were interwoven with patriotic instruction, such as commemorations of "the Birthday of Sun Yat-sen" (国父诞辰) and lessons on "Our Country" (我们的国家) and "The Abominable Japan" (可恶的日本) (Xiong n.d.). Xiong stated plainly that "cultivating children's national consciousness was one of the nursery's chief goals," linking daily instruction with the GMD government's wartime educational directives (Xiong 1944b, p. 53).

In her reports, Xiong emphasized the visible improvements she believed signaled progress: clearer speech, polite greetings, better health, and new habits of washing. One grandmother marveled that her grandson, once resistant to washing, now insisted that his mother clean his face and clothes. The teachers' attention to manners, greetings, and table etiquette turned moral cultivation into a collective exercise in social order. One anecdote illustrated this transformation vividly: when a mother tried to take her child home out of

1 For Xiong Yana's educational background, see Wu Yifang to Mr. Wilmer Fairbank, 29 December 1945, YDL, UBCHEA, RG 11, Box 137-2757.

turn, the little girl burst into tears, insisting on waiting in line "like the other children" (Hsiung n.d.). For Xiong, such behavior demonstrated how proper discipline and collective order could be learned through daily practice. The cultivation of cleanliness, politeness, and self-restraint reflected a shared moral vision that linked Protestant ethics with the New Life Movement's ideals of orderly and responsible citizens.

The mentality of rationalizing everyday life was also reflected in the Ginling workers' efforts to improve children's nutrition. In the first annual report to the Provincial Social Bureau, Xiong noted that "nutrition" (*yang* 养) was as important as "education" (*jiao* 教) in the nursery's program. To strengthen the children's health, the staff served breakfast daily, including grains, soybean milk, sweet potatoes, and green vegetables (Xiong n.d.). In an English-language report, Xiong observed that most of the local children did not eat green vegetables, carrots, or tomatoes. Therefore, the nursery school served especially these "nutritious foods," and "the children gradually learned to take them" (Hsiung n.d.) She treated this change as one of the nursery's greatest achievements, interpreting the acquisition of certain dietary habits as a sign of progress (Xiong 1944b, pp. 51-52).

Ginling's nutritional work reflected a larger wartime movement to improve the health of Chinese children—what Fu Jia-Chen has described as the mobilization of nutrition science for national defense. In early twentieth-century China, nutrition science was new and far from universally accepted. Chinese nutritional activists and scientists began to promote a "scientific diet" not merely to prevent hunger but to strengthen the population and defend the nation during times of crisis (Fu 2018). By the 1940s, the GMD government had made nutrition a matter of national policy (Ren et al. 1941). Drawing on research by the Chinese Medical Association, a guide issued by the Ministry of Education recommended green vegetables as essential sources of vitamins and minerals, since milk was rarely consumed and animal products and fruits were expensive ("Zhongguo minzhong zuidi xiandu zhi yingyang xuyao" n.d.). The Ginling nursery designers followed this same logic. Rather than focusing solely on providing basic grains to ward off starvation, they aimed to supply specific nutrients—such as protein, vitamin B, and calcium—to foster robust and healthy children.

It is difficult to know whether the villagers fully understood the scientific reasoning behind these dietary reforms. Yet their growing participation in the program suggests that they recognized the authority of the Ginling workers and their methods. Within two weeks of the nursery's opening, many parents began contributing food voluntarily. The staff created a register to record the donations according to nutritional categories—vegetables, grains, and soy products—and parents followed these recommendations when offering food

(Xiong n.d.). This practice not only reduced the nursery's expenses but also turned nutrition education into a form of community cooperation. By organizing parental contributions in the language of nutritional science, the Ginling women reinforced their position as experts in family education and encouraged new ways of thinking about care and responsibility. Their efforts to improve children's health and diet suggest how Christian service ideals and modern scientific knowledge could come together in the routines of daily life.

This effort to reform rural daily life extended beyond the nursery to the families themselves. The Ginling workers treated home visits as the "key" to their success: they visited households regularly, interviewed parents, and sought their cooperation in caring for what Xiong called "problem children" (Hsiung n.d.). Twice a month, about thirty to forty parents attended meetings where staff gave short talks and demonstrations on daily care, such as making comfortable clothing and toys, improving children's nutrition, and learning songs and games to use at home (Xiong n.d.). These encounters reinforced the teachers' role as specialists in family education. By showing parents how to apply scientific and hygienic principles to childrearing, the nursery staff encouraged small but visible changes in domestic life and deepened local trust in their guidance.

Although the regular staff and student volunteers at the station sometimes wrote about villagers in a condescending way—describing them as "frank, generous, energetic, yet ignorant"—they were committed to "meeting the needs" of rural families and involving them in social service. A central goal of the program was to train local women as nursery assistants. The staff recruited village girls with primary education—seven in the first year and twice as many the next. When Ginling planned to open a second nursery to help mothers during the harvest season, a local leader organized villagers to clean and repair a house and build toilets so the project could begin. Villagers also donated bamboo for making basins, cups, and toys. This active participation encouraged the Ginling team to expand their work further, opening a summer nursery (*xialing tuoersuo* 夏令托儿所) and another for farmers' families during the busy season (*nongmang tuoersuo* 农忙托儿所) to meet the changing needs of village life (Hsiung n.d.; Xiong n.d.).

The Sichuan Social Bureau, impressed by how the program "seemed fitted to Chinese rural life," approved a budget increase in 1944 despite wartime inflation (Hsiung n.d.; "Sichuanshengzhengfu shehuichu guanyu shuoming Jinling nüzi wenli xueyuan heban xiangcun shiyan tuoersuo suoxu jingfei qing caizhengting zhaobo xi chazhao de qiantiao" 1944). The GMD government endorsed such an initiative not only because it offered a replicable rural service model but also because it aligned with the wartime campaign for civic responsibility. Yet such endorsement did not remove the

material and human constraints under which the Zhonghechang station operated. As Xiong Yana noted in her annual report, a persistent shortage of personnel shaped nearly every aspect of daily work. The local teenage girls trained as nursery assistants varied widely in educational background, making instruction uneven and labor-intensive. During the busiest farming seasons, limited staffing forced the nursery to operate only half days, falling short of villagers' needs. Even efforts to test and refine nursery equipment and toys as part of Ginling College's research program remained constrained by the lack of trained workers (Xiong n.d.).

Within these limits, Ginling's approach to service took shape through close contact with villagers. The Zhonghechang station contributed to wartime mobilization by organizing rallies to raise donations for the war effort and inviting local church members to visit soldiers' families "to let them know the love of Christ" ("Reports of Ginling's Rural Work" 1945). Such activities aligned Ginling's work with the GMD's civic discourse, yet they did not amount to a simple or passive incorporation into state agendas. Rather, Ginling's educators actively reinterpreted Christian service, translating its moral expressions into forms that resonated with wartime ideals of responsibility and sacrifice while maintaining an emphasis on care and personal transformation.

Although explicit evangelism was absent, Christian service was an indispensable part of Ginling's mission. In December 1944, the Zhonghechang rural service team collaborated with the local church to celebrate Christmas with the community. Children performed songs and plays before more than sixty parents, and during the Sunday service, seven young people were baptized. By the end of the war in 1945, the ideals of Christian service, rural education, and domestic improvement had become deeply localized—shaped as much by wartime scarcity and staffing limits as by the reformers' aspirations. A visiting missionary woman reflected on this transformation: "The work points to a new China after the war. We want thousands of such stations where devoted Chinese people become missionaries to their own people." ("Reports of Ginling's Rural Work" 1945) Her observation captured the broader significance of Zhonghechang: a place where Christian service, state policy, and village initiative converged, though unevenly and imperfectly, to meet the demands of China's wartime reconstruction.

## Reworking Rural Womanhood: Education, Authority, and Affection in Wartime Encounters

Education for rural women formed a central thread in Ginling's wartime work in Sichuan, yet this concern grew out of a longer history of reform that linked women's education to national regeneration. As Andrew Liu has noted,

some May Fourth intellectuals connected the "woman question" (*funü wenti* 婦女問題) with the "agrarian question" (*nongcun wenti* 农村问题), seeing both as part of the broader search for a moral and productive citizenry (Liu 2018). During its formative years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also made women's emancipation central to its revolutionary cause. As Christina Gilmartin has shown, Communist leaders in the 1920s viewed the transformation of gender relations as inseparable from social revolution, calling for women's participation in political and economic life (Gilmartin 1995).

Around the same time, Chinese Christian reformers were experimenting with alternative models of social change. The Mass Education Movement (MEM), launched by James Yen, envisioned a modern and democratic nation grounded in a literate population (Hayford 1990). The MEM reformers regarded women's education as vital to this goal, prioritizing literacy education in their work for women. Instruction emphasized home economics and childrearing, reflecting the belief that women's moral and domestic roles were key to modernization. While women's emancipation was often subordinated to state-building and economic growth, the MEM nonetheless created new spaces, such as literacy schools, cooperatives, and women's clubs, where rural women began to engage in public life (Merkel-Hess 2016, p. 57, p. 62).

The New Life Movement (NLM), initiated by Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Mei-ling in 1934, extended these ideas into a state-led moral campaign and placed greater emphasis on women's role in shaping household virtue and public order (Schneider 2013, pp. 185-186). At the 1935 Conference on Work for Rural Women and Children (*nongcun furu gongzuohui* 农村妇孺工作会) held by the GMD government, delegates described rural women as vital to family life and agricultural production yet still "lacking knowledge" (Ding 1935, p. 25). Cheng Bolu 程伯卢, head of Jiangxi's provincial education department, outlined women's education as a program of national rural reconstruction: cultivating patriotic and community spirit, teaching hygiene and handicraft, and promoting practical literacy and child care (Cheng 1935, p. 12).

Long before these political campaigns, Christian missionaries and churches had viewed women's education as central to moral and social uplift. The late-nineteenth-century slogan "woman's work for woman" reflected both a theological ideal and a missionary strategy (King 1989). Through training of Bible women, literacy classes, and domestic education programs, Christian missions created early networks that promoted women's learning and participation in community life (Wong 2015; Paddle 2024). By the late 1930s, Chiang and Soong's appeals to Christian organizations to join rural

reconstruction brought these religious efforts into closer alignment with state goals of social reform (Rigdon 2009, pp. 179-180).

Within this landscape, the rural service projects of Ginling Women's College during the war years marked a new stage in this evolving movement. Building on these earlier religious and political visions, Ginling educators sought not only to teach rural women but to work with them—to make education a collaborative experiment in rural improvement. Their programs in Renshou and Zhonghechang reveal how ideas first articulated in missionary and reformist discourse were put into practice by Chinese women under wartime conditions. Though reform rhetoric often continued to portray women as dependents in need of guidance, in Ginling's work they also emerged as active participants and local leaders in shaping new forms of family and community life.

A central figure in developing Ginling's women's education program in Zhonghechang was Xu Youzhi 徐幼芝, a 1934 sociology graduate of Ginling ("Miss Tsu Yu-Dji" n.d.). After graduation, she joined the rural reconstruction project in Lichuan, Jiangxi, a joint effort between Christian reformers and the GMD government that sought to rebuild villages in areas recently reclaimed from Communist control.[1] There, she worked to improve women's literacy and emphasized "tailoring teaching to individual needs" (*yincai shijiao* 因材施教) (Xu n.d., p. 22). One of her major initiatives was a three-month women's vocational training course that combined handwork, reading, and general knowledge, aiming to prepare villagers to take leadership in improving their own communities. The course featured a "learning by doing" (*zuozhongxue* 做中学) approach, having participants share household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, to cultivate a sense of cooperation and mutual responsibility in everyday life (Xu n.d., p. 27).

Yet Xu soon realized that most students wanted only literacy lessons and resisted household labor. Reflecting later, she described the work as "reclaiming a wasteland," admitting they were still "groping in darkness" (Xu 1936, p. 36, p. 39). Her struggle revealed a common tension in Christian women's reform work: as Jennifer Bond observes, missionary-trained educators often saw themselves as bearers of modern knowledge about hygiene, childrearing, and morality, but such ideals often collided with the

1 For more on the Christian rural reconstruction efforts in Lichuan, Jiangxi, see James C. Thomson, *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928-1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Liu Jiafeng 刘家峰, *Zhongguo Jidujiao xiangcun jianshe yundong yanjiu (1907-1950)* 中国基督教乡村建设运动研究 (1907-1950) [The Rural Reconstruction Movement of Chinese Christianity (1907-1950)] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2008), 160-175.

realities of rural poverty, labor demands, and skepticism toward outside reformers (Bond 2024). In Lichuan, Xu faced precisely these challenges, where local women questioned the value of literacy and preferred practical skills like knitting or mending tools that met immediate needs.

Despite these difficulties, the Lichuan experience gave Xu a deeper understanding of the rural women she aimed to serve. After returning briefly to her hometown of Changsha in 1936 to care for her mother, she became general secretary of the local YWCA, then joined James Yen's MEM movement in 1939 to conduct surveys on rural home life in Guangxi ("Miss Tsu Yu-Dji" n.d.). When Ginling invited her to lead its new service station in Zhonghechang, Xu brought a decade of experience linking women's literacy training, civic education, and rural service.

When Xu Youzhi arrived in Sichuan in March 1943, even with her earlier experience in Jiangxi and Guangxi, she found herself uncertain where to begin. "The most difficult question now," she wrote, "is what to teach." She recognized that these women needed more than literacy; they needed lessons suited to their daily lives. Through home visits and local surveys, Xu began to understand the world of the village women around her. The women had seen the textbooks once used in a local people's school (*minzhong xuexiao* 民众学校), yet they found them meaningless and unrelated to their daily concerns. When asked what they wished to learn, they hesitated, replying that reading and writing were pursuits for "wealthy townspeople." Xu chose instead to learn through daily encounters—by listening, chatting, and sharing in the women's routines. As they talked, she and her colleagues heard rural women's worries about the rising cost of goods, their confusion over "piaozi" 票子 (paper money), and their unease when local officials or police came to their homes. They spoke of children who often fell ill, asking how to prevent disease and teach good habits. Many also wished to learn to write letters or read land deeds—skills that had grown more relevant as wartime disruptions brought new dealings with officials, markets, and outsiders (Xu 1944, p. 56).

Out of these conversations, Xu reshaped her curriculum. She combined simple lessons in reading and writing with talks on household hygiene, childrearing, and the new social and political order of wartime life. Instruction in the county's administrative system, the use of money, and public sanitation offered practical guidance for dealing with the growing presence of the state (Xu 1944, p. 57). For many women, civic education thus became a way to make sense of the new order rather than a distant political ideal. As newcomers and refugees poured into Zhonghechang, they also grew curious about unfamiliar customs and manners. Xu used lessons in Chinese history and geography to situate their daily experiences within a wider national framework, encouraging them to see themselves as citizens connected to people beyond

their village (Treudley 2011, p. 100). What might have begun as a patriotic program took shape instead as a form of everyday education—linking the duties of citizenship with the ordinary cares of family and community.

In the winter of 1943–44, Xu organized a more intensive four-month women's training course that met each afternoon when farm work was light (Treudley 2011, p. 100). The program, as she and her colleague Xiong Yana later explained, aimed to prepare women "for democracy" (Hsiung n.d.). Activities centered on practice rather than lectures: participants learned how to keep meeting minutes, observe rules of discussion, chair meetings, and speak in public. Religious lessons, given by the church workers attached to the station, emphasized the moral foundation of democratic life: to overcome selfishness and serve the common good. The results, she noted, exceeded expectations. After only a short period of training, many women showed marked improvement in expressing their views. One woman in her thirties who had never attended school was able to serve as chair, recite Sun Yat-sen's political testament, and deliver reports with ease. Younger girls who had once appeared shy and self-conscious now volunteered to dance or sing on stage (Xu 1943, p. 8). One student, a young woman who earned her living collecting dog droppings for fertilizer, proudly donated ten yuan to the soldiers at the front—a gesture that, for the female Ginling educators, symbolized the awakening of civic spirit among rural women (Hsiung n.d.).

At the same time, Xu's report made clear that these changes did not erase the difficulties she and her colleagues perceived in their work. She described the women as "petty," "stubborn," and slow to cooperate—traits she regarded as products of long-standing social conditions rather than individual failings (Xu 1944, p. 57). Such dispositions, she insisted, could not be altered quickly. Nor could educators rely on harsh discipline or complete permissiveness. What was required instead was the gradual work of moral influence and personal example. Those engaged in women's education, Xu concluded, needed "great patience and sympathy" (Xu 1943, p. 8). Her assessment echoed Irma Highbaugh's repeated insistence that rural service was necessarily slow work, demanding sustained presence rather than quick results, and underscored the gap that Ginling workers themselves perceived between their reform ideals and village realities.

Ginling's women reformers therefore placed great emphasis on relationships as a condition of effective teaching. Xiong Yana observed that personal bonds between teachers and students often did more to draw local women into learning than any well-prepared curriculum. "Those who work with women," she advised, "must first be their friends" (Xiong 1944, p. 65). Friendship, however, was not an abstract sentiment but a daily practice. Home visits allowed teachers to move beyond the classroom, helping with chores,

talking while working, and sharing ordinary routines (Lin 1940, p. 55). Through these repeated encounters, Ginling students learned how village women organized their days and negotiated family responsibilities. Such shared labor and conversation did not eliminate differences in background, but they helped make cooperation possible and encouraged village women's participation in the programs.

These personal bonds were also established in the rural service station, which served as an open, welcoming space where women could step beyond their homes and fields to meet, talk, and exchange news. Village women gathered there to *bai longmenzhen* (摆龙门阵, a Sichuan phrase meaning to chat and share stories) and to seek advice from the staff. One student recalled that Irma Highbaugh was especially beloved; women came almost daily to sit and talk with her and greeted her warmly on her visits to nearby villages ("Nongcun funü gongzuo zai Renshou" 1940, p. 71). Such encounters often turned foreign and "down-river" (下江人, a Sichuan term for migrants from the lower Yangtze region) educators into trusted figures of authority. Rural women called them *xiansheng* (先生, an honorific meaning "teacher" or "expert") and sought their counsel on an array of matters—settling domestic disputes, writing contracts, or even designing clothing patterns (Xiong 1944, p. 65).

Still, this closeness did not erase social distance. Ginling workers were conscious of their urban, educated backgrounds and often viewed rural women as both admirable and deficient— "curious, generous, and industrious," yet "emotional" and "blind," as Xiong put it (Xiong 1944, p. 63). They believed that with "proper guidance," rural women could extend their influence from the household into the broader community. The programs they built opened new opportunities for participation, yet they did not challenge patriarchal norms. Teenage girls, for example, attended classes on childcare, household management, and family relations "in preparation for marriage" (Hsiung n.d.) As Xiong remarked, rural women's work was not a "family revolution" (Xiong 1944, p. 65). This ambivalence—between empowerment and restraint—mirrored what Jane Hunter identifies among American women missionaries, whose efforts to uplift Chinese women also projected ideals of Victorian domesticity (Hunter 1984). For the Ginling reformers, a sense of moral superiority coexisted with genuine friendship and emotional intimacy. Their encounters in the villages reveal both the barrier of cultural authority and the beginnings of a shared sisterhood forged through daily labor and conversations.

At the same time, rural women were far from passive recipients of reform. Their hesitation, selective acceptance, and practical demands repeatedly shaped how Ginling's programs unfolded in practice. Village women

questioned the usefulness of certain lessons, gravitated toward skills that addressed immediate needs, and responded unevenly to moral instruction, prompting educators to revise curricula and teaching methods. These everyday interactions posed subtle but persistent challenges to elite urban reformers' assumptions about rural womanhood and forced ongoing adjustments in pedagogy and priorities.

## Conclusion

Ginling's experiment of rural service in Sichuan reveals how wartime reconstruction unfolded not only through institutional networks and program design but also through the slow, intimate work of building relationships. In Renshou and Zhonghechang, Christian women reformers translated ideals of service, citizenship, and moral education into small acts, such as organizing fairs, running nurseries, and visiting homes, which redefined the meaning of both "women's work for women" and Christian social engagement. Their programs were shaped by state imperatives and nationalist rhetoric, yet they were sustained by the personal trust and emotional labor of women who moved between different worlds: between urban and rural, Christian and secular, elite and popular.

Unlike earlier forms of missionary-led rural service, Ginling's wartime programs were carried out largely by Chinese Christian women whose religious commitments were closely intertwined with concerns for national survival and social reconstruction. Foreign missionaries such as Irma Highbaugh remained important mentors and facilitators, but the daily work increasingly reflected Chinese Christian actors' own interpretations of Christian service under wartime conditions. This positioning enabled Ginling workers to engage in reconstruction efforts led by the GMD government not merely as passive participants but as mediators who translated Christian ideals into forms intelligible and acceptable within local and national contexts.

The Ginling workers' experience underscores the dual nature of Christian reform in wartime China: it was both a project of moral cultivation and a negotiation of power. Their efforts introduced new practices of civic education, hygiene, and family management in village life, but they also reflected enduring hierarchies of class, culture, and gender. In tracing these tensions, this study suggests that the significance of Christian rural service lay less in its immediate results than in the possibilities it created for connection and participation.

By attending to these granular encounters—teaching, visiting, talking, and sharing in daily life—we can see how Christian women reformers contributed to wartime reconstruction not merely as agents of Western modernity or state policy, but as historical actors who shaped China's moral

and social fabric from within. Their work, modest in scale yet ambitious in spirit, points to a broader story of how religious commitment, gender, and rural reform intertwined to redefine the possibilities of social change in Republican China.

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