History of Chinese Red Cross: Part I

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We asked Caroline Reeves of Emmanuel College’s history department to do a two-part guest posting for us that puts the current actions of the Chinese Red Cross into historical context. Reeves has conducted extensive research on the history of the Chinese Red Cross and late Qing and twentieth century Chinese relief work.

By Caroline Reeves

Among the scenes of devastation—small bodies in shrouds; crumpled buildings and bridges; dazed survivors—another image flashes across the screen: something familiar, something reassuring to international viewers. Out of the chaos appears the symbol of the Red Cross, on the arm of a medic, on the side of an ambulance: a sign that there might be some hope—or at least some comfort—for these victims of China’s horrific earthquake.

As we watch the unreal footage of a natural disaster that has, so far, claimed almost 30,000 lives, we are brought back to our own comfort zone by the presence of that familiar symbol, the Red Cross. This is something we “know,” something that needs no translation from cryptic Chinese into English, or German, or whatever our language. But what we are looking at is not “our” Red Cross, but the Red Cross Society of China, Zhongguo Hongshizihui (RCSC). This is an organization with its own history and its own imperatives, a Society whose background gives us important insights into the China we cannot pull our eyes away from today.

The Chinese Red Cross Society was founded over 100 years ago.[i] It was established not by Americans or Britons or even Swiss intent on bringing their humanitarian institutions to China, but by the Chinese themselves. The Chinese Red Cross Society is a profoundly Chinese institution, much as the American Red Cross is deeply American and the Japanese Red Cross is inextricably Japanese. It is one of China’s most enduring social welfare institutions, outlasting diverse governments, changing conceptions of social welfare and dramatic policy swings on international involvement. Its existence reveals two important aspects about Chinese society often overlooked in the world’s media coverage of that country: first, the Chinese people’s desire to help their compatriots personally and directly, despite authoritarian governments or social systems; and second, China’s overwhelming desire to be included in the great international movements of the last 150 years, including the international humanitarian movement embodied by the international movement of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (see also Kate Merkel-Hess’s post on International Women’s Day). The media often portrays China as a monolith, “where the state decides everything and groupthink predominates” (see Wasserstrom’s formulation in his recent article), but today, when China is quite literally falling apart, it is precisely these two aspects that prevail.

Part 2: To come....At the turn of the 20th century, China was being torn apart not by earthquakes, but by political, social and intellectual currents. The formation of the Chinese Red Cross was a product of this turmoil.

i. I have written about various aspects of the Chinese Red Cross Society in a number of venues, most recently as a chapter in UC Berkeley’s publication, Cities in Motion: Interior, Coast, and Diaspora in Transnational China, and in a University of Hawaii Press book, Interactions: Transregional Perspectives on World History.