

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Searching the early lives of the Soong sisters in Macon, Georgia: three Chinese overseas students in the American South

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## Abstract

This article uses local history approaches to reconstruct the early lives of the Soong sisters at Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The sisters' experiences as Chinese overseas students were situated in the histories of American South and of Asian Americans. By examining the sisters' transition to Wesleyan, their everyday lives on campus, and their occasional off-campus encounters with Maconites, the article argues that the "Southernness" of Wesleyan and Macon distinguished the sisters' experiences from other Chinese overseas students that are more familiar to Chinese historians. Because of the relative absence of Chinese residents in this small Southern town, the girls were rarely categorized with Chinese laborers and hardly felt the strong anti-Chinese sentiments that were experienced by students who went to Western states and large cities. Similarly, the slow adoption of new utilitarian courses at this elite Southern female college also meant the sisters were neither trained as qualified homemakers nor as career women like many other American-educated Chinese women in their generation. They were taught to become housewives that played important, unpaid social roles – a path that they would later follow.

**Keywords:** Asian Americans in Southern history; Chinese overseas students; Soong Ching-ling; Soong May-ling; Soong sisters; Wesleyan Female College

The Soong sisters, Ai-ling, Ching-ling, and May-ling, are important historical figures in China's modern history, well known for their marriages to prominent political and business leaders of the early twentieth century. Their private and public lives after marriage have been well documented by historians and biographers. But their early lives, such as their experiences studying abroad in the United States, have largely been neglected, likely due to limited surviving archival materials. The Soong sisters were among the first Chinese female students to study in America. Together, they lived almost for a decade in the segregated South – Ai-ling, the oldest, arrived in 1904 and left in 1909 while Ching-ling and May-ling stayed between 1908 and 1913 – and attended Wesleyan Female College at Macon, Georgia. Their stays as schoolgirls in the American South not only shaped their later lives as important public figures in modern China but also reflected the varied experiences of Chinese overseas students in America during the early twentieth century. Revisiting the Soong sisters' early lives at Macon will therefore contribute to the two subfields of modern Chinese history: the personal history of Soong Ching-ling and Soong May-ling and the studies of Chinese overseas students.

Because of the relative absence of personal letters and diaries dated back to their Macon years and little other archival materials directly linked to the sisters' lives in Wesleyan, this study adopts a local history approach and relies heavily on the study of Macon's local contexts, including the histories of

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Macon, the Methodist church that the Soong sisters were affiliated with, and Wesleyan College, to reconstruct the Soong sisters' lives there. Among the few primary sources that exist, a 1940s survey conducted by Wesleyan's alumni office to gather people's memories about the Chinese sister's early school lives provided more than thirty responses with valuable information from their old classmates. Relying on local sources from Macon has invited me to further engage in dialogue with the existing studies of Southern history and especially the studies of Asian Americans in Southern history. Does the "Southernness" of Wesleyan and Macon make the sisters' experiences different from other Chinese overseas students in America who often chose colleges in big cities and Western states? How do the sisters' experiences help us understand Chinese Americans' racial interstitiality within the black/white binary in the South and how this special racial identity might have had an effect on the sisters? These questions will be addressed when the study of the Soong sisters' early lives as Chinese overseas students is situated in the context of American Southern history and Asian American history.

The article, with an agenda to reconstruct the Soong sisters' schoolgirl lives in the American South, starts with their transcultural childhoods in Shanghai and tries to understand the culture shock they faced when they transitioned to the American college. It then examines the campus life and school curriculum, revealing how Southern education shaped their later lives as prominent women in modern Chinese history. The story concludes with a discussion of the Chinese sisters' off-campus encounter with Maconites and a comparison between the sisters and other Chinese overseas students in terms of the racial situation they faced in the United States.

### From Mctyeire to Wesleyan: the sisters' journey to the West

Although the Soong sisters were born in China to Chinese parents, their childhood was a rather transcultural experience. First and foremost, the family lived in Shanghai, a Chinese treaty port that was under very strong Western influence. The busy streets, Western-style buildings, and modern layout of Shanghai's international settlement gave the city a cosmopolitan image that mirrored many modern cities in the world. The city census in 1900 shows a growing foreign population of 6,774, including 2,691 British and 562 Americans.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, their father Charlie Soong, a young US-educated Christian who had spent almost a decade in America before coming back to China and settling in Shanghai,<sup>2</sup> had an obsession with all things American and tried to imitate the American lifestyle at his own home. Their house, located in the suburban Hongkou region, was "half-Chinese, half-foreign" in both architectural style and decor. There was "a Chinese parlor furnished with redwood tables and stiff little chairs" and "a foreign-style parlor with piano and comfortable chairs and sofas." The bedrooms were equipped with American mattresses and the bathrooms were fitted with Suzhou tubs. There were also lavatories inside the house. Moreover, "the heating was furnished by gas radiators, a refinement that many foreigners in Shanghai did without."<sup>3</sup>

Due to their mother's limited understanding of English and hesitancy in using it, the Soongs spoke Chinese, or more specifically Shanghaiese, in their transcultural home. But the father taught English to his children – Ching-ling could still hum the American songs she learned from her father 70 years later when she was in her eighties. The girls, and their brothers, were dressed in Chinese clothes like their mother, but their father occasionally wore Western-style clothes. At the dinner table, the family enjoyed both American and Chinese cuisine. Charlie Soong had become accustomed to American meals during his stay in the United States and never settled back down to Chinese cuisine for the rest of his life. So his wife learned to cook Western-style food. But they also hired a Chinese cook who did the normal Chinese-style cooking.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Burke 1960, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Charlie Soong went to America in 1878. He later returned to China in December of 1885 and arrived in January 1886. Burke 1960, pp. 8, 32.

<sup>3</sup>Hahn 2014 [1941], pp. 68–69; Huang 2012.

<sup>4</sup>Epstein 2004, p. 22; Hahn 2014 [1941], p. 70.

What the couple both shared was their Christian devotion. Charlie Soong was baptized at a Methodist Church in Willington, North Carolina on November 7, 1880, when he was a teenager. He entered Trinity College in North Carolina and then transferred to Vanderbilt University, both with financial help from people associated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, especially its North Carolina Conference. After graduating with honors in theology at Vanderbilt, Soong was admitted on trial into the North Carolina Conference and appointed a missionary to China.<sup>5</sup> This is how he returned to Shanghai in 1885, and later he married Miss Ni in 1887.<sup>6</sup> Ni, although she never went abroad, was a baptized Protestant under the influence of the London Missionary Society in Shanghai and went to a missionary school for girls in Shanghai before she met her husband.<sup>7</sup> In 1890, Mr. Soong resigned from his full-time missionary job for other business engagements. According to an 1892 letter of his, the decision was made due to the insufficient salaries he received as a native preacher despite his American education.<sup>8</sup> But he kept his preacher's license, taught a Sunday class, and remained active in Christian work.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Soong, like most preachers' wives, worked with her husband to help the poor and she was a patron of various schools and churches.

This "half-Chinese, half-American" Christian family is where Ai-ling, Ching-ling, and May-ling grew up before they were old enough for Mctyeire, a prestigious Shanghai school for girls run by American Southern Methodists. At an extraordinarily early age of five, Ai-ling started her formal education at this boarding school and was tutored privately by Miss Richardson, who later became the school principal, for the first 2 years because she was the only one in the age group. Later, Ching-ling entered Mctyeire at seven and May-ling at five, although the little sister went home soon because she was found not ready for boarding school and was tutored at home until she went to the United States in 1907 at age nine.<sup>10</sup>

In total, Ai-ling attended Mctyeire for about 10 years and Ching-ling for about 7 years as boarding students. Then, in 1904, Ai-ling traveled to America to enroll in Wesleyan Female College in Macon, Georgia.<sup>11</sup> Her two younger sisters followed her 3 years later. Charlie Soong's connection to Southern Methodists was often singled out as the reason behind his choice of this Methodist college. One of Charlie's old classmates at Vanderbilt later became a fellow Methodist missionary of his in the Shanghai region. A Macon native, William Burke, was a close friend of DuPont Guerry, Wesleyan's president between 1903 and 1909. According to Burke's biography written by his own son, Mr. Soong asked Burke to correspond with Guerry regarding Ai-ling's schooling before he decided to send the young lady to Wesleyan.<sup>12</sup> A few existing studies of the Soong sisters also like to emphasize the fact that Wesleyan is the first American college chartered to grant degrees to women. Its reputation thus attracted Soong.<sup>13</sup> However, although the American South pioneered higher institutions for women, Southern institutions had been slower to raise matriculation and graduation standards and by the beginning of the twentieth century, women's colleges in the South already needed to emulate the curriculum models of their counterparts in the Northeast to catch up.<sup>14</sup> A quick comparison between the early twentieth-century school catalogs of Wesleyan and Wellesley, a top women's college in Massachusetts, can easily convince us that with more and better-qualified teachers, a wider choice of courses, higher matriculation and graduation standards, and better facilities, Wellesley offers a much better education. As a Vanderbilt graduate, Mr. Soong should have been aware of these problems in Southern schools.

<sup>5</sup>Barnett 1942, pp. 74–77.

<sup>6</sup>Burke 1960, p. 32; Huang 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Burke 1960, pp. 37–38; Hahn 2014 [1941], p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Burke 1960, p. 54; and Romance of Charlie Soong, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup>Burke 1960, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup>Hahn 2014 [1941], pp. 73–79, 89–94.

<sup>11</sup>Anonymous 1904.

<sup>12</sup>Burke 1960, pp. 14–24, 226–27.

<sup>13</sup>Zhu 2005, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup>Corley 1985, pp. 157–60; McCandless 1999, pp. 6–7.

Therefore, Soong's choice of Wesleyan might not be as straightforward as existing scholarship has shown us, especially in Ching-ling's case. In 1907, when the middle sister came to America on a government scholarship as one of the four female students who were selected to be sent to US universities, the group's original destination was Wellesley. The four girls should've known each other. All of them were either students or graduates of Mctyeire, and among them, Miss Cao Fangyun, an 1897 graduate of Mctyeire who returned to the school as a teacher in 1892 after studying at Cottey College in Nevada, Missouri for 5 years, could have taught Ching-ling and her older sister before. Records suggest that they spent the month-long trip to America together. It is documented that at least two of them, including Miss Cao, did attend Wellesley as planned.<sup>15</sup> But Ching-ling did not join her friends to attend the more prestigious college in the suburb of Boston. Instead, she and her younger sister, May-ling, went to Wesleyan to join Ai-ling, who was 1 year away from graduating.<sup>16</sup> If Ching-ling could find help from other Chinese friends at Wellesley, maybe the presence of Ai-ling was not the only reason for Mr. Soong to choose Wesleyan for her, just like the introduction of William Burke might not be the only reason that he chose Wesleyan for Ai-ling 3 years earlier.

In a letter from Laura Askew Haygood, the founding principle of Mctyeire, she claimed that she would never consent to taking young women from China to America for education unless they have assured protection of a small family like school. She specifically mentioned that "the perils that would come inevitably to Chinese women in a large city" should be avoided.<sup>17</sup> What exact perils was she talking about? The discrimination against Chinese, or the regular crimes toward single young women in general? Likely both. The same view was possibly shared by Charlie Soong. After spending two tough years in Boston, young Charlie was taken by a friendly southern captain to Wilmington, North Carolina. From there, he moved first to Trinity, North Carolina, and then to Nashville, Tennessee. In the late nineteenth century, the mounting anti-Chinese sentiments had been federally sanctioned through the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and became a nationwide phenomenon. But in the small towns of the American South, where there were very few Chinese immigrants, they could, from time to time, claim a near-white status within Jim Crow's black/white binary system.<sup>18</sup> This is why the boy was warmly welcomed by elite southern Methodists, an experience very different from his early encounter in Boston.<sup>19</sup> This safe and friendly environment is what he cherished most about America and it is what he wanted for his daughters. It is much more important than a superior education with an improved curriculum. Especially if Soong shared the values of other Southern planter fathers and saw the college education as a symbol of "class" and as means to prepare their daughters for a life of gentility and not for a profession.<sup>20</sup> In what environment the girls took the classes meant more than what exactly they learned from the classes.

No matter how Soong chose Wesleyan for his daughters, the choice made it a very easy transition for the girls to start their college lives. There were a lot of similarities shared between Mctyeire and Wesleyan. Both were connected to Methodist Episcopal Church, South in the United States. Mctyeire was a product of its China Mission and Wesleyan was founded by its Georgia Annual Conference in cooperation with the people of Macon.<sup>21</sup> Both schools were designed for upper-class girls and aimed at raising refined and godly wives within the elite circle.<sup>22</sup> The two schools were further connected through their teachers and curriculum. Miss Haygood, the founding principle of

<sup>15</sup>Qinghuadaxue 1917, pp. 146–47; Wu, 1988, p. 89; Ye 2002, pp. 62–63, 136–37; Zhu 2012, pp. 38–39.

<sup>16</sup>According to Anonymous 1942, Ching-ling and May-ling spent a year at a small preparatory school in Summit, New Jersey before they went to Macon, Georgia.

<sup>17</sup>Haygood 1904, pp. 315–17.

<sup>18</sup>Bronstein 2013, p. 119. Also see Jianli Zhao, *Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, Their Community and Stories of Their Lives*, pp. 22–37 for an overview of Chinese in Southern history.

<sup>19</sup>Barnett 1942, pp. 73–76.

<sup>20</sup>MacCandless 1999, pp. 6–7.

<sup>21</sup>Gurry 1962, pp. 7–11. "Wesleyan and Mulberry – a Hundred Year of Partnership" and Helen Glenn (1958), "And So It Began..." *Bulletin of Wesleyan College* 38:3, pp. 1–16. Mulberry Street Methodist Church Archives, Macon, Georgia.

<sup>22</sup>Liu 2017, p. 41; Young 2009, pp. 180–82.

Mctyeire, graduated from Wesleyan in 1864.<sup>23</sup> Possibly due to Haygood's influence, the curriculum of the two schools both emphasized a liberal arts education with instruction of art and music as electives, and both placed the studies of principles of the Christian religion in the center of the institutions.<sup>24</sup>

The campus life of Mctyeire in Shanghai also mirrored that of a small American college like Wesleyan. When it was built in 1892, Mctyeire Home and School only had one building, with its "home" and "school" parts separated, but under one roof.<sup>25</sup> After Mctyeire added a substantial annex in 1900 to meet the growing need for an expanding school, it continued to mix dorms and classrooms in the two connected buildings.<sup>26</sup> This was a common arrangement for early female colleges in the United States, which can be justified by the need to protect the students and to create a family like atmosphere.<sup>27</sup> Inside the two Western-style buildings,<sup>28</sup> the boarding students slept, dined, prayed, and studied together under the supervision of the same group of teachers.<sup>29</sup> Every Thursday night, they joined together for religious discussions led by guests. Every Sunday morning, they went to the same church next to the school to attend service and the older Mctyeire girls formed the choir there.<sup>30</sup> The busy schedule and frequent interactions helped to form a close-knit, family like community, which echoes the one later discussion in this article finds at Wesleyan College.

In 1904, when Ai-ling traveled across the Pacific Ocean to America and arrived in Macon, Georgia at midnight on a hot August day to attend Wesleyan Female College, she did not walk into an entirely foreign land. Compared to the pioneers of the Chinese Educational Mission between 1872 and 1881 and the students who flock to the United States in 1909–1939, sometimes identified as the first wave and the second wave of Chinese overseas students in America, Ai-ling and her sisters probably faced a lesser cultural shock due to their transcultural childhood.<sup>31</sup> For the young Ai-ling, to some degree, she was returning to her dad's homeland. In fact, Ai-ling and her sisters suffered much more from the reverse cultural shock after they returned home and gradually got to be familiar with a different China beyond its treaty ports.

### Life at Wesleyan College

Just as her father hoped, Ai-ling was wholeheartedly welcomed by the school communities. On the next day after Ai-ling's arrival, the local newspaper, *The Macon Telegraph*, published a news report about her arrival. It emphasized the fact that Ai-ling was accompanied by the well-respected Reverend William Burke – the same person that introduced Wesleyan College to the Soong family – she grew up in a Chinese Christian family, and she was not only a product of "their" own missionary work but would also join the Christian work in China after finishing her education at Wesleyan. According to the report, President Guerry of Wesleyan did not doubt that the Chinese girl, being the first Chinese student on campus, would be greeted with kindness and respect, although he wouldn't force her upon any young lady on campus as an associate.<sup>32</sup> The 1905–1906 yearbook of Wesleyan college seems to confirm that Ai-ling was well treated by her classmates. There was a biography of the new Chinese girl with a photo portrait of Ai-ling sitting cross-legged, a sitting posture not considered suitable for well-bred Chinese ladies, in both Western clothing and hairstyle. Given most of the girls, except the graduating seniors, were only mentioned in the class roll and appeared in the group pictures, the featured article of Ai-ling was a special honor for her. In this biography,

<sup>23</sup>Haygood 1904, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1907–1908*, pp. 33–58; Haygood 1904, p. 280.

<sup>25</sup>Haygood 1904, p. 282.

<sup>26</sup>Haygood 1904, pp. 286–87.

<sup>27</sup>Turner 1984, p. 140.

<sup>28</sup>See Haygood 1904, pp. 276–77 for two photographs of Mctyeire's school buildings.

<sup>29</sup>Haygood 1904, pp. 277–78, 286–87.

<sup>30</sup>Hahn 2014 [1941], pp. 74, 92.

<sup>31</sup>See Rhoads 2011 for a thorough study of the "first wave" and Bieler 2015 for the "second wave."

<sup>32</sup>Anonymous 1904.

Ai-ling's Christian background and her personal tie with Mr. Burke were reemphasized. The article further introduced her father as a wealthy Chinese businessman with a Vanderbilt education and her uncle as an important Qing diplomat sent to America. In another word, despite being Chinese, this girl came from an upper-class Christian family just like her white classmates.<sup>33</sup>

If only Ai-ling can ignore the little mishap that she was detained in San Francisco for more than 2 weeks due to the stringent exclusion law, she was treated almost like a white girl. Ai-ling's detention in San Francisco has been well-documented by historians, who often cite the episode as proof of the anti-Chinese sentiments prevalent in America that a well-connected upper-class Chinese student like Ai-ling, who should be exempt from the Chinese Exclusion Act, was still harassed by immigration officials.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that Ai-ling, a 15-year-old girl who was raised in a transcultural environment, felt deeply hurt by the mistreatment. But her American friends at Macon did not necessarily see her detention as a case of racial discrimination. In Mr. Burke's biography, the incident was portrayed in a very different light. Here, Ai-ling was detained because her father, against the advice of Mr. Burke, purchased a fake Portuguese passport for the young girl and hoped she could get by as a Portuguese citizen. Although the book recognizes that it was commonly perceived, at least by the Chinese, that the Americans were hostile to legally accepted upper-class Chinese visitors. This public opinion could be shaped by overreported incidents of forced detention of Chinese students and businessmen entering American ports in the Shanghai newspapers. In another word, if Ai-ling told the truth and showed the immigration officers her true upper-class Chinese student identity, her chance of humiliating detention in San Francisco was slight.<sup>35</sup> This could be a view widely shared by Ai-ling's white upper-class friends at Wesleyan college. To them, Ai-ling's identity as a member of the superior class overshadowed her identity as part of the inferior race. Although she occasionally was teased about the Chinese laundryman down the street,<sup>36</sup> she gained more respect, and probably even some jealousy, from her classmates with the handsome amount she spent on her spring clothes.<sup>37</sup>

The community embraced Ai-ling, and later her sisters; it was a small close-knit one that felt like a big family. About half of Wesleyan's more than 400 students resided on campus, living in the dormitory part of the main building; they formed the core student body. The commuter students or the day students included some married Macon ladies who took only one or two courses every semester and therefore didn't play much of a role in campus life.<sup>38</sup> The female college faculty members, most of whom were unmarried women or widows, lived in the hall as resident housemothers.<sup>39</sup> At least one lady teacher resided on one dormitory floor.<sup>40</sup> Their male colleagues lived near the campus and were on call to protect the women in an emergency.<sup>41</sup> The college presidents, although male and usually married, also resided on campus. His family occupied an apartment in the main building.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>33</sup>*The Zig Zag* (Wesleyan College Yearbook), vol. 3, 1906.

<sup>34</sup>Leong 2005, p. 109; Ye 2002, pp. 88–94.

<sup>35</sup>Burke 1960, pp. 228–37.

<sup>36</sup>According to "A 1940s survey response from S. S. (Ai-ling's friend at Wesleyan) to Wesleyan's alumni office." Wesleyan College Archives, Davenport Guerry, likely the son of President Guerry, liked to tease Ai-ling about the Chinese laundryman down the street. The laundry business was the main profession the few Chinese residents in Macon were engaged in. According to the personal memoir of a Chinese immigrant growing up in Macon (Jung 2005, p. 5), the city had only three Chinese, all laundrymen, in 1900. Also see Raymond A. Mohl, "Asian Immigration to Florida," p. 77 for an explanation of Chinese laundry tradition.

<sup>37</sup>"A 1940s letter from Flora C. Turner (Ai-ling's friend at Wesleyan) to Jennie Loyall." Wesleyan College Archives.

<sup>38</sup>According to *The Zig Zag*, 1905, vol. 2, p. 40, in the academic year 1904–1905, 230 out of 464 students lived on campus. The enrollment number remained stable during the decade when the Soong sisters attended Wesleyan. According to the *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1912–1913*, p. 79, there were 412 students enrolled in the school in the academic year 1913–1914.

<sup>39</sup>Corley 1985, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1910–1911*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup>Corley 1985, p. 119.

<sup>42</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1908–1909*, p. 11.



Everybody lived on campus, resided in the same building, ate the same food in the same dining room, and prayed together twice every day. The daily schedule kept girls busy and put them under the round-the-clock supervision of their teachers and in the constant company of their fellow students. Every morning started with the president's 15-minute daily chapel talk.<sup>43</sup> The day was then followed by eight classes, with two of them taking place after the dinner break. The girls had regular classes on Saturdays as well.<sup>44</sup> There was no class on Sundays, but the school managed to have the girls fully occupied. In the morning, all the boarding students, escorted by their teachers, would take a 15-minute walk down the hill to the Mulberry Street Methodist Church downtown for the Sunday service. Only the ones that provided legitimate excuses could stay home from church.<sup>45</sup> In the afternoon, there was a silent hour from 3:30 to 5 o'clock, and the girls were supposed to stay in the room without making any noise.<sup>46</sup> Then, at night, everybody went to the college chapel to attend the prayer meeting presided over by the college's pastor, who was usually the school president.<sup>47</sup>

While the busy schedule created plenty of opportunities for the students to socialize within the campus community, the strict rules typical of girls' schools in the South limited their social interactions beyond the bounds of the campus. The students were not allowed to go to places of entertainment such as theaters and vaudeville shows. They needed special permission to go downtown, and they were forbidden to leave the buildings at night. They could only receive female visitors and only when there were no conflicts with their college duties. With in-person or written applications from the parents, they could visit friends or relatives in town, but they were not supposed to stay overnight. Out-of-town visits were not permitted.<sup>48</sup>

These strict school rules, the busy schedule with round-the-clock supervision, and the physical layout of the dormitories, all typical in women's colleges of the South, fostered camaraderie among the students and their teachers.<sup>49</sup> This special bond within the school community was further strengthened by the fact that many teachers attended Wesleyan when they were young, and many students were relatives of graduates. For example, Mrs. M. M. Burks, the chair of English literature and the surrogate mother of young May-ling, was a graduate of Wesleyan.<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Burks' daughter, Margie, also attended Wesleyan before she was hired as a tutor on the Wesleyan faculty and became a special teacher of May-ling.<sup>51</sup>

Like other Wesleyan girls, the Soong sisters had built a strong and enduring emotional bond with their classmates and teachers during their stay at Macon. Ching-ling, for example, couldn't wait to write to her one-time teacher, Ms. Margaret Hall, on her journey back home and detailed her trans-Pacific trip in a letter she drafted on an ocean liner.<sup>52</sup> Ai-ling kept such close contact with her friends at Wesleyan that one of her classmates sent her son to meet Ai-ling in Shanghai in the late 1930s, nearly 30 years after they graduated.<sup>53</sup> In 1978, when Ching-ling was already in her eighties, she was so excited about the visit of the daughter of an old Wesleyan classmate who looked just like her mother.<sup>54</sup> The bond allowed them, often unconsciously, to identify themselves with the elite Southern women later in their lives. The same emotional bond also helped them to keep a close

<sup>43</sup>May-ling Soong 1966, "Fall Convocation Address by Madame Chiang Kai-shek." *Bulletin of Wesleyan College* 45:1, pp. 7–11. Mulberry Street Methodist Church Archives, Macon, Georgia.

<sup>44</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1903–1904*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>45</sup>*The Zig Zag*, vol. 3, 1906.

<sup>46</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1907–1908*, p. 64.

<sup>47</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1910–1911*, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1907–1908*, pp. 64–65. *The Zig Zag*, vol. 2, 1905, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup>Jabour 2009, chapter 2.

<sup>50</sup>"Wesleyan Sign-In Sheet," September 5, 1908. Wesleyan College Archives.

<sup>51</sup>Corley 1985, p. 126.

<sup>52</sup>Epstein 2004, pp. 6–8.

<sup>53</sup>"A 1940s survey response from Myra Stubbs Talbert (Ai-ling's friend at Wesleyan) to Wesleyan's alumni office." Wesleyan College Archives.

<sup>54</sup>"Letter from Soong Ching-ling to Chen Hansheng, July 24, 1978," China Welfare institute 2013, pp. 256–57.

personal relationship with each other, as sisters and as Wesleyannes, despite their political differences after they were married.<sup>55</sup>

### The education they received

After the Civil War, higher education in the South was behind that of the Northeast because of the poverty and dislocation caused by the Civil War and Reconstruction. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Wesleyan eventually found itself in a better financial situation and was eager to catch up with the Northern schools.<sup>56</sup> Between 1904 and 1913, the years the Soong sisters spent at the college, the campus underwent much development.

One notable change is the physical appearance of the school. In 1901, right before Ai-ling's arrival, a brand-new four-story brick school building was erected that housed, on its first floor, the college museum with greatly augmented geological and zoological collections.<sup>57</sup> In late 1906, the construction of a new university chapel and the expansion of the dining hall were both finished.<sup>58</sup> By 1912, a new separate gymnasium building was further added.<sup>59</sup> New buildings didn't necessarily equal better education but they reflected the college's financial health, which was crucial to the improvement and expansion of the school curriculum. Better facilities also created a positive, satisfactory college experience for the Soong sisters and made the improved education quality tangible for them.

More crucial changes lay in the tightened standards, a strengthened faculty, and a broadened curriculum, which reflected Wesleyan's desire to meet the national standard that was set by the white elite Northeastern women's colleges.<sup>60</sup> A comparison between the school catalog in 1904, the first year of Ai-ling's enrollment, and the catalog of 1912, the last year of Ching-ling and May-ling's stay, reveals that the entrance requirements were raised substantially over this period. In 1904, the admitted students were required to have some knowledge in the following five fields: geography and history, mathematics, English, Latin, and Greek or one of the three modern languages that included French, German, and Spanish. But the college catalog only specified a list of classic books that were required for the English part. The requirements for geography and history, mathematics, and Latin were otherwise very general that can be met by students with a wide range of knowledge and skill levels. It even made the Greek or modern languages requirement optional, saying that the students could make it up by taking the classes at Wesleyan after admission.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, the school had already introduced the new system of entrance units in 1912, specifying a student needed to study a subject at a high school level for at least 120 "sixty-minute" hours to earn one unit. Overall, to be admitted to Wesleyan, a student needed to have three units in English, two units in history, one and a half units in algebra, one unit in plane geometry, four units in Latin, two units in Greek or modern language, and one unit in science – among which half a unit could be substituted by solid geometry or history. Within each unit, details about the required books and required knowledge were also provided.<sup>62</sup> The unit system and the raised matriculation standard were introduced as early as 1908 when Ching-ling was admitted to the college. This is why, unlike her sister, Ching-ling did not start her study directly at Wesleyan when she arrived in the United States in 1907. Instead, she went to Summit, New Jersey first to study Latin and French at a small preparatory school to meet the college entrance requirements.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Chang 2019; Yang 2011. Their close personal relationship is also reflected in their correspondence. A 1942 letter from Ching-ling to her friend Annaliese Wang reveals that in Chongqing she borrowed the family cook from her sister Ai-ling temporarily, Soong Ching-ling Foundation, 2004, p. 6. A 1946 letter from May-ling to Ching-ling shows direct affection from the younger sister through gifting, Soong Ching-ling Memorial Residence in Shanghai, 1995, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup>See Gurry 1962, chapter 6 for Wesleyan's financial insecurity during the late nineteenth century.

<sup>57</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1902–1903*, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup>Akers 1976, p. 128.

<sup>59</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1911–1912*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>60</sup>Corley 1985, pp. 208–17; White 1987, pp. 154–55.

<sup>61</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1903–1904*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>62</sup>*Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1911–1912*, pp. 15–20.

<sup>63</sup>Zhu 2005, p. 58; *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1907–1908*, pp. 27–31.



Besides the raised matriculation standard, Wesleyan also reorganized and expanded its faculty. In 1904, there were only six departments and six subsequent chair professors. In 1912, the school expanded to have nine departments and nine chair professors. The original natural science department was split into two: the department of biology and geology and the department of physics and chemistry. Two new departments were added: a department of history and economics and a department of Sunday school pedagogy.<sup>64</sup> A strengthened faculty brought an improved and expanded curriculum. For example, in 1904, a student working toward her Bachelor of Arts degree was required to take 2 years – the first four semesters – of math classes that covered college algebra, solid and plane geometry, and plain trigonometry. In 1912, Wesleyan students needed to master the same knowledge with only 1 year of required math core classes, which reflected both the increased standard of admission and the enhanced core education. At the same time, the college offered many new electives such as economics, political science, and sociology. These new courses suggested a slow and gradual departure from the college's early emphasis on classical learning that included ancient languages and literature, mathematics, natural science, and philosophy. They also reflected the impact of “progressive ideas” on college curricula in general in the United States.<sup>65</sup> But compared to many other female or coeducational colleges, what was missing in the new curriculum is vocational courses. White private female colleges such as Wesleyan preferred to stick to their liberal arts tradition and saw utilitarian courses as peripheral to the real schoolwork or unacademic. They only made occasional concessions to home economics courses, which were not introduced at Wesleyan until after the Soong sisters left.<sup>66</sup>

The rapid development of the college must have impressed the Chinese girls greatly and allowed them to fully appreciate the education they received, although Wesleyan was not recognized by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools as a standard college nationwide until 1919.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, experiencing the rapid growth on campus and being equipped with progressive ideas learned from their newly hired teachers inside and outside the classroom, the sisters could also easily identify themselves as new, or modern women upon their return to China.

But their definition of “modern” would be very different from that of many other American-educated Chinese women who arrived in the United States since the late-1910s as part of the second wave of Chinese overseas students in America. These students are labeled as the May Fourth generation in Dr. Weili Ye's *Seeking Modernity in China's Name* due to their prior exposure to feminism in China. Influenced by both the May Fourth Cultural Movement at home and the emerging feminist movement in America, this group had a strong desire to enter professional fields and pursue economic independence.<sup>68</sup> But in Macon, marriage was deemed as the duty of Wesleyan girls in the South. The absence of vocational courses at Wesleyan also discouraged the students to pursue careers after graduation. Even if some Wesleyan graduates remained single and had a career, their professional choices were often limited to fields that are considered “feminine” such as teaching. According to a survey conducted by President Quillian in 1920, most of the graduates from 1900 to 1920 got married or taught.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, the Soong sisters were not exactly like the “modern-day good mothers and virtuous wives” identified in Ye's same book on Chinese students in the United States. This smaller group, according to her, was educated in the United States roughly from the turn of the century to the mid-1910s, the same period when the Soong sisters stayed in the United States. Partially influenced by a school curriculum shaped by the home economics movement, these American-educated Chinese women held a more traditional view of women's roles and saw qualified homemakers as the ultimate

<sup>64</sup> *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1903–1904*, p. 5; *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1911–1912*, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1903–1904*, pp. 28–46; *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1912–1913*, pp. 22–45; Corley 1985, pp. 157–70.

<sup>66</sup> McCandless 1999, pp. 51–61.

<sup>67</sup> Corley 1985, pp. 208–17; White 1987, pp. 154–55.

<sup>68</sup> Ye 2002, chapter 4.

<sup>69</sup> Corley 1985, pp. 349–51.

goal of female education. With a transcultural childhood, the sisters had not been refrained from the prescribed roles for Chinese women, and therefore didn't need to make painstaking efforts to reconcile women of yesterday and women of today – a struggle went through by these Chinese women.<sup>70</sup> A relatively late introduction of home economics courses at Wesleyan also meant Ai-ling and Ching-ling were never exposed to ideas of domestic science like some other Chinese students.

At this elite Southern school, the young women of the new century were trained neither as career women nor as pure housewives. They were meant to become housewives who would play important, but unpaid, social roles. After graduation, the wealthy Southern women taught Sunday School classes, supported missionary societies, joined local women's clubs, and participated in voluntary activities in their communities. More often than not, it was the extracurricular activities like sororities they participated in college, rather than the credit-earning classes, that prepared the female students with the skills relevant to the community service job they would later get involved in.<sup>71</sup> Outside the classroom at Wesleyan, the Soong sisters edited the school magazines, worked as a corresponding secretary at the literary club, participated in the drama club, sang in the second soprano group at the graduation recital, and played the leading roles in the school opera, "The Japanese Wedding."<sup>72</sup> The student-run magazine was widely distributed among the parents and alumni and the music performances were hosted at the Wesleyan Chapel open to the general public.<sup>73</sup> These kinds of extracurricular activities offered the Chinese girls some real-life experiences that were crucial to the social welfare activities they got involved in later in their lives.

If there was anything new, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for elite Southern women's community engagement activities, it was relatively new attention to the political events of the day, which echoed the new courses in political science, sociology, and economics offered at the college. In April 1912, Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey visited Macon and was invited to give a speech at Wesleyan.<sup>74</sup> Then, in November of the same year, when this native Georgian ran for president, the Wesleyan girls printed a pocket version of his election campaign pamphlet and rallied to the Macon city hall to show their support although women in America had not yet had their votes.<sup>75</sup> Enrolled as an upper-class student, Ching-ling most likely participated in both events, which may have later shaped her political activism.

### Encountering everyday Maconites

At Wesleyan, the Chinese girls stayed within a close-knit white campus and received an education that aimed to produce refined housewives who served the communities. The strict school rules discouraged them from having contact with the outside world, but their activities were not entirely limited to campus. Every Sunday morning, the well-dressed young girls made an impressive scene walking down the hill to the Mulberry Street Methodist Church for the Sunday service. Escorted by at least one female staff member, they often walked in pairs when passing the big mansions along Georgia Avenue and carefully stayed on the paved sidewalk to keep their shoes and long dresses clean.<sup>76</sup> Once arrived, they would attend Sunday school and then meet with a larger group for public service.<sup>77</sup> To the

<sup>70</sup>Ye 2002, chapter 4.

<sup>71</sup>McCandless 1999, pp. 60–61; Ogren and VanOverbeke 2018, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup>*The Ku Klux* (Wesleyan College Yearbook), vol. 6, 1913, p. 50; *The Zig Zag*, vol. 4, 1910; *Annual Catalog of Wesleyan Female College, 1904–1905*, p. 82.

<sup>73</sup>Akers 1976, p. 100 describes the scene of a school concert open to the public.

<sup>74</sup>Simms 1989, p. 49.

<sup>75</sup>*The Ku Klux*, vol. 6, 1913, p. 197.

<sup>76</sup>"A 1940s letter from Flora C. Turner (Ai-ling's friend at Wesleyan) to Jennie Loyall." Wesleyan College Archives.

<sup>77</sup>According to an 1898 church service program, the Sunday school started at 9:30 am and the morning service started at 11:00 am. Another 1923 program indicates that both the Sunday school and the morning service were moved half an hour earlier by then. "Mulberry Street Methodist Church Service Program," March 13, 1898, and "Mulberry Street Methodist Church Service Program," November 25, 1923. Mulberry Street Methodist Church Archives, Macon, Georgia.

girls, the church was like an extension of the campus community. Both the Wesleyan girls and members from the Mulberry Street Church came from the same elite class of the White South. Many church members were former Wesleyan graduates, or more often, were related to Wesleyan graduates and students. The church appointed its pastors in the same pool of candidates from where Wesleyan hired its presidents. William Newman Ainsworth, for example, was the church pastor in 1904 and 1905 when Ai-ling attended Wesleyan, and then he served as the college president between 1909 and 1912 when Ching-ling and May-ling were in Macon. In 1912, 1 year before the two younger girls left, the same man was reappointed as the pastor of the Mulberry Street Church again.<sup>78</sup>

Although the church offered a familiar environment that was very similar to the campus, it could still add some excitement to Wesleyan girls' lives that followed a strict schedule and were under round-the-clock supervision. Here, the young schoolgirls could expect some romantic encounters, and it was not uncommon for the girls to be arranged to sit by a potential suitor during the service.<sup>79</sup> But it was a different story for the Soong sisters. Despite the near-white status they received at Wesleyan as students, they were not placed with whites in the "dating pool" for young gentlemen of the South in the era of anti-miscegenation laws. By the beginning of the twentieth century, six states in the West and Mississippi already passed statutes prohibiting marriage between Whites and Asians. Some of these laws were specifically directed against the Chinese.<sup>80</sup> The legitimacy of Chinese-white marriages in Georgia was also contested, although the state left out clear language to label Asian, or more specifically Chinese, as non-white in its 1865 statute against interracial marriage until the 1920s.<sup>81</sup>

The Chinese sisters could have been advised to avoid interracial romance by their father. It was rumored that the father, Charlie Soong, had developed an unwanted affection for the niece of his benefactor at Trinity College, which resulted in his "exile" to Vanderbilt University in 1882.<sup>82</sup> Whether the romance was true or not, the father should be well aware of the social norm regarding Chinese-white marriages in the American South and presumably told the girls about it. Still, at an age that desired romance and intimacy, the Chinese girls had expressed their interest in white Southern boys. In a letter to her close friend Jennie Daughtry in the summer of 1909, Ching-ling mentioned boys enthusiastically.<sup>83</sup> Many years later, when the same Jennie wrote a short memoir of the sisters, she still remembered how May-ling spoke favorably about the Southern country boys.<sup>84</sup> There was no documented romance though and, presumably, the community would help them to avoid intimate relationships with white boys even if a special friendship had developed. If incidents like this did happen, we can only imagine the disappointment the Chinese girls might have felt when their "whiteness" was denied by the same white families that openly embraced them once the prospect of marriage became involved.

But the church was obviously not the only place where they were treated differently. With permission, Wesleyan girls also walked in groups to local businesses to shop. They frequented the College Hill Pharmacy on the street right behind the college for snacks and drinks. The shop was also May-ling's favorite. In 1943, when she returned to Macon during her highly publicized trip to the United States, the Chinese first lady took a detour with a handful of old friends to this pharmacy and ordered strawberry ice cream soda there.<sup>85</sup> For May-ling, the memories associated with her favorite teenage food and the little shops selling them were so sweet that she cherished them toward the end of her life. During the last years of her life, she mentioned to her nephew over a Thanksgiving dinner that the salad

<sup>78</sup>Hart 1965, pp. 162–75.

<sup>79</sup>Interview with Ms. Carolyn Dominy, the church historian of Mulberry Street Methodist Church, Macon. April 11, 2022.

<sup>80</sup>Sohoni 2007, pp. 596–600.

<sup>81</sup>Bronstein 2016, p. 175.

<sup>82</sup>Martin 2005; Mellon 2014.

<sup>83</sup>"Letter from Ching-ling to Jennie Daughtry, June 19, 1909," Wesleyan College Archive.

<sup>84</sup>Jennie Sue Daughtry, "China's first family," Wesleyan College Archive.

<sup>85</sup>Price 1943.

reminded her of the pickles she bought with a penny at a grocery store in Macon.<sup>86</sup> What she might have forgotten over the years was the soda boy's suspicious glance when she, as a young Asian lady, first walked into the business establishment that received exclusively white consumers.

The off-campus destinations the Soong sisters occasionally visited were all white establishments, including the above-mentioned pharmacies and grocery stores, the YMCA and Mercer University receptions at the beginning of the school year, and the state fairs that were hosted at Central City Park every fall.<sup>87</sup> There was no Chinese shop in town, and they needed to mail-order oriental cosmetics from California.<sup>88</sup> They wouldn't be advised to go to black venues either. With almost no exceptions, the Chinese girls would have joined the off-campus visits in a chaperoned group with their white classmates and teachers.<sup>89</sup> On some occasions, they might take the streetcar that stopped at Washington Avenue right in front of the college.<sup>90</sup> In these public areas outside the campus, the Soongs could have easily identified themselves as white since they attended an elite white college, befriended their white classmates, and were welcomed by an upper-class white church. But their white association needed to be publicized and affirmed, especially in establishments that were not affiliated with the college. Presumably, the gateman at the Georgia State Fair would feel more at ease to let the Chinese sisters in after their classmates disclosed their identity. The bus driver would be happy to allow the Chinese girls to sit in the front, white-only rows of a segregated streetcar when he observed the intimacy between them and their white classmates.<sup>91</sup> Although we don't have any surviving historical records that reveal how the Chinese sisters confronted these situations when their social status was contested outside the campus, we can still imagine the awkwardness and frustration they felt when they navigated the binary world of white and black in the segregated south and searched for an interstitial place of their own.

The most challenging encounter for the Soong sisters was probably the very rare occasions that they had to travel alone in and out of the city. Perhaps like many other Chinese people in America at the time, they had learned strategies to avoid putting their whiteness to the test. They would only visit venues where they knew they were welcome guests, such as the pharmacies they'd already been to with their white classmates.<sup>92</sup> They would buy first-class train tickets to protect themselves against racial discrimination when they traveled during school breaks.<sup>93</sup> For example, in 1910, May-ling and Ching-ling traveled from Atlanta, Georgia to Fairmont, North Carolina for summer school.<sup>94</sup> Then in the summer of 1912, they went to Montreat, North Carolina to attend a church-sponsored YMCA conference.<sup>95</sup> The girls also spent some of the Christmas vacations in Washington as guests of the Chinese ambassador.<sup>96</sup> It is very likely that they traveled alone on some of these journeys and it is almost certain that they rode first class.

<sup>86</sup>Soong 2015, p. 24.

<sup>87</sup>*The Ku Klux*, vol. 6, 1913, pp. 196–97.

<sup>88</sup>“A 1940s survey response from Myra Stubbs Talbert to Wesleyan’s alumni office.”

<sup>89</sup>Corley 1985, p. 50.

<sup>90</sup>A 1910 photograph of Wesleyan College shows a streetcar stopping in front of the college buildings. The Genealogical & Historical Room, Washington Memorial Library, Macon, GA.

<sup>91</sup>According to Bow 2010, pp. 1–2, a Japanese woman traveling to Jackson, Mississippi in 1943 found herself grouped with the whites by the driver in a segregated bus. So, the Soong sisters probably would not be considered “colored” on a Macon bus in the 1900s and 1910s even if they travel alone. But their connection to Wesleyan would certainly reassure their whiteness.

<sup>92</sup>Bronstein 2013, p. 119.

<sup>93</sup>Ye 2002, p. 96 suggests that many Chinese overseas took first-class cabins on the ocean liners en route to America to avoid racial discrimination by American immigration officers at the port of entrance by deliberately stressing their class status.

<sup>94</sup>Hahn 2014 [1941], pp. 129–30 includes a letter written by May-ling to Mr. George C. Bellingrath of Demarest, Georgia that describes her trip with Ching-ling from Atlanta, Georgia to Fairmont, North Carolina for a church-sponsored YWCA conference in the summer of 1912.

<sup>95</sup>Rosholt 1989, pp. 111–12.

<sup>96</sup>“A 1940s survey response from Gladys Anthony (May-ling’s friend at Wesleyan) to Wesleyan’s alumni office.” Wesleyan College Archives.

In sum, the Soong sisters had some, but very limited opportunities to venture outside the campus. During the off-campus visits, they were identified by themselves and by their classmates as part of the Southern white society. This identity was also widely accepted by everyday Maconites, largely because Chinese immigrants in the South were too few to be seen as a threat and could easily be made as exceptions. But still, their white associations need to be repeatedly reaffirmed either by their Wesleyan identity or by the upper-class lifestyle they could afford. The only situation in which their “whiteness” was mostly denied, by the same Southern white society that warmly embraced them, is when it came to courtship and marriage.

Together with their very friendly encounters on campus, the Soong sisters’ racial situation in America was similar to that of many other Chinese overseas students in the early twentieth century in its ambiguous nature. Although they were, in general, kindly received by the members of their college communities, they could be susceptible to racial discrimination, especially outside the campus.<sup>97</sup> Despite the similar precariousness, the racial situation the Soong sisters found themselves in was markedly less hostile. Because of the relative absence of Chinese residents in Macon, and in the South in general, they were rarely classed with Chinese laborers and hardly felt the strong anti-Chinese sentiments that prevailed in the big cities and Western states.<sup>98</sup> They were largely treated as equal members in the white school community and were only occasionally at risk of losing that identity and regrouping with the blacks. This experience contrasts strikingly with that of some other Chinese overseas students, who were less financially privileged, had fewer prior transcultural experiences, and went to schools in regions with larger populations of Chinese laborers. In 1924 at Colorado College, for example, three pairs of six Chinese men marched in the front of the graduating class while other male students all paired with females in the commencement ceremony as a long-observed tradition in this coed institution. The awkward arrangement was made because no American female students were willing to walk next to Chinese men.<sup>99</sup> At Oberlin College in Ohio, Fei Qihe and Kong Xiangxi – Kong later married Ai-ling after they both returned to China – might have felt marginalized in the college community in the first decade of the twentieth century since they only belonged to one campus organization. Both of them did well academically and went to graduate school after graduating from Oberlin. Before returning to China, Fei wrote an article to express his disappointment in America despite having made many sincere American friends.<sup>100</sup> In 1915, when Hong Ye started as a junior at Ohio Wesleyan University, he worked several part-time on-campus jobs to subsidize a tuition scholarship. After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan, Hong moved to New York City to attend Columbia University. There, he was frustrated that the Chinese students were often associated with the lower classes living in the city’s Chinatown and he hoped the Americans could look beyond urban Chinatowns to understand the Chinese people and their culture.<sup>101</sup> The above-mentioned frustration of being marginalized as the inferior Chinese, or Asian, students and the resentment at being identified with Chinese coolies shared by most of the Chinese students in America at the beginning of the twentieth century was largely absent in the life of the Soong sisters.

## Conclusion

From Ai-ling’s arrival in the fall of 1904 to Ching-ling and May-ling’s departure in the summer of 1913, the Soong sisters jointly spent nine formative years in the small Southern town of Macon. The beautiful magnolia trees on campus, the cotton bales on the busy Poplar Street downtown, and

<sup>97</sup>Bieler 2015, p. 111; Ye 2002, pp. 82–84.

<sup>98</sup>According to the personal memoir of a Chinese immigrant growing up in Macon (Jung 2005, p. 5), the city had only three Chinese laundrymen in 1900. And then when the author and his family moved to Macon in 1928, they were the only Chinese family in the town. A 1943 news report (Waller, 1943) reveals that the same Chinese author and his family were invited to Macon’s welcome party for May-ling’s revisit in 1943. The publicity this Chinese family received suggests that there were probably few Chinese residents in Macon as late as the 1940s.

<sup>99</sup>Ye 2002, p. 81.

<sup>100</sup>Bieler 2015, pp. 20–24.

<sup>101</sup>Bieler 2015, pp. 112–21.

the delicious fried chicken served at the school cafeteria had all deeply rooted in their memories as young schoolgirls at Wesleyan in Macon, Georgia. A detailed study of the local contexts that the Soong sisters had encountered suggests that the “Southernness” of the town and the college would have made the sisters’ experiences distinguishable from many other contemporary Chinese overseas students in the United States that are familiar to Chinese historians, revealing a different facet of this small, but influential, social group in early twentieth-century China. In a small southern town with few Chinese residents, the Soongs were rarely classed with Chinese laborers and hardly felt the strong anti-Chinese sentiments that were observed by other Chinese students that mostly went to Western states and big cities in the North. Their father’s connection to Southern Methodists further ensured that they easily received near-white status at this Methodist female college, although there were still occasions when their white identities were contested or denied, mostly outside the campus. In these cases, they might have struggled even more, than students that were constantly exposed to anti-Chinese sentiments, to find an interstitial place in the white/black binary system of the South.

Furthermore, the lagged development of Southern universities and Wesleyan’s slow adoption of new utilitarian courses, including vocational and home economics courses – the sentiment that preferred the liberal arts tradition and saw new utilitarian courses as unacademic was shared by leading elite female colleges in the Northeast as well, but the Southern schools resisted to this “progressive” change more strongly – also meant the sisters were neither trained as qualified homemakers nor as career women like many other American-educated Chinese women in their generation. The affluent Wesleyan girls were trained to become housewives that played important, but unpaid, social roles in the community. The Soong sisters’ transcultural childhood had allowed them to quickly transition to American college lives and easily adopt this Wesleyan value. For the rest of their lives, they had followed more or less the same path that they were taught as schoolgirls and from time to time identified themselves, often unconsciously, with the elite Southern women.

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