

Women's Multiple Roles: Perspective Spanning 5 Generations

Heather Smith Xie



Good afternoon! What a joy and a privilege to be here with you all celebrating 100 years of the Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association.

I have so much to say about Women's Multiple Roles, as my life's trajectory has taken me so many different ways. From teacher to Wall Street lawyer to fundraiser to biotech entrepreneur to interim director for a local church, to Outward Bound...

But this talk is not about me. You and I have ALL had multiple roles. And we're all here today because we want to **use** whatever role we find ourselves **in** to make the world a better place!

This talk is really about the YWCA. I have always believed in and supported the issues the YWCA seeks to address. But I didn't realize until I began preparing this talk *how much* the YWCA has influenced my life and all those "multiple roles" I've had!

In fact this is the story of how values, attitudes and actions of the YWCA have shaped the lives of 5 generations of women in my family for well over 100 years.

Corabel Tarr Boyd



The story starts with my great grandmother, Corabel Tarr (later Boyd), who in **1889** became one of the first General Secretaries of the National YWCA in the United States.

Corabel's parents were Methodists, a Christian denomination that was very active in social reform, applying Christian ethics to issues of social justice. Her father was a pastor and educator and her mother was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union (the WCTU), a powerful religious and political organization whose influence led in **1919** to the passing of the 18th amendment to the US Constitution banning the sale of alcohol. Think about that: One year *before* they secured the right to vote, women changed the Constitution!

Corabel's parents believed strongly in education and Corabel graduated from a Methodist co-educational 4-year college in **1885**. She taught college Latin and elocution (what we would call today public speaking) for four years before she was recruited by the national YWCA in **1889** as Associate General Secretary. Within the year she was promoted to General Secretary. In **1890** she became the first *International* Secretary of the YWCA (which included Canada), speaking all across the United States inspiring young Christian women to lives of service.

Corabel was credited with starting the annual YWCA summer conferences in **1889** where she led the systematic training of local, state and regional YWCA secretaries. (That 3 week conference cost only \$5—all included!)

In **1892**, a meeting was held in London, with YWCA delegates from around the world, to discuss the possibility of forming a **World** Association. Corabel was one of *two* delegates from the US. Other delegates were from Australia, England, France, **India**, Norway, Sweden, Spain and Switzerland. Corabel, along with two other delegates, drafted the Constitution for the new **World YWCA** which was formally established in **1894**.

My great grandmother was doing all this in her 20s over **130 years ago!** This young single Christian woman was giving talks all over the United States, traveling to Europe, drafting international constitutions—before airplanes had even been invented!

Where did this courage, conviction and energy come from?

It is clear that it was Corabel's **Christian faith** that fuelled her passion to reach out to young women everywhere. And the structure, organization and mission of the YWCA, along with the comradery of like-minded Christian women, gave Corabel a perfect platform from which to spread the Gospel, inspire young women to find their true identity, and empower them to make a positive impact on the world.

Corabel Tarr, Int'l Secretary of YWCA in 1890

In the following article reporting on the **1890** Third Annual Convention of the YWCA, Corabel was asked whether there was really a *need* for the YWCA, since new organizations had been formed to build hospitals, orphanages, elderly homes, etc. Corabel answered, "The name [Young Women's Christian Association] signifies the aim of the association. It is an associated effort of young women, Christian young women, to lead their sisters to the foot of the cross. This is not a charitable institution [*per se*], yet the members in doing their work cannot see any one in need without doing something for that one."

So for Corabel, it was the Christian aspect of the YWCA that inspired the work for social justice.

The Syracuse Journal.

MONDAY EVENING, APRIL 14, 1890.

The Weather.

Reported for The Journal by Brown & Dewees,
Druggists, 13 South Saline-st.

	Ther.	Bar.	Wind.
8 p. m. yesterday	78° above	30.10	North East
8 p. m.	64° "	30.70	North East
8 a. m. to-day	68° "	30.70	West
10 a. m.	49° "	30.83	West
12 m.	77° "	30.81	North West
3 p. m.	80° "	31.01	North West

AVERAGE.

1888-89 74° | 1889-90 74° | 1890-91 74°

INDICATIONS FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

WASHINGTON, April 14.—8 a. m.—Forecast till 8 a. m. Tuesday:—

For Vermont and Eastern New York—Fair weather, followed by increasing cloudiness and light showers to-night, cooler, variable winds, becoming westerly.

For Western New York—Fair Monday and Tuesday, preceded by showers to-day, colder, northwesterly winds.

The weather in New York city to-day is fair.

Journal Telephone Calls.

CONVING ROOM, 874; EDITORIAL ROOMS, 878.

Entertainments This Evening.

WITING OPERA HOUSE—"Mr. Barons of New York."

GRAND OPERA HOUSE—"A Rag Baby."

LOCAL JOYFINDER.

The Tailors' union, K. of L., will remove May 1st to the Pike block.

The closing hop of Prof. Gutstadt's dancing class will be held at Greyhound hall this evening.

Rev. E. A. Rogers of Jordan will lecture on "Sir Walter Scott," at the Fourth Baptist church this evening.

Rev. A. R. Palmer of Collingwood, N. Y., will preach in the Fourth Baptist church on Tuesday evening of this week.

A supper and entertainment will be given by Home Council, United Friends, to-mor-

CHRISTIAN YOUNG WOMEN.

The Convention Brought to a Close Last Evening.

The third annual convention of the Women's Christian association was brought to a close last evening. Services were held yesterday in several churches, in the Y. M. C. A. Music hall and in the University chapel. Miss Corabel Tarr of Chicago, secretary of the International Young Women's Christian association, was the principal speaker at the First Presbyterian church last evening. Miss Tarr said this was the great age of organized effort. There are organizations of very many kinds. When woman began to realize her individuality she began to reach out her hand to do something for other women, and to help mankind generally. These organizations have resulted in the building of hospitals for the sick, and asylums and homes for orphans, the aged and the friendless. It is not surprising, she said, that the question has been asked: "Do we need the Young Women's Christian Association?" The name signifies the aim of the association. It is an associated effort of young women, Christian young women, to lead their sisters to the foot of the cross. This is not a charitable institution, yet the members in doing their work cannot see any one in need without doing something for that one.

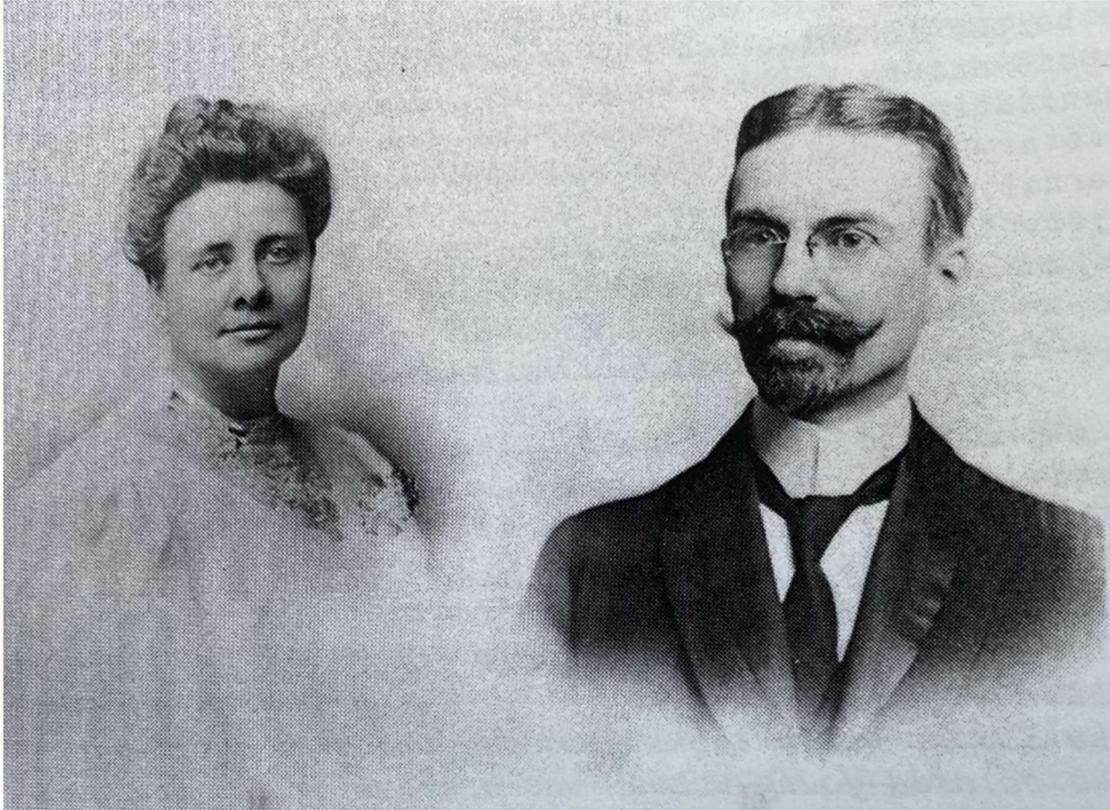
The committee on resolutions returned thanks to the members of the University Young Men's and Young Women's associations, to the Y. M. C. A. of the city for the use of Music hall, to pastors of the city for the use of their churches, to citizens generally for throwing open their doors, to the members of the press for their notices and reports of meetings, and to Chancellor Sims, Prof. C. J. Little and Rev. Dr. Stebbins for addresses.

On Saturday evening parlor conferences were held from 4:30 to 7 o'clock. One at the home of George C. Sawyer was led by Miss R. F. Morse of Chicago; one of the Y. W. C. A. was led by Miss Tarr, International Secretary of the Y. W. C. A., and one at the Y. M. C. A. parlors by Miss R. P. Wilder of New York.

Saturday evening at the First Methodist church, William M. Griffith, secretary of the State committee, Y. M. C. A., spoke on the general work of the Y. M. C. A., and H. P. Wilder of New York, spoke on "The Young People's Movement in Foreign Lands."

On one of these speaking engagements, she met my great grandfather, William Boyd, a YMCA secretary. At that time the YWCA did not employ married women so Corabel resigned, reluctantly, in 1892 to get married. But she remained a staunch supporter of the YWCA, proud of its past and optimistic about its future.

Corabel Tarr and William Boyd during their courtship in 1892



Here's a letter she wrote in **1894** (as Mrs. Boyd) to a university women's group which, to me, expresses why she so loved the YWCA.

"I long to feel that young women are weighted not in the scale of **appearances** but by realities, not by what they **have**, but what they **are**; that our feelings of love and sympathy are not limited to a chosen few, but are broad enough to encircle **all** who need the touch of love; that we are living not to do great things in the eyes of others but those things which shall lift humanity to a higher level of peace and happiness... I feel that all young women ought to be living for each other, not in a material sense, but in thoughts, in feelings, and in purposes, in true heart sympathies; for I believe **that** is the surest and most rapid way to solve many of the vexed questions in our national life to-day. When all women are true and true to each other, our social, political, and religious difficulties will be solved."

Speaking of Multiple Roles...Corabel went from YWCA General Secretary to wife and soon mother, but the values and skills she acquired at the YWCA stood her in good stead the rest of her life as she continued to empower women—both at home and abroad.

In her role as "mother" Corabel and William made sure their 3 daughters were well educated (all went to Wellesley College) and they all had to **work** for two years after graduation before getting married. Corabel wanted them to know that marriage was a choice, and that they were capable of taking care of themselves.

Corabel continued her *international* work as well. In **1919** she went with the Federation of Woman's "Board of Foreign Missions" to Japan, Korea and China to report on institutions and women's work there. Seeing first-hand the poor conditions of many women in Asia, Corabel was determined to do something about it.

From Corabel's Letters 1929

the "Tokio Woman's Christian College." This is one of the seven Women's Oriental Colleges for which the church women of America, of all denominations, set up a campaign and raised \$3,000,000 for buildings in 1923. The list is:

Woman's Christian College	Tokio, Japan
Yenching College for Women	Peking, China
Woman's Medical of North China	Tsinanfu, China
Ginling Woman's College	Nanking, China
Isabella Thoburn College	Lucknow, India
Woman's Christian College	Madras, India
Woman's Medical College	Vellore, India

We of Yenching received \$600,000 of this fund and with it have built the buildings for women, in connection with the Yenching University - new campus and buildings and it is to the formal opening and dedication of this new campus and buildings that we are going to Peking - this being the real climax of our trip and its *raison d'etre*.

Corabel was part of a group of "American Christian Women" who in **1923** raised **US\$3 million** to fund 7 Christian colleges for women in Asia—3 in China, 3 in India and 1 in Japan.

Woman's Christian College	Tokio, Japan
Yenching College for Women	Peking, China
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Woman's Christian College	Madras, India
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(Woman's Christian College in Madras = Chennai, Christian Medical College, Vellore)

All seven of these colleges are still in operation, with the colleges in India and Japan all remaining Christian.

In China, the Christian colleges were taken over by the government in **1950**. But most of the professors and students remained, continuing to influence Chinese education for generations.

Yenching College for Women was subsumed into what is now Peking University, one of the most prestigious educational institutions in China. The beautiful buildings at the center of Peking University are the former Yenching University campus buildings.

Which leads me to the second woman in this story: My grandmother, Miriam Boyd (later Parlin), and the Yenching College for Women.

Miriam Boyd



Miriam graduated from Wellesley College in **1921**, majoring in chemistry. Because of her parents' rule, Miriam had to work for 2 years before marriage. So she had been working in the University of Pennsylvania's Medical School chemistry lab and living with her parents in Philadelphia.

The two years were almost up and she'd just gotten engaged when something completely unimaginable disrupted their plans.

The President of Yenching University, John Leighton Stuart, was a friend of my great grandparents and was visiting them on his 1923 fundraising trip. One evening, he received a telegram from China with an urgent call for a chemistry teacher for the Women's College. I can picture my grandmother coming in to dinner from the chemistry lab and President Stuart turning to her saying, "Miriam, how'd you like to teach chemistry in China this year?"

Miriam was 24 years old and had just gotten engaged. Go to China? In 1923, the only way to get there was a 2 week ocean journey from Vancouver, Canada to Japan, on to Shanghai, and then by train up to Beijing. Was she going to do this? ALONE?

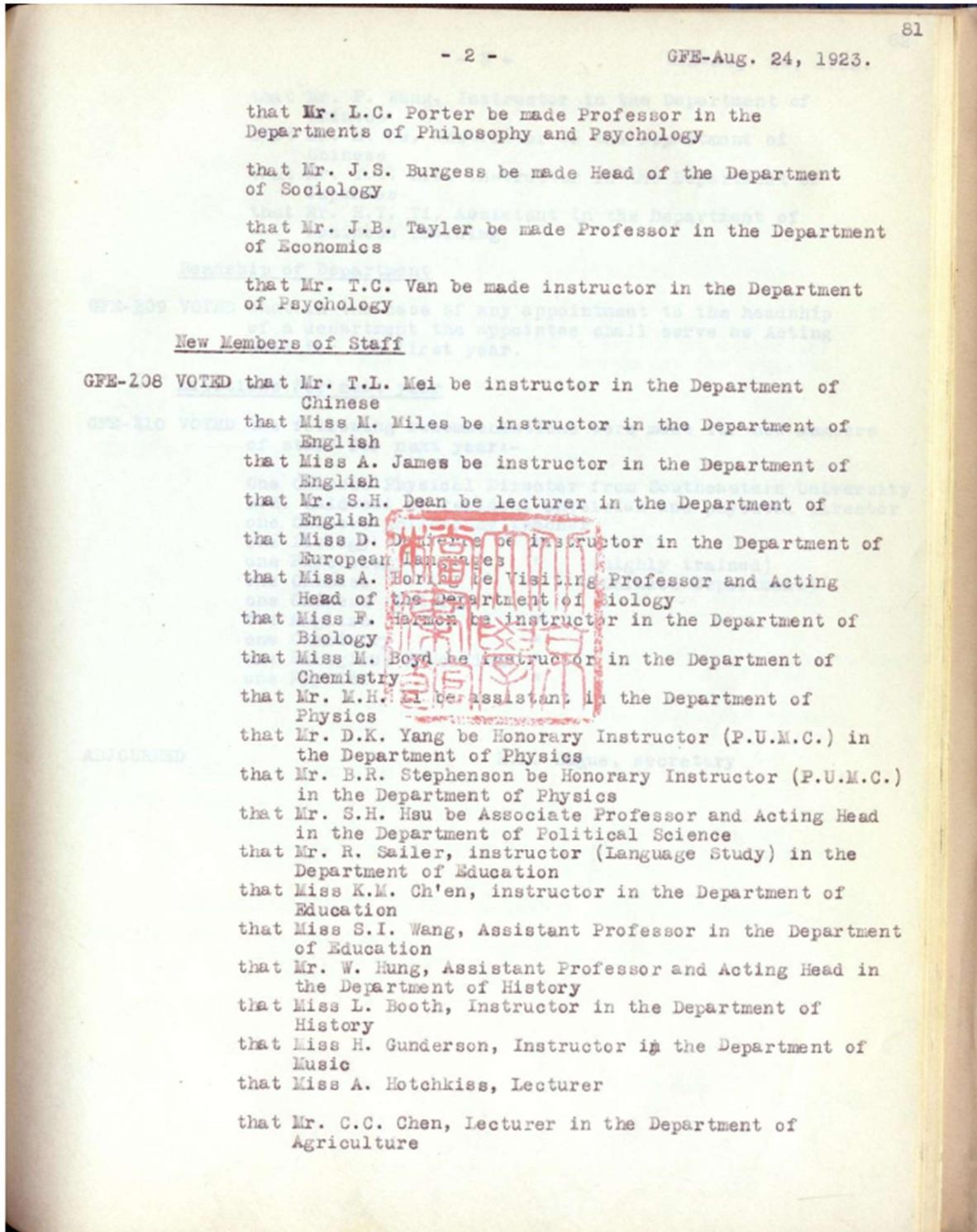
She talked it over with my grandfather. I want to read you part of the letter he wrote to her.

"Dear Miriam— It is less than twenty four hours since you told me about the possibility of a chance to go to China but I have thought a great deal about it and have figured it all through and have come to my conclusion. If the chance materializes and the opportunity comes I think it would be a fine thing and that you ought to go.

"It is not an easy matter by any means. The engagement year is ... one of the happiest periods of a man's life; and to celebrate it with his fiancée in China is unique to say the least. But the unique part doesn't worry me at all because that was part of our bargain = we were going to make our own rules and let the gossips take care of themselves... [I love that!]

"That the work in China would be interesting goes without saying...I think it is something you would always be proud of and that you would always be very glad that you had spent the year in that type of service... And I know that if I were ever a factor in keeping you from going just because of the pleasure of our weekends together I would always feel that I had been very selfish indeed. Not only would I be withholding [Christian service to] the school, but...I would be keeping from you something that I am sure would make your life fuller, both in memories and experience." Miriam went.

Miriam Boyd, Instructor in the Department of Chemistry 1923



Miriam's decision to go to China is an example of the continuing influence of the YWCA on the women in my family.

Another young single Christian woman with the courage and the conviction to serve and empower other young women...anywhere in the world!

Miriam discovered it was a tremendous responsibility teaching at the Yenching College for Women. It wasn't like Wellesley. Yenching College for Women was the *first* college for women in China. And chemistry had **just** been introduced in China as a modern science. This was a big deal. She wasn't just teaching; she was changing society.

Miriam not only taught chemistry to women, she also taught Physical Education (which was something the YWCA brought to Asia). Miriam couldn't understand why these young women had such trouble in PE class. She soon discovered the reason: They all bound their chests so tightly they couldn't breathe! They also wore long, heavy woolen skirts so they could barely move. Miriam made a rule: before PE class, unbind your chest and wear bloomers!

“Bloomers”

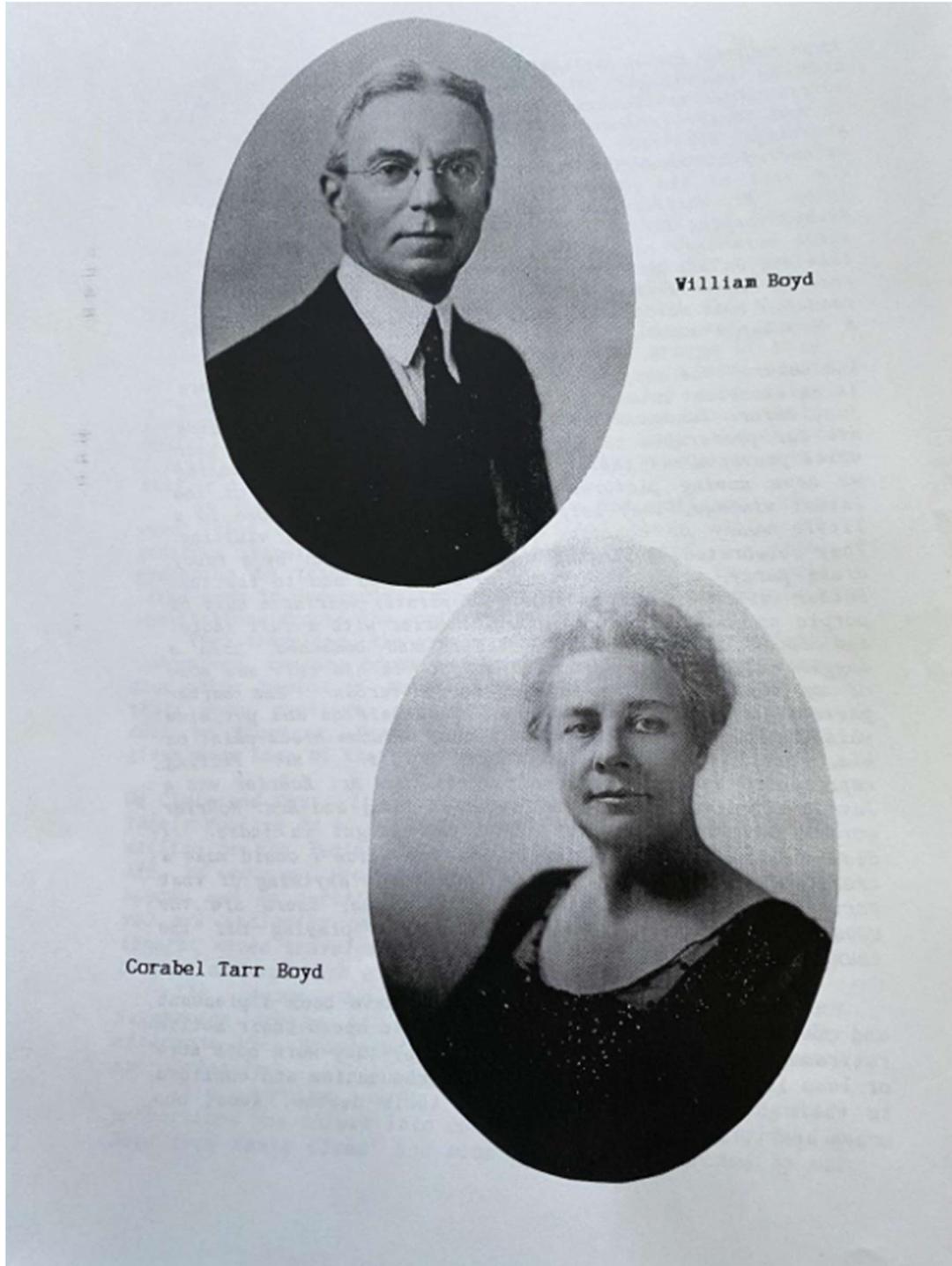


“Bloomers” were trousers for women that had become popular in the 1880s and ‘90s in Europe and the US for bicycle riding. My grandmother scandalized the missionary community in Beijing by wearing bloomers in public to ice skate on the frozen Wei Ming Hu!

Miriam kept her promise to my grandpa and returned a year later to marry him. She didn't go by boat this time. She was the second American woman in history to take the Trans-Siberian railroad from Beijing to Moscow—ALONE! (Eleanor Roosevelt was the first.)

But the Boyd-Yenching connection didn't end there. Of the \$3million Corabel helped to raise, \$600,000 went to the Yenching College for Women, and Corabel became the head of the Promotions Committee for the Women's College raising additional funds. (The women raised a lot more money than the men, so the women's buildings went up first! The women even paid to build several other buildings that would be used by both men and women.)

But in 1927 there was still not enough money to build a women's gymnasium. I'm sure it was **Corabel** who convinced her husband to help. They donated US\$100,000 to build a beautiful gymnasium for women, including an indoor swimming pool, and established a scholarship for women studying physical education.



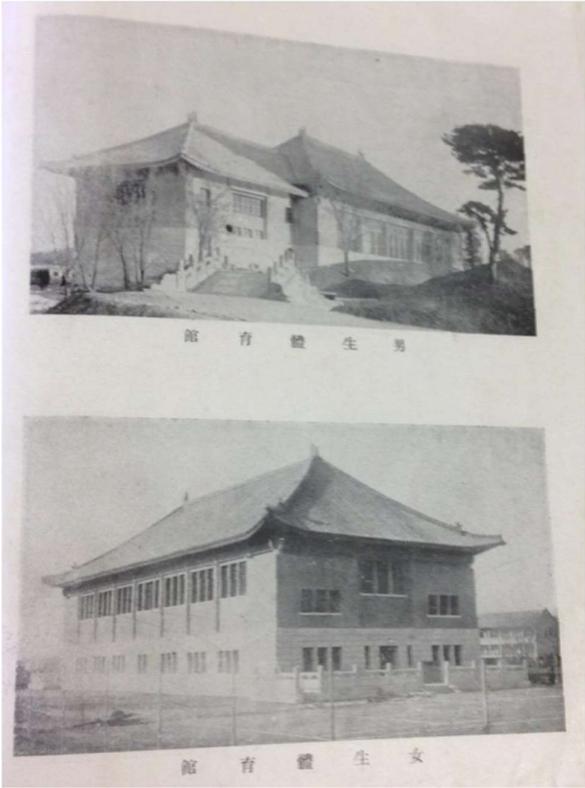
**Corabel and William Boyd with President Leighton Stuart at the
Opening Ceremony of Yenching University October 1929**



Here they are with President Stuart at the Opening Ceremony of the Yenching University campus in **1929**.

The Boyd Gymnasium for women was completed in **1931**. Here are some photos from the 1931 Yenching Yearbook.

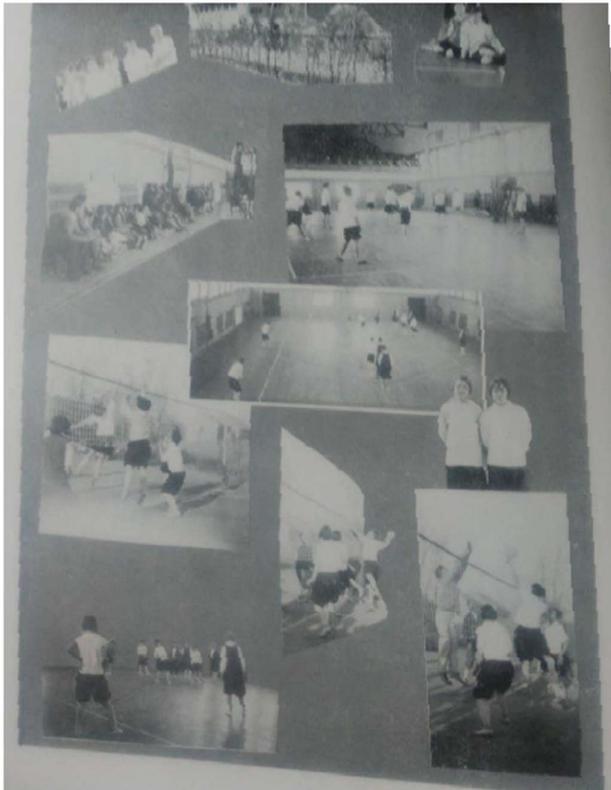
**From the 1931
Yenching University
Yearbook**



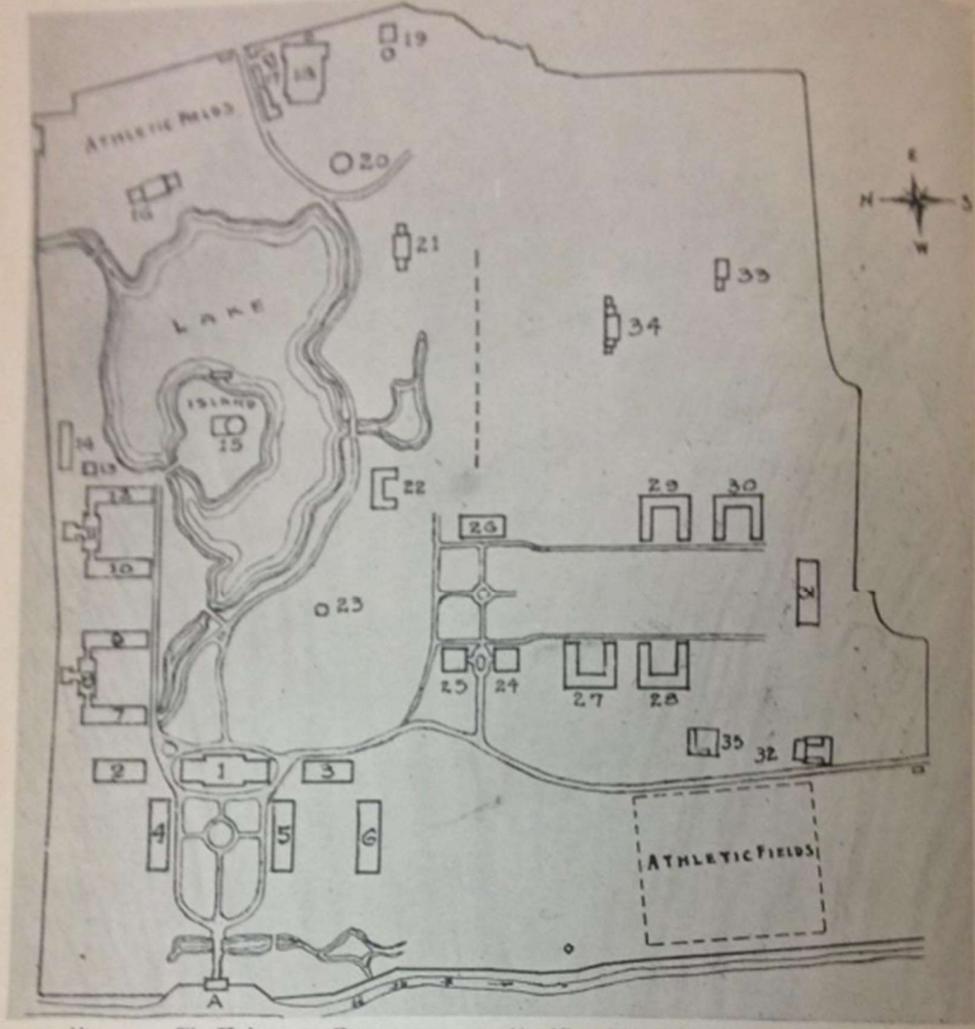
The Warner Gym for Men

The Boyd Gym for Women

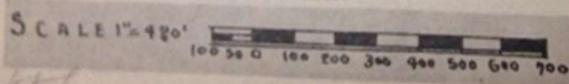
Inside the new Boyd Gymnasium for Women 1931



校園平面圖 A Sketch Map of the Campus



A	校門	University Entrance	18	機器房	Power Plant
1	公樓	Bashford Admin. Bldg	19	煤汽機	Gas Plant
2	德樓	Ninde Hall	20	塔	Water Tower
3	瑞樓	Library	21	莫氏療養院	Men's Infirmary
4	樓	McBrier Hall	22	臨湖軒	President's House
5	容樓	Physics & Biology	23	鐘亭	Bell Tower
6	化學樓	Chemistry & Geology	24	甘德閣	Dean's Residence
7	斐樓	Men's Dormitory No. 1	25	麥風閣	Mjner Hall
8	第一膳廳	Refectory No. 1	26	適樓	Sage Hall
9	蔚復膳廳	Men's Dormitory No. 2	27	院	Women's Dormitory No. 1
10	第二膳廳	Men's Dormitory No. 3	28	院	Women's Dormitory No. 2
11	膳廳	Refectory No. 2	29	院	Women's Dormitory No. 3
12	幹宿會	Men's Dormitory No. 4	30	院	Women's Dormitory No. 4
13	湖宿會	Men's Dormitory No. 5	31	鮑氏體育館	Boyd Gymnasium
14	湖宿會	Men's Dormitory No. 6	32	家政見習室	Practice House
15	思義亭	Luce Pavilion	33	幼稚園	Kindergarten
16	華氏體育館	Warner Gymnasium	34	附屬小學	Practice School
17	合作社郵政局	Co-operative Store & Post Office	35	女生醫院	Women's Infirmary



英吋每寸等於四百八十八尺

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Map of Yen-ching University campus 1931 Yearbook

After Miriam returned to the US, she and Corabel both joined the Board of Directors, Corabel on the Board of Yenching University until her death in 1937 and Miriam on the Board of the Women's College until 1950.

The devastation of Sino-Japanese war and the plight of Chinese refugees galvanized Miriam to become the head of the local New Jersey China Relief Society. That's how my mother, Camilla, grew up eating with chopsticks! The owner of the local Chinese restaurant insisted on treating the family to scrumptious Chinese meals out of gratitude for Miriam's help. My mother grew up loving China, but because of US-China politics, she never had an opportunity to visit.

Until **1998** that is, when she and I were invited to attend Peking University's 100th anniversary celebration, in honor of our family's contribution to the university! Here we are in the Great Hall of the People.

Camilla and Heather in the Great Hall of the People celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Peking University



The Peking University campus celebrations took place right in front of the Boyd Gymnasium! (Now the 第二体育馆.) We were thrilled!



My mother was also deeply moved by the many women science professors and department heads at BeiDa who warmly shook her hands, and thanked her for her mother's coming to China as a chemistry teacher. They said her mother had been a role model for Chinese women scientists and they would not be where they were today without women like her mother.

My mother's own experience of empowering women in Asia came years earlier in 1980 when she taught Women's Studies at Ewa University. (My dad went along as "spouse".) She is the third generation of women in my family who has been influenced by the legacy of the YWCA.

Camilla and Harold in Korea 1980



1980 was the same year I graduated from college with a degree in East Asian Studies and Chinese. I got my Masters in Teaching and in **1982**, when I was 24 years old, I went to China to teach English to Chinese scientists preparing to study in the USA—almost 60 years after my grandmother, **also** 24 years old, went to China to teach chemistry.

In 2019 I returned to BeiDa to research the early history of the Yenching College for Women in the Peking University archives. I taught a graduate history seminar entitled, “History or Her-Story?” about the impact the of the women’s college on the success of Yenching University. I challenged them, as students of history, to always dig below the surface to discover the true story.



Heather teaching at BeiDa 2019

(Slide of Yenching University campus circa 1930)

Here's my cousin, another of Corabel's great granddaughters, who came to visit me at BeiDa. We're here in front of the Boyd Gymnasium for women.

Corabel's great granddaughters in front of the Boyd Gymnasium for Women



There is so much more I could share about how *my* life has been shaped by the legacy of the YWCA. I'm currently working at Outward Bound where 50% of our school participants are girls and **50% of our instructors are women!** My great grandmother would have loved it! Like the YWCA, Outward Bound provides a *unique* opportunity for young women to step out of defined roles and discover their **true** potential—to care for themselves, others and the world.



And here's our daughter, Renni—the 5th generation of our family's YWCA legacy. She is a tri-lingual activist, athlete and artist, empowering both women and men to be their true selves, working together to make the world a better place.



All I can say is, “Hong Kong Young Women’s Christian Association 加油! Here’s to another 100 years!