CHAPTER EIGHT

SAVING LIVES IN WARTIME CHINA: WHY IT MATTERED

Oh, the pain and misery of China.
—Ai Qing, 1937¹

The 1930s and 40s represent a watershed era in Chinese history, between the gradual withering away of the chaotic warlord era and the establishment of the People’s Republic. Politically the rise and fall of the Nationalist government, and the success of the Communist forces in gaining control throughout China delineate this era. More to the point of this study, it was a time of massive amounts of premature death due to fecal-borne diseases, tuberculosis, smallpox, malaria, typhus, childbirth complications, other infectious and parasitic diseases, opium, starvation, drowning, and military and civil oppression, amounting to tens of millions of uncounted and uncountable fatalities. All that pain and misery is summed up in an unforgettable poem by Ai Qing.

Yet this era saw both Nationalists and Communists paying attention to saving military and civilian lives under some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable. What have we learned from their efforts?

The modern health movement in early to mid twentieth century China rose up in response to the widespread evidence of premature mortality and its association with scientific and national incapacity. As we have seen, the healthcare reformers recognized that a strategy focused on curative medicine would not suffice to bring the vast population of rural China into the modern era, let alone dig them out of misery, nor could it be afforded. Preventive health care was the only way to go. Preventive healthcare meant hygiene and sanitation on the one hand and prophylactic strategies to combat epidemic disease on the other. We have observed district nurses visiting families to initiate sanitary methods to control trachoma, and Red Cross and army medical teams using oil drums and other

---

¹ From Ai Qing (艾青), “Snow Falls on China’s Land” (雪落在中国的土地上), written in 1937 following the outbreak of the War of Resistance, translated by Marilyn Chin, and published in Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (1995). The original text is 中国的痛苦与灾难，像这雪夜一样广阔而又漫长呀。Oh, the pain and misery of China, as long and vast as this snowy night!
improvised materials to set up delousing, bathing and scabies stations to bring typhus and scabies under control. We have also seen national health, provincial health and Red Cross units delivering hundreds of thousands of prophylactic inoculations and vaccinations to control cholera and smallpox in infected regions, and issuing millions of quinine pills to mitigate malaria. They engaged in propaganda drives to visit schools and teach rural and urban children and their families the basics of hygiene and sanitation. This focus on public hygiene was a new phenomenon in the history of modern China.

Efforts were also launched to train modern midwives in registered schools of midwifery, to set up child health centers, to undertake antepartum and postnatal examinations, and to make birthing available in hygienic settings. In epidemiological transition theory, however, this puts China in the 1930s and 1940s in a primary phase still dominated by acute infectious diseases and severe maternal child mortality. In demographic transition theory China was still in a high fertility and high mortality stage. Those were the civilian challenges to lifesaving. What made those challenges so lethal was the ignorance of both the educated and uneducated population as to their dangers, in consequence of which healthcare reformers too often found themselves working in an atmosphere of suspicion and noncooperation.

It should be added that while the healthcare initiatives can be explained to a certain extent through epidemiological and demographic analysis, such analysis did not motivate them. However, greater attention to epidemiological transition theory would help to explain the problems and transitions going on in China at this time and provide an explanatory alternative to dependence on political and military factors to explain historical development.

A third area of lifesaving health care, which has received somewhat more attention in the public record, has to do with front line rescue of wounded soldiers. Dr. Norman Bethune is the most publicized advocate of this approach, and Communist Eighth Route Army soldiers were the fortunate beneficiaries of his work. Clearly the Red Cross Medical Relief Corps and the work of the Nationalist Army’s medical reformers must also be credited for tens of thousands of saved lives that would otherwise have been lost due to gangrene and hemorrhagic shock. Here, as with maternal childcare, we have marveled at the work of key medical reformers, who were motivated by patriotism to engage in this ill-paid, dirty, and dangerous work. One outstanding example of this concern for human life