


RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Madame Wellington Koo”: a diplomatic wife and a Peranakan representing and socializing for Republican China

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Abstract

Modern Chinese diplomatic histories rarely discuss the marriages of diplomats, leaving the impression that women made little impact on their husbands' careers. The extraordinary performance of Oei Hui-lan (1889–1992), wife of celebrated diplomat Wellington Koo (1888–1985), challenges this view. Hui-lan's contributions to diplomacy call our attention to the role played by Chinese diplomatic wives: as reception hostesses and embassy managers, they cultivated social relationships to facilitate diplomatic exchange. Hui-lan's story reminds us that to study modern diplomatic history solely through the lens of professionalization and institutionalization – while forgoing perspectives of gender and family – is insufficient to explain China's success in this period. Hui-lan's Peranakan family background in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) equipped her with the financial assets and cosmopolitan upbringing to shine as a diplomatic wife. And yet, though she benefited from her overseas origins, Hui-lan had an uneasy relationship to her Chinese identity. Concealing the tension in her two autobiographies, Hui-lan later reconstructed her past, emphasizing her patriotism and ethnic Chineseness to befit her established position. Thus, her case also shows how the complicated process of identity rebuilding and selective adaptation played out for elite overseas Chinese women through their engagement with modern China.

Keywords: diplomatic wife; identity; Oei Hui-lan; Peranakan; Republican China; Wellington Koo

Historian William Kirby has long noted the “stunning accomplishments” of Chinese diplomacy in the Republican era (1912–1949), which saw the nation move from “a position of unenviable weakness” to one with significant sway.¹ Its most notable success, Kirby argues, was defending and maintaining the Qing empire borders as the basis of Republican territory until the Communist takeover. Despite all the unequal treaties signed in the late Qing, by the early 1930s China was able to take back control of maritime customs, tariffs, postal communications, salt monopoly revenues, and nearly two-thirds of foreign concessions.² In 1943, all foreign concessions (except for Hong Kong) and extraterritorial rights were abolished. As Julia Strauss has shown, the successful diplomatic work had a lot to do with the Foreign Ministry's ability to recruit “some of the best educated, most sophisticated, and most urbane men in China,” with the expertise to marshal an “inexorable legalistic gradualism” in their “persistent painstaking endeavor.”³

¹Kirby 1997, pp. 436–437.

²Ibid., p. 441.

³Strauss 1998, p. 153.

Among this group, the most celebrated was probably Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun, 顧維鈞, 1888–1985), often viewed as the number 1 diplomat of Republican China. Educated first at St. John's University (in Shanghai) before receiving a PhD in International Law and Diplomacy from Columbia University (New York), Koo was not only an important member of the Chinese legation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, but was later involved in forming the League of Nations, to which he acted as China's first representative. In 1945, Koo became a founding member of the United Nations. After his retirement from Chinese diplomatic service, in 1956, his reputation enabled him to serve as judge and as vice-president in the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

Biographies and many articles have been written both in Chinese and English about Koo's diplomatic strategies and theories. Rarely do these narratives mention Koo's marriages and wives; at most, they are treated as sensational aspects of his private life with no significance to his career.⁴ Even his own lengthy memoir, based on oral history interviews, says very little about his wives. Koo married four times. His first marriage was arranged and brief. His second marriage, to Tang Baoyue (唐寶玥, also May Tang, 唐梅), after his graduation from Columbia University in 1912, jump-started his political career, as his new father-in-law, Tang Shaoyi (唐紹儀, 1862–1938), was a well-respected and connected political figure who was appointed the Prime Minister of China by Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859–1916) in 1912. Koo's second wife died in the United States during the 1918 Spanish flu. Koo's longest marriage was his third, to Oei Hui-lan (黃蕙蘭, 1889–1992), which lasted for more than thirty years, from 1920 until he retired from the Chinese diplomatic service in 1956. This was the height of his diplomatic career: from 1922, he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Finance (from 1926–1927 holding concurrent positions as acting Premier and interim President of China), Chinese Ambassador to France (1932–1940), Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom (1940–1946), and Chinese Ambassador to the United States (1946–1956). After they divorced, he married Juliana Young (also Yen Yu-yun, 嚴幼韻, 1905–2017) in 1959 and lived with her until his death in 1985.

Throughout their thirty-year marriage, Hui-lan contributed in important ways to her husband's diplomatic career and used her family's wealth to serve the needs of Chinese diplomacy. Growing up in Semarang in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), she was the favorite daughter of Oei Tiong Ham (黃仲涵, 1866–1924), a business tycoon of Chinese descent often dubbed the “sugar king of Java.” His success in sugar trading made him the wealthiest person in southeast Asia at the start of the twentieth century, a time when the weak and poor Republican Chinese governments lacked sufficient funding to support Chinese diplomacy. Hui-lan used money from her father to subsidize Koo's diplomatic socialization, to entertain on a regular basis, and to renovate Chinese embassies abroad. Throughout this process, Hui-lan played the role of “Madame Wellington Koo,” a “diplomatic wife” who facilitated Chinese diplomacy by cultivating personal relationships with Western diplomats and officials while representing Chinese women on the international stage. It was a role without established precedents or rules in Chinese diplomacy. Without being officially employed by the Chinese government, Hui-lan contributed in ways that have not been widely acknowledged in the existing historiography, neglect due largely to the conventions of diplomatic history, which encourage a focus on professional diplomats and institutional building.⁵

The role of gender and family in modern Chinese diplomatic history has only begun to receive the attention of scholars. I have examined the gendered etiquette and politics of socializing in late Qing diplomacy. I demonstrated that because elite wives from respectable families still conformed to the Confucian principles of domestic seclusion and gender separation, when the demand arose for Chinese diplomats to follow Western social etiquette – bringing their spouses abroad, meeting foreign dignitaries in public functions, hosting embassy receptions – their concubines often served the role of “public wife.”⁶ In the Republican period, as respectable women no longer endangered their chaste

⁴Craft 2015; Yang 2014.

⁵On institutional building, see Strauss 1998.

⁶Shi 2021.

reputations by showing up in public, more and more women began to step into the public realm and appear at social and diplomatic functions. This article uses the case of “Madame Wellington Koo” to examine a public role that emerged in this period: the Chinese diplomatic wife. By playing this role exceptionally well, Mme. Koo contributed to the successes of both Chinese diplomacy and her husband’s career. Her experiences reveal the interpersonal, cultural, even accidental factors that helped shape modern Chinese diplomacy.

Molly Wood has pointed out the important role played by the “diplomatic wife” in the US Foreign Service from 1905 to 1941.⁷ In the pre-World War II period, diplomats needed to spend time establishing and maintaining personal relationships with local officials and dignitaries to gather information, to represent their own country’s positions to their hosts effectively, and to informally negotiate deals. Many of these relationships were cultivated in private – beyond work hours, through various social functions. The success of these occasions often relied on the domestic and social skills of the diplomatic wives, who organized and managed these highly visible functions to facilitate the exchange of information and messages. As “wives, mothers, hostess, homemakers and role models,” Wood argues, diplomatic wives exerted “considerable influence as informal representatives of the U.S. government.”⁸ They “managed, without pay, the domestic duties and social obligations that ensured the smooth operation of American missions.” They thereby “helped established a powerful American presence in countries all over the world.”⁹ Wood notes that foreign service wives were often neglected as serious subjects of study because they were perceived by feminist scholars as playing conventional gender roles. Furthermore, few of these women left their own written records. Wood’s research breakthrough came when the Association of American Foreign Service Women conducted an oral history project in 1986.¹⁰ Wood utilized their materials to piece together a historical picture of women’s contributions to American diplomacy.

The role of diplomatic wife was new to Republican China. Though it was politically informal, and feminine by conventional definitions, when a woman with the right combination of ability and resources assumed it, the position became visible and significant. Among Chinese diplomatic wives during the Republican period, Mme. Koo’s high profile was unmatched. Still, little scholarly research on her life and activities has been published.¹¹ A historical reckoning with her influence is long overdue.

Though other diplomatic wives left behind little print evidence of their experiences, Mme. Koo was very conscious of telling her life stories. She published two English autobiographies through orally narrating her life history to two different writers, the first in 1943 and the second in 1975. Though she did not explain her reasons for publishing the autobiographies during her lifetime, she may have believed simply that her extraordinary life – one that involved being frequently inside the world’s top circles of wealth and power – was worth recording. Taiwanese scholar Lin Ping believes that her autobiographies contain both invaluable historical sources about her life and world as an elite southeast Asian Chinese woman and some deliberate artistic creations to cater to contemporary European and American societies’ curiosity for and imagination of the “exotic” orient. The autobiographies overall show more on how she would like to be known and remembered than offer a factual record of her real life.¹²

What is relevant to this article is that although Mme. Koo omitted certain aspects of her life history, or reconstructed them in pointed ways, the two autobiographical narratives contain rich and valuable details about how she played the role of a diplomatic wife for over three decades and how she reconstructed her Chinese identity. On matters related to diplomatic occasions and activities, her accounts seem reasonably trustworthy; since her contemporaries could easily verify the facts and discern any distortions, this information can be largely relied on. Issues tied to her subjective experience on the

⁷Wood 2005.

⁸Ibid., p. 142.

⁹Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 152.

¹¹For one exception, see Lin 2022.

¹²Lin 2022, p. 5.

other hand, such as the intensity of her patriotic feeling toward China, could not be so easily disputed. It is in these areas that she had more room and reason to alter her past to suit her purposes, and here that we should exercise caution in our reading.

In addition, due to her public visibility as the wife of a high-ranking Chinese official, there were far more contemporary newspaper reports on her activities than on other diplomatic wives. These are very important sources to examine her public perception both in China and on the international stage. Among other things, I will examine her changing images on the *Vogue US* magazine to analyze how she learned to use fashion to represent China and modern Chinese women to the Western world. Finally, whenever applicable, sources from (and about) her well-known father, her husband, and her acquaintances are used to get us closer to the life and world she had really lived. These include biographies, memoirs, and existing studies on these men. Since a lot of information on her is often rumors or hearsay, it is especially important to corroborate with other types of evidence.

Since I have not seen any sources presenting concrete evidence on how her action directly led to major diplomatic achievements, the focus of this article is not on the direct impact of her activities on the outcome of Chinese diplomacy but on the novel, instrumental role of Chinese diplomatic wife she pioneeringly and creatively played. Even if her certain actions did have concrete impact on diplomatic history, chances are that they were not officially recorded under her name, since back then women's identity to a large part was still tied to the men they married. Consequently, their official husbands often received the credit when their wives proved to be "great helpers" in various occasions and functions.

A combination of factors relating to her overseas background enabled Mme. Koo's exceptional performance as a diplomatic wife and her unique contributions to modern Chinese diplomatic history. Her family's immense wealth, accumulated in the Dutch East Indies, provided the funds for regularly entertaining diplomatic guests on China's behalf; her cosmopolitan and Western upbringing as an elite Peranakan (meaning locally born and creolized, often of mixed ancestry) equipped her with a superb command of multiple foreign languages and familiarity with Western culture and social etiquette. Her upbringing stood in sharp contrast to most contemporary Chinese officials' wives from mainland China, who were not yet comfortable stepping out of their accustomed domestic seclusion. Finally, being no stranger to living in grand style with many servants, as she had since childhood, Hui-lan possessed a unique talent in utilizing and improvising Chinese material culture – fashion, jewelry, art-work – to represent China, decorate Chinese embassies, and perform Chineseness on the international stage. In an era when China was still perceived as a very poor country, she understood the importance of using every resource at her disposal to burnish China's image in foreign eyes. Judging by the international applauses she received then, she undoubtedly successfully represented China and Chinese women on the international stage.

What made Hui-lan willing to use her own family's wealth to assist Chinese diplomacy? What could she and her family gain from doing so? In this article, I argue that Hui-lan's personal background as a member of an extremely wealthy but politically powerless Peranakan family in a Dutch colony shaped her life ambition, her persistent pursuit of status and social acceptance, and her strong determination to positively represent China on the international stage. In fact, Hui-lan's extraordinary performance in playing a diplomatic wife and embodying Chineseness concealed an uneasy relationship with her Chinese identity. Before her marriage to Koo, she enjoyed an extravagant Western lifestyle and purposefully distanced herself from the Chineseness that invited discrimination from Dutch colonizers in Java. After becoming Mme. Koo, she faced a conundrum: her overseas background, an important asset in her success as a diplomatic wife, was perceived by some elites from mainland China as not respectful enough to suit her new position as a high-ranking Chinese official's wife. In two autobiographies, she therefore reconstructed her past to emphasize her patriotism and her Chinese identity, a stance befitting her established position as the wife of an illustrious Chinese ambassador.

A close study of Mme. Koo thus reminds us that elite overseas Chinese women's identity was not static, but could be reinvented in response to various changes in international power politics, historical contingencies, and individual agency. So far little research has focused on elite Chinese women of

southeast Asia.¹³ We are far more familiar with prominent overseas Chinese male individuals, such as the philanthropist Tan Kah Kee (Chen Jiageng, 陳嘉庚, 1874–1961) and the Peranakan social reformer Lim Boon Keng (Lin Wenqing, 林文慶, 1869–1957).¹⁴ As we will see, throughout her extraordinary life, Hui-lan kept reinventing herself in new ways: from the daughter of a wealthy Peranakan merchant in the Dutch East Indies to the wife of a highly respected Chinese diplomat, to a representative of Chinese fashion and citizen of the world. Therefore, identity transformation had been an overarching theme of her life. A case study on how the complicated process of identity rebuilding and selective adaptation played out for Hui-lan in the changing contexts of Chinese diplomatic history can shed important light on the ambivalent and fluid nature of elite overseas Chinese women's identity and its reconstruction through their engagement with modern China. In addition, this study shows that although Hui-lan was operating on an entirely different sphere from the prominent overseas Chinese male social reformers, the role of diplomatic wife enabled her to carve out a feminine space of her own to contribute to the making of modern China on the international stage.

An extraordinary diplomatic wife

Mme. Koo contributed her personal wealth to Chinese diplomacy in an era that saw the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in frequent and severe shortage of funds. Scholars have pointed out the Beiyang government's (1912–1928) lack of resources to support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, due to a weak state and the loss of custom income. This was particularly true when compared to the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the later Nationalist government (1928–1949). Consequently, Chinese envoys abroad could barely make ends meet in their own lives, much less carry out the necessary entertaining on their country's behalf. Some Chinese embassies could not afford to rent decent legation quarters, nor could they afford to renovate the sites when needed.¹⁵

Mme. Koo offered an insider's view on the Chinese government's lack of funding for diplomatic needs. What she describes below was already the situation in the 1940s, when the Nationalist government could afford more than the Beiyang warlord government:

Chinese ambassadors were paid \$600 a month, plus a free house, two servants, and a car and chauffeur. There was also an entertainment allowance, which varied according to the post and what the government could afford at the time. Chinese ambassadors were not chosen for their wealth and ability to entertain on a grand scale with their own money, as has been the case with so many American ambassadors. They were picked for the most part because they were yes-men – even bootlickers. Only a few were as highly qualified as Wellington, and in most cases, not being rich and not having rich wives, they had to save the entertainment allowance because they needed some form of old-age pension.¹⁶

Most early twentieth-century American ambassadors came from wealthy families, and their pay was far higher than the income received by Chinese diplomats. Many American diplomatic officers and their wives “relied on family money to supplement their small Foreign Service salaries and to absorb extra expenses, notably those pertaining to the ‘social aspects of diplomatic life.’”¹⁷ Few Chinese diplomats could compare to their American counterparts on this front.¹⁸ Other sources confirm Mme. Koo's observations that Chinese officials often had to save the entertainment allowance for

¹³On elite Chinese women in Dutch East Indies, see Dawis 2014; Kwartanada 2017. On Chinese women in Singapore and Malaysia, see Fan 2019. On how some overseas Chinese women chose to return to China and what happened to them afterward, see Teoh 2018.

¹⁴Chan 2015; Yong 1989.

¹⁵Xu 2020, pp. 168–169.

¹⁶Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 242.

¹⁷Wood 2005, p. 148.

¹⁸Yue 2004, pp. 112–122.

themselves. During his five-year term as envoy to France, around 1912, Hu Weide (胡惟德, 1863–1933) refused to entertain foreign diplomats, save a small party he hosted each year for Chinese overseas students during the National Day. Hu thereby saved around 10,000 francs yearly, but nobody in French diplomatic circles knew him. Every year when he went to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct business, Hu could only talk to low-level staff.¹⁹ Sources suggest that many other Chinese envoys chose a similar strategy, closing their doors to foreign guests and pocketing the money intended for mingling with fellow diplomats.²⁰

Situating Mme. Koo in this context clarifies her unusual contribution to Chinese diplomacy. Using money from her father, she renovated Chinese diplomatic residences, generously entertained foreign guests, and dressed in the latest fashions – all with an eye to representing China. Shortly after their marriage, in 1920, Koo was transferred to London to succeed Alfred Sze (Shi Zhaoji, 施肇基, 1877–1958) as the Chinese minister there. Seeing the old house at Portland Place that the Qing government had purchased and used as the location for the Chinese Legation, Mme. Koo began an extensive renovation project, shopping “furiously” for furnishings with money from her father, despite warnings from her husband that whatever she bought would belong to China, and that they “could not expect China to pay for improvements or take new furnishing with us if we left.”²¹

Around 1922, when Koo was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hui-lan secured money from her father to purchase a large “palace” in the capital, Peking (now Beijing).²² Located in the center of the city, their new residence had ten acres and two hundred rooms. Later, her father gave Hui-lan another \$150,000 to renovate the palace and install modern facilities.²³ She hired about forty servants, drove the only Rolls-Royce in Beijing, and frequently hosted foreign visitors. She took her guests on excursions, out shopping, and enjoyed other entertainments, and their palace became the Chinese government’s official place to entertain. When the Crown Prince and Princess of Sweden visited Republican China in October 1926, Koo happened to be both the Acting Prime Minister and regent of China. He asked Hui-lan to take charge of preparations to entertain the royal couple. She successfully accommodated his wishes in the palace’s newly decorated Blue Dining Room, with forty-eight guests in attendance.

Hui-lan spoke six languages and was deeply familiar with European high society and culture.²⁴ In addition to her native Malay, she spoke fluent English and French (her French was better than her husband’s²⁵), decent Hokkien, Mandarin, and Dutch. This was in sharp contrast to the limited language abilities of many Chinese officials’ wives, who neither spoke foreign languages nor had experience mingling with Westerners. Due largely to her exceptional language and social skills, when the Kooes were living in Beijing during the 1920s under the warlord government, Mme. Koo became one of the few active Chinese official’s wives who mingled in diplomatic circles.²⁶ Her public appearances preceded those of the well-known Song Meiling (宋美齡, 1898–2003). It was only in December 1927 that the American-educated Meiling married Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), became the First Lady of China, and began attending official and diplomatic functions. But Mme. Chiang was not primarily a diplomatic wife, since her husband did not represent China abroad.

Even after the Nationalists overthrew the Beiyang warlord government and unified China, Mme. Koo remained a highly visible diplomatic wife both in China and on the international stage. When the Lytton Commission – a significant investigatory team led by Victor Bulwer-Lytton (1876–1947)

¹⁹Yang 2014, p. 86.

²⁰Yue 2004, pp. 112–122. Yue also offered some detailed examination of salaries and other benefits of diplomats of Republican China.

²¹Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 132.

²²However, the palace had to be registered under her husband’s name, since according to Hui-lan, if it were not, “he as a Chinese man would have looked ridiculous.” Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 153; Also see Yuan 1988, p. 10.

²³Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 153.

²⁴Ibid., p. 5.

²⁵Yuan 1988, p. 9.

²⁶Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 204.

and appointed by the League of Nations – visited China to determine the cause of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (on September 18, 1931), Mme. Koo was the only woman who traveled with the Commission on the boat chartered to take them from Shanghai to Nanjing.²⁷ Contemporary Chinese newspapers published photos of her and Yu Fengzhi (于鳳至, 1897–1990), the wife of Zhang Xueliang (張學良, 1901–2001), the young marshal who controlled Manchuria, accompanying the committee to visit the Great Wall.²⁸ Once the Commission arrived in Peking, it was decided that they would be entertained at her palace. Mme. Koo not only supervised the palace renovations in time for the occasion; she also gave an official luncheon for members of the Commission and a dozen or more for their assistants. Lord Lytton showed “the most flattering appreciation” of her palace.²⁹

From 1932 to 1940, while Koo served as Chinese Ambassador to France, Mme. Koo had the Chinese embassy in Paris renovated and decorated. The Nationalist Chinese government paid thirty-million francs for a large private house, and Koo was given a budget of \$100,000 to decorate it. Knowing his wife’s talents and taste, Koo sent her to China by plane to buy antique Chinese furnishings. It took Hui-lan twenty days in 1937 to finish the trip, which was routed south through the Middle East and India in small planes that often had room for only one passenger, as commercial aviation was still in its early stages.³⁰ When all was done, Kong Xiangxi (H. H. Kong, 孔祥熙, 1880–1967), then Finance Minister of China, came for a visit and praised the house’s beauty. Mme. Koo organized a major reception for Kong, with 1,300 attendees; by the end, she’d shaken hands with them all.³¹

Hui-lan also learned to manage the complicated establishment of a Chinese embassy and entertain in the European manner.³² When Koo served as ambassador to France, Hui-lan kept the Chinese Embassy running smoothly on daily basis. She employed twenty servants: half French, half Chinese. She was fully aware that an important part of her role as “ambassadress” (in her words) was planning “official dinners and receptions.” She knew “long in advance the minimum number of entertainments required.”³³ She also made a point of introducing one or two Chinese dishes into the European menu at important dinners, and hosted dinner parties every two to three days. Using the thirty-six sets of gold dinner plates that her mother had given her as a wedding gift, her reputation as an impressive host spread. In his later years, Koo confirmed that Hui-lan used money from her father to entertain on behalf of Chinese embassy (after her father passed away in 1924, she inherited from him a large sum of money with annual interest income).³⁴ Koo acknowledged her social skills, and made special note of the friendships she made with White Russian aristocrats, many of whom had fled to Paris and maintained significant influence in French high society.³⁵

Over the years, Hui-lan became a master of Western social etiquette, a skillful society host, and a fashion icon. Before her marriage to Koo, her mother ensured that Hui-lan wore the most expensive jewelry and was dressed in the correct and latest fashions, many of them tailored in Paris.³⁶ Hui-lan knew that Republican China was regarded as a poor country; it was important that she and her husband dressed impeccably to reform that image of China, much as she had renovated the palace. Soon after her marriage to Koo, Hui-lan learned various diplomatic protocols and studied how to be a society hostess, from arranging seating plans in accordance with rank at official luncheons, to greeting and socializing with royalty, to wearing the proper attire and curtsying with ease.³⁷ Eventually, she became

²⁷Ibid., p. 322.

²⁸Xiao shijie: *Tuhua banyuekan* 1932, p. 9.

²⁹Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 324.

³⁰Madame Koo and Taves 1975, pp. 207–211.

³¹Ibid., p. 216.

³²Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 149.

³³Ibid., p. 382.

³⁴Yuan 1988, p. 9.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 8–9.

³⁶Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 129.

³⁷Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 382.

such an expert on “the rules of the inner circle of power” that her husband often relied on her instead of the embassy’s protocol expert.³⁸

Like many other diplomatic wives, Mme. Koo also often engaged in charity, hosting balls and parties to raise donations for disaster and war relief. Compared to other Chinese officials’ wives, her Western education and overseas connections enabled Hui-lan to raise funds directly from the United States, Europe, and southeast Asia.³⁹ Soon after the second Sino–Japanese War (1937–1945) broke out, she occupied herself in organizing for war relief, sending out thousands of personal appeals. Together with other Chinese women overseas, she arranged charity bazaars, tea parties, and concerts, many of them great successes that secured considerable donations.⁴⁰ In March 1938, *Shibao* (*The Eastern Times*, 時報), a major daily newspaper published in Shanghai, reported that “Mme. Koo” organized a major charity event in Paris to collect donations for the Chinese Red Cross. Prominent Western diplomats and officials attended.⁴¹ During wartime in London in the 1940s, when she no longer needed to regularly entertain official guests, she volunteered for the night shift at the ambulance corps for four months. This experience instructed her in the realities of war and exposed her to the suffering of ordinary people.⁴²

Judging by her autobiography, it seems that Hui-lan did not view herself as a mere “assistant.” Instead, she described having “deliberately set out to create my own career.”⁴³ Molly Wood has argued that diplomatic wives are often overlooked because feminist scholarship regards their roles as traditional, feminine, and domestic rather than seeing them as women pioneering their own careers, challenging established gender hierarchies and stereotypes. This runs contrary to the views expressed by American diplomatic wives, who described having their own careers in the oral history interviews conducted years later.⁴⁴ It seemed that Hui-lan shared their views, treating her diplomatic role as a career and expressing pride in her contributions to Chinese diplomacy and her husband’s achievements. Compared to American diplomatic wives, who did not need to convince anyone of their country’s powerful position, Hui-lan had the considerably harder task of representing the newly founded and still poor Republican China, convincing others that it too was an important political actor on the international stage. Although we have no sources that demonstrate her activities directly changing the outcome of Chinese diplomacy, she clearly played a role in managing Chinese diplomatic residences abroad and regularly cultivating friendly relationships with Western officials. Mme. Koo’s indispensable role as a diplomatic wife suggests the need for gender historians (in addition to diplomatic historians) to broaden our perspectives, going beyond well-studied professional women or female revolutionaries when discussing new models of Chinese womanhood.⁴⁵ In particular, some new models of Chinese womanhood, such as the diplomatic wife, or the “public wife,”⁴⁶ did not require women to challenge men’s social authority and political power. Their roles were largely based on gender difference rather than gender equality. However, these roles enabled women to carve out a space of their own in the newly opened public sphere, sometimes even to start a “career” to find life’s fulfillments and realize personal ambitions. In addition, rather than judge women’s activities in history based on our contemporary feminist standard, we need to consider those women’s subjective views of their own lives and experiences. Only then can we truly understand how a variety of women found their place and empowerment in the newly opened public realm and contributed to the making of modern China.

³⁸Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 124.

³⁹Baoqiu 1931.

⁴⁰Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 383.

⁴¹Shibao 1938.

⁴²Madame Koo and Taves 1975, pp. 251–252.

⁴³Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 163.

⁴⁴Wood 2005, pp. 146–147.

⁴⁵On professional women, see Lien 2001. On female revolutionaries, see Gilmartin 1995.

⁴⁶On the emergence of the “public wife” in late Qing, see Shi 2021.

Other Chinese diplomatic wives during this period fulfilled their duties to varying degrees, though few of them had the financial resources, command of foreign languages, or cosmopolitan upbringing that would have enabled them to match Mme. Koo's extraordinary performance on the international stage. We know too little about other Chinese diplomatic wives, their views and activities due to a lack of sources and the fact that history only records their husbands' official deeds. Another prominent woman who seems to have fulfilled her role effectively was the wife of Alfred Sze (Shi Zhaoji, 施肇基). A prominent Chinese diplomat, Sze served as Acting Foreign Minister, Ambassador to the United Kingdom (1929), and Ambassador to the United States (1933–1936). His wife, Tang Yuhua (Alice Tang, 唐钰华, 1886–?) was a niece of Tang Shaoyi, Koo's former father-in-law (Yuhua and Koo's second wife, Baoyue, were cousins). Yuhua seems to have received her early education in the United States and to speak at least English, if not other foreign languages.⁴⁷ After their marriage in 1905, Sze's career benefited tremendously from his connection with Tang Shaoyi, as had Koo's. Yuhua won applause for regularly assisting her husband by socializing with and entertaining diplomatic guests, "neither stingily nor extravagantly."⁴⁸ However, we know few details of Yuhua's activities, nor did she write autobiographies or memoirs. One 1921 report in *Shenbao* (申報), a major newspaper published in Shanghai, displayed their photos and referred to "Mme. Sze," together with Mme. Koo, as "the two madams of the Chinese diplomatic world."⁴⁹ Though Mme. Sze was visible in public, she received less detailed and sensational coverage in contemporary Chinese newspapers than did the high profile, extravagant Mme. Koo.⁵⁰

A Peranakan representing China

There is an irony embedded in Hui-lan's story: she successfully played the role of a diplomatic wife and represented China on the international stage precisely because she had a Western (rather than Chinese) education, as a result of her special upbringing in an immensely wealthy family in the Dutch East Indies. Her familiarity with Western cultures, customs, and languages enabled her to adroitly socialize with Westerners in the diplomatic world. Raised in an extremely affluent household, with easy access to various goods of the finest quality, she developed a talent for creatively choosing elements of Chinese material culture to represent China and decorate Chinese embassies. On the other hand, and despite her success representing China, growing up as a Peranakan left her with a distant relationship to her Chinese identity. It was only her marriage to Koo that prompted a dramatic shift in her attitude toward Chineseness.

Peranakan (meaning "local born" in Malay) Chinese usually refers to the descendants of Chinese immigrants (mostly from southern coastal China) who live in southeast Asian countries.⁵¹ Their culture is often a creolized version of local cultures mixed with Chinese culture. Unlike first-generation, new immigrants (often called *totok*), they maintained no special commercial or other relationships with mainland China. Before Indonesia gained its independence from Dutch colonial authorities, in 1945, Peranakan Chinese were typically engaged with business and trade to make a living. The largest concentration of Chinese occupied the cities of Java, where they were required to live in separate Chinese quarters, since the Dutch kept various ethnic groups segregated from one another. Though some of them became immensely wealthy through trade and commerce, they also endured discrimination and retained, either voluntarily or by force, time-honored Chinese customs and traditions distinct from the indigenous population.⁵² Because the Dutch often viewed the Chinese as economic

⁴⁷Deng 2018.

⁴⁸Chen 2020, p. 102.

⁴⁹Shenbao 1921c.

⁵⁰Chinese newspaper coverage of Mme. Sze provided mostly photos. However, their coverage of Mme. Koo often included more substantive details (though quite a number of these reports seemed to be untrue). Tabloids loved to focus on Mme. Koo's family's wealth and her luxurious lifestyle. This conclusion is derived from keyword searches in the database *Quanguo baokan suoyin* (National index to Chinese newspapers and periodicals).

⁵¹Onghokham 1989, pp. 158–159.

⁵²Kuhn 2008, pp. 69–74.

rivals without common interests, historian Onghokham notes that “nowhere were the Chinese regarded with greater suspicion than in the Netherlands Indies,” including in the British and French colonies, where Chinese merchants faced less discriminatory treatment.⁵³ In the nineteenth century, most Peranakan were of mixed ancestry – since Chinese women only began immigrating to Java near the end of the century – and spoke Malay, the archipelago’s *lingua franca*. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the elites of this Peranakan Chinese community, often called *cabang atas* (literally “highest branch” in Malay), became more Dutch oriented than Chinese oriented, both culturally and for business reasons.⁵⁴ The wealthiest members of this small but influential Chinese elite – the richest and most successful of the Chinese immigrants, such as Hui-lan’s father – were appointed the principal representatives of the local Chinese community, often with the honorary military rank *Majoor der Chinezen* (Major of the Chinese).

It was during Hui-lan’s father’s time that the Oei family accumulated enough wealth to reach the status of *cabang atas*. Hui-lan’s grandfather, Oei Tjie Sien (黃志信, 1835–1900), left Fujian province in southeast coastal China and arrived in the city of Semarang, then the biggest harbor and trading center of Java, in around 1858. Starting from petty trading, he eventually established a wholesale business. Hui-lan’s father, Oei Tiong Ham, inherited the business and enlarged his fortune by investing in opium, later expanding into the production and trade of sugar and other export crops, as well as the banking and shipping industries. Widely acknowledged as a brilliant businessman, Oei established the first modern business conglomerate in southeast Asia and had become the wealthiest Chinese in the region by the turn of the century. Oei’s main wife, Hui-lan’s mother, was handpicked by his father from one of the oldest established Peranakan families in Semarang. He also had more than twenty concubines, thirteen sons and thirteen daughters. Most of them received Dutch educations. Hui-lan, his favorite daughter, was the closest to him throughout his life. His influence on her was considerable; her two autobiographies make clear that he shaped much of her outlook on life.⁵⁵ To understand Hui-lan’s identity, it is therefore important to understand her father.

In contrast to her conservative grandfather, who still adhered to Chinese customs and philosophy, Hui-lan’s father had a modern and Westernized outlook on both life and business. This preference can be seen in his requests to the Dutch government to wear European attire and haircuts, rather than the Chinese costume, as early as in 1889, and his petition to live and work in Semarang’s European rather than Chinese quarter.⁵⁶ Oei became “the first Java-Chinese to dress in a Western style.”⁵⁷ Because of his immense wealth, he was able to win special privileges from the Dutch government not generally granted to Chinese residents. He built a “showplace” (in Hui-lan’s words) in the European quarter of Semarang, in the Dutch colonial style, and entertained Java’s most impressive visitors there. He purposefully built the mansion far from Semarang’s Chinese quarter to dissociate himself from the Chinese community.⁵⁸ He also adopted European methodologies in his professional life. Rather than following Chinese management principles, such as working exclusively with family or otherwise-related Chinese, Oei appointed staff based on their skill and expertise. Dutch engineers and managers built his machines and ran his companies; Dutch or Dutch-educated Chinese employees worked in his offices.⁵⁹ Despite his work and his immense wealth, Oei “remained an outsider in the Dutch community.”⁶⁰ Throughout his life, he spoke little or no English or Dutch, but only Hokkien and Malay.

Sources suggest that Oei was not enthusiastic about the state of China’s affairs, unlike the “patriotic” overseas Chinese philanthropists or social reformers that people many histories of the period.

⁵³ Onghokham 1989, p. 174.

⁵⁴ Yoshihara 1989, p. 149. On *cabang atas*, also see Onghokham 1989, p. 163.

⁵⁵ Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 33.

⁵⁶ van Roosmalen 2020, p. 19.

⁵⁷ Onghokham 1989, 169.

⁵⁸ van Roosmalen 2020, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Yoshihara 1989, p. 142.

⁶⁰ van Roosmalen 2020, p. 11.

Hui-lan recalled of her father, “To my grandfather, China was the world. But my father, now the head of the Oei family, was of a different mind. He visited China, but it held no particular pull for him. The world did, and as he reached out toward it he took me with him.”⁶¹ We can also sense Oei’s attitude toward China from a short biographical collection published in 1937 on Chinese social notables during the Republican period, in which Oei is described as “unwilling to donate for social welfare in China. He looked down upon Chinese, so he chose to become a Japanese citizen... his daughter Hui-lan also declared she would not marry a Chinese man. Only after she was abandoned by her British husband in 1920, she married Wellington Koo.”⁶² Judging by the existing sources, this description was not untrue. Onghokham notes that in addition to disliking associating with Chinese, Oei “seem[ed] little interested in the question of China and other political matters.”⁶³ Onghokham attributes this disinterest to Oei’s intention to be as “apolitical” as possible, partly for the sake of his business. Though he was aware of the revolutionary movements underway in China, Oei maintained a neutral stance and did not offer financial support.⁶⁴ Still, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs benefited from his wealth indirectly through his financial support of his favorite daughter.

Before her marriage to Koo, Hui-lan seems to have shared her father’s desire to dissociate herself from Chineseness, and to have been more comfortable with Western ways than with Chinese customs. Her mother, a strong-minded, ambitious woman, hired an English governess to home school Hui-lan and her older sister Tjong-lan (琮蘭), training her to be “a woman of the world, equal to Europeans, to mingle in society as few Chinese women could have.”⁶⁵ This reflects the westernization of the *cabang atas* in colonial Indonesia from the late nineteenth century onward, from which Hui-lan’s family was not immune.⁶⁶ However, compared to other *cabang atas* families in Java, most of whom were Dutch oriented and educated, Hui-lan’s father had a broader vision and more international outlook. At one stage, Onghokham suggests, Oei became an “anglophile,” despite living in a Dutch colony.⁶⁷ This may explain why Hui-lan’s governess was English rather than Dutch. As a result of her Western education, among the languages Hui-lan spoke, she was least fluent in Chinese. In her early years, she wore mostly Western dresses, often following the latest fashions from Paris. Hui-lan spent most of her teens living with her mother and sister in England, where she became known as a party girl.⁶⁸

Hui-lan’s wealthy Peranakan family background gave her not only a cosmopolitan upbringing, but also shaped her future ambitions. From this perspective, her marriage choices, her pursuit of social status, and her efforts to elevate China’s international standing begin to make sense. Despite her father’s immense wealth, he was still Chinese, an inferior race in the eyes of Dutch colonizers. There were certain occasions and places he could not gain access to because of his race and lack of political power. Hui-lan was keenly aware of the limits of her status as the daughter of a Chinese merchant, albeit an extremely wealthy one. In her early years, she attempted to transcend these barriers and gain access to European high society by marrying a British diplomat – a consular agent named Beauchamp Caulfield-Stoker (1877–1949) – in Semarang in 1909. This coincided with the period when her father’s Anglophilia was at its height, and it seems likely that he played a role in arranging or facilitating his daughter’s first marriage. The young couple moved to London, lived in a house purchased by Hui-lan’s father, and had a son together. Meanwhile, Oei’s son-in-law began representing his business empire’s sugar interests in London, where Oei quickly setup an office.⁶⁹ Before long, London became the major export market for Java sugar: Oei’s broad vision beyond the Netherlands had enabled him to successfully venture into the international market. Meanwhile, Hui-lan often

⁶¹Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 28.

⁶²Jia 1993, p. 500.

⁶³Onghokham 1989, p. 173.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 174.

⁶⁵Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 7.

⁶⁶Govaars-Tjia 2005.

⁶⁷Onghokham 1989, p. 169.

⁶⁸Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 97.

⁶⁹Caballero and Aspinnall 2018, pp. 164–165.

showed up in London high society. Known as “Lady Stoker” or “Countess Hoey [an Anglicization of Oei] Stoker,” her fondness for fashion, dancing, aviation, and fast luxury cars became legendary. But the couple’s personal incompatibility and Hui-lan’s social ambitions made their marriage a difficult one. In 1919, Hui-lan filed for divorce.⁷⁰

The next year, Hui-lan’s marriage to Koo finally satisfied her social ambitions and opened the door to a world that even her father could only have dreamt. Koo’s appeal for Hui-lan, she admitted in her autobiographies, was in a large part the special privilege she could enjoy as the wife of a high-ranking Chinese diplomat in Western high society, something money could not buy and her first husband could not give. When her mother and sister introduced Hui-lan to Koo in Paris, she was not excited. Koo was not stylish, did not drive or dance, had two children and been married twice before. But the limousine and chauffeur supplied him by the French government impressed her, and when Koo took her to watch opera in the theater, they sat in the official boxes reserved for government officials. Hui-lan realized that no matter how much her father had been willing to pay, he could not have bought those boxes: they were reserved for dignitaries.⁷¹ Koo opened a fascinating world to Hui-lan, a world that included Buckingham Palace, Elysee Palace, and the White House. Koo explained that as his wife, she would be included in the invitations when he attended state functions.⁷² She was “amused” to learn that the wives of diplomats were always referred to as “Madame,” since the official language of diplomacy was French. Within several months of their first meeting, Hui-lan was persuaded by her mother, sister, and many members of the Chinese delegation to accept Koo’s marriage proposal. Henceforth, Hui-lan was known as “Madame Wellington Koo.” Even after she and Koo divorced in 1958, and Koo remarried, Hui-lan still claimed that she was the real Madame Wellington Koo, a title and identity that no amount of money could buy.⁷³

In the early years of her marriage, during the 1920s, Hui-lan still appeared a largely Westernized woman. Her familiarity with Western languages and social etiquette facilitated her smooth entrance into the diplomatic world, but her lack of visible Chineseness led many Chinese to treat her like a foreigner.⁷⁴ A survey of her public images in Chinese newspapers in the early 1920s shows Hui-lan mostly dressed like a typical flapper, a look that would have seemed completely unChinese to most readers.⁷⁵

Hui-lan came to realize that her position as a high-ranking Chinese diplomat’s wife required that she and her husband represent China on the international stage – they were the country’s “showcase” – a need that increased as China’s importance grew in the eyes of Western powers. In the 1920s, since foreign countries widely viewed China as a second-rate country, they only sent ministers to Beijing. But by the 1930s, China was seen as a growing power, and its ministry had been raised to an ambassadorship.⁷⁶ Hui-lan responded to these changes, making deliberate efforts to represent China. Starting with her appearance, she began to cultivate the image of a modern *Chinese* woman with excellent taste. By the 1930s, her image in Chinese print media was transformed. She was now pictured as an elegant Chinese lady in a luxurious silk dress and jade necklace.⁷⁷ Hui-lan the flapper, seen in newspapers from the 1920s, was gone. Her Chinese acquaintances, who had viewed her as “the essence of everything modern and foreign,” were surprised to discover that she “preferred jade to diamonds, Chinese food to French cooking and old Chinese houses to their shiny modern homes.”⁷⁸ Around 1930, it was rumored that Hui-lan started the trend of finding innovative ways to adapt the Manchu style of dress (*qipao*, 旗袍), which she wore with lace trousers and jade necklaces: “I started

⁷⁰Malaya Tribune 1920, p. 8.

⁷¹Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 110.

⁷²Ibid., p. 111.

⁷³Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁴Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, pp. 199–200, 202.

⁷⁵Shenbao 1921a, Shenbao 1921b.

⁷⁶Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 134.

⁷⁷Beiyang huabao 1931; Shishi xinhua 1930.

⁷⁸Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 295.

a Chinese wardrobe... and in the process accidentally made several adaptations which, because they were widely copied, set me up as a fashion leader.”⁷⁹ The adaptations she made to *qipao* included slitting the gown to the knee, wearing lace pantalettes, and adding decorative trimming to the side slits and to the opening of the gown between the collar and underarm.⁸⁰ She insisted on using Chinese silk in an age when foreign imported fabrics were viewed as desirable and chic.⁸¹ Although it is difficult to prove whether these innovations originated with Hui-lan, there is no doubt that she was a trendsetter in China. On the other hand, by mentioning that she “started a Chinese wardrobe,” Hui-lan implicitly revealed that she had previously possessed few Chinese clothes. In other words, the wife of a prominent Chinese diplomat had to that point been wearing mostly Western styles to public functions. Hui-lan confirms this fact in other parts of her autobiography. “When I first arrived in China” in the 1920s, she wrote, “I wore Western clothes, dresses and coats I had brought from Paris and London.”⁸² Still, there are no sources that suggest any Western diplomats harbored doubts about Hui-lan’s Chineseness, even when she was wearing Western-style clothing, or after learning that she did not grow up in China. This was an age, after all, when race, ethnicity, even nationality were perceived by Westerners as biologically (rather than culturally) determined traits.

Mme. Koo’s public appearance caught the eye of Western observers; before long, she was revered as a representative of Chinese fashion. An examination of her images in *Vogue* magazine over the years shows her becoming more conscious and confident in performing her Chineseness on the international stage, having now grasped the politics of diplomatic representation. In 1929, when the young Mme. Koo was featured in *Vogue US* as the wife of the then Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, the caption read: “A distinguished personality in the society of both London and Paris.” Her portrait shows a modern young woman with permed, bobbed hair wearing a white sleeveless dress, her lack of Chineseness suggesting that she has successfully mingled and assimilated into the high-society circles of London and Paris.⁸³ In 1943, *Vogue US* published an article on the older Mme. Koo, calling her “a Chinese citizen of the world, an international beauty.”⁸⁴ In the accompanying portrait, Mme. Koo wore a *qipao* embroidered with pagodas, gardens, and a dragon, unmistakably highlighting her Chinese identity.⁸⁵ She had clearly become adept at using Chinese elements to present herself and the country she represented. The article’s subtitle captured her mission: “Making friends for China is her talent, her lifework,” before describing how Mme. Koo, then wife of the Chinese ambassador to Britain, “has used her intelligence, looks, and fortune to advance China.” The article went on: “She brought two hemispheres together with her persuasive personality and served as charming link between old China and the new.” “Her life is inextricably woven with her husband’s career, her efforts complement his completely,” and in both “Paris and London, she created the first Chinese embassies where the East and West met on easy footing, where Europe’s great and near-great could get to know, if not understand, their Asiatic counterparts.”⁸⁶ In this setting, creatively redecorated with traditional Chinese furnishings and artworks, she “presented modern China to European statesmen whose good-will means loans and political support for Chiang Kai-Shek’s young, stable, enlightened Government.”⁸⁷ The emphasis was no longer whether she had been accepted into high-society London and Paris, but the important part she had played in representing China, a country of unquestionable significance in its own right.⁸⁸ In this way, Hui-lan refashioned the image of Chinese diplomatic wife: a modern-educated Chinese woman speaking fluent English wearing the signature national dress of

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 294.

⁸⁰Finnane 2008, p. 153.

⁸¹Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 181; Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 295.

⁸²Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 181.

⁸³*Vogue* (New York) 1929, p. 52.

⁸⁴Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 30.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 31.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 73.

⁸⁸For more on how the *Vogue* magazine represented China’s modernity through women’s fashion, see Chan 2017.

qipao and jade jewelry. Successfully winning the world with her innovative Chinese fashion, she setup an example for many diplomatic wives and public women to follow in modern China.

Yet, beyond her changed appearance, throughout her life, Hui-lan remained more familiar with Western than Chinese societies. In his later years, Koo recalled of Hui-lan: “She was very experienced in Western societies and could respond fluently. There, she was like a fish in water. However, in Chinese societies, she did not feel very comfortable. This was because 1) her Chinese was not good enough, though later improved. 2) she was not very familiar with affairs in China. She liked to socialize with Westerners.”⁸⁹ These seeming contradictions did not impede her from fulfilling her role as a diplomatic wife, which was spent mostly abroad, in Europe and the United States, socializing with non-Chinese in diplomatic circles. Her duties as a diplomatic wife required familiarity with Western customs and diplomatic protocols more than they demanded any deep knowledge of China.

Hui-lan remained fully aware that it was her marriage to Koo, a top Chinese official, that hastened her from the margins of the Chinese world to its center, giving her unprecedented social acceptance and a high position. She mentioned the difference between how she and her family were treated before and after her marriage to Koo in her autobiography:

Socially, we were at a disadvantage in the [European] countries we visited. If we had been from mainland China, we would have been welcomed by the select group of Chinese officials at the various legations. But two things were against us: First, we were Overseas Chinese, which to people from the mainland, marks one as provincial. It is rather the way British snobs regard their Canadian or Australian compatriots – tolerated but not really accepted. Second, we were so very rich. Mamma and my sister would go about innocently loaded down with diamonds and rubies and emeralds, jewels the legation people envied but pretended to scorn. And in addition, our usual shopping habits, placing gigantic orders without dreaming of asking prices, must have seemed preposterous to them...

Years later, when I married Wellington Koo and was automatically accepted into the top circles of mainland China, I looked back and smiled at how unsophisticated and naive we must have seemed in Europe. Even later, some catlike female, jealous of my position and money, would bring up the fact that I was Overseas Chinese, as though it were something of which I should be ashamed....⁹⁰

Legally speaking, when Hui-lan married Koo, she automatically acquired Chinese citizenship, which she kept from then on, despite that in her later years, her passport was issued by Taiwan government since the United States refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the regime of Communist China.⁹¹ She did not reveal her nationalities of her earlier years in her memoirs since it was probably a topic she did not want the public to know considering how she as Mme. Koo was determined to show her patriotism and Chineseness. Culturally speaking, the passage quoted above also reveals the condescension directed at overseas Chinese by people from the mainland. Traditionally, especially during the age of mass emigration (1840s–1940s), it was mostly men without enough land to farm in overpopulated southern coastal China who left home to try their luck in southeast Asia, Europe, the Americas, or other parts of the world, with the assistance of commercial and familial networks.⁹² More than twenty million Chinese emigrated during this period, and though a very small number of them made their fortunes overseas, an overwhelming majority began from humble social origins. Once they emigrated and settled down, or married a native woman, they were viewed by many in mainland China as having left the center of civilization and become tainted by inferior, even barbaric customs. Their descendants, born and raised overseas, were even less familiar with

⁸⁹Yuan 1988, p. 9.

⁹⁰Madame Koo and Taves 1975, pp. 72–73.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 299.

⁹²Kuhn 2008.

Chinese culture and society. Despite their immense wealth and Chinese ancestry, Hui-lan's family's Peranakan status precluded their acceptance in high-society China. It was the unexpectedly shortened distance to political power that mattered: Hui-lan's marriage to a top-ranking Chinese official did the trick. Still, even after she became Mme. Koo, some associates still liked to remind Hui-lan that she was an "overseas Chinese," a marginal category of emigrants whose Chineseness could always be questioned. In response, Hui-lan took pains to emphasize her patriotism and Chinese identity in her autobiographies.

In both accounts, Hui-lan maintained that soon after becoming Mme. Koo, she developed intensely patriotic feeling toward China. In her 1943 autobiography, she described first coming to China around 1922 (two years after their marriage) as Mme. Koo, wife of the new Foreign Minister: "The China which I had once accepted so passively had blossomed since my marriage into a more personal land, a land which already possessed my husband body and soul, and was slowly claiming my devotion. I was returning to my country, not as a heedless young girl, but as a woman who had an assured position of her own to maintain."⁹³ None of the sources indicate that Hui-lan cared much for China before her marriage to Koo. Her father surely did not. They saw China as a backward, unfamiliar land, and being ethnically Chinese had limited their social mobility in the Dutch East Indies. Then how to explain Hui-lan's newly acquired patriotism? Were her feelings invented to flatter the book's audience? The reality was probably complicated. Indeed, in such a short time from her marriage, it seems unlikely that she had gained a significantly deeper understanding of the society, history, or culture of China and developed a strong love of the country. But her patriotism could have been a direct outcome of her new status as the wife of a top-ranking official whose duty was to represent China and protect China's interest internationally. Hui-lan knew that the special position she and her husband shared was bestowed on them by China, a vast and important country. It was the authority and privilege that China offered her after she married Koo – "an assured position of her own to maintain" – that changed Hui-lan's feelings toward what she now called "my country." Hui-lan played up her patriotism and ethnicity to enhance her public image more obviously in her 1975 autobiography. Describing her eagerness to learn about the international affairs of China after her marriage, she wrote: "My patriotism for China was uncomplicated by politics; I was Chinese, so of course I loved China."⁹⁴ Putting this statement in the context of her early life history undercuts – or at least complicates – its sincerity.

After Hui-lan established her position as the patriotic Mme. Wellington Koo, she seems to have realized the importance of reviewing her past and rewriting her life history to suit her new image and position. Her first marriage – to a British man (for about ten years), no less, with whom she had a son – was completely omitted from both autobiographies. Admittedly, divorce was far less socially acceptable in this period. But Hui-lan may also have been wary of accusations that she'd once sought to raise her social status through a mixed-race marriage, a practice that could be viewed as unbecoming her later position and image as the wife of an illustrious Chinese ambassador. Instead, her autobiographies strain to show how determinedly she maintained her Chinese identity. When she gave birth to her first son with Koo, in January 1922, she insisted on giving birth at the home rented for the Washington Conference in the United States by the Chinese delegation. Assuming the residence counted as Chinese soil, their son would therefore be considered a Chinese citizen.⁹⁵ Her 1975 autobiography also describes the disapproval she showed her grandsons' white girlfriends, and insist that she only gave her approval once they found Chinese women to marry.⁹⁶ For someone who'd grown up in a mixed-race society and had a mixed-race marriage and child herself, this was a dramatic change of attitude. I am not suggesting that she was insincere or hypocritical; Hui-lan seems to have embraced her Chinese identity wholeheartedly after her marriage to Koo. Instead, I

⁹³Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 168.

⁹⁴Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 127.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 140.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 297.

am arguing that Hui-lan's repeated emphasis on her Chineseness – and her deliberate omission of important life events in her autobiographies – reveal, perhaps counterintuitively, her *insecurity* about her Chineseness. Many readers and acquaintances knew of her background, and some even showed contempt for it; and she knew that before her marriage to Koo, she did not care much for China, and that her father had purposefully disassociated his family from Chineseness. But her past did not suit her position as Mme. Koo, despite the fact that it was precisely her cosmopolitan past that enabled her to perform that role with aplomb. So she reimagined and reconstructed her past in her published writing. In this sense, it might be said that her autobiographies were more about the life of Mme. Wellington Koo than the life of Oei Hui-lan.

Conclusion

Though diplomatic historians have paid little attention to Hui-lan, her contribution to Chinese diplomacy was acknowledged by some contemporaries, her friends and family. Her husband was the first to realize her importance. About a year after their marriage, they attended a ball at Buckingham Palace. Koo must have been pleased with his wife's appearance and conduct, for he commented: "You and I really make a very fine team."⁹⁷ Koo was aware of the important role his wife played. As a team, they functioned for decades; even when their marriage was in trouble, they continued to work together to manage the Chinese embassies and entertain consular guests. Koo knew that Hui-lan could help him navigate the intricacies of diplomatic life in Europe due to her familiarity with English and French customs, and her knowledge of how to behave with royalty and nobility.⁹⁸ Years later, after Koo remarried, he was asked about Hui-lan's contribution to Koo's diplomatic career by Yuan Daofeng, a fellow diplomat and long-time friend who knew Hui-lan as well. Koo readily acknowledged that "she helped a lot."⁹⁹ In the book Yuan published about Koo in 1988, he concluded that among the Chinese diplomats' wives, Hui-lan was truly "the most outstanding (*zui chuse*, 最出色)."¹⁰⁰ He added that Hui-lan loved to "fight for the face" (*zheng mianzi*, 爭面子) of the Chinese in diplomatic social functions. In her unique ways, Hui-lan left her marks in modern Chinese diplomatic history by playing the pioneering role of diplomatic wife and set a successful example for other officials' wives to follow in terms of how to represent modern China to the international world. She projected modernity through her familiarity with Western languages and cultures and her luxurious and cosmopolitan lifestyle. She performed her Chineseness through selectively adopting traditional Chinese elements to furnish the exterior, from her own appearance to her decoration of the Chinese embassies. In so doing, she successfully brought the East and the West together on the international stage. It was said that Madame Chiang Kai-shek acknowledged Hui-lan's contribution as well. When a group of Chinese officials visiting Washington praised Koo for having increased the recognition of China abroad, Mme. Chiang said, "Don't forget that the ambassador's wife played a great role, too."¹⁰¹

Indeed, the case of Mme. Koo was exceptional, since few Chinese women possessed the rare combination of financial resources, cosmopolitan backgrounds, social skills, and language proficiency to contribute as she had. She also happened to be married to a prominent talented Chinese diplomat who had an unusually long, illustrious diplomatic career during the first half of the twentieth century. In other ways, the role Mme. Koo inhabited can be understood as representative, drawing our attention to other diplomatic wives who played their parts for China. Though few of them occupied positions as high and as visible as Mme. Koo's, they probably also fulfilled their duties on regular basis. In this sense, this article sheds light on the hitherto under the investigated group of diplomatic wives in modern China.

⁹⁷Madame Koo and Van Rensselaer Thayer 1943, p. 141.

⁹⁸Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 236.

⁹⁹Yuan 1988, p. 8.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰¹Madame Koo and Taves 1975, p. 242.

Because the role and duties of the diplomatic wife were carried out mostly from within the feminine and domestic sphere and because these women were rarely viewed as “professionals,” their activities and public presence did not pose a fundamental threat to the male-dominated gender system and rarely caused any social controversies as the radical “new women” frequently did in Republican China. In fact, Mme. Koo’s memoirs suggest that she had a rather old-fashioned view on gender and family relations throughout her life: “No matter how clever and able a woman is, she must never seem to dominate her husband.”¹⁰² Some scholar has noted that many of the wives of Communist diplomats and officials in the early 1950s resisted merely assisting their husbands in diplomatic and public functions – a practice, the women argued, that contradicted the principles of gender equality and women’s liberation. Instead, they believed it important to have careers of their own. In addition, the nature of serving as the diplomatic wives of their husbands was believed to have a strong bourgeois flavor at odds with the values of the revolution. It was only after Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來, 1898–1976) and his wife Deng Yingchao (鄧穎超, 1904–1992) stressed to them the significance and indispensability of “wife diplomacy (*furen waijiao*, 夫人外交),” these officials’ wives stopped protesting and willingly accepted government organized training in foreign languages and etiquette to better play their roles as diplomatic wives.¹⁰³

One reason that Hui-lan so successfully stepped into the role of the diplomatic wife was her Peranakan Chinese background. Coming from the Dutch East Indies, rather than from mainland China, set her apart. In 1920s China, few women were educated in ways that would have left them feeling as comfortable as Hui-lan was in Western societies. Her father’s immense fortune was accumulated through international trade, and businesses based in the Dutch East Indies. Contemporary merchants in China during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period could not even dream of rapidly accumulating so much capital: the endless waves of crises – from foreign invasions and domestic rebellions to all-out revolutionary wars – made such dreams impossible.

Still, Hui-lan’s relationship with her Chinese identity was not always a simple or straightforward one. Her family’s persistent pursuit of social status determined her changing distance to her Chineseness in different periods of her life. Whenever her existing identities put her at a disadvantaged position, she consciously rebuilt her identity. Therefore, we see how young Hui-lan and her father disassociated themselves from Chineseness for fear of lowering their status in the Dutch East Indies. She even tried to marry into British high society. However, ironically, it was her later marriage to a Chinese official that satisfied her social ambitions. She understood that her new high status derived from China’s significance in the world. After being accepted into the top circles of mainland China, she quickly embraced her Chinese identity, performed her Chineseness with style, and reconstructed her past to fashion her image as a respectful, patriotic Chinese wife. As Mme. Koo, her Chineseness was never questioned by Western officials, but only by elites from mainland China, revealing the different views of what constituted Chineseness in this period. In reinventing her identity, she chose to emphasize her ethnic Chineseness and downplay her Western cultural upbringing by highlighting her patriotism and selectively adopting traditional Chinese material culture to decorate her appearance. In so doing, she exerted her agency to be remembered not as Oei Hui-lan, a Peranakan merchant’s daughter with a distant relationship to China, but as Your Excellency Madame Wellington Koo, a prominent diplomatic wife whose Chinese identity was as incontestable as the high status she had successfully acquired.

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¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 296–297.

¹⁰³Jiang 2016, p. 37.

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