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## **Rethinking the Origins of Transnational Humanitarian Organizations:**

### **The Curious Case of the International Shipwreck Society**

#### **Abstract**

By exploring the evolution of the International Shipwreck Society (ISS) – a previously neglected transnational humanitarian organization encompassing branches in every continent by the late 1830s – this article sheds new light on three key aspects of the development of global humanitarianism. First, through revealing how a secular humanitarian association with a global organizational structure was developed in the 1830s, the article challenges conventional assumptions with respect to when internationally organized humanitarian action became possible. Second, through exploring the influence of Chinese precedents in the ISS, the article reveals the importance in the development of transnational humanitarianism of previously neglected Eastern origins. Third, through evaluating the role of individuals in the evolution of the ISS, the article provides a more balanced perspective on the role of individual leadership in early transnational humanitarian organizations than has traditionally been put forward. In each of these aspects, the article provides a new perspective on the origins of global networks.

#### **Keywords**

Transnationalism; Globalization; Global Civil Society; Cosmopolitanism; Governance; Networks

#### **Introduction**

Transnational humanitarian organizations including the institutions of the Red Cross movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Doctors Without Borders are among the best-known contemporary transnational actors. The history of these organizations is well-known and has been extensively researched (Moorehead 1999; Forsythe 2005; Fox 2014), and an increasingly rich and diverse body of literature on transnational humanitarian history has developed (Cabanès 2014;

Laqua 2014; Rodogno, Struck and Vogel 2015; O'Sullivan, Hilton and Fiori 2016). However, despite significant advances in recent years (Barnett 2011; Götz 2014; Moniz 2016) the roots of transnational humanitarian associationalism before the late nineteenth century remain under-researched.

This article explores the work of a remarkable but previously neglected transnational humanitarian organization which in the late 1830s comprised more than 150 participating sections encompassing every continent (Liancourt 1877). The International Shipwreck Society (ISS) was the earliest organization to be international in both structure and name, and it aimed not only to provide humanitarian assistance to the shipwrecked but also towards 'uniting the benevolent of all countries' (ISS 1837b: 600). In its efforts to promote humanitarian action worldwide, it was regarded in the 1860s as a precursor to the Red Cross movement.<sup>1</sup>

The ISS is not only interesting for the precedents it set but also because it throws into question some traditional assumptions concerning the origins of transnational humanitarianism, including: (i) the timing when a transnational secular humanitarian organization with global reach became possible; (ii) the assumed Western roots of transnational humanitarian organizations; and (iii) the presumed motivations and impacts of individuals involved in the formation of early transnational humanitarian organizations.

Despite the growth of transnational historical research (Iriye and Saunier 2009), it remains widely assumed in wider literature that transnational humanitarian organizations are recent, especially in textbooks introducing them among 'new actors of global politics' (Attinà 2011: 176). Even in some historical work it has been argued that globally-structured humanitarian associations were introduced in the twentieth century, with the relief efforts during and after the First World War said to have 'announced the rise of permanent and transnational humanitarian organizations' (Cohen 2012: 58; Cabanes 2014).

Although the deep roots of transnational humanitarianism in religious and missionary activities are widely recognised (Walker and Maxwell 2009: 13-16), Barnett (2011: 76) has noted that

'many histories of humanitarianism ... begin with Henry Dunant' in the late nineteenth century. Barnett and other authors including Moniz (2016) have done much to redress the balance by highlighting developments from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. These authors have also helped to take the history of humanitarianism beyond 'the parameters of distinct nations or particular movements, such as anti-slavery or prison reform', with their multi-issue and multi-national focus (Moniz 2016: 3). There is now a variety of studies of particular episodes of transnational humanitarian networking preceding the Red Cross movement (David 2007; Green 2014). However, there remains a perception that the scale of cross-border humanitarian action before the late nineteenth century was limited to *transnational networks* rather than *global organizations* (Moniz 2016: 170-171). While later organizations from the establishment of the Red Cross onwards appear to have been longer-lasting, the institution explored in this article was just as impressive in its global scale and high-level patronage, despite functioning before the changes of the late nineteenth century thought to have made such scale possible (Boli and Thomas 1999), such as greatly expanded rail and steamship travel, and international regimes on cross-border postal delivery and cable communications (Suri 2005: 228-229). The first aspect of conventional wisdom challenged by the evidence in this article therefore relates to the timing when transnational humanitarian organization beyond religious institutions yet extending to all continents was to become evident.

The second traditional assumption challenged in this article relates to the direction of influence between 'West' and 'East' in the origins of transnational humanitarianism. Recent studies have made significant progress in turning attention away from national histories of humanitarianism towards a transnational focus (Tyrrell 2010; Barnett 2011; Moniz 2016). A growing body of literature has also shone light on the significance of religions beyond Christianity in the long-term historical development of humanitarianism, particularly Islam (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003). However, it remains widely accepted that humanitarianism 'is rooted in Western history and globalized in ways that were largely responsive to interests and ideas emanating from the West' (Barnett 2011: 16).

That imperialism and 'Western' institutions were significant in the development of transnational humanitarianism is not denied in this article. A rich array of work has highlighted the importance of imperial ties in the evolution of multiple aspects of transnational humanitarianism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Harrison 2008; Barnett 2011; Moniz 2016). However, it is argued that to concentrate on these dimensions alone is not sufficient given the importance of diffusion processes from East to West in the origins of the ISS. As Green (2014) has argued, existing work on transnational humanitarian history has focused excessively on Anglo-American roots, and greater attention needs to be turned elsewhere. While the 'Eastern origins of Western civilization' have been recognized in many other fields (Hobson 2004), those in the evolution of transnational humanitarianism deserve greater attention.

There has been some attention to the significance of the Middle East in the development of early twentieth century humanitarianism (Watenpaugh 2015). However, it is important also to take into consideration the role of developments far further East much earlier. Konishi (2014) and Käser (2016) have drawn attention to the contribution of Japanese humanitarian associations to understandings of humanitarianism and the development of the Red Cross movement in the late nineteenth century. This article, by contrast, looks at the role of Chinese influences upon a transnational humanitarian organization operating three decades before the Red Cross movement was formed.

The third conventional assumption challenged in this article relates to the roles of individuals in the development of early transnational humanitarian organizations. Histories of the Red Cross movement are replete with references to the role of 'Dunant, the visionary thinker, and ... Gustave Moynier, the more practical and systematic lawyer' (Forsythe 2005: 17). Studies of earlier networks of humanitarian societies also emphasise the role of a limited number of individuals such as the 'couple of dozen men who led in philanthropic circles' investigated by Moniz (2016: 6).

In this article, the significance of individuals is not denied: the crucial role of Auguste Godde to the development of the ISS will be highlighted. However, the evidence from this organization will

reveal that attributes such as the 'altruistic' qualities ascribed to Dunant in founding the Red Cross movement (Finnemore 1996: 87) may not be appropriate in consideration of the earlier activities evaluated here. The examination of individuals' roles in this article will therefore help to provide a more balanced account of the ways in which they inhibited as well as facilitated the development of an early transnational humanitarian organization. In particular, this article considers how in the early nineteenth century context the ISS exhibited symptoms of 'founder's syndrome', a concept which has been gaining increasing recognition in the study of contemporary non-profit organizations but which deserves greater attention in respect of early humanitarian history (Block 2004, Schmidt 2013).

This article commences by placing the ISS in the context of existing knowledge of the network of 'humane societies' that developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It proceeds to evaluate the pioneering global structure and reach of the ISS significantly before later global humanitarian institutions such as the Red Cross. The article then considers the importance of precursors in the Chinese context and the influence of China on the origins of the ISS, thereby challenging conventional assumptions of Western origins of transnational humanitarianism. The dual facilitative and inhibitive roles of individuals in this pioneering transnational humanitarian organization are then considered, before concluding with reflections on the implications of the evidence of the ISS for our understanding of transnational humanitarianism and institutions.

### **The transnational lifesaving movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries**

Recent work on the development of transnational humanitarianism has gone a long way to challenge traditional accounts taking the 1860s as a starting point. Barnett (2011: 49, 57), for example, traces a 'humanitarian big bang' to the late eighteenth century, and highlights that 'for many students ... it all began with the anti-slavery movement'. More recently, attention has concentrated on another aspect of transnational humanitarianism that grew in scale and reach in Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century onwards: the lifesaving movement.

It has been assumed, as Moniz (2016: 9) argues, that ‘the lifesaving movement had begun in Amsterdam in 1767, and, building on medical networks, spread around Europe and across the Atlantic’. The first European lifesaving society is generally held to be the *Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen* established in 1767 to disseminate information on resuscitation methods and to encourage their implementation by offering rewards to successful lifesavers (Cogan 1773: 2; Heldring 2006: 4). Accounts of its history have tended to look to local context (Booy 1967), emphasising concern among Dutch doctors at the numbers lost in canals to drowning ‘for want of proper treatment’ (Johnson 1773: 3). Societies emulating its objectives were established in Hamburg in 1768 and in France by 1772 (Heldring 2006: 4).

By 1774, a Society modelled on the Amsterdam institution was established in London, known initially as the ‘Humane Society instituted for the Recovery of Persons apparently Drowned’ and today as the Royal Humane Society (RHS). Its prime mover was Thomas Cogan, a medic who had translated the Amsterdam Society’s memoirs (RHS 1774). The London Society emulated the Amsterdam Society’s aims, and it achieved success promoting creation of similar institutions across the British empire and in the United States, Barbados, Jamaica, Portugal, Prague, and Saint Petersburg (Moniz 2008a: 359-62). The RHS has been credited with advancing ‘enlightened humanitarianism’ (Davison 2001: 111) and an ‘impartial approach’ in providing humanitarian assistance without discrimination on the basis of nationality, race or class (Moniz 2009: 611-612; Moniz 2016: 141).

Studies of the early transnational lifesaving movement have largely concentrated on the ‘transnational, though primarily Anglophone, network of fellow organizations’ centred around the RHS (Moniz 2008b: 11). Especially well-researched are the British and American Humane Societies, which are said to have developed notions of universal moral responsibility ‘in the wake of the crisis of community wrought by the American Revolution’ (Moniz 2016: 171). The roots of this network are generally traced to the Amsterdam Society, widely thought to have been ‘a new type of eleemosynary undertaking’ (Moniz 2008b: 10) and ‘entirely unprecedented’ (Davidson 2001: vii).



The transnational network of Humane Societies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is notable for its geographical reach, including associations across Europe, North America, and a few European settlements further afield. Although connected through exchange of correspondence, publications, and ideas, these Societies operated autonomously and were not united in a single, global organization. The development of global humanitarian organizations – rather than just transnational humanitarian networks linking locally-based associations – is widely understood to have been a development that took place much later in the nineteenth century (Moniz 2016: 171).

### **The ISS**

If one extends one's focus beyond the Dutch-inspired Anglophone network of Humane Societies on which existing attention has tended to concentrate, then a different picture of the evolution of the transnational lifesaving movement – and in turn of the history of transnational humanitarianism – emerges. The early transnational lifesaving movement did not merely consist of a network of independent Humane Societies, but also witnessed in the 1830s and 1840s the development of a remarkable transnational humanitarian organization, which may have been the first transnational humanitarian organization to be 'international' in both name and structure: the ISS established in Paris in 1835.

Originally known as the '*Société Générale des Naufrages et de l'Union des Nations*' and later adopting the title '*Société Internationale des Naufrages*' by the end of the decade, the ISS has been almost entirely neglected in existing historical literature (exceptions being short references to its existence in Caille 2006: 208, and Davies 2014: 32). Its principal organizer was Godde, a medical doctor who had been an active participant in Parisian literary societies including the *Société de Civilisation*, of which he was progenitor of its exterior relations committee (Société de Civilisation 1834: 147-8). Godde served as ISS secretary-general from its foundation in January 1835, while another medic – Daniel de Saint-Anthoine – was its commercial and scientific director. The

organization's President was well-travelled French engineer, diplomat, colonel, and Ottoman historian Antoine Juchereau de Saint Denis, and its lifesaving director was British admiral Sidney Smith, who had made Paris his home after an impressive naval career. Further members of its original organizing committee included French polymath Marc-Antoine Jullien of Paris, US diplomat Dunscomb Bradford, and Ottoman statesman Rouheddin Effendi (ISS 1835: 9-10).

Unlike earlier lifesaving societies, which extended their international ambitions no further than networking with societies in other countries and which remained local in organizational form, the ISS was intended, as Juchereau argued at the organization's inaugural meeting, itself 'to embrace all parts of the world' (ISS 1835: 10). Godde and Saint-Anthoine considered Paris to be a particularly suitable base for an internationally-structured organization, given its cosmopolitan population and central location (ISS 1835: 1).

Like earlier lifesaving societies, the ISS disseminated information on lifesaving and rewarded rescuers (ISS 1835: 3). In contrast to earlier lifesaving societies, the ISS aimed to be comprised of 'an indefinite number of members of all nations' organized into national sections, and to have its own worldwide infrastructure of lifesaving stations with an ISS agent at each of them (ISS 1835: 2-6). Although its goals were largely centred around saving lives from shipwreck, the Society's statutes also proclaimed a broader objective of 'uniting the benevolent of all countries' (ISS 1835: 2). The Society quickly attracted the French king's patronage, and by September 1835 it already had an international membership of several hundred subscribers (ISS 1835: 9).

In some of its activities, the ISS continued on an expanded international scale work already undertaken by earlier societies, such as awarding medals and disseminating literature. Within six years, the Society had rewarded more than 1,300 rescuers in twenty nations, and distributed approximately 1.2 million pages of literature plus more than 20,000 items of handwritten correspondence (Godde 1841: 6). So extensive were its activities that contemporary commentator Louis Reybaud remarked that 'no other society made a greater racket in the columns of publicity or devoted itself to more ingenious experiments' than the ISS (Reybaud 1845: 270).

It was in its growth as an international humanitarian organization, however, that the ISS was most remarkable. Within a year, Smith reported to the French King – who stated he viewed the organization’s work as ‘very profitable to humanity’ – that the ISS ‘embraced the whole world’ (ISS 1836: 41-42). Its sections by May 1836 included Portuguese, British, Spanish, Belgian, Ottoman, Greek, US, Moroccan, Sardinian, Bavarian, and Brazilian branches in addition to its many French member societies and correspondents further afield including in Algeria, Iceland, Guadeloupe, and Tangiers (ISS 1836: 87-90). By the following year, sections in Macao and Mexico had been added (ISS 1837a: 153, 187). The ISS proclaimed that its flag could be seen on the banks of the Seine, the Plate, the Nile and the Bosphorus, and the shores of the Persian and Mexican Gulfs, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Chinese, Mediterranean, and Caspian Seas (Godde 1841: 8). With the organization’s branches spanning from Montevideo to Macao, the head of the Mexican section described the ISS as ‘the most immense philanthropic society in the world’ (ISS 1841: 75).

At the outset, the ISS headquarters was located in Place Vendôme, reflecting the close links between the organization’s founders and the July monarchy (ISS 1835: 1). The organization’s fundraising capacity was remarkable, making use of a tiered subscription system by which one could buy ‘protector’ status equivalent to that of monarchs for a thousand francs, or a lower category of status for lesser sums (ISS 1835: 3-4). The ISS was also notable for its ambitious publications, including from 1842 a journal entitled *The International*, which aimed to be ‘a means to stimulate and honour the philanthropic spirit which all peoples share’ and to reach ‘all parts of the globe’ making use of the ISS’ worldwide reach, Paris’ central location, and the universality of the French language (ISS 1842c: 2).

### **A pioneering international humanitarian organization**

Launching one of the first international periodicals was one among many path-breaking dimensions of the ISS’ work. It was especially notable as the earliest organization to be both international in name and international in structure. Previous organizations calling themselves international such as

the International Association set up in Scotland in 1834 had been international only in name (Davies 2014: 30). While internationally-structured organizations had existed for many centuries, the term 'international' only reached common discourse in the 1830s (Suganami 1978), and few organizations used the label before the 1860s, when it was popularised by the so-called 'First International' of 1864.

Having previously been known as 'the *general* society of shipwrecks', in 1839 the ISS began highlighting the significance of 'the principle of *internationality*' in guiding its work, which Godde described as something 'new and without precedent' and involving 'shared interests' worldwide 'of the great human family' (ISS 1839: 51). For the ISS, therefore, the term 'international' referred not only to having a composition encompassing multiple countries, but also serving these countries' shared interests. The ISS understood its international nature to include both structural dimensions in the sense of 'being of all nations, like charity', and normative dimensions in that 'its fatherland is charity and virtue', 'serving all countries without distinction' and being 'humane' in purpose (ISS 1840: 159-160).

For the ISS, 'internationality' and serving 'humanity' were interlinked. The ISS considered itself to be a 'humane society', and it was keen to emphasise, as articulated at one of its meetings, that it had 'no other goal than the welfare of all without distinction, and regardless of country of origin' (ISS 1841: 26). In contrast to earlier transnationally-structured humanitarian organizations that had tended to be religiously motivated, this was therefore one of the earliest to promote on an international scale humanitarian assistance apparently without regard to religion, race, or other distinguishing features such as occupation. It made much of its composition of 'people of all classes', its work to develop lifesaving stations in 'deprived localities' and not merely in major ports, and its rewarding of the work of Asian and African lifesavers (ISS 1839: 16, 103, 175).

There were, of course, limits to the egalitarianism of the ISS. Although its assistance and rewards were provided to people of all social backgrounds and national origins, and although its membership was open to all, its tiered structure with aristocratic 'protectors' at the top reflected

class divisions at the time, and its composition was overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) male. The ISS (1842c: 1) also emphasised how its reach extended to ‘all *civilised* peoples’, and its Macao branch, despite including Chinese members and providing assistance to sailors regardless of origin, was dominated by its European leadership, which expressed frustration at the extent to which local authorities were prepared to cooperate, and at the limited effectiveness of Chinese lifesaving activities (ISS 1840: 138-139). The central secretariat of the ISS, on the other hand, argued that the limitations of humanitarian work in Europe were as great as in China (ISS 1840: 139).

Despite its limitations, the operation of the ISS as an internationally-structured body was remarkable given the context in which it functioned, with rail and steamship travel still at an early stage of development, and preceding the accelerated global communications made possible in the late nineteenth century by institutions such as the Universal Postal Union and infrastructure such as the Suez canal. The ISS consisted of a central secretariat in Paris, plus national sections organized according to provisions in the ISS statutes. The national sections sent representatives to the general meetings of the ISS, while the international secretariat was represented by ‘special agents’ in the sections (ISS 1837b: 600-601). The secretariat provided the sections with equipment (including lifejackets and lifeboats), funds, literature on lifesaving techniques and technology, model courses, and copies of its journal, while the sections were charged with implementing ISS educational and lifesaving programmes, testing and demonstrating the latest equipment developed by the Society, providing to the secretariat data on navigation, lighthouses, and shipwrecks in their respective countries as well as regular reports on their activities, and liaising with the secretariat on resources required through the special agents (ISS 1842a: 2).

In practice, the relationship between the secretariat and the sections varied considerably, as did the work undertaken by the sections, which were given considerable autonomy by the secretary-general (Liancourt 1877: 11). Some, such as the Macao branch, focused especially on providing direct assistance to the shipwrecked, while others, such as the Russian branch, concentrated more on development of new lifesaving equipment (ISS 1839: 177). The secretariat was particularly

successful in collecting information from sections, distributing medals, diplomas, literature and equipment to sections, promoting the establishment of new lifeboat stations such as in Algeria and Mexico (ISS 1841: 75), and running a common lifesaving training programme across its national branches (ISS 1840: 176). The secretariat made personal visits to sections in continental Europe, but was unable to do this further afield (ISS 1840: 169). The most active sections tended to be those in countries where the pre-existing network of humane societies was less well-developed, including in France, its colonies in Africa, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries in Europe and South America, and Macao, rather than English-speaking countries (ISS 1840: 45).

The ISS operated as an international organization not only in respect of co-ordinating activities of member sections and allocating their resources, but also through advocacy on cross-border issues. It saw its role not only in terms of treatment of the problem (i.e. rescue of the shipwrecked), but also *prevention* through transnational cooperation (ISS 1841: 28-29). To this end it sought to serve as a central bureau of information on navigation across different regions of the world which was disseminated through its internationally distributed publications, and it lobbied governments to adopt standardised rules of navigation (ISS 1839: 154-157). It also claimed success in lobbying governments in Europe, North Africa, and South America to establish lifeboat stations (ISS 1840: 3).

According to its founder, the ISS' creation as a specifically *international* organization was motivated by the existence of 'general interests' common to 'all nations' in addressing the problem of shipwrecks, which locally organized associations alone could not sufficiently address (ISS 1838a: 3; ISS 1839: 51). Internationally co-ordinated action, it was claimed, was made possible by 'our industrial society' and the 'age of force', as well as by 'doctrines of progress' (ISS 1839: 14-15). The ISS published the work of Blanqui, which unpacked the opportunities provided by the context of the time, including technological aspects such as travel by rail and steamboat, political aspects such as international peace since the Congress of Vienna and the development of bilateral postal and commercial treaties, and the expansion of international co-operation such that he envisaged 'the

moment is not far off when there will be no other politics than that of the common interests of all countries' (ISS 1842b: 4). To the ISS leadership, international linkages had brought about a 'moral revolution' necessitating promotion of 'the common thought of humanity' (ISS 1842c: 2), noting that all the world's regions and religions promote charity and humanity (ISS 1842b: 2) – this may constitute an early example of what Iriye (2002: 8) terms 'global consciousness'.

As Keck and Sikkink (1998: 7, 15) highlight, in addition to contextual factors and common understandings, the development of international networks also depends on the relationships of political entrepreneurs and their contacts. In the ISS case, secretary-general Godde drew on his connections developed in Parisian associations in developing the ISS as an international organization. Resident in Paris were a significant number of diplomats and other notable figures from many countries, who were able to facilitate the establishment of branches of the ISS in their home countries: the Russian section, for instance, was organized by General Swetchine, husband of Anne Sophie Swetchine who ran a popular Parisian salon. The ISS also drew upon colonial and missionary networks in establishing sections in Asia and Africa: the President of its Chinese section, for example, was German missionary Karl Gützlaff. The ISS also benefited from the widespread sympathy that had already developed internationally for associations promoting lifesaving due to the work of existing humane societies.

Despite the progress in global communications that had helped to make the ISS' international work possible, the limitations to this progress constrained the ISS' capacity to organize across borders. In the absence of a universal postal regime, communication between the secretariat and its sections often relied on third party intermediaries such as Lord Palmerston to ensure documents reached their intended recipients, which was frequently a slow process and relied on personal links to and the good-will of the third parties (ISS 1838b: 99). The remoteness of the Paris secretariat from its national sections was identified as a problem, and sections complained of their lack of influence in decision-making (ISS 1841: 107-108). Revised statutes were introduced in 1842 to provide sections with greater influence over elections of officers and disbursement of funds, but

given the slowness of communications at the time six months had to be allowed each time there was an election to replace an officer of the Society to allow sufficient time for votes from sections to reach the secretariat (ISS 1842a: 3).

### **Eastern origins**

Extending one's focus beyond the Anglophone Humane Societies does not merely shed light on the development of a transnational humanitarian organization beyond networking in the early nineteenth century. Looking to the ISS also reveals the significance of roots beyond the European and North American context in the development of a transnational humanitarian organization.

One of the ISS' most prominent branches was its Chinese section in Macao. Led by a German missionary and consisting of a largely European membership in a colonial settlement, this ISS component appears little different from other associations in Asia with apparently Western roots. The section struggled to communicate with the Chinese emperor due to the context of the Anglo-Chinese dispute concerning opium. However, it made efforts to ensure that Chinese legislation mandating rescue of the shipwrecked regardless of nationality dating to the early eighteenth century was disseminated in the ISS' internationally distributed publications (ISS 1840: 126-137).

The Chinese legislation which the ISS disseminated had been actively promoted internationally by the Chinese authorities (Edwards 1997: 39). It was known to the founders of the ISS: in a deputation to the French King on New Year's Day 1836, Smith not only reported that the ISS by that point 'embraced the whole world' but acknowledged that 'we must pay homage to the emperor of China Qianlong who was the first to decree by imperial ordinance a century ago the duties of humanity, imposed on coastal officials, with respect to the unfortunate victims of shipwreck' (ISS 1836: 42).

Contemporary observers noted that Smith 'always thought that the Chinese had preceded other peoples in the establishment of means of saving the shipwrecked' (Ribeiro dos Santos and de Castilho Barreto 1839: 460). The principal organizer of the ISS thought likewise: when reflecting on



the origins of the ISS, Godde noted that 'China gave a first and powerful impetus' to the organization's work, alongside others (Godde 1841: 3).

The significance of China to the development of the transnational lifesaving movement is not limited to the influence of Qianlong's legislation. The role of associations for the rescue of the shipwrecked that developed in China must also be considered. The earliest associations for rescuing the drowning were not European, as traditionally assumed, but Chinese.<sup>2</sup>

Among the most notable of the Chinese associations is Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society, the premises of which have been preserved as a museum. Its earliest instantiations date to the twelfth century: it was established at a Yangtze River ferry crossing at Xijin in Jiangsu Province, by Zhenjiang mayor Cai Guang, who purchased five lifesaving boats. The Society's early versions were government-organized and provided a free ferry service in addition to rescuing the shipwrecked, which lasted until war in the seventeenth century made its activities unsustainable. In their place, local monks organized a rescue service and shelter at Jinshan Temple.<sup>3</sup>

In the first decade of the eighteenth century, a new privately-organized rather than government-run Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society was established during the reign of Qing Dynasty Emperor Kangxi. Fifteen subscribers established the association, and the Society refused to accept government funding. The Society's founders were led by local philanthropist Jiang Yu, whose family went on to run the association for seven generations. They raised significant funds from the public, and established the Society's headquarters which is now the Society's museum. Its objectives are set out in a stone tablet and included rewarding lifesavers, rescue of the shipwrecked, and provision of burial services for those whose lives could not be saved. The first two of these objectives were to be central to the work of the later European and North American lifesaving societies.<sup>4</sup>

The activities of Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society lasted until the Second Opium War, when the British occupied its premises and used them as a consulate. As with later European and North American lifesaving societies, Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society inspired the establishment of lifesaving societies elsewhere, including in Sichuan, Hubei, Anhui, and Jiangxi.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known of how the Chinese lifesaving societies came to be emulated in Europe in the late eighteenth century. The situation is not helped by the fact that most of the records of the first of the European humane societies, the *Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen*, are missing for the first two years of its existence (Stibbe 2016). Nevertheless, it is known that by the mid-eighteenth century Chinese lifesaving techniques were being taught at Leiden's medical school (Evans 2003: 18), and that many of the most influential founders of the earliest European and North American lifesaving associations, including John Crawford and Thomas Cogan, were educated there (Moniz 2016: 119).

The connections between Chinese lifesaving associations and the ISS, on the other hand, are much clearer. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Chinese government and private individuals promoted the development wherever possible of public and private lifesaving stations, and a particularly active period of this promotion was the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a period of especially poor sailing conditions (Fan 2002: 26). Gützlaff, who at that time was writing accounts of Chinese history for consumption in Europe (Lutz 2008), sent to Godde on multiple occasions details of the Chinese lifesaving institutions (ISS 1840: 128). Moreover, ISS founders Smith and Godde directly attributed in large part to Chinese influence both the international and the humanitarian character of the work of the ISS.

With respect to the significance of Chinese precedent to the ISS' international orientation, Godde highlighted that the Chinese 'established in principle that "the whole world must rescue and provide real assistance to the shipwrecked"' (ISS 1838b: 104). Acknowledging 'the genius of Chinese prescience', Godde also emphasised how their practices did not discriminate on the basis of nationality (ISS 1838b: 105). The significance of Chinese precedent to the humanitarian orientation of the ISS should therefore also not be underestimated: at the ISS' founding, Smith stressed the importance of 'the duties of *humanity*' established by the Chinese institutions on account of these provisions (ISS 1836: 42).

In some aspects, the ISS more closely followed the model of Chinese lifesaving associations than that of European humane societies. Whereas European humane societies had tended to concentrate on diffusion of medical knowledge on *resuscitation* and rewards to *resuscitators*, Chinese lifesaving associations – in addition to rewarding lifesavers – concentrated more on the purchase/building of *lifeboats*, and the establishment of affiliated public and private lifeboat establishments in as many places as possible (Fan 2002: 26-27). Similarly the ISS aimed to promote the establishment of affiliated private and government-backed lifeboat stations, and spent a significant proportion of its resources on acquiring lifeboats (ISS 1840: 3, 78).

In contrast to many European NGOs operating at this time, which viewed China as lagging behind Europe in the humanitarian field (Harrison 2008), the ISS looked to China as a pioneer of the humanitarian activities that it aimed to take forward. Käser (2016) and Konishi (2014) have shown how Japanese humanitarian activities predating the creation of the Red Cross influenced the development of the Red Cross movement and the notion of humanitarianism in the late nineteenth century. In the case of the ISS, on the other hand, activities in China were seen as a model to be emulated in the rest of the world much earlier. Unlike the Japanese Philanthropic Society that became a Red Cross Society, the Chinese lifesaving institutions remained independent of the ISS. Since the pre-existing life-saving activities in China were so considerable, the work of the ISS in cases of shipwreck in China was limited to a supplementary role in providing relief to the shipwrecked upon their reaching land rather than involvement in their rescue (ISS 1839: 159).

## **The ambiguous role of individual leadership**

Looking to the experience of the ISS not only reveals the scale of transnational humanitarian organization that became possible in the early nineteenth century and the significance of Asian influences in its development, but also provides an opportunity to examine the ambiguities of individual leadership in an early transnational humanitarian organization.

Block (2004: 136) has argued that ‘founders tend to dominate and control the direction of the organization they started’, and the ISS appears to have been no exception. From its foundation to its demise, the ISS was in large part shaped by its secretary-general Godde. Its success in developing sections around the world depended on his energetic correspondence with the international network of individuals he had befriended in Paris in the societies in which he was active. It also relied on his composition of many of its principal publications, including not only its journal but also its widely circulated handbook of lifesaving (Godde 1841). The ISS’ statutes, which Godde drew up, placed sizeable responsibilities in the hands of the secretary-general, who was given responsibility for the Society’s correspondence, its day-to-day management, nomination and revocation of ‘the men employed of every rank chosen for the good of the Society’, and administration of the organization’s expenses and receipts (ISS 1837b: 602).

Godde had developed his leadership skills when he formed in 1833-1834 the international relations section of the Society of Civilization, where he not only acquired a reputation for ambitious efforts towards international expansion, but also for awarding special diplomas to foreign dignitaries without consulting the rest of the organization, a breach of the Society’s conventions (Société de Civilisation 1834: 138). Launching his own philanthropic institution – the ISS – provided Godde with an opportunity to pursue such objectives without the same constraints.

While leading the ISS, Godde called himself ‘Count of Liancourt’, a title not to be confused with Duke La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, held by the well-known social reformer who had died in 1827. Given the philanthropic associations of the Liancourt name, this played a part in attracting generous benefactions to the ISS (Nougarède 1847: 705-706). Godde also found himself in receipt of

substantial gifts from those seeking association with the ISS' humanitarian work, such as Russian Tsar Nicholas I who furnished Godde with 'a magnificent diamond ring' (Liancourt 1877: 35).

Given Godde's success in procuring funds for the ISS in exchange for its various tiers of membership, the sudden collapse of the Society in 1843 may seem puzzling. An exploration of the Society's final publications, however, reveals how central Godde was not only to the ISS' formation and expansion, but also to its demise. In October 1842, the ISS' journal published a striking report entitled 'General Shipwreck Society: Should We Speak Up or Should We Remain Silent?' (Palet 1842: 1). In it, it was revealed that Godde had no basis to claim to be 'Count of Liancourt' and that he had adopted the title 'with an impudence without parallel, causing great confusion among men of the highest rank across all nations' who had supported the Society (Palet 1842: 1).

The subsequent inquiry into Godde's work as secretary-general revealed that his title was not the only source of confusion. It was reported in December 1842 that Godde 'believed himself entitled to manage and administer the ISS according to his fantasies', a situation that had been made possible by the secretary-general's responsibility for both management of the organization's activities and control of its budget (ISS 1842e: 3). He was also accused of extortionate expenditure on correspondence and travel without appropriate receipts, and as a result Godde was expelled from the Society. The ISS continued to operate for a few months after Godde's expulsion, but ceased after April 1843, when the last appeal for funds was launched (ISS 1843b). Following the expulsion, the ISS had split into two competing institutions, each with their own journal and account of Godde's activities. According to Godde's supporters, the ISS had been deceived not by Godde, by Sebastian Palet, a Spaniard who had proposed and funded the launch of *The International* journal. 'Pretending to be an agent of the Regent of Spain', Palet had instigated the inquiry into Godde's work that led to his removal from office, and Palet proceeded to take this position for himself (Godde 1842: 2). With two institutions each claiming to be the 'official' ISS and accusing the other of corruption, neither was able to procure sufficient funds to survive. His reputation discredited, Godde

fled in 1843 to England, where he became a French language teacher and died a Poor Brother of Charterhouse in 1890 (Charterhouse 1894).

In light of these developments, the ISS offers a study of how in the early nineteenth century context an international humanitarian organization was vulnerable to symptoms of 'founder's syndrome', whereby a founder's efforts 'to preserve one's organization and further one's self-interest as the organization's leader' may contribute to a spectrum of outcomes from 'mild conflict and controversy' through to 'considerable organizational dysfunction' (Block 2004: 136-137). Each symptom of founder's syndrome identified by Schmidt (2013) appears to have been exhibited by the ISS: (i) 'inability to delegate'; (ii) 'inability to make a smooth transition from the founder to new leadership'; (iii) 'unwavering dedication to the original vision'; and (iv) 'a sense ... that the organization is the founder's, and it exists to serve his or her ego (or pocketbook)'. The fourth symptom was particularly prominent, given the extensive mandate Godde gave himself as secretary-general and his use of the organization's funds. Godde also displayed inability to delegate, and the organization depended excessively on his personal connections and correspondence. When his authority was challenged in 1842, clear arrangements for succession were missing, as Godde had resisted earlier efforts to reform the organization (ISS 1843: 1).

As Schmidt (2013) argues, founder's syndrome may be facilitated by poor governance structures, and these were especially problematic for the ISS. Its statutes gave too much responsibility to a single individual, centralizing both administrative and financial responsibilities in the hands of the secretary-general and providing insufficient mechanisms for oversight of the secretary-general. With its aim to operate internationally being 'something new and without precedent', the ISS had limited previous experience on which to draw in designing its organizational procedures (ISS 1839: 51). Being established in the turbulent context of France's July monarchy, the ISS also operated in the absence of the more developed government regulation of non-profit associations that was later significant in holding such organizations to account.

The problem of poor governance structures was compounded by limitations of international communications infrastructure at the time. Liaison between the secretariat and many of the national branches was inhibited from mid-1842 onwards, since with Godde under investigation and refusing to cooperate, the organization was left without access to Godde's personal contacts who had ensured communications had previously reached their destinations in the absence of reliable international postal networks that later organizations could depend on (ISS 1842d: 1).

Later organizations benefited both from more developed communications infrastructure, and from organizational procedures more resilient to problems associated with founder's syndrome which the ISS had suffered. The International Committee of the Red Cross, for instance, initially comprised five Swiss nationals each of whom made significant contributions to its development, rather than centralising responsibilities in a single secretary-general, and its international expansion was facilitated by governments' commitments to the establishment of associations in an intergovernmental convention rather than relying on the personal connections of the founder (Forsythe 2005: 17, 20). By contrast, the ISS' success in developing a transnational organizational structure had in large part depended on Godde's leadership, his close ties to dignitaries of many countries, and his prolific correspondence. Having been so dependent on Godde's reputation and capabilities, it was unable to survive once his reputation had been called into question. In sum, the ISS reveals how problems associated with founder's syndrome interacted with the early nineteenth century context and the organization's flawed organizational structure to limit its capacity to function in the long term.

## **Conclusion**

Although humanitarian activities crossing national boundaries significantly predate its formation, the ISS has a strong claim to have been the first secular humanitarian organization to be organized on a global scale with branches in every continent. While not the first organization to describe its objectives as international, the ISS was also the first to describe itself as international by virtue of

comprising an internationally-organized structure. In exploring the unprecedented global reach of the ISS in the late 1830s, this article has shown that a secular transnational humanitarian organization had developed significantly before better-known institutions of the late nineteenth century.

This study has also explored how non-Western origins of transnational humanitarianism extend beyond those traditionally recognised such as the charitable activities of religious institutions of major world faiths. Chinese associations over the course of many earlier centuries pioneered activities later promoted globally by the ISS. Moreover, the ISS' founders explicitly acknowledged the importance Chinese precursors in stimulating their efforts towards formation of a global humanitarian institution.

As with later global humanitarian organizations, individual leadership was critical to the ISS' establishment: without the remarkable networking undertaken by its secretary-general, the global scale of the ISS would not have been possible. However, the ISS' evolution also reveals potential limitations of individual leadership in the early nineteenth century. Created in a context of limited regulation, and with a structure centralizing administrative and financial responsibilities in the secretary-general, the ISS was vulnerable to potential mismanagement, which was ultimately to prove fatal to the institution. The experience of the ISS is therefore also an early signal of the need for effective monitoring of and accountability in the work of transnational humanitarian organizations.

Given the experience of the ISS, it is necessary to reconsider traditional assumptions with respect to how transnational humanitarianism has evolved. Early nineteenth century developments and non-Western roots may have been more significant than traditionally recognised. The role of imperialism in the development of transnational humanitarianism should also be rethought. In the ISS case, European imperial networks were undoubtedly vital to facilitating much of its global expansion, such as the missionary outposts that provided infrastructure for many of its activities. However, the ISS' development was not a one-way top-down process of the spread through



imperialism of purportedly ‘Western’ ideas: instead, ideas promoted by the ISS involved learning from Chinese precedents. Studies of the evolution of transnational associations must therefore avoid replicating Western imperial biases in accounts of how these phenomena evolved, and should pay greater attention to the export of Eastern ideas to the Western context. In light of ISS experience, research into the evolution of transnational humanitarianism also needs to be more attentive to the limitations in addition to the benefits of individual leadership. Reconsidering the role of Western origins and of individual leadership is important not only in order better to understand the evolution of transnational humanitarianism, but also in order to enhance understanding of the broader development of global networks, among which humanitarian associations have been some of the most prominent institutions.

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### **Notes**

1. On the ISS as a precursor to the Red Cross, see the correspondence in box CC4 / 2075, Marine Archives, Vincennes.
2. Early Chinese lifeboats are discussed in Evans (2003: 14-16) and Worcester (1971).
3. These developments are outlined in parts 1-4 of the materials at the Lifesaving Museum of Zhenjiang, China.
4. On the privately-run version of Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society, see ‘The Fourth Part: Lifesaving Run by Local People and aided by Government’, Lifesaving Museum of Zhenjiang, China. Worcester (1971: 311) draws attention to the tablet.

5. The later years of the association are outlined in parts 4-6 of the materials at the Lifesaving Museum of Zhenjiang, China.

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