

# Guide to the Esther Tappert Mortensen Papers

RG 21



Compiled by Martha Lund Smalley

1990

409 Prospect Street  
New Haven, CT 06511  
divinity.library@yale.edu

<http://web.library.yale.edu/divinity/special-collections>

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Yale Divinity Library  
409 Prospect Street  
New Haven, CT 06511  
divinity.library@yale.edu  
<http://web.library.yale.edu/divinity/special-collections>

**CALL NUMBER:** RG 21

**CREATOR:** Mortensen, Esther Tappert

**TITLE:** Esther Tappert Mortensen Papers

**DATES:** 1903-1972

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 3 linear feet (8 boxes)

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The papers provide documentation of a missionary who served in varied roles in China during the turbulent period of 1929 to 1953. The later letters from Shanghai provide information about the situation in the city after the Communist takeover. Esther Tappert taught English at Ginling College, a mission-sponsored women's college in Nanking, China from 1929 to 1931 and 1933 to 1937. From 1937 to 1939 she taught English at Chungking University, a Chinese government university. She returned to the U.S. in 1940 and completed her doctorate at Yale. In 1945 she returned to China, married Ralph Mortensen and lived in Shanghai until January, 1953.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/divinity.021>

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## Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use on site, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/divinity.021>.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b.      box  
f.      folder

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## Administrative Information

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### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Ralph Mortensen

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### Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

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## Preferred Citation

Esther Tapper Mortensen Papers (RG 21), Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

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## Biographical / Historical

Arriving in China as a single woman, thirty years of age, Esther Tappert taught English at Ginling College, a Christian women's college in Nanking, for three years before returning to the United States. Esther described her role at Ginling as "trying to make good women who can read and write English and save China."

Returning to Ginling in 1933 after receiving an M.A. in Education from Yale, Esther continued teaching English there until the summer of 1937. When the Japanese invasion of Nanking prevented her return from a vacation excursion to western China, she spent the next two academic years teaching English at Chungking University, a Chinese provincial government university. This proved to be a positive and liberating experience for Esther. The only Westerner on the faculty at Chungking University, she felt useful and respected. Reflecting during this period on her years at Ginling, Esther wrote to her family: "no wonder I am death on women's institutions with their petty spites and trivial concerns..."

After leaving Chongqing (Chungking) in 1940 to return to the United States, Esther became engaged to Ralph Mortensen, a widowed Lutheran missionary who was working for the American Bible Society in China. She completed work for her doctorate at Yale and sailed for Shanghai in November 1945. Esther was married to Ralph Mortensen in January, 1946 and her primary role for the next several years was that of missionary wife. Following the Communist takeover, the Mortensens were held in Shanghai until January, 1953 because of suspicion regarding Ralph Mortensen's activities.

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## Scope and Contents

Esther Tappert Mortensen's twenty years in China are well documented in regular and detailed letters to her family. These letters report on Esther's activities, reflections, and emotions in her daily work and recreation. They also document wartime conditions in China and special events such as the visit of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh to the Ginling campus in 1931. Esther's correspondence with colleagues at Ginling shows her to be a strong-minded individual who became increasingly discontent with her status at Ginling. Additional correspondence and documentation of Esther's Ginling years is available in YDSL Record Group No. 11, the Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.

The letters from the period after Esther's marriage to Ralph Mortensen tend to be more domestic in nature and reflect a more contented frame of mind. These letters from Shanghai do provide valuable information about the situation in the city after the Communist takeover.

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## Arrangement

- I. Family Correspondence, 1929-1953
- II. General Correspondence, 1929-1955
- III. Writings and Collected Material, 1924-1951
- IV. Personal Items and Memorabilia, 1916-1972

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## Collection Contents

### Series I: Family Correspondence, 1929-1953

b. 1, f. 1-14	ETM letters home to family	1929 Aug - 1930
b. 2, f. 15-30	ETM letters home to family	1931 -1933 Nov
b. 3, f. 31-49	ETM letters home to family	1933 Nov 24-1936 May 7
b. 4, f. 50-68	ETM letters home to family	1936 May 17-1940 Jun
b. 5, f. 69-82	ETM letters home to family	1940 Jul - 1953 Jan
b. 2, f. 83-86	Mother to ETM	1929-1931 Jul
b. 6, f. 87-93	Mother to ETM	1931 Aug-1940
b. 6, f. 94-96	Helen (sister) to ETM	1929-1938, n.d.
b. 6, f. 97	Other family members	1903-1937, n.d.6

**Series II: General Correspondence, 1929-1955**

b. 6, f. 98	Circular letters by ETM	1930-1934
b. 6, f. 99	Circular letters by ETM	1935-1955
b. 6, f. 100	Associated Boards for Christian Higher Education in Asia	1933, 1938
b. 6, f. 100	Bachman, Matilda	1938-1939
b. 6, f. 101	Bates, Miner Searle	1937-1940
b. 6, f. 101	Chen Lan-ying	1938
b. 6, f. 101	Chungking University, Chongqing: administration, faculty, staff	1939
b. 6, f. 102	Cooper, Grady	1930-1932
b. 6, f. 103	Curtis, Catherine	1929
b. 6, f. 103	Djeng Ying-hwan	1937
b. 6, f. 103	Endicott	1938
b. 6, f. 103	Federation of Woman's Boards of Foreign Missions	1933
b. 6, f. 103	Garing, Trudy	1932
b. 7, f. 104-105	Ginling College Committee	1929-1933
b. 7, f. 106	Loram, C.T.	1938
b. 7, f. 106	Moffet, Anna	1938
b. 7, f. 106	Moncrieff	1938
b. 7, f. 107	Mortensen, Ralph	1940, 1944 Jul-Aug
b. 7, f. 108	Mortensen, Ralph	1944 Sep-Nov, 1954
b. 7, f. 109	Nowlin	1939
b. 7, f. 109	Peck, Willys	1938
b. 7, f. 109	Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions	1929-1933
b. 7, f. 110	Priest, Elsie (Treasurer of Ginling College)	1929-1940
b. 7, f. 110	Rees	1938
b. 7, f. 110	Reich, Lydia	1930, 1936
b. 7, f. 111	Rosenthal, Oskar	1940
b. 7, f. 111	Smythe, Lewis	1938
b. 7, f. 111	Spicer, Eva	1938-1940

b. 7, f. 112	Sutherland, Catharine	1931-1938
b. 7, f. 112	Thurston, Matilda	1938-1940
b. 7, f. 112	Treudley, Mary	1929
b. 7, f. 113	United Lutheran Church	1932
b. 7, f. 113	Vautrin, Minnie	1933-1937
b. 7, f. 113	Wu Yi-fang	1937-1939
b. 7, f. 114	Yale University	1932-1933
b. 7, f. 115	Regarding business and travel arrangements	1933-1940, n.d.

**Series III: Writings, Collected Material, 1924-1951**

Writings of ETM		
b. 7, f. 116	Diary of ETM	1924-1925
b. 7, f. 117	Travel journal of ETM	1937 Jul-Sep
b. 7, f. 118	"The China I Know and the China I am to Discover"	n.d.
b. 7, f. 118	"Martha on the Mission Field or On Being 'Only a Wife'"	n.d.
b. 7, f. 119	Miscellaneous	1940, n.d.
Writings of others		
b. 7, f. 120	Writings of Miner Searle Bates	1936-1938
b. 7, f. 121	"And Yet - Jesus Christ", by Pearl Buck	n.d.
b. 7, f. 121	"Christianity and the Churches", by John Macmurray"	n.d.
b. 8, f. 122	"Factors Associated with Success of Chinese Families as Families", by Lewis S.C. Smythe	1950
Material related to Ginling College		
b. 8, f. 123	Re. Ginling College	c.1937-1944
Other documents		
b. 8, f. 124	"Address to the Commission of Inquiry of the League of Nations"	1932
b. 8, f. 124	"Cooperative New Rural Life Program"	n.d.
b. 8, f. 124	Community Church - Shanghai, Resident Membership List	1950
b. 8, f. 124	Document for the Transfer of Administrative Power of the North China Territory of the Salvation Army	1951



**Series IV: Personal Items Memorabilia, 1916-1972**

b. 8, f. 125	Documents and memorabilia related to ETM's education and career	1916-1940
b. 8, f. 126	ETM travel documents, cards, Chinese language material	
b. 8, f. 127	Photographs	1947, 1953, n.d.
b. 8, f. 128	Material related to Ralph Mortensen	1946-1972, n.d.
b. 8, f. 129	Financial records related to life in Shanghai	1952-1953

## **Selected Search Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### **Subjects**

Education -- China  
Educators  
Missionaries  
Missions -- China  
Women -- Education -- China

### **Names**

Mortensen, Esther Tappert  
Mortensen, Ralph

### **Corporate Bodies**

Chungking University  
Ginling College (Nanjing, Jiangsu Sheng, China)