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Who Will Care for the Orphans? Women's Contributions during China's War against Japan (1937-1945)

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On July 7, 1939 Japan's Imperial Army sparked an 8-year war against China with a battle at Lugouqiao (Marco Polo Bridge) near Beiping. The Japanese army then began invading cities all along the eastern coast of China, and by December 1937 the capital Nanjing fell. The first provisional capital, Wuhan, fell in October 1938. The Nationalist Government then moved further inland to the city of Chongqing in Sichuan province [show maps & explain strategic location]. For the remainder of the war, Chongqing was subject to a total of 268 air raids from Japanese bombers, which targeted civilian residences, business districts, schools, and hospitals. There is no conclusive tally of the numbers of people killed and wounded in Chongqing throughout the war, but the existing records are staggering.

We are accustomed to thinking of wars as male affairs, and although China's War against Japan largely adhered to this truism, in certain respects women stood at the forefront. Wartime China's First Lady Madame Song Meiling (宋美齡) traveled across the U.S. throughout the war years speaking to all manner of civilian organizations and raising money for China's war effort. Song Meiling—better known by the sexist title of Madame Chiang Kai-shek—had attended both high school and college in the U.S., graduating from Wellesley College in 1917 after spending her first year at Wesleyan. She spoke nearly perfect English, was a Christian of outstanding morality, and was the first Asian and second woman ever to address the U.S. Congress, where

she delivered an eloquent and moving speech on behalf of her war-torn country on February 18, 1943.[1]

In China, Song Meiling also worked with her two sisters—Song Ailing (wife of financial tycoon H.H. Kung) and Song Qingling (wife of Sun Yat-sen)—to champion the cause of refugees and orphans. The three sisters, the most high-profile women in China at the time, traveled throughout occupied and Free China visiting philanthropic organizations, hospitals, nursery schools, orphanages, and refugee relief organizations, encouraging people to help their fellow citizens, particularly orphaned children.

Behind the 3 famous Song sisters and their well reported and frequently acclaimed charity movement were 2 other women activists. Li Dequan (李德荃), wife of the military warlord General Feng Yuxiang (馮玉祥), was the first to organize a public meeting about China's war orphans in January 1938, in which she asked Shi Liang (史良), a prominent charity activist of the time, to chair a national organization of orphan relief.[2]

Ms. Shi had already distinguished herself as a radical activist who was jailed in November 1936 for advocating military resistance against Japan (Japan had occupied Manchuria, in northeast China, since 1931). She was also primarily responsible for organizing the women's branches of the National Salvation Association in cities all around the country, and she was the primary leader of women's relief organizations in Wuhan during its time as provisional capital. She befriended the 3 Song sisters in the early 1930s, and made instrumental use of this personal connection after Li Dequan deputized her as the head of orphan relief.[3]

[1] Tyson Li: 34, 97, 199.
[2] MacKinnon 2001: 130.
[3] Ibid: 127.

Scholars have recently compiled the most complete statistics of wartime refugee populations which fragmentary evidence makes possible. Drawing on the work of Ch'i Hsi-sheng, who tabulated 95 million, Stephen MacKinnon asserts that at least 100 million refugees streamed across western and southern China throughout the war, making this by far "the greatest forced migration in Chinese history."[4] In Sichuan province, migration from rural areas into Chongqing (the wartime capital as of late 1938), preceded the war and was precipitated by warlord armies, landlord predations, and banditry. These migrants were primarily men, since the women and children stayed at home to do the farm work.[5] The men were also pressed to leave their farmlands because military press gangs roamed the countryside, sometimes even taking men in the middle of the night as they slept![6] Refugees from other provinces more often included whole families, though if at all possible the elderly were left behind so that they would not have to endure the hardship of travel.

Women's Wartime Volunteerism

The government-sponsored Refugee Child Welfare Association (*nanmin ertong baoyu hui*, 難民兒童保育會) was among the most active relief organization in which women participated, and had branches throughout occupied and Free China.

The report on women's work in Jiangxi province in southeastern China [show map] listed the following activities in its 1939 annual report:

- Publicizing military conscription laws
- Collecting donations to entertain and enliven the soldiers
- Honoring the families of military officers and soldiers

[4] MacKinnon 2008: 46-48, 60. 30 million people were displaced by the mid-19th century Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864.
[5] Howard: 89, 101.
[6] McIsaac: 182.

- Making materials that can be used in war (bandages, winter coats, uniforms, etc.)[7]

A later enumeration of donated materials that women collected at festivals and sent to wounded soldiers in the hospital listed: 9 silver dollars, 1,878 francs, 1 golden vessel, 61 silver vessels, 6 fat pigs, 73 chickens, over 2,000 chicken eggs, and a bushel of soybeans. Additionally, the women's group had organized 936 young women into 45 work teams, 892 children into 23 work teams, and 225 people into sewing and laundering teams that in one week made 400 military uniforms and collected 1,000 winter coats. The women's group also set up tea and nursing stations near war zones in the province.[8]

This exhaustive list points not only to the alacrity with which women moved to alleviate soldiers' strife, but also wider community support for a group of people who were chronically underpaid, underfed, and poorly trained by a central government which was clearly faltering in its care for the armed forces.[9] In a larger sense, the women's activities illustrate a pervasive gender dynamic in wartime China in which men were the primary actors in the war, while women constituted the support staff—nurses, laundresses, prostitutes, bereft widows, and grieving mothers. It should also come as no surprise that women stepped in to fill the gap left by a negligent central government; women were often at the forefront of relief work wherever the Nationalist government failed to care for the people.

Some articulations of women's work were more expansive. An article by Xu Kairui (徐闓瑞), which appeared in the 1938 work report of the Women's Conversational Group (婦女談話會), listed women's wartime tasks as the following:

[7] *Women's Work in Jiangxi Province*: 4.
[8] Ibid.: 11.
[9] White and Jacoby.

1. Agricultural production
2. Child welfare
3. Refugee relief
4. Assisting the government with military conscription
5. Recruitment work
6. Assisting the government with scouting out traitors and spies
7. Relief gifts, nursing, and other service in warfront territories[10]

Xu's list is noteworthy in its inclusion of more direct involvement with government tasks such as recruiting soldiers and hounding out traitors, as well as the traditional "care economy" work with refugees and orphans. Xu also begins the list with "agricultural production," acknowledging the feminization of the countryside which China's bloodiest war produced as press gangs emptied rural China of all able-bodied men for military service, while other men fled the recruiters and sought refuge in alternate places of employment such as factories, schools, and mines.

Even more noteworthy is a report on child welfare work in the same 1938 collection by Tang Guozhen (唐國楨). Buried within the report is a reference to the education of "exceptional children" (*teshu ertong* 特殊兒童). First the term is explained: these "special" children are those who have not received good family care and have spent some time in vagrancy. They clearly do not have the same life habits as other children, but they are quick to learn, and they will soon attain normal health. Moreover, assures Tang, their will is particularly strong, and after receiving a short amount of training at the Children's Welfare Center, all of their evil habits will be reformed. This short section ends with the assertion that: "Many vagrant children can shoulder the responsibility of [serving as] a good commanding officer [*duizhang* 隊長]. They just need to receive a good education, expend a little extra effort, be led patiently and gradually on the right

[10] *Women's Conversational Group Work Report*: 3.

path, and from this class of children one can select a few of the most talented to become fresh troops for national salvation [*jiuguo de shenglijun* 救國的生力軍]."[11]

Although this report does not tell us how many orphaned children were indeed sent out to war to serve as young soldiers, the government's desperation for "fresh troops" as the war dragged on, coupled with the refugee and orphan crises in much of Free China, would have made this a most tempting tactic.

Orphans were also sent to work in factories. The Military Commission and National Defense Industries Committee (*Guofang gongye weiyuanhui* 國防工業委員會) opened several vocational schools in several Chongqing arsenals in 1940 to train 16- to 20-year old boys to serve as new factory workers. Over a two- to three-year course, the boys also received training in Mandarin Chinese, math, physics, and military drills. The guidelines for the vocational schools stipulated that new apprentices could be recruited from the schools established for children of existing staff members, or from orphanages set up for children from war zones. These included the Chengdu, Chongqing, and Yongchuan orphanages.[12] One hardly needs to ask if the stipulations required that the orphans themselves express an interest in learning how to make bombs and artillery.

It appears that child welfare only went so far during a time of national emergency. Talented orphans were expected to serve as soldiers or arsenal workers if the nation had a need for them. This puts children in a parallel situation with Chinese women, who were told under no uncertain terms as the Japanese armies advanced that they must set aside their movement for women's rights and sacrifice themselves for the war effort. The overarching theme of China's

[11] Ibid.: 23.
[12] McIsaac: 117-18.

war was self-sacrifice for communal good, and this sacrifice was distinctly assigned according to one's age and gender.

Questions for which I have only partial answers at the moment but which I will further explore include: Other than institutionalized sexism and assumptions that women could not participate in direct military combat, what other social factors led to this gendered division of wartime tasks? Why did women take these tasks up? How were these women seen by their contemporaries, and how did they envision themselves? How can we best honor their legacy?

Questions about this study's larger significance include: What can this study of China during WWII tell us about other warring societies? What, if anything, is particularly Chinese about this story, or is particular about this war? Can we draw any lessons from the study of China's war against Japan that can help us plan war relief efforts in current and future situations?

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