

**Powerful Husbands and Virtuous Wives:
The Familial Structure in the Leadership of the New Life Movement, 1934-1938**

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The New Life Movement, launched in February 1934 in China, was a Nationalist project of making strong and modern citizens through social and cultural reforms. The initiator of the Movement, Chinese President Jiang Jieshi criticized the Chinese people for living a barbaric and backward life, being dirty, spitting everywhere, and having no manners. He attributed the degeneration of Chinese people to the loss of “inherent Chinese virtues,” which he labeled the spirit of the Chinese nation. Jiang promoted the New Life Movement to reform Chinese customs and everyday life through reviving these “inherent Chinese virtues” of etiquette, justice, integrity, and conscientiousness (*li-yi-lian-chi*), and applying them to everyday life: food, clothing, residence, and behavior (*shi-yi-zhu-xing*). The goal of the Movement was to militarize Chinese life to make it orderly, clean, simple, and frugal. The promotion of the New Life Movement was led by government officials and first started in state apparatus, central and local government agencies, schools, and military forces. I call it a male strategy of mobilizing the Chinese nation for a modern state. The presumption of the male political and social subject as the norm resulted in the tactic of turning state agents, overwhelmingly male, into social leaders. But this male strategy turned out to be unsuccessful when male state agents tried to bring the Movement inside the home, even though they themselves were all family members and resided in households. So male New Life leaders transferred the task of modernizing the home to women and made their wives responsible for mobilizing ordinary women to fulfill the task.

This paper focuses on the first stage of women’s mobilization in the New Life Movement from 1934 to 1938 to show how this approach to women’s organizing

emerged. I will first talk about the structure of New Life leadership and then evaluate the wifely leadership of women's New Life organizations. I will show that the gendered leadership did successfully mobilize women of the family into society, although a very small number, but also paradoxically reinforced the gendered labor division.

The structure of New Life leadership

Since the very beginning the New Life Movement adopted existing organizational forms, including government departments, institutions, schools, police, military, and commercial organizations, to form hierarchical New Life movement promotion committees. Typically, the head of an existing organization led the corresponding New Life movement promotion committee of that organization, and the staff of the organization became the staff of the committee. For example, Jiang Jieshi was the Chair of the New Life Movement Promotion National Headquarters. New Life leaders applied the same logic of mobilizing men to women. They grouped women employees of state institutions to guide ordinary women to practice New Life regulations at home, to reform the household.

The first women's New Life organization was the Nanchang Women Civil Servants Service Corps (hereafter Service Corps). Nanchang was the place where the NLM started. It was established eight months after the Movement started and it turned out a failure. The 347 women civil servants were far from enough to influence the 50,000 households in Nanchang. And, unemployed women, who far outnumbered state women employees, were dispersed inside the household. They posed a particular problem for women's mobilization. A month later, male New Life leaders abandoned the strategy of

using women civil servants to mobilize women at home and decided to change the Service Corps by bringing in housewives.

The first group of housewives mobilized was male New Life leaders' wives. The reformed women's New Life organization, the Nanchang Women's Life Reform Committee (thereafter Reform Committee), established in April 1935, had Xiong Shihui's wife as the chair of the committee board. Xiong was the governor of Jiangxi and vice Chair of the New Life Movement Promotion National Headquarters. Most of the 15 board members were high official's wives, presented as Mme. So-and-so, whose own names never appeared in available New Life documents. They were responsible for recruiting other officials' wives to join the Committee.

Although no paper trail survives about how the board functioned, it is safe to assume that the Reform Committee was successful enough to be made a leadership model for women's New Life organizations for two reasons. First, it was soon extended to supervise women's New Life reforms throughout the province under the revised name of "Jiangxi Provincial Women's Life Reform Committee" (hereafter Jiangxi Reform Committee), with almost the same roster of leading figures. Second, other local, and later the national, women's New Life organizations were all chaired by officials' wives, and this leadership model lasted until the end of the Movement. In February 1936 the New Life Movement National Headquarters established the New Life Movement Promotion National Headquarters Women's Guidance Committee (hereafter Women's Guidance Committee) to supervise and guide women's New Life Movement throughout the nation. The chair of the NLM National Headquarters, Generalissimo Jiang Jieshi, appointed his wife Song Meiling as the Director General of the Women's Guidance Committee. At provincial and

municipal levels these organizations were named with the standard format of [Placename] New Life Movement Women's Work Committee, for instance Zhejiang Provincial New Life Movement Women's Work Committee and Nanjing Municipal New Life Movement Women's Work Committee. At state organization levels, women's organizations were called [Organization] New Life Women's Work Team, for example the Ministry of Politics New Life Women's Work Team. The heads of these Women's Work Committees and Work Teams were invariably wives of the top leaders of the organizations to which these committees and teams belonged. So, while heads of women's New Life committees at different levels were the wives of heads of corresponding New Life promotion committees, women's New Life organizations became virtual wives of male New Life organizations. These high officials' wives became intermediaries of female New Life organizations to access state and social resources.

Evaluating the Wifely Leadership

As heads of local New Life women's organizations, their top, if not their only, responsibility was to raise money from the state and other sources. How these high officials' wives negotiated and obtained funding is beyond our comprehension since no surviving documents gives any details about their specific activities. But one obvious reason for having them responsible for raising money was their strong personal relationship with powerful men. Wu Jufang, wife of Guangzhou provincial chairman Li Hanhun, was the chief board member of the Guangdong Provincial New Life Women's Work Committee. One of Wu's key responsibilities was to "solve finance problems for the committee." She successfully sought money from the Provincial Finance Department to open a literacy school and from the Finance Ministry and the Chinese Relief

Association to support children's relief and education programs in Guangdong. Although it is impossible to trace how exactly she got financial support from government agencies, there is no doubt that her identity as Madame Li Hanhun contributed to her success in solving financial difficulties.

Besides their capacity to raise funds, officials' wives' capability to lead and their dedication to women's work were also crucial to the functioning of women's organizations. Wu Jufang proved herself to be a very talented and competent woman leader. According to a young woman cadre working in the committee, Wu was a vigorous young woman "in a khaki riding-breeches military uniform, wearing a black tie, [...] very different from the image on an official's wife." She founded the Guangdong Provincial New Life Women's Work Committee, won funding for the committee, mobilized wives of provincial government and department leaders to join the committee, opened schools for women and children, and organized women's coop shops and production teams to support both wartime women refugees and the committee's operation. Her contribution to the committee gained her respect from women cadres.

But not all officials' wives were as talented, competent and committed as Wu. A contrasting example was Hong Xihou, wife of Zhang Zhizhong, the director of the Politics Department (zhengzhibu) of the Military Commission in Sichuan. Hong was one of the founding board members of the Women's Guidance Committee and the head of the Politics Department New Life Women's Work Team in 1940. A woman cadre who worked for Hong, Chu Wenjuan, described her as follows:

Speaking about this Mme. Zhang, she was indeed quite a legendarily interesting figure (renwu). She was illiterate and could only recognize her name, "Hong Xihou." But wouldn't recognize it if the three characters appeared in different places. She was

in her fifties, from the same native place as Zhang Zhizhong, Hefei in Anhui. Her feet had been unbound and she walked with a swaying motion. Not only was her appearance unpleasant to Chu, but the way Hong worked also disturbed her. Chu complained about the low efficiency of Hong's organization:

Work plans were often piled up without implementation. Especially when it came to money, we always had to get Mme. Zhang's approval. But Mme. Zhang always sought permission from her Minister on every issue. So, things that should have been done in 3 days were postponed for a week or half a month. The sarcastic tone exposed Chu's discontent and contempt for the incompetent official's wife. In Chu's account, Hong was worse than a figurehead. A figurehead would have left cadres free to work. But Hong's stubborn intervention jeopardized the operation of the women's team.

Of course there was no lack of figurehead officials' wives. According to Yang, when the Guangdong Provincial New Life Women's Work Committee was established, Wu Jufang spent most of her time mobilizing wives of provincial government and department heads to join the committee as board members or team leaders. Yet, "most of the team leaders rarely came to the committee office to work." They might be better educated than Hong, but they were definitely less committed than Wu. Their involvement in women's work served to add numbers of upper-class housewife participants, which could be taken to symbolize upper-class women's acceptance and support of women's New Life work. This mode of mobilization set up models for ordinary women to follow. But it ran the risk of further alienating ordinary women who would think that the New Life was a rich people's game.

The contrasting examples of effective and ineffective New Life wifely leadership, Hong Xihou and Wu Jufang, suggest that the only criterion for choosing these women to lead New Life women's work was not excellence or experience, but their marriages to

men in power. This personalistic leadership had contradictory effects on the project of women's New Life Movement. On the one hand, it reinforced women's submissive and passive position in the gendered power relationship between husbands and wives. They did not take the leadership on their own initiative. Rather, they were placed in leader's positions whether or not they were interested in or qualified for the positions. The performance of incompetent women leaders, such as Hong, also sent out the message that women did not have to empower themselves through improving their knowledge and talent. Marrying a powerful husband could be the simplest and easiest way, as embodied in the Chinese idiom *ful gui fu4 rong* 夫贵妇荣, "a husband's splendor gives his wife glory." The personalistic leadership was also harmful to the mobilization of ordinary women. Although the intention was to make these upper-class housewives models for ordinary women to reform the domestic realm and serve the nation-state-society whole, placing high officials' wives on top of women's New Life organizations highlighted class distinctions and further increased the distance between them and their mobilization targets, lower-class women.

And yet, the personalistic leadership of women's New Life was valuable in many respects. It successfully turned housewives, although very limited in number and unrepresentative in their high social status, into leading figures and gave them a public presence. Although individual woman leaders might be incompetent and indifferent, as a group these housewife-turned-leaders embodied the possibility for women to obtain political power and influence outside the domestic realm. Personalistic leadership was also a useful tool for women to break into the male bureaucratic power structure in the nation-state-society whole. Their personal relations with powerful men made it possible

and easier for women leaders to gain access to financial and human resources, such as capable women cadres, that were originally under the control of male dominated state apparatus. The personalistic leadership format lasted throughout the New Life Movement. Its endurance suggested that personalistic leadership was an effective, or at least practicable, strategy to turn women's dependence and passivity in the gendered power relationship between husbands and wives into an asset for New Life women's work.