

Not Just a Man's War
Chinese Women's Memories of
the War of Resistance against
Japan, 1931–45

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UBC Press · Vancouver

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Introduction

Sitting in the living room of her Beijing apartment, eighty-eight-year-old Wang Yao (1913–2008) recalled the night of September 18, 1931. She had been a high school student in the city of Shenyang. That evening, a Friday, she and her friends

went to school to watch a play called “A Patriotic Heart.” It was about a student with a Japanese mother and a Chinese father. The mother had to leave China for Japan because of the tensions between the two countries. The play was put on to raise funds to help the victims of the Yellow River flood. We were so excited that we wanted to go to another show the following night ...

Then we heard the sound of cannons. Within one night, Shenyang was no longer ours ... The war changed my life.¹

That night, the Japanese Kwantung Army staged what came to be known as the Manchurian (Mukden) Incident near the city of Shenyang, in which the Japanese Army blew up a section of the Japan-controlled railway, blamed it on the Chinese army, and then used it as a pretext for attack. The Chinese garrison resisted but was forced to retreat. Shenyang and Changchun were occupied by the Japanese. Soon the Japanese Imperial Army occupied all of Manchuria (comprising three of China’s most northeasterly provinces) and established a puppet state, Manchukuo, in February 1932. In July 1937, China and Japan entered a full-scale war that ended with Japan’s defeat in 1945.

Known in its short form as *Kangzhan* in Chinese (the Resistance War, or the War of Resistance), China's war against Japan lasted from 1931 to 1945 and was one of the principal theatres of the Second World War. The War of Resistance transformed China. By the end of the war, China had nullified all unequal treaties with Western powers that had previously reduced China to a semi-colonial status. China then became one of the great powers as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had grown much stronger than before in terms of territory, number of adherents, and military force. In contrast, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD), the ruling party of China, had been devastated by the war and its own corruption. Postwar negotiations, mediated by the United States, sought a coalition government in which both parties would have participated, but failed to bear fruit. China descended into a civil war (1946–49) from which the Communists emerged as victors. On October 1, 1949, CCP chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Nationalist government fled to Taiwan and China became a Communist country. Tensions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and between China and Japan have persisted to this day, a potential source of crisis in East Asia.

The complex impact of the War of Resistance on the Chinese people has lasted far beyond the war and into the Cold War and after. This book is an interpretation of Chinese women's memories of the war. It is based on memoirs, oral histories, and collections of reminiscences published on mainland China and Taiwan, plus nineteen interviews I conducted personally. During the war, China was fragmented. The urban areas in the coastal east were mostly under Japanese occupation. The Nationalist government, with its war capital in Chongqing, exercised control over southwest China, while the Chinese Communist Party, headquartered in Yan'an, controlled the northwest and some rural areas in north and central China. The war left people with different experiences and memories as they lived in various places in wartime China in which the levels of violence, suffering, and resistance varied.² This book uncovers the diverse gendered, political, military, social, economic, and psychological experiences of ordinary women who lived in different geographical regions: in the Chinese Communist Party, with the Nationalist Party, and of the privileged middle class, the victims of sexual violence at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army, and the working poor under the Japanese occupation. It inquires into how the war was experienced by them, what these women want to remember, and what they wish to convey with their

narratives; it explores how they, as social actors, exerted their own agency under social, economic, and political constraints to survive and to effect change for themselves and for Chinese women in general.

For decades, the history and the public memories of the War of Resistance was monopolized by the PRC government during the Mao Zedong era (1949–76). The master narrative of the twentieth century was a history of the political evolution of the Communist Party centring on Mao. To build the cult of Mao, the roles of other Communist male leaders remained secondary. Communist women's history was marginalized, and their images were stereotyped. The PRC historical discourse demonized the Nationalists and distorted their roles. From the early 1980s, with the reform and the opening up of China to the world, the war has become more of a central part of the official discourse for a new nationalism. The political relaxation and the end of the Cold War led to remarkable developments in the reinterpretations and remembrance of the war in China and overseas. On September 3, 2015, under Xi Jinping's government, Beijing staged the first national parade in commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war, marking "a major milestone" in the changes in the collective memory. The war became more of a political tool in Xi's efforts to assert China's role on the world stage.³

Since 2012, Xi Jinping's government has tightened up political and social control, with greater concentration of power and more intense penetration of society by the state.⁴ In spite of the political closing down, there have already appeared in China and overseas a rich body of in-depth studies on the military, political, economic, and diplomatic aspects of wartime China, the experiences of various regions, and the important role of the Nationalist government and army in the resistance. Studies on China's war memory have investigated how memories were politicized, distorted, and suppressed, and how they remained in the shadows in the Cold War climate. Since the 1980s, there has been a new remembering, and retrieval of the memories of survivors of the war has grown.⁵

For this book, I have chosen a range of mostly ordinary women for analysis. A series of "great" women – those prominent in politics, literature, and religion, and as professionals – played important roles in history that will be addressed here where relevant, but this book focuses on stories of mostly ordinary women and their self-writings and narrations.

Feminist studies based on official documents have explored the Chinese women's movement and offered a series of critiques on the mixed, mostly damaging effects on women of the policies of political parties and governments. Since the 1990s, there has been a shift in research into women's

personal experiences and perspectives, and their tactics and approaches with regard to patriarchy. This shift is shown in the extant English scholarly works on Chinese women's war experiences. Placing women on centre stage, they deal mostly with a specific geographical region or a specific category of women. This book also has women's personal experiences as a focus for analysis. Each group of stories has enriched the narrative of the war history, making the history more inclusive. It stresses women's agency in history. More importantly, it connects diverse groups of ordinary women to address how different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, political inclinations, and geographical locations shaped their lives and informed their choices during the war in terrible, sometimes life-or-death circumstances and put them on different trajectories of experiences.

The book not only treats women's memories as sources for a deeper understanding of the war but also takes them as a subject for critical analysis and interpretation.⁶ As memories were collected or written down when the women were in their later years, they could be fragmented or faulty, given the passage of time; they might exhibit distortion due to the restraint demanded by cultural values and social norms and/or the women's inability to clearly articulate long-ago experiences. Political and historical changes can lead one to be selective, restrained, or exaggerated when relating memories, or even to conflate some memories with others. In addition, these women's gender consciousness or subconsciousness may also have had the effect of "(muting) their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives" in publicly acceptable terms.⁷

Feminist studies have established theories and approaches for examining women's personal experiences. They have addressed both the limitations and effectiveness of oral history, biography, autobiography, testimonies, and memory. They answer basic questions: Why did women accept positions of inferiority? Why and how did they refuse such positions?⁸ How can we use women's history to write a war history?⁹ History is made by memories. Oral histories let women speak for themselves.¹⁰ Women's personal narratives, written or oral, form a vital part of the recovery of women's hidden history. The self-narratives of women shed light on subjective meanings to women themselves.¹¹ As Gail Hershatter has shown in her oral history study of Chinese rural women in the 1950s, women's memories would provide rich details, gendered perspectives, and specific ways of describing the past that may not be found in archival sources.¹² What matters most in my work are the memories of ordinary women of different backgrounds. Their self-writing and narration reveal

the strong inner urge of this war generation to remember the war toward the end of their lives because the past was meaningful in shaping their lives and the history of China. In their own words, with their own logic, these women present a women's war, a war in which women underwent multiple types of suffering, made contributions to the war effort at home and at the front, and more importantly, found ways to effect changes in everyday lives, whether as soldiers or students, whether working outside the home or as homemakers.

The book demonstrates that the self-articulation of the past empowered women. It validated the importance of their life experiences. We see how the Communist women soldiers argue that their "quiet" devotion and heroic efforts contributed to the party's rise to power, and that the revolutionary wars were never just a man's cause. The War of Resistance was not just a man's war, thus the title of this book. The self-writing and narrations of the women associated with the Nationalist Party and government make us see how they paid tribute to the human spirit in the war of suffering. The stories of middle-class and working-poor women bring us into a deep understanding of how they refused to be ignored as passive beings in all the hardships they shared in the face of Japanese aggression, and why the victims of the sexual violence perpetrated by the Japanese Imperial Army wanted to speak before they died.

The book is a micro-history, with a small selection of women's memories. Their stories demonstrate the texture and rhythm of everyday life during the war. Although the word "feminism" rarely came up when they reflected on their past, these women demonstrated autonomy and courage in their search for strength. One could change one's life and those of others regardless of one's political association, socio-economic status, or education. Their incremental efforts made social changes.

THE STRUGGLES FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION AND WOMEN'S
LIBERATION: THE CHINESE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT (1890S–1945)

The women who lived through the War of Resistance were born and grew up in the early twentieth century of a China in transformation, when the Chinese women's movement grew and evolved. In the 1898 "Hundred Days of Reform" during which leading male reformers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao campaigned for gender equality, women reformists themselves asserted that women's liberation needed to be closely connected with the fate of the country. Referring to the well-known

phrase “The rise and fall of all-under-heaven is the responsibility of every man” (*tianxia xingwang, pifu youze*),¹³ reformist women raised the slogan “the rise and fall of all-under-heaven is also the responsibility of every woman.”¹⁴ The women’s movement from then on played an undeniable role in all major events of the Chinese nation: the 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth Movement (New Culture Movement) (1915–20s), the Northern Expedition (1926–28), and the War of Resistance against Japan. In accordance with the Third World women’s movements, the Chinese women’s movement could never be independent of the nationalist movement: it was first of all motivated by the desire to save the country. In her exploration of women’s subjectivity in the early 1900s, Joan Judge has pointed out that when nationalism was the dominant political priority in China’s transformation, women activists used nationalism to “carve out new subjectivities and act on them in society and politics,” although nationalism also yoked them to the demands of the larger national project.¹⁵ Although the extent of the enabling and yoking effects of nationalism on women striving for equality is debatable, women activists within the two political parties, the Nationalist and Communist, and outside them had functioned as a collective political force invoking national liberation as a means of advancing women’s status in the early twentieth century.¹⁶

THE NEW LIFE MOVEMENT

From the Manchurian Incident in 1931 to early 1937, faced with escalating Japanese aggression, the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek insisted on a policy of “first internal pacification, then external resistance.” This involved the subduing of regional warlords and elimination of the Communist Party, and the building of a strong China. The government, in its social engineering, implemented the New Life Movement (NLM) beginning in 1934. Directly opposing the radical anti-Confucian and liberal feminist tendencies of the May Fourth Movement that began in 1915, the NLM aimed to restore the Confucian ethical concepts of *li*, *yi*, *lian*, and *chi*, rendered as propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame, so as to lead China to a spiritual rejuvenation. Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, Song Meiling, were dominant leaders of the NLM. Song called upon Chinese women to reform the family and serve the broader Chinese society. She maintained that the nation’s problems needed to be solved by the citizens themselves, and, in

the same way, women's inferior status needed to be rectified by women citizens.¹⁷

Feminist critics have pointed out the limited effects of the NLM on gender equality.¹⁸ Once dismissed as a frivolous, useless, and reactionary project, the NLM in recent scholarship has, on the contrary, come to be seen as a prominent vehicle for instilling in the population a sense of Chinese citizenship in the face of Japanese aggression and battling against the Communist ideology of class warfare.¹⁹ The NLM invoked a concept of citizenship that emphasized more responsibility in the fight for China's survival against foreign imperialism than individual rights from the state.²⁰ Its social engineering strongly espoused the belief that social stability was closely related to the family, that managing the family well would contribute to a stronger China.²¹

In its own journal, *Women's New Life Movement Monthly* (*Funü xin shenghuo yuekan*), which ran from November 1936 to June 1937, the NLM for women had essays discussing the roles of women in saving the nation. It linked nationalism closely with motherhood and created for Chinese women an ideal image of the "super wise wife and good mother" (*chao xianqi liangmu*).²² Author Zhenzhuang reiterated that restoring old virtues did not mean that women would have to return to their previously submissive status; rather, the "super wise wives and good mothers" were those who would actualize their own potential and assume their own duties as wife and mother, and, as the national crisis intensified, shoulder the mission to save the nation.²³

Within the Nationalist Party, a group of women activists advocated for women's interests. Their journal, *Women's Resonance* (*Funü gongming*), took a strong feminist stance on the issues of women's self-liberation. Amid the national crisis triggered by the Japanese invasion, the journal called for the emancipation of women as part of national salvation.²⁴ When the NLM for women created the notion of "super wise wife and good mother," the journal proposed "new-wise-wife-good mother-ism" (*xin xianqi liangmu zhuyi*), which demanded reciprocity, the basic principle of Confucianism that both women *and* men should cultivate the virtues and ethics necessary for successful families and a resilient society.²⁵

The NLM worked to revive Confucian values, as women throughout the ages had followed Confucianism since its core values could benefit them. Recent scholarly works argue that Confucianism lent important responsibilities to women in the family as educators of children, as moral custodians of the family, and as the force keeping the household intact.²⁶ Women's domestic, private spaces were closely connected with outside,

public spaces. Women in the historical past used the domestic power to exert their influence.²⁷ As in the societies of other developing countries, where the domestic sphere is one in which women “may have ultimate control” and where the woman’s role in the home is “a means of empowerment,”²⁸ Chinese women’s experiences in the early twentieth century affirmed the importance of the domestic.

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY: THE RADICAL IDEOLOGY AND THE PRAGMATIC STRATEGY

The Chinese Communist Party, born in 1921 during the anti-traditional, iconoclastic, anti-imperialist May Fourth era, had its theory on women’s liberation grounded in the Marxist ideology that class rather than gender was the fundamental source of gender oppression. Women’s liberation could be realized only in a proletarian-dominated socialist society that had eliminated private ownership and all traditional views and practices that had placed women in an inferior status. The Chinese Communist Party considered liberal feminism “elitist,” “bourgeois,” and “narrow and one-sided,”²⁹ and as a negative term to be combined with the adjective “western.”³⁰ In reality, the party exhibited both ideological rigidity as well as pragmatic flexibility when working with other women’s organizations. It utilized established venues for advancing its own cause.

After the Manchurian Incident in 1931, the Chinese Communist Party called for immediate armed resistance against the Japanese imperialists.³¹ On August 1, 1935, it issued what was famously known as the August First Declaration, departing from its previous policy of overthrowing the Nationalist government. Instead, it called for an end to civil war and the establishment of a united front of all parties, organizations, and people of all circles, including overseas Chinese and ethnic minorities, for the cause of national salvation. Although it was still weak in political and military power, the Communist Party’s anti-Japanese stance galvanized public support for the party, while Chiang Kai-shek’s continued policy of non-resistance alienated many. In occupied Manchuria, the August First Declaration resulted in the formation of the Northeast Anti-Japanese Allied Forces (*Dongbei KangRi lianjun*), which included men and women, the non-Communist anti-Japanese forces, and the Communists.³² In Shanghai, the Communists developed a pragmatic policy of working collectively with organizations disgruntled by Chiang’s nonresistance to Japanese aggression. This approach enabled the party to create a space for its own influence and development.³³

In urban areas, the Communists infiltrated schools and factories and radicalized women. As part of the Communist strategy to employ art as a medium for political messages, the party penetrated the Shanghai film industry, producing films addressing women's conditions as well as the question of national salvation. One such film was *Sons and Daughters of the Time of Storm* (*Fengyun ernü*, 1935). The theme song of the film, "The March of the Volunteers," written by Tian Han, an underground Communist Party member, and set to music by Nie Er, a member of the Communist Youth League from 1928, soon gained popularity in calling for resistance against Japan. It became the national anthem of the People's Republic of China in 1949.³⁴

The Communist and pro-Communist women contributors made their voices heard in the realm of publishing. The journal *Women's Life* (*Funü shenghuo*) took the lead in reporting on activities related to national salvation and in consolidating a united front for women.³⁵ It was strongly opposed to the NLM's image of the "wise wife and good mother." One of its authors, Junhui, condemned the ideology as a Hitlerian attempt to control women,³⁶ while another, Shen Ziji, condemned this image as serving foreign imperialists since this ideology was aimed at pushing women back into their homes at a time of national crisis.³⁷

FEMALE ACTIVISM IN THE MOVEMENT FOR NATIONAL SALVATION

A dynamic national salvation movement emerged that involved women of the Nationalist Party, the Communist Party, and forces outside the two parties – women's organizations, students, and the Chinese Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), making women a vital force for social, political, and public activism. The Nationalist government's policy of appeasement aroused strong public indignation. Motivated by patriotism, these differing forces formed strong centres of public opinion that played an important role in mitigating Chiang Kai-shek's policy of internal pacification before external resistance and in providing opportunities for the Communists to increase their influence.³⁸

Prominent women in the left wing of the Nationalist Party, such as Song Qingling (1893–1981) and He Xiangning (1878–1972), were the national voices and leaders in this broader salvation movement. Song Qingling, the widow of the founder of the Nationalist Party, Sun Yat-sen, denounced Chiang's government for stifling people's resistance.³⁹ From the early 1930s until the end of the war in 1945, she remained a

strong symbol and voice in China's human rights movement and in the war.⁴⁰ He Xiangning, who joined Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui) in 1905, worked often in cooperation with Song in support of national human rights and resistance to the Japanese.⁴¹ Female students, a new social collective, had emerged as one of the outcomes of the modernized educational system instituted in the early 1900s. Exposed to the outside world and informed of national history and politics, they had become very active in China's political scene and in the national salvation movement.⁴² The Chinese YWCA was another important force in the movement. Since its establishment in Shanghai in 1899, it had played an important role in the transformation of Chinese women. It evolved into an organization that cut through class distinctions and brought together women from various social strata: students, clerks, those in businesses, professionals, housewives, and the working-class poor in both urban and rural areas.⁴³ Its programs dealt with social ills and stressed self-cultivation and self-liberation instead of devotion to radical political revolution.⁴⁴ Through its night classes for women factory workers, the YWCA spread the ideas of patriotism, nationalism, and anti-imperialism.⁴⁵

CHINA'S BITTER WAR: 1937-45

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, when Japanese and Chinese troops exchanged fire near the bridge, marked the beginning of all-out war between China and Japan. The war unified China. The Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, previously enemies, established the United Front in September to fight against the Japanese aggressors.⁴⁶ Commitment to national salvation also led to a women's united front. In May 1938, Song Meiling invited fifty women from across the nation – social activists, women professionals, educators, leaders of the YWCA and of the Communist Party – to a five-day conference at Lushan in Jiangxi to discuss women's work for the war effort. They decided that the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) (Funü zhidao weiyuanhui) of the New Life Movement under Song Meiling would be the coordinating agency for all women's organizations. The WAC had since functioned as the leadership responsible for mobilizing Chinese women for war efforts in the Nationalist-controlled areas.⁴⁷ The Lushan conference initiated the Work Program to Mobilize Women for Participating in the War of Resistance and National Construction (Dongyuan funü canjia kangzhan

jianguo dagang), which outlined the organization and training of women from all backgrounds – peasants, workers, professionals, students, housewives, refugees, and military dependents – with the primary goal of mobilizing women to participate in the “sacred war of resistance and national construction.” The program was not feminist since addressing women’s interests was only a prerequisite to harnessing the enthusiasm and energy of women rather than a goal in itself. It was reformist in its calls for change geared exclusively toward women, including increasing literacy, improving occupational skills, increasing opportunities to work in industry and government, and improving working conditions. It also called for social reform and for changes in customs that had oppressed women for centuries: female infanticide, foot-binding, child marriage, polygamy, physical abuse, and the selling of women as housemaids and concubines.⁴⁸

In October 1937, the Nationalist government moved China’s capital from Nanjing first to Wuhan in Hubei Province and then to Chongqing in Sichuan by the end of the year. A port city on the Yangtze River, in the mountainous terrain of southwestern China, Chongqing would be the wartime capital of China until May 1946. The Nationalist-controlled provinces of southwestern China became “Free China,” referred to as the “Great Rear Area” (*da houfang*).

THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT: FULFILLING GENDERED DUTIES AS GOOD CITIZENS

Under the slogan “Resistance above all” (*kangzhan gaoyu yiqie*), the Nationalist government continued the notion that a wise wife and a good mother should also be a good citizen. To be a good citizen, men should fight on the front lines and women should devote themselves to the home front by participating in production, propaganda, rescue work, child care, and the provision of battlefield services. Song Meiling held that

if a woman wishes to make an actual personal contribution to the nation’s advancement, she must be a wise wife and a good mother as well as a good citizen. If she cannot be a good citizen, she cannot be a good mother or a wise wife. If she cannot be a good mother or a wise wife, she then cannot be a good citizen. Her children could not have much confidence in her or in their country.⁴⁹

In “The Mission of Chinese Women in the Resistance War,” published on July 1, 1941, in the *Chongqing Daily*, Song affirmed that in the war, the central issue for the Chinese women’s movement was not demanding political equality from the state, as the law had already accorded them that. Rather, women should demand opportunities from the state to offer their service and devotion to maximize their potential. Song added that women should not strive for individual rights as the European women of the nineteenth century had done. “Our greater mission is to unite women nationwide to stand side by side with men, and make concerted efforts to achieve the freedom, equality, and independence of our nation.”⁵⁰

Critics of the Nationalist Party’s gender policy in the war point out its ambivalence and limitations. The government encouraged women to organize and participate in the war effort, and yet feared women’s growing influence. The Nationalist women’s organizations left out peasants and working women.⁵¹ The emphasis on women serving on the home front held a biased, traditional view of gender that treated women as less physically strong and resilient than men. Demanding that women contribute would not automatically lead to a higher status for women.⁵² Careful research has also documented how, in Nationalist-controlled areas, the resistance brought out the potential of Chinese women in their service to the nation, and how educated women worked to extend the mobilization from urban Chinese to the rural poor, a group that had been previously overlooked.⁵³ China’s women’s movement in the War of Resistance, Lü Fangshang notes, broke away from the “old and conservative” way of focusing on women’s individual rights and on men-women conflicts, embraced women of all strata nationwide, and broadened its mission to encompass not just women’s equality but also national resistance and reconstruction. During the war, more than eighty women’s journals were published.⁵⁴ Over 800 women’s organizations existed.⁵⁵ Song Meiling, herself a Christian, had continued to work closely with such important Christian women educators as Wu Yifang, president of the Jinling Women’s College (1928–51), the first female college president in China.⁵⁶ Both the YWCA and the YMCA, their headquarters relocated to Sichuan, actively provided services in propaganda mobilization, fundraising, and assistance to the Chinese military, wounded soldiers, war refugees, and students who evacuated into the country’s interior. The organizations were an active link with the outside world, obtaining moral and material support from overseas.⁵⁷ Studies by Isabel Crook show that the reforms carried out in the Nationalist-controlled areas stimulated local changes.⁵⁸ In her study of the Chinese suffrage campaign in the first

half of the twentieth century, Louise Edwards argues that Chinese suffragists were pragmatic in appropriating nationalism in their own cause and in invoking both the logic of gender equality and gender differences for women's political rights.⁵⁹ She holds that during the war, the Chinese women suffragists, both Nationalists and Communists as well as those from nonaligned parties, invoked nationalism to lobby on behalf of feminist issues and continued to fight for women's political rights. The War of Resistance did not restrict the Chinese women's movement.⁶⁰

Recent studies on women's personal experiences have attached more importance to women's own agency. Danke Li's oral history of women of diverse backgrounds in wartime Chongqing tells stories of women as activists in the resistance, as victims of wartime suffering, and as "innovators of survival strategies and managers of survival for the family and community."⁶¹ Joshua Howard's study of women workers in the cotton mills of wartime Chongqing explains how these workers became politicized and active in the labour movement.⁶² Helen Schneider demonstrates that during the war, the Nationalists engaged in the dual project of resistance and state reconstruction through social reforms to enhance family education and women's role in managing the family as mothers and homemakers for strengthening China. She observes that women reformers were empowered by participating in the project.⁶³

THE COMMUNIST PARTY: THE UNITED FRONT AS A POWERFUL WEAPON

The Chinese Communist Party, under the United Front during the war, expanded its base areas behind enemy lines with the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei (abbreviated as Jin-Cha-Ji) Border Region government and in rural central and southern China. Similar to the Nationalists, the Communists subordinated the women's movement to their broader political agenda. Kay Ann Johnson argues that the party's women's policy sacrificed women's rights in the name of a united resistance against Japan: "Its policies, by the early 1940s, were aimed at hindering the development of a women's movement."⁶⁴ One particularly well-known case is that of Ding Ling, who openly raised questions of gendered problems in the Communist Party during the war and was therefore attacked by the party.⁶⁵

Ding Ling (1904–86) gained fame as a young writer during the May Fourth era. An anarchist with a feminist mind, she eventually turned to communism and joined the Communist Party in 1932. In November

1936, she went to Yan'an, where Mao Zedong greeted this nationally famous writer with a poem, describing her with the phrase “yesterday’s civilian lady, today’s military general.”⁶⁶ Distraught by the discrimination against women that she witnessed in Yan’an, she wrote two stories that exposed the gender problems of Communist rule: “When I Was in Xia Village” and “In the Hospital.”⁶⁷ In her essay “Thoughts on March 8” (“Sanbajie yougan”) of 1942, Ding Ling describes the problems that a liberated woman in Yan’an had to face. Women could not freely socialize with men before marriage without inciting gossip. If a married woman had to stay home to take care of her children, she would be slandered as “a Nora who returned home.”⁶⁸ In addition, men divorced their wives on the grounds that they were backward, even though what caused their “backwardness” was the heavy burden of child care. To avoid this burden, women resorted to having abortions or begging orphanages to take in their babies.⁶⁹ During the Rectification Movement (1942–44), the party criticized Ding and those who agreed with her.⁷⁰ On Ding’s feminist tendencies, the party maintained that “full sex equality had already been established” in the Communist-controlled areas, and that feminism was outdated and harmful.⁷¹ Ding subsequently admitted that she had been wrong to stand on the side of the few and not that of the party. Even in her later years, after decades of reflection, she still believed that her “Thoughts on March 8” had a major flaw in its biased women’s perspective that failed to consider the larger political situation.⁷²

In February 1943, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a resolution on women that criticized the women’s movement in the Communist base areas for its neglect of economic production as the most suitable mode for women’s contribution, and its overemphasis on such slogans as “free choice in marriage,” “economic independence,” and “down with the four women’s oppressions” (the four oppressions imposed by political, religious, clan, and husband authorities). It insisted that women’s economic independence was fundamental to women’s liberation, and therefore “encouraging them to participate in production was of the utmost importance in protecting women’s interests.”⁷³

Feminist studies based on official documents have offered a series of critiques on the mixed but mostly damaging effects of the Communist Party policy on women. Elisabeth Croll concludes that, under pressure for unity against the Japanese invaders, it proved impossible to completely eliminate the inequalities between the sexes, generations, and classes.⁷⁴ Patricia Stranahan argues that the party’s priority was not a revolutionary transformation of gender inequality but political survival and growth.⁷⁵

While working under the United Front, the party scaled back all social revolutionary programs in the areas it controlled.⁷⁶ Judith Stacey contends that in its efforts to mobilize a people's war, the Communist Party had to retain the support of the Chinese peasants, and therefore its economic, military, and family policies in the base areas were effectively a "democratic patriarchy" that empowered peasant men and sustained patriarchy in the family.⁷⁷ Within the party, the party positioned itself as a benevolent father, echoing the concept of the "Confucian patriarch" from Chinese tradition.⁷⁸ Its intervention in the personal lives of its members with regard to their choice of marriage partners followed traditional "Chinese familial patterns."⁷⁹ As radical feminists see women's entry into the military as representing women's potential for power,⁸⁰ the party's exclusion of women from combat meant that women still engaged mostly in traditional domestic work during the war.⁸¹

By contrast, Communist top women leaders in charge of "women's work" – Cai Chang (1900–90), Deng Yingchao (1904–92), and Kang Keqing (1912–92) – concluded that as a result of the collective efforts made by Chinese women during the war, women raised their own consciousness and political and social status.⁸² Postwar research published in China also emphasizes that the Communist Party implemented a policy of gender equality and mobilized women into a broad anti-Japanese democratic movement that increased women's status.⁸³

By shifting from party policy to focus on women's own experiences, Christina Gilmartin, in her analysis of the dynamism between the party's patriarchy and Communist women's agency from 1921 to 1927, argues that Communist women tolerated unequal treatment within the party partly because these women "had created their own space, culture, and lives within this political organization." At the same time, their complicity with the party's gender hierarchy also perpetuated patriarchal patterns within the party.⁸⁴ By letting women speak for themselves, Helen Young's oral history of the Communist women soldiers of the Red Army reveals that they maintain a more positive view of their experiences in their own stories than feelings of oppression by the party's patriarchy.⁸⁵ Nicola Spakowski shows that during the War of Resistance, although the Communist Party mostly placed women in supporting roles and political work, some women challenged the exclusionary policy of the party: "they raised the question of women's 'right to fight.'"⁸⁶ David Goodman illuminates how women of different social backgrounds within and outside of the Communist-controlled Taihang region struggled for gender equality.⁸⁷ In exploring marriage in revolutionary regions during the 1940s, Cong

Xiaoping shows how rural women used the legal system in changing their lives.⁸⁸ By examining the lives and careers of some Communist women and men during the Communist revolution, the War of Resistance, and after 1949, Wang Zheng maintains that Communist women and men fought strenuously against sexism and male dominance in society and in the party.⁸⁹

How did Chinese women themselves perceive the Nationalist and Communist ideologies and their own lived experiences during the War of Resistance? The following chapters will examine this topic.

DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 discusses how representations of women in the War of Resistance have evolved in the People's Republic of China from a state monopoly to a multi-faceted, diverse, new way of remembering. The master narrative of the War of Resistance during the Mao era reinforced the cult of Mao Zedong and the domination of males, and the concomitant marginalization of females in the party. Women were not erased, however. The government under the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and mass media publicized exemplary Communist heroines in the war to serve Communist Party's ideological and political purposes. Since the 1980s, with China entering the era of reform and opening to the outside world, there have been remarkable developments in terms of the reinterpretation of China's history in the twentieth century. Women themselves have played crucial roles in researching Chinese women's history, writing reminiscences, and carrying out and participating in oral history interviews, all of which have provided rich sources for my study of the women's war experience.

Chapter 2 is a critical analysis and interpretation of the reminiscences of the war years published by women soldiers of the Communist New Fourth Army. It examines how their gendered perspectives shaped their stories, and how the publication of their memories has reclaimed the crucial roles of the New Fourth Army and the women in that army, both of which were neglected in the history writing under Mao. Their memories prove that the war was not just a man's cause.

Chapter 3 captures the voices of five Communist women, plus the interview of the son of a Communist woman. The thematic analysis of those memories offers insights into each person about how they, as young female students of relatively well-to-do families, decided to

embark on the Communist revolutionary path, what the war experience meant for them, and why they perceived the war era as a time “full of youth and idealism,” in the words of Luo Ying, one of the women interviewed.

Chapter 4 switches to an examination of the perspectives of women associated with the Nationalist Party based on publications in Taiwan and two unpublished oral narratives I collected. These women were of the wealthy and privileged class or of prominent local families who supported the Nationalist establishment. The chapter explains why Chi Pang-yuan (a student in the war) and other women associated with the Nationalists saw the war and postwar time of 1945–49 as years of suffering, loss, and exile as they fled from Japanese aggression and then from mainland China after the Nationalists’ defeat in the civil war. It shows that they did not present themselves as passive victims because each in her own way functioned as a historical actor for the improvement of her own situation.

Chapter 5 offers a discussion of my interviews with six middle-class women who lived in Japanese-occupied areas. During the war, although many chose to go to the Nationalist or Communist-controlled areas, the rest of the people remained under Japanese occupation. In the public perception, their life was seen then as pathetic. One of the women, Wang Yao, said that her life was too ordinary to remember, and yet her story and those of the others show that they refused to give in to despair in the harsh conditions of the occupation. Apolitical though they were, their war experiences had political significance.

The last chapter has a discussion of the Chinese “comfort women,” those who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army. It makes a special point that in the process of speaking up, these women were transformed into “survivor activists.”⁹⁰ The chapter also brings in the voices of five ordinary working-class women I interviewed. Working from childhood to support their families, they lived under Japanese aggression and patriarchal oppression. The war was full of bitterness, “was no life for humans,” in the words of Wang Hong, one of the five interviewees. Yet, they survived and persevered with fortitude and courage.

These women’s stories provide insight into their war lives and demonstrate that women’s experiences matter in the writing of the history of the war. They address the many ways women are related to war, how they suffer and respond. They testify to the fact that war has unique effects on women; it is crueller for women than for men worldwide

throughout history.⁹¹ Also, as Robert Gildea's *Marianne in Chains* shows that the history of occupied France was not a simple story of cold, hunger, and fear, nor of good French and bad French, but rather one of multiple experiences,⁹² so the Chinese story similarly consists of different people having different experiences under different circumstances. My book is about the women's war, which "has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings."⁹³ It has its own words – women's words.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Not just a man's war : Chinese women's memories of the war of resistance against Japan, 1931-45 / Yihong Pan.

Names: Pan, Yihong, author.

Series: Contemporary Chinese studies.

Description: Series statement: Contemporary Chinese studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240317866 | Canadiana (ebook) 20240317947 | ISBN 9780774870351 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774870368 (softcover) | ISBN 9780774870382 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774870375 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945—Women. | LCSH: World War, 1939-1945—Women—China—Manchuria. | LCSH: Women—China—Manchuria—History—20th century. | LCSH: Communists—China—Manchuria—History—20th century. | LCSH: Oral history—China—Manchuria. | LCSH: Manchuria (China)—History—1931-1945.

Classification: LCC DS777.533.W65 P36 2024 | DDC 940.53/518082—dc23



Canada Council
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UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Scholarly Book Awards, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Financial support from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation is also greatly appreciated.

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