

ON THE FRONT: WOMEN CONFRONTING WAR

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Much of the written history on the War of Resistance (1937-1945), known as the Chinese theater of World War II to the West, is a record of warfare—of conquest and revolution, of battles and casualties, of heroes and enemies. Such accounts have touched on large segments of Chinese society; however, women's experiences during the war are still relatively neglected. Women are rarely represented in this history, and when they are, they tend to be depicted as destitute refugees and victims of sexual violence.¹ Part of the reason for this neglect lies in the fact that conventional imagery on gender and war has long suggested men as naturally linked to warfare, women as naturally linked to peace. Such images forge a "protector/protected" relationship in which men protect women from assault and violence. While women did not always participate directly in the fighting, they always had specific roles in the combat, for example, to take care of the wounded. Such a dichotomy expects women to be inherently nurturing and peaceful caregivers, while men are bold and courageous warriors. Thus, women have historically been denied a literal as well as figurative presence on the battlefield.² So strong have been such social and cultural associations between gender and war that any efforts by women to enter directly the field of battle have generally met with vigorous opposition. As a result, women remain invisible in military policy-making and combat roles, reflecting the "natural" assumptions about the masculinity of war.

In reality, women's activities have extended well beyond the private sphere. In contrast to the stereotype, they have participated in a variety of ways in conflicts that involved their communities, such as the service roles of feeding and clothing war refugees, nursing the aged and the wounded, providing moral support and joining in production, in addition to participating in underground resistance movements. While accounts of war usually focus on the combatant roles and the activities of high politics, women appear more as, in Cynthia Enloe's words, "an off-stage chorus to a basically

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- 1 For example, if one checks a library catalogue, the issue of comfort women typically attracts much more attention in both academic and public discourse than any other topics in studying women's experience in the Asia-Pacific war.
 - 2 Sharon MacDonald, "Drawing the Lines—Gender, Peace and War: An Introduction," in Sharon MacDonald, Pat Holden, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), pp. 1-26.

male drama.”³ Modern Chinese historians have attempted to highlight the gendered dimension of war, through interview collections like Li Xiaojiang’s *Let Women Speak* (Rang nüren ziji shuohua), and *20th Century Wartime Experiences of Chinese Women* (Fenghuo suiyue xia de Zhongguo funü), one of an oral history series edited by Lo Jiu-jung, Yu Chien-ming, and Chiu Hei-yuan from Academic Sinica, Taiwan. However, the literary treatment of women’s activities in war has rarely made its way into critical discussions. As social and cultural prohibitions have banned women from combat and many military-related activities, women writers have also been silenced as legitimate narrators of war. Yet the majority of women’s war accounts combine autobiographical elements with actual historical events. Such narratives hold the potential to illuminate the subject of gender in particular and of war in general.

This article is a first attempt to consider the gender dimension of China’s anti-Japanese war. It will focus on women’s writings about and their services on the military front, especially during the first year of the war, based on primary sources published during that period. The choice for such time limitation is that the first stage of war (from August 1937 to the end of 1938) witnessed the heightening of Chinese nationalism, mass mobilization of youth, a vibrant culture and an uplifting atmosphere that attracted international attention to the Chinese resistance. During this time period, women were active in organizing war efforts. Besides the sorts of activities mentioned above, they also initiated various associations and organized all-women’s corps to visit the military front. Though they did not fight directly in battles, many of them experienced military conflict first-hand. An exploration of these women’s war writings as a commentary on a segment of women’s history will not only render more visible what has until now been neglected in official, male-centered war records, but also further the general investigation of the interconnections between gender and war by analyzing the ways in which gender norms were constructed: Did women’s high-profile activities in the first year of war help change the established gender ideology and practice? Did their war experience help them achieve gender equality? To answer these questions, it is important first to examine the wartime discourse on ‘total war,’ for it was within the conceptualization of “total war, total mobilization” that these women constituted their gender identities in that period.

Women’s Role in Total Mobilization

Republican China was not isolated from the interwar European discourse of total war. Since the late 1910s, Chinese writers translated a series of books on the Great War and introduced the latest military theories to domestic readers, including *Shijie dazhan congshu* (series on The Great War), *Ou zhan congshu* (series on the European War), *Zhan shi congshu* (series on the History of War), *Shijie zhan shu yu zhan shi* (Technology and History of War), and the complete works of Clausewitz (1915, 1934, 1937). Close cooperation with Nazi Germany in the 1930s brought not only German capital and

3 Cynthia Enloe, “Feminists Thinking About War, Militarism, and Peace,” in Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree, eds., *Analyzing Gender* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage), p. 529.

technicians to China, but military technology and ideas as well. Delegations of Chinese officers were dispatched to observe mobilization in interwar Europe.⁴ Ludendorff's *Total War*, for example, was translated by two Chinese writers simultaneously under the same title *All People's War* (*Quan minzu zhanzheng lun*). The version authored by Zhang Junmai, published by the Institute of Chinese National Economy, highlighted the German writer's ideas that the nature of future wars would not be battles between soldiers, but bitter fighting between two populaces. The fact that Zhang's first edition received immediate acclaim and was followed with a reprint within a month confirms the wide attention given to the theory among Chinese readers who envisioned an imminent war against Japan.⁵ Thus, it is no surprise that, during his 1935 inspection trip to Sichuan, Chiang Kaishek lectured local officers on the subject, declaring that "every citizen will be a war participant, and every inch of land will become the fighting ground."⁶

While the concept of total war became the new common sense to the military elite, it remained alien to the general populace. Yet the Shanghai campaign (August to November 1937) quickly turned into a live example of total war. Japanese air raids targeted civilian quarters, making no differentiation between military and civilian populations. For many urban residents, the battle came as a surprise: "This is a strange war! A strange war without name!"⁷ Educated society understood it better. For them, the battle represented "the first war of the entire nation in Chinese history. In comparison, all those preceding it were merely partial wars."⁸ Many realized that the task of national salvation would make unparalleled demands on the human and material resources of the nation. Beginning in late 1937, public media engaged in a discussion on the nature of total mobilization (总动员) and one writer defined it in the following way: "It means that national activities will change into a wartime mode the minute a war starts. All human and material resources, both visible and invisible, will be immediately concentrated under the total control of the government for use in military development."⁹ His definition, while insightful in pointing out the complete nature of the wartime mobilization, raised social concerns with respect to the organization of each area for total mobilization.

Writers of a variety of political and social backgrounds expressed their opinions on the mobilization of the broad populace. Li Gongpu, a leader of the National Salvation Association and an advocate for anti-Japanese policy, suggested that the Nationalist

4 William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), esp. chapter 3.

5 Jiang Fangzhen, "Zhang yi Lu-tun-dao-fu 'quan minzu zhanzheng lun' xu," in Jiang Fucong and Xue Guangqian, eds., *Jiang Baili xiansheng quanji* (Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue chubanshe, 1971), vol. 2, p. 197.

6 Chiang Kaishek, "Xiandai guojia de shengmingli" in Qin Xiaoyi, ed., *Zongrong Jiang gong sixiang yanlun zongji* (Taipei: Zhongguo Guomindang zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1984), vol. 13, p. 408.

7 Tang Maisong, "Shanghai dianmiao," in He Shensui and Chen Maiqing, eds., *Lunxian tongshi* (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 266.

8 *Dagongbao* (Shanghai), 19 August 1937, p. 1.

9 Wu Huan, "Tan guojia zong dongyuan," *Kangzhan sanrikan* 7 (9 September 1937): 11.

(GMD) government should make full use of the power of the masses.¹⁰ Pan Hannian, a Communist cadre, concurred that mass mobilization was crucial to the incorporation of all sources of manpower so as to carry out various war activities. The unemployed could participate in construction work, help provide medical services, and maintain social order.¹¹ Liberal newspapers such as *L'Impartial (Dagong bao)* agreed that participation in the war effort was the duty of every citizen, whether man or woman, military or civilian.¹² In general, these different voices defined that total mobilization was first and foremost a mass movement. It was within such a theoretical delineation on mass mobilization that the roles of women at war were brought up for public discussion.

The Chinese women's emancipation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, much like other non-western feminist movements, displayed an intersection of feminism and nationalism. It was initiated by male intellectuals and acted out against a background of nationalist struggles aimed at achieving political independence, asserting a national identity, and modernizing society.¹³ Nationalistic as Chinese feminism was, the chorus of total mobilization again brought the mobilization of women onto the political agenda. "Total mobilization includes that of women," announced Wang Pingling, a member of the All China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists, "being half of the overall population, women should become an indispensable part of war efforts." By his observation, however, the reality was disappointing, "the majority of educated women still indulge in the pursuit of entertainment," a situation incompatible with war urgency. Educated women should be equipped with "revolutionary spirit" and devote their energy to war efforts.¹⁴

Many historians have pointed out that women in WWI gained from war by expanding their job opportunities in public society due to an insufficient male labor market, a phenomenon emphasized by Chinese women during the war. They often cited the progress that European and American women had made in WWI to call for domestic progress in gender equality. In their writings, the growth of women's job opportunities was identified as one of the hallmarks of democratic systems. Only such anti-democratic countries as Nazi Germany and Japan imposed strict constraints on their women and required them to go back to the kitchen. In the war mobilization, since women's employment constituted an indicator of social progress, these authors argued that Chinese women should identify the goal of women's liberation with the liberation of the Chinese country and contribute their labor to war efforts.¹⁵

10 Li Gongpu, "Quanguo dongyuan gao guoren shu," *Kangzhan sanrikan* 18 (16 October 1937): 5.

11 Pan Hannian, "Quanmian kangzhan zhong de zhengzhi dongyuan de jidian," *Kangzhan sanrikan* 5 (3 September 1937): 3.

12 "Ganxie weiguo junren," *Dagongbao* (19 September 1937), p. 1.

13 Peter Zarrow, "He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 4 (Nov. 1988): 796-813.

14 Wang Pingling, "Zhanshi zhishi funü de zhuyao renwu," *Funü gongming* 7.5 (20 March 1938): 5.

15 Qian Yonghe, "Zhongguo funü de ziligengsheng," *Funü yuekan* 1.6 (Feb. 1942): 557-559.

Wartime China offered women an increasing number of job opportunities, particularly in the textile industry and public schools. Many war accounts confirm that women who relocated from the east coast took over large numbers of teaching positions in the Western interior, especially in elementary schools. Within the textile industry, in the first year of the war, some jobs were created specifically to recruit women refugees. Take the Hengyang Quilt and Uniform Factory as an example: Due to a shortage of military uniforms, the Department of Military Utilities established textile factories in Hengyang, Hunan province, and directed relief stations to select women refugees to staff these factories. As a result, more than 2,000 women were employed in 1938.¹⁶ Similar measures on job placement continued throughout the war. By 1943, women refugees made up almost half of the total number of employees in six relief factories set up by the wartime state.¹⁷

“Home front” was another previously unfamiliar concept that became known to readers. The term had been coined in English during the First World War, before which it would not have made sense to pair “home” or “domestic” with the military term “front.” In China the appropriation of this foreign term, with its meaning and connotations, now started to be extended beyond the confinement of a small quarter of the military and intellectual elite. A total war not only incorporated both a military front and a home front that were considered inseparable from each other, it also developed along a gendered division of labor: Men defending on the battlefield, women working at the homefront. “Like hardworking fighters on the war front, women also have their primary task. Women are also fighters for the independence and freedom of the Chinese people.” In Wang Pingling’s view, women’s work on the home front was of parallel importance to that performed by the soldiers on the military front.¹⁸

Equally important as they were, the way women contributed to total mobilization on the home front was different from armed men defending the nation on the military front: Women were expected to provide moral support to the military front. In one of his articles, Wang Pingling cited European women in WWI as the role model for their Chinese counterparts: “In the Great War many young women sent their sweethearts off to the front enthusiastically, delivered flowers to [hospitalized] soldiers, and warmly consoled the wounded heroes. Such brave and lofty behavior greatly lifted the morale of the army, and was much more powerful than any kind of propaganda.” Even if Chinese women might not be able to do the same, Wang asserted, “at least they can help the war by making winter clothes, becoming nurses in hospitals, and taking over some easy family business in their husbands’ stead.”¹⁹ More important, women should play a motherly role in protecting future citizens of the nation. According to Wang Pingling, “It is now the decisive moment for the very survival of the Chinese

16 Telegraphs of the Hengyang general refugee station, August 1938, Second Historical Archives (SHA), 117 *quanzhong*, 15 *juan*.

17 Statistics on the wartime relief factories, 1945, SHA, 116 *quanzhong*, 1167 *juan*.

18 Wang Pingling, “Zhanshi zhishi funü de zhuyao renwu,” p. 5.

19 Wang Pingling, “Zhi quanguo qingnian de zimeimen,” *Funü gongming* 7.2 (5 February 1938): 3.

nation.” The priority for women’s work was to strengthen the nation by raising and educating refugee children, while the priority for women’s mobilization was to initiate the enterprise of child relief and take charge of relevant welfare measures.²⁰ In short, women at home were expected to play their traditional roles as caregivers.

The essence of such gender-divided fronts was better captured in official rhetoric, in particular the speeches delivered by First Lady Song Meiling, known as Madame Chiang. In August 1937, she called together a group of prominent women at the capital Nanjing. At the opening ceremony of the conference, Madame Chiang highlighted women’s responsibility to the national cause: “We women are citizens as well. Even though each of us differs in status, talent, achievements and activities, each and every individual should work to the best of her capabilities in making a contribution to the overall effort to save our nation.” Women’s participation in the war being established, they were assigned to a role different from that of men: “During wartime, men go to the front line to kill enemies, so the work behind the lines on the home front is our women’s responsibility.”²¹

A clear demarcation was drawn: Men dominated the military front, women were confined to the home front. They were distinct from each other in occupying different space. In addition, such demarcation between men and women was endowed with gender specific roles assigned to each of the sexes: Men on the military front would play the most masculine task of soldiering and enemy-killing; and women were to carry a feminine role in providing moral and material support on the domestic front. It is within such a framework of gender-divided fronts that the article turns to a group of educated women’s experiences to highlight how they perceived their own identities when encountering the military front.

Women’s Condolence on the Front

As most commonly defined, women’s wartime mobilization aimed to increase wartime production and maintain national morale. In May 1938, Madame Chiang addressed leading women representatives at the Lushan conference, establishing the guidelines for women’s activities and organizations. She emphasized the training of women in productive skills to “satisfy life’s necessities” and add to the overall strength of the nation. The primary approach was to expand women’s job opportunities in industry, agriculture, and cooperatives. In a more concrete sense, women not only took charge of cleaning, sewing, weaving, and childcare, but also of fund-raising, collecting clothes and shoes for soldiers, serving medical care and food supplies at relief stations and delivering propaganda messages.²² Such a vision of women’s social roles, as Wendy Larson suggests, was “much more limited” as it “situated women within the household, but with a grasp of ‘useful’ modern knowledge and technologies such as

20 Wang Pingling, “Zhanshi zhishi funü de zhuyao renwu,” p. 5.

21 Mey-ling Soong Chiang, “Appeal to Women of China,” in *War Messages and Other Selections by May-ling Soong Chiang* (Hankou: China Information Committee, 1938), p. 1.

22 Liang Huijin, “Kangzhan qianhou de funü yundong,” in Bao Jialin et al, eds., *Zhongguo funü yundongshi* (Taipei: Jindai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2000), pp. 289-290.

literacy, nutrition, and hygiene.²³ Yet at the same time, women were endowed with such responsibilities as providing services to the front, gathering intelligence, and discovering espionage.²⁴ These tasks offered women opportunities to be engaged more directly in military-related activities.

In September 1938, a delegation of eighteen women from Hong Kong, probably comprised of the wives of high-ranking GMD officers, organized a Women's Condolence Corps. Purportedly representing women of all classes in Guangdong, they traveled northward to Nanchang, Jiangxi province, where the troops from their province were stationed. There they stayed for nearly a month, presenting banners to high-ranking commanders, expressing their gratitude toward soldiers, consoling the wounded, and donating their presents including medicines, shoes, jackets and winter coats.²⁵ The reports and travel accounts written by these women depicted the ongoing war with Japan as one fought heroically by men at arms, the most canonical of war texts. Their trip not only bridged the space between the home and military fronts but, more importantly, defined and maintained the gender divide separating combatants from civilians.

The Hong Kong women's trip to Nanchang, like many similar ones made by war activists of the time, was an attempt to bridge the divide between the front and home: "[People on the home front] should continue sending out delegates, bringing with them the passion of the people in the rear and bringing news from hometowns to the soldiers in the front, so as to comfort our army and encourage their fighting spirit. In the opposite direction, the delegates will bring back the reality of the front, so that the spirit of the soldiers will fuel the passion of the people in the rear." Through such idealistic trips, the geographically divided fronts would no longer be closed to each other; instead "communications between the front and the home will truly be achieved."²⁶

The women's experience on the front confirmed the "myth of war experience"—a myth that was, above all, masculine.²⁷ Gender roles could hardly be more divided between the soldiers and the civilians: the former was the protector, "rescuing his countrymen from the fate of becoming slaves;" the latter was the protected. A great deal of war reportage was produced during the first year of war. In it, women depicted were always in distress: They faced the danger of losing everything in the war, their family property burned in fires, children disabled, husbands killed in bombings, not to mention they themselves usually being the target of sexual violence. In a typical example of the war accounts, a woman carried her son in her arms walking on and on in spite of her bound feet. The next day the boy was found dead. She was seen crying

23 Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 168.

24 Liang Huijin, p. 290.

25 Wu Jufang, "Baogao beishang weilao jingguo," *Nanxunxian funü weilao tekan* (Hong Kong: 1938, hereafter *Nanxun tekan*), p. 5.

26 Wu Jufang, p. 5.

27 George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memories of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

out hysterically, “How sad it is for a mother to lose her child!”²⁸ Other women went into labor in exile: New babies died quickly due to lack of nutrition or medical care, their mothers accepting birth and death impassively without any sign of grief. “Life is so hard that she needs sympathy just to stay alive.”²⁹ Male refugees looked no stronger: Amid the lines of refugee they “carried all the family property, a package, small pieces of furniture, and cooking pots” on their backs. Regardless of their physical strength, they looked no different from the weak: “All the same – same ragged garments, same depressed outlooks. On their faces are the same traces of sadness.”³⁰ In these accounts, men and women, young and aged, all waited for salvation.

In contrast to the passive civilians on the home front, the very authenticity of the war front lay in its masculinity. Glorification of male soldiers filled the records written by these Hong Kong women. Under their pens, images of the soldiers were consistently constructed in a graphic fashion: “Officers and soldiers fight a bloody fight, living permanently in trenches, sleeping only on straw, eating mostly thin porridge. In the heat of summer they have little medicine, and they endure the cold of winter through a single layer of ragged garments, not to mention the constant imminent threat to their lives.” Moreover, the wounded suffered from a shortage of proper care to such an extent that they “could only lie on the ground, waiting for death.” Yet despite this pathetic portrait, they were considered true warriors “fighting for the very survival of our countrymen.”³¹ In such graphic scenes, soldiers lived up to notions of heroism in a most masculine fashion, the exact visions a civilian audience would demand from the battlefield.

War offered women opportunities rarely available before. Among the women members of the condolence corps, some had never before traveled outside Guangdong. The trip to the front thus constituted their “very first long distance travel” under the meticulous arrangements of their male protectors:³² When they arrived at Zhuzhou, Hunan province, they were received at the train station by an officer sent by the Guangdong regiment, who escorted them to a hotel for rest, and reserved a train to take them on to Nanchang. There the women delegates were put under meticulous care: High-ranking officers welcomed them at the train station. They were put up in good hotels and given formal meals at local restaurants. In comparison, the presentation of banners to General Xue Yue seems more like an interval between meals. To protect them from the real dangers of battle, officers temporarily left their positions on the battleground and came to the Nanchang headquarters to receive the donations from home.³³ Intruding into the male domain of the war front, these women were in all senses under the protection of male soldiers. The gender relationship of peacetime remained intact.

28 Ai Wu, “Hu-Hang lu shang,” in Qin Mu, ed., *Zhongguo kangri zhanzheng shiqi dahoufang wenxue shuxi*, ser. 5, *Sanwen zawan* (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1989), vol. 1, p. 333.

29 “Nanmin aihua,” in Qin Mu, p. 197.

30 Lin Na, “Nanmin de hanglie,” in Fan Changjiang, ed., *Zhanhui dong zhanchang* (Hankou: Shenghuo shudian, 1938), pp. 45-46.

31 Mo Shaohua, “Bushu xinku shi xintong,” *Nanxun tekan*, p. 38.

32 Yang Yuanqing, “Yijian shi he yimu xianju,” *Nanxun tekan*, p. 39.

33 Wu Jufang, pp. 6-8.

The Hong Kong women consciously maintained such boundaries. Though at the battlefield, the members of the corps continued to don their usual dress by wearing skirts. Their feminine appearance was so visible that, according to their observation, these “ladies from the south attracted the attention of local squads.”³⁴ Such “a team of tender and frail ladies” was simply so incompatible with the existing military and masculine environment that soldiers passing by “could not help looking surprised and impressed.”³⁵ Feeling uneasy about trying to fit these women into the role of comrade-in-arms, the soldiers returned their greetings by addressing them as “madam” and “miss”— the kind of reference a woman might encounter routinely in the home. In that specific military context, the encounter was consequently alienating rather than linking the soldiers to these women activists. Costume itself helped maintain effectively the gender divide on the fronts. The Hong Kong women remained excluded from the battleground.

The presence of women in the most masculine environment illuminates how certain visions of femininity could be integrated into the experience of the battlefield. Some of the women’s corps members had a clear conception of their role in the national cause of war: “What kind of contribution have I made to the nation and the Chinese people? How can I take full responsibility as a citizen?” Their answers to such questions tended to relate to the maintenance of morale—the kind of work supportive and inspirational to the nation, as defined by their roles as civilians. As one of the women delegates believed, “women’s love is rooted in the very ‘nature’ of their tenderness and humility.”³⁶ Women on the home front performed an endless list of duties, including collecting donations to soldiers, comforting the wounded, helping them with letter-writing, and mending their clothes. Such work, she believed, was by nature feminine and fitted perfectly into the traditional image of women as caring angels.³⁷ Presenting donations and banners to the combatants on the front aimed to “deliver soldiers the gratitude of the home front, in the hope of encouraging their fighting spirit.” In the understanding of some of these women activists, moral encouragement from women was crucial to men’s participation in the war in the following way: While the soldiers on the front could not help but have concerns over their families and hometowns, if people in the home areas constantly kept the soldiers in mind, “transmitting the passion of the rear and news from hometowns to the soldiers in the front,” then it “would comfort the officers and soldiers and encourage their fighting spirit.” On the contrary, if civilians were “indifferent to the front, and content with an easy life and entertainment,” soldiers would experience pain and suffering. Women in the home front thus possessed the power either to assist the war or to demoralize soldiers.³⁸

The literary accounts by the members of the Hong Kong Condolence Corps depicted their activities on the battlefield and advocated roles appropriate to maintaining the gendered barriers between war and home. While some posed specific critiques of the war such as the lack of total mobilization in the home, most of these texts documented

34 Yuan Jingchang, “Beishang funü weilao tuan suizheng baogao,” *Nanxun tekan*, p. 34.

35 Long Qiyang, “Cong xianqi shudao moyingdui,” *Nanxun tekan*, p. 40.

36 Wang Jingbi, “Weilao Nanchang shangbing yinxiang ji,” *Nanxun tekan*, p. 42.

37 Lin Haiqiong, “Wei kangzhan shoushang de yiwei yongshi,” *Nanxun tekan*, pp. 36-37.

38 Wu Jufang, p. 5.

the “emotional work” of patriotic, moral support that these women provided to soldiers in battle. Their visit to the military front gave special legitimacy to the claims each made to recount the truth about war as lived and embodied experience. Though this trip connected the war front and home front through their geographic mobility from Hong Kong to Nanchang, the visions they preserved of war could be seen paradoxically, as portraits of actions and thoughts that by their very nature and context excluded women and the feminine from what made the war front a masculine world.

The Meaning of Women Soldiers

Total war provided an unusual opportunity for women to experience war first-hand. While air raids that had intentionally targeted civilians since the very beginning of the Shanghai campaign transformed both men’s and women’s perceptions of war and thus had made women also central to the historical records on war, the focus for this section is women as soldiers on the military front. The first year of the war saw a peak in the number of service women on the front as thousands of educated elite and working class women affiliated with various organizations went to the front in various war zones.³⁹ They perceived themselves, and were referred to, as women soldiers. What exactly did these soldiers do on the front? In comparison with the very civilian nature of the women’s delegation discussed above, to what extent were these women militarized? Were they, and women in general, empowered as a result of this military experience? In his study on wartime popular culture, Chang-tai Hung notices the centrality of female resistance symbols, including patriotic courtesans and female heroes and warriors in the art of wartime spoken drama. The cultivation of female symbols in a bold, courageous, even militant fashion, Hung suggests, evinced the playwrights’ intention to shame male spectators and inspire men to act.⁴⁰ In this sense, probably no contemporary woman better exemplifies the symbol of the female warrior than Xie Bingying.

Xie (1906--2000) was born into a gentry family in Hunan. She had been a rebellious character since early childhood, first by refusing to have her feet bound or her ears pierced in accordance with tradition. She attended many schools including an old-style school for boys that she entered at the age of ten. Her vigor as a student leader in an anti-Japanese demonstration earned her expulsion from school. Later she broke tradition again by entering a military academy in Wuhan at the age of twenty. Together with a group of women soldiers, she participated in the National Revolutionary Army during the Northern Expedition in the mid-1920s. While serving in the army, she described her experience vividly in the popular book *War Diary*, which earned her high prestige as a writer and female activist and became her best known literary work. In the next few years, Xie went to Japan to study a couple of times, and was imprisoned there. After being released from prison, she returned home and took a teaching position in southwest China.

39 Liang Huijin, p. 366.

40 Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 77-78.

When the Shanghai campaign broke out, Xie organized the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps, which comprised sixteen women from Hunan who were later joined by eight women from Shanghai and Suzhou. Leaving Changsha in September, the corps was dispatched with General Wu Qiwei's Fourth Army to care for the wounded on the Eastern front—including Wuxi, Jiading, Suzhou, Shanghai, and the coastal areas south of the Yangzi River. They worked for months under terrible conditions to help the wounded and the dying. All this time, Xie wrote about what she saw, publishing her short reportage articles in newspapers. These writings were gathered together in the book *New War Diaries* (Xin congjun riji, 1938). Her stories told in simple language of the excitement and sadness she experienced on the battlefield, but they also revealed bureaucratic corruption and a serious lack of war mobilization, especially in the countryside, as well as the selfishness of common people.

After the Chinese loss of the Eastern front at the end of 1937, Xie retreated to the wartime capital Chongqing in the western interior, where she became editor of a literary supplement of *Xinmin bao*. In the spring of 1938, she visited the Xuzhou front as a war correspondent attached to the Fifth War Zone—south of the Huai River in Jiangsu and Henan provinces—and interviewed commanders Li Zongren and Bai Chongxi. Throughout this period she wrote prolifically on the early developments of the war and issued war reports under the titles *On the Front* (Zai huoxian shang), *Miscellaneous Notes in the Army* (Junzhong suibi) and *Trips to the Fifth War Zone* (Diwu zhanqu xunli), among others.⁴¹

While artists revived the image of Hua Mulan in various forms of wartime culture such as dramas and cartoons, they called on women to assume important active roles and contribute to war efforts.⁴² Xie and her team members embodied such spirits of activism and determination. To contemporaries, though, the military front still constituted an obstacle to women's public service. Some of her potential teammates were unable to make it to the front because they ran into familial prohibition and were kept under "house detention," as in the case of a woman named in Xie's accounts who was kidnapped by her father and locked at home. Such actions reflected a deep-seated suspicion of women's roles in wartime. As Xie put it: "More than disbelieving that women have the courage to go to the front, [the resistance forces] do not trust women with the responsibility of saving the nation either." Even when informed that women had already been on the front during the Northern Expedition, they refused to acknowledge women's appearance on the battleground by simply deeming it "ridiculous."⁴³ Such reaction to the historical precedent, in Xie's opinion, showed a deep-seated distrust of women soldiers: "Women cannot work on the battleground. If they go, they will only add troubles for the army. In no way will they provide any help. On the contrary, if

41 Howard Boorman, *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1971), vol. 3, pp. 102-103; and Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century 1912-2000* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 228.

42 For women's images in wartime culture, see Hung, pp. 113-116.

43 Xie Bingying, *Kangzhan riji* (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1988 [1938]), pp. 4-5.

young women live among soldiers, it will easily disturb military morale.”⁴⁴ The concept that women had intruded and would intrude into a male domain and as a consequence undermine the myth of the male protector role sparked a sense of anxiety.

It was in challenging such gender prejudice that Xie Bingying highlighted the change war brought to the routine of her civilian life. Her army life was filled with energy and dynamism: “How to describe my happiness? ... I am wild with joy.” “Truly, my happiness goes beyond any language.” Going to the military front was a life changing moment: “I can experience again a meaningful, valuable, grand, and complete life.”⁴⁵ Rather than the tearful mother or girlfriend, which were popular images traditionally associated with wartime women, “the death, excitement, camaraderie, hardships, patriotism, and idealism of war so lit her life.”⁴⁶ Working on the military front, war provided women an opportunity to transgress traditional gender boundaries.

The war provided a great opportunity to reconstruct women’s identity. The Nanjing Decade (1927-37), in Xie’s opinion, was a “long, hard and difficult” time in which women were relegated to an inferior status. Yet, not only would war offer women a chance to free themselves from the old “feudal” shackles, it also opened women’s access to soldiering: “Today I finally have a chance to step out on the military journey and fight to the death with our biggest enemy Japanese imperialists.” “Women could go to the battlefield!”⁴⁷ Xie was not alone in sensing the changes war was going to bring to women. Shen Zijiu, a famous feminist, educator, and chief editor of the journal *Women’s Lives* (*Funü shenghuo*), also celebrated women’s presence on the military front: “What is truly rare is that many who used to work with pens, such as Ding Ling, Xie Bingying, and Hu Lanqi, now lead numbers of young women onto the battleground, the brave [women] grouping together regardless of class background. From now on who dares to say that Chinese women are peaceful and frail? Who can claim again that women cannot fight on the battleground?”⁴⁸ Many educated women probably perceived their wartime roles this way: Their battleground experience would help shatter the traditional images of women as passive and submissive in order to move further toward gender equality.

The battlefield has been perceived as men’s domain, a terrain built upon the promotion of martial and masculine values. When women participated in the military, willingly or not, they were subject to such values, starting with the mundane aspect of physical appearance. Though Xie Bingying did not mention much about costume, a glimpse at Hu Lanqi and her service women may shed light on this issue. Hu Lanqi, an activist from Sichuan province, in many ways followed a similar trajectory to that of Xie Bingying. She also studied in military school during the era of the Northern Expedition, then pursued further education abroad in the early 1930s, and was also imprisoned in a

44 Hu Lanqi, *Hu Lanqi huiyilu 1936-1949* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1987), p. 14.

45 Xie Bingying, p. 3.

46 Barry Brissman & Lily Chia Brissman, trans., *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story: The Autobiography of Xie Bingying* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. xi.

47 Xie Bingying, p. 4.

48 Zijiu, “Kangzhan yinian lai funü gongzuo de jiantao,” *Funü shenghuo* 1.6 (20 July 1938): 7.

foreign land. In September 1937, Hu Lanqi organized the Shanghai Labor Women's War Service Corps and also departed for the Eastern front. At departure, each of the team members took off her usual *qipao* gown, and put on cream-colored shirts and trousers. At the front, the first items they received included a gray cotton uniform, a military cap, and a pair of puttee leggings. They also immediately cut their hair "as short as that of boys."⁴⁹ Women's identity as soldiers on the battlefield starts with a manly appearance. Thus it is no wonder that residents of the suburbs of the capital Nanjing mistook Xie and her teammates for men, which led to their being refused lodging with other women. When the local women were later informed they laughed: "You are women as well. No problem, you are welcome to stay."⁵⁰ In the eyes of local civilians, women soldiers obviously looked manly enough to defy differentiation from their male counterparts.

Mundane as it may seem, the change of costume determines the story of women soldiers on the front: The patriarchal nature of the battleground denied the existence of anything womanly. Besides costume, adjustment to a militarized and masculine lifestyle was a repressive process in which Xie and her teammates had to struggle consciously all the time against their "natural" tendencies. Conservatives were concerned about the degrading lure of women's sexuality, so both Xie's and Hu's service corps received special and repetitive warnings that women must "sacrifice" emotional affairs on the front.⁵¹ In other words, tenderness, delicacy, sentimentality, and desire for emotional engagement—culturally more characterized as feminine—had no space in the military. Women members of the institution must discard such femininities. Xie Bingying recorded "three cardinal principles" that were imposed on the women: If a member fell in love at the front, she would first receive a warning or persuasion in private, then second be subject to public criticism, and if she still persisted she would then be dismissed from the corps. With some women applauding and others passively accepting the policy, it did function as it proclaimed. Liu Qingyun, the vice director of the service corps was the first victim of the policy when she was deprived of her post after becoming involved in a love affair.⁵² In comparison with such external coercion, the anecdote in which Xie Bingying restrained herself from feeling fond of a children's toy further testifies to the effectiveness of the denial of feminine virtues on the military front.⁵³

If women soldiers themselves consciously identified with the masculine, the way they were perceived on the front was different. Neither Xie's nor Hu's service corps ever had the opportunity to engage directly in combat. Rather, they received assignments more expressly supportive in nature. According to their accounts, women soldiers' activities on the front fell into the following categories: catering to the needs and requests of the wounded soldiers, providing medical relief and writing family

49 Hu Lanqi, pp. 17, 19.

50 Xie Bingying, pp. 13-14.

51 Hu Lanqi, p. 17; Xie Bingying, pp. 65-66.

52 Xie Bingying, pp. 71, 140.

53 The toy story happened when Xie picked up a colorful toy that attracted her. Her teammates laughed at her loudly and she herself felt ashamed at her own womanly proclivities. Xie Bingying, p. 116.

letters on their behalf; communicating with local peasant populations for the purpose of mass mobilization; gathering intelligence information by interrogating the arrested or keeping an eye on plain clothes enemy agents; writing reportage literature back to the home front and collecting aid (food, clothes, quilts, reading material, etc) for the army; harvesting crops with local women to ameliorate the shortage of male labour; as well as rehearsing songs and designing dramas to entertain male soldiers and boost the morale of the army. In short, critical to the war effort, the ways women fought on the front were by providing support for the victory of their male counterparts. Narrating women's actual contributions to war, women soldiers of these service corps confirmed the clear sexual division of labor: men combating, women supporting.

Gendered division of responsibility on the battleground serves to underscore the patriarchal foundation of the military front by accentuating the difference between men and women, even when both sexes take on the same tasks and/or women perform at least as well as men. Take war mobilization as an example: In her accounts, Xie Bingying frequently exposed the lack of mass mobilization on the front: "Given this is a nationalist war, commoners should have been more enthusiastic about receiving our army, but nowhere we have passed through has any villager paid us any attention." "We have been neglecting the education of the masses. As a result they are now so ignorant that they don't even know to which nationality they belong." "How can we organize them to support the war when they live in such ignorance?"⁵⁴ To mobilize the masses, women soldiers throughout the war demonstrated initiative in spreading literacy and nationalist education among peasants and the army, training peasant populations with basic military skills and organizing them to provide military supplies.⁵⁵

Service men were also assigned the same tasks. The Y.M.C.A. in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, for example, dispatched teams of their members to the Nanchang front, the destination of the Women's Condolence Corps discussed earlier. The mobilization of the masses was deemed so crucial to the success of the war effort that male soldiers made it a significant component of their service on the front as well. In cooperation with the staff of the Political Training Department, they performed similar tasks to those done by service women, including educating, organizing and training villagers.⁵⁶ Despite the fact that many men were deployed to such tasks, war mobilization was viewed as a "womanly" job, "natural" to women soldiers. Xie Bingying and her service corps received such an assignment under the following justification: "Our staff [of the Political Training Department] consists entirely of men. They do not get along with civilians easily. Local women would immediately hide themselves when they see male soldiers, even closing their doors in our faces. If you women join in, it will be much more convenient because, first of all, civilians will not feel scared. Second, you women are tolerant and mild in temper. For sure you women will be more successful than male soldiers."⁵⁷ Mass mobilization was thus designated as a feminine domain because it evoked the image of caretaking.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 24, 44.

55 Liang Huijin, pp. 368-370.

56 Yue-Gang Qingnianhui, *Suijun sanyue* (1938), pp. 7-8.

57 Xie Bingying, p. 86.

Such identification articulated long-held patriarchal attitudes about what constituted appropriate responsibilities for both men and women. Despite their achievements, women soldiers found that they were still trapped in conventional feminine identities. Very few women enjoyed the right to fight directly in combat—the activity core to the definition of the masculine at war.⁵⁸ This explains why such feminists as Xie Bingying so envied male soldiers that she expressed repeatedly the desire to take guns and kill enemies on the front. Though militarized, women enjoyed little opportunity to break down traditional gender norms.

Conclusion

This article draws on a variety of accounts from the first year of the war to uncover how some Chinese of the time comprehended the circumstances of their wartime worlds. While women were called upon to claim agency and become active participants in the war effort, public rhetoric continued to emphasize their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and housekeepers—sources of moral and emotional support for the cold and brutal battlefield. Thus official discourse during the war tended to reinforce the “stable” separation between war front and home front, men and women. However, with the commencement of the war, men and women bridged the gap between the front and the home by organizing service corps to the battleground and publishing their eyewitness accounts directly from the front, as Xie Bingying did. These literary works shaped how wartime readers might have imagined the war “as it was”—the clear divide between the military front and the home front disappeared.

Even though war provided women with opportunities rarely available before, such as women marching and working on the battlefield, their new experiences did not necessarily put them on an equal footing with men. Serving as supporters to male soldiers in all respects, women were excluded from combat roles, particularly and increasingly after 1938 when women on the home front were encouraged to centre their wartime activities around a domestic life of relief and production. Although soldiering came to represent a routine military role for women, epitomized by the “hundred thousand youth, hundred thousand soldiers” movement—a state-initiated, widespread mobilization of educated youth into soldiering—launched towards the end of the war, women’s activities on the front were shaped by the gender norms of peacetime. To a great extent, women soldiers simply adapted women’s usual cultural and social roles as nurturers, caregivers, and moral supporters. Their experiences on the military front in this sense served only to replicate the gender system of peacetime. Whether “total war” changed Chinese gender relations and systems has been a central conundrum among scholars of the period. The evidence put forward in this article supports the case that the answer was ‘no’.

58 For the very few exceptions of women who did fight in combat, see Liang Jinhui, pp. 377-384.

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