

Women and China's War of Resistance Against Japan¹

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Introduction

Scholarship on wartime China tends to focus primarily on military encounters, wartime politics, and labor and the economy.² More specifically, the majority of existing scholarship on the history and memory of China's War of Resistance Against Japan examines the Nanjing Massacre, as well as Unit 731 (Imperial Japanese Army's biological warfare unit based in northern China).³ Scholars have also explored developments in China's wartime capital of Chongqing, which was under the Guomindang (GMD) or Nationalist Party from 1938 to 1945. They examine such themes as wartime mobilization, collaboration, and resistance.⁴ In China, as elsewhere, the principal actors in wartime history are mostly men.⁵ Studies of women's activities during the war against Japan have investigated Chinese women writers' experience in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, the impact of the war on Chinese feminist activists, women's participation in guerilla and political propaganda activities in and around Beijing and Shanghai, and women's participation in anti-Japanese resistance under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and in CCP-controlled areas.⁶ Not many studies have been conducted on the wartime experiences of women in GMD-held Chongqing.

Exactly what role did women⁷ play in the wartime capital of Chongqing during China's war against Japan? University- and college-level students of Chinese history and politics, gender and women, and the Asia-Pacific War will find this topic compelling because it provides a more comprehensive picture of China's War of Resistance.⁸ This unit illuminates women's varying

experiences of the war, i.e., how women from all walks of life coped, worked, and lived in Chongqing during this significant period in Chinese history.⁹ Very little has been written on this topic. There are studies of women and disease in Chongqing during the war, and of Madame Jiang Jieshi's hospital visits and efforts to raise awareness and gain support in the United States.¹⁰ It is important to consider the experiences of ordinary women in Chongqing because in China, as elsewhere, they are often marginalized in historical narratives. This point galvanized historian Danke Li to conduct oral interviews with Chongqing women from differing socio-economic backgrounds; the interviews were compiled in her book, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (2010).¹¹ In this unit, students will use interviews from Li's book to answer these central questions: How did women in Chongqing experience the war against Japan?¹² What do their experiences tell us about how war impacts gender and society, and how women's participation in the war impacts wartime Chinese society and politics?¹³ By using interviews with women from diverse backgrounds, students will gain insight into Chongqing women's varied experiences of the war and their profound consequences.

Background

Chongqing became China's capital in 1938 and remained as such for the entirety of the war. Sprawled over steep hills at the junction of the Jialing River and the Yangzi, Chongqing is connected by water to the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan (see figure 1).¹⁴ It is located in a mountainous area in southwest China and was safe from Japanese attack by land, although it had little protection against air attack.¹⁵ The waterways that linked Chongqing to other parts of Sichuan and the southwest region provided the city with access to valuable resources. Chongqing's favorable location and links to other parts of the region allowed the wartime

Figure 1. The Chongqing Region¹⁶



The Chongqing Region

government to maintain a “viable political and economic system to ensure the nation’s survival.”¹⁷

Chongqing was already an important commercial and industrial hub in southwest China since the end of the nineteenth century. The War of Resistance ushered in both economic and educational opportunities that transformed the city “from a regional center to an internationally known wartime capital.” Approximately 200 factories and enterprises relocated to Chongqing in 1938. The number of factories doubled in 1940 to include arsenals, smelting factories, power industries, chemical plants, and textile factories. By 1944, Chongqing served as “the heart of the industrial lifeline in wartime China,” holding 28 per cent of the country’s 4,346 registered factories. Furthermore, four important banks relocated from Shanghai. Following the GMD officials’ move to Chongqing, China’s national library and national museum, in addition to the headquarters of print and broadcast stations, moved to Chongqing. Major newspapers, including *Zhongyang Ribao* [Central Daily], a GMD official paper, the *Xinhua Ribao* [New China Daily], an official newspaper of the CCP, and *Dagongbao* [*L’Impartiale*], a newspaper that represented middle-ground political opinions, followed other media outlets to the city. University professors and students from many of the country’s higher education institutions, including Shanghai’s Fudan University, followed suit and made the same journey to Chongqing.¹⁸ In addition, the telephone system expanded to cover the entire southwest region of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces. International long-distance services were established after 1941, which connected Chongqing to Hong Kong and the United States.¹⁹

An important political development of that time was the Second United Front agreement between the GMD and the CCP forged in September 1937. This paved the way for the Communists and political third parties to participate in wartime Chinese politics and war efforts.

After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937, the Japanese military quickly advanced in north and central China, and this made the support of *all* Chinese people and political groups necessary for national survival. As a result, the CCP's military forces became the Eighth Route Army under the Nationalist government. It opened an office in Chongqing, headed by Zhou Enlai and his wife Deng Yingchao, a veteran of the May Fourth Movement and a prominent feminist in China. Women from all walks of life and differing political persuasions were then encouraged to participate in formal political institutions and wartime mobilization. In 1938, the People's Political Council (PPC) was created to rally the people for war efforts, and women – comprising 10% of the PPC – were appointed as council members. In addition, major political parties, such as the GMD, CCP, and the third parties (nonaligned), officially acknowledged in their party programs the need to include women in wartime mobilization and postwar reconstruction.²⁰ As scholars have pointed out, this had serious political and economic repercussions for women during and after the war.²¹

Numerous women's organizations emerged in Chongqing during the war. Forty registered with the city government in 1941, and women from all political groups recognized and participated in three national organizations: Zhongguo funü weilao ziwei kangzhan jiangshi zonghui (National Association of Chinese Women for the Cheering and Comforting of the Officers and Soldiers of the War of Self-Defense and Resistance Against Japan), Zhongguo zhanshi ertong baoyuhui (Wartime Child Welfare Protection Association), and Xinyun fuzhihui – Xinshenghuo yundong cujin zonghui funü zhidao weiyuanhui (XYCZFWZ or Women's Directorial Committee of New Life Movement Promotion Federation). The directors of these three organizations included women from different political groups: Song Meiling, who headed the national New Life Committee formed in 1934 (and wife of GMD leader Jiang Jieshi); Deng

Yingchao, a CCP representative to the PPC (and wife of CCP leader Zhou Enlai); Shi Liang, a renowned woman lawyer and a leader of the third-force political groups; and Li Dequan, a leader of the YMCA and one-time president of the Chinese Woman's Christian Temperance Union (and wife of Feng Yuxiang, a powerful militarist). These women formed a formidable united front and were engaged in numerous activities, including *weilao* (bringing gifts and greetings to soldiers and their families), fundraising and goods collection, services to the wounded, assistance to *kangshu* (families with members serving in the military), wartime children's welfare and education, and training and organizing *xiangcun fuwutuan* (wartime service teams for the countryside) for mobilizing rural women and organizing them into wartime production. Overall, well-to-do and ordinary women were mobilized en masse in the GMD-held urban sector as well as the surrounding countryside.²² Some of the interviews that were included in this unit were conducted with women from varied socio-economic backgrounds who were involved in these activities.

The war led to a massive influx of people to Chongqing. After the fall of central and east China to Japan by the end of 1937 millions of people fled to the southwest, with many relocating to Sichuan and especially Chongqing. According to Chongqing municipal records, Chongqing's population reached almost 476,000 in 1937. The total population swelled to over one million by 1945, posing a major challenge to Chongqing's resources.²³ There were shortages in housing, water supply, and other basic necessities. Fires caused by Japanese bombs destroyed many of the homes that were made of light materials, and there were inadequate air-raid shelters. Economic conditions worsened. By 1940, inflation rose approximately 10 percent per month. Salaries and wages fell behind inflation. There was widespread malnutrition coupled with the onslaught of tuberculosis and other communicable diseases. People sold furniture, clothing, and heirlooms in

order to survive. Those with money and personal/political connections lived luxuriously in their homes, but majority of the people in Chongqing lived in poverty.²⁴ The interviews that were included in this unit were those with *xiajiang* (downriver) refugee women, well-to-do Chongqing women, and those from the lower classes who experienced the impact of this massive movement of people to Chongqing and the heavy Japanese bombings of the city.

Methodology and Questions to Consider

The sources in this unit are intended to provide varied perspectives on wartime experiences of Chongqing women and the consequences of their participation, if any, in politics, economy, and society.

Sources 1 and 2 show how the influx of *xiajiang* people to Chongqing contributed to rising prices of basic commodities, making it difficult for local women from poor peasant families like Li Shuhua (b.1913) and Wang Shufen (b.1920) to make ends meet.²⁵ Prior to the war, they were able to feed their families and find work. The situation changed, however, during the war with Chongqing's swelling population, rising inflation, and heavy Japanese bombings that razed their homes to the ground. The conditions of *xiajiang* women were not easy either. Source 3 shows the difficulties that Liu Qunying (b.1921) encountered as she and her family (her mother and younger brother) fled from heavily-bombed Wuhan to Chongqing. They were easy targets for robbers and sex offenders, and Liu was forced to have sexual intercourse with a man in return for help and protection of her family.²⁶

The impact of the war on well-to-do families can be gleaned from Source 4, an interview with Chen Guojun (b.1918), daughter of a rich and powerful family, and wife of the king of dyestuffs in southwestern China. The war interrupted her life as a college student. As a student,

she provided assistance to her roommate and friend who was a member of the underground Chinese Communist Party. She helped raise funds for the Women's Directorial Committee of New Life Movement Promotion Federation as well. As a married woman with ample resources and connections, she worked with the wives of several rich businessmen to stage a Beijing opera performance to raise money for the war. She continued to help underground Chinese Communists in Chongqing. This document also suggests that the war interfered with some of Chen Guojun's pleasures, such as playing *majiang* and holding dinner parties.²⁷ Meanwhile, women from poor families like Wu Shuqun (b.1923; source 5) and Xu Chengzhen (b. 1923; source 6) were aware of the fundraising and other kinds of activities that were held in support of the war, but they were too busy surviving and did not have the time or the money to contribute.²⁸

New jobs (e.g., stitching buttonholes on military uniforms, serving as telephone operators) were created in Chongqing, providing work for women who needed to support their families. Sources 5 and 6 also show how women's participation in wartime production affected existing gender relationships and the household division of labor. A heavily-debated issue during this time was whether or not women should stay at home. Women from various political parties participated in this debate. Widespread appeal for the government to guarantee women's rights to equal opportunity in all aspects of their lives resulted in a 1942 national government decree that prevented governmental units from firing women employees. As Li pointed out, wartime debate and the movement for women's economic rights made the question of women's employment an important issue in postwar People's Republic of China and Taiwan.²⁹

Source 7 demonstrates the varied impact of *xiajiang* people on Chongqing. Well-connected and qualified teachers relocated from Shanghai and Beijing, making it possible for local women like Zhu Shuqin (b.1923) to pursue further learning.³⁰ The impact of Zhu's

education on her sense of identity and level of political awareness can be gleaned in this document. Although Zhu did not join GMD and underground CCP members on campus, she did participate in numerous war propaganda activities. Unlike Zhu, Ren Zaiyi (b.1920) joined the Communists in the GMD-controlled Chongqing. She was a senior middle school student when the war broke out in 1937. Ren Zaiyi's participation in war propaganda and popular cultural activities for war mobilization had a profound impact on her life, as illustrated in Source 8.³¹

As students use these sources to answer the main questions in this unit, they will be addressing issues related to gender, as well as class. Scholars who study gender examine how past societies formed their ideas of what it means to be male or female. Norms of masculine and feminine behavior are socially constructed and historically variable.³² As students read and look at these sources, they should identify which of women's wartime experiences are shaped, implicitly or explicitly, by gender ideals. During this period, what opportunities and problems, if any, arise from their being women? From their being women from higher- and lower-classes? From their being *xiajiang* women?

Oral history is a valuable source for historians, especially for those interested in social history and the history of women and gender, because the views and experiences of women are seldom included in official records. Furthermore, not many women, especially from the lower classes, kept records of their experiences. Oral history is, therefore, an appealing method when used in conjunction with written sources. The instructor can supplement these interviews with other types of sources such as newspaper accounts, government pronouncements, and political cartoons. Along with thinking about the content of these sources, students may then consider differences among the types of sources that they are using. How might ideas expressed in oral interviews conducted later differ from contemporary newspaper accounts and official

government pronouncements? What do the oral interviews add that could not be gained from other sources?³³ Students should also consider the period when these interviews were conducted. How might this have shaped how these women remember their wartime experiences?³⁴

Conclusion

Chinese men and women suffered on many levels during the War of Resistance Against Japan. As the interviews in this unit demonstrate, however, women's experiences of the war were compounded by gender. They were vulnerable to sexual abuse, and for some, their hardships were compounded by poor health due to multiple pregnancies.

Yet, the war did not have a uniform impact on women. The social divide in Chongqing society persisted during the war: it inconvenienced well-to-do women's *majiang* games and dancing parties, while it made ordinary women's lives extremely difficult.³⁵ The war had a differential impact on women, depending on a number of factors, including level of education, and the political and economic connections of their families.

Nonetheless, the war against Japan also allowed Chinese women – single and married, those from well-to-do and poor families, *xiajiang* and local women – to break gender norms and engage in activities that were frowned upon under normal circumstances. For some, their participation in wartime mobilization activities had significant impact on their political awareness and sense of identity as Chinese citizens and as women.

¹ I would like to thank the Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad Program, the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, the U.S. Department of Education, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the China Education Association for International Exchange, and other government and non-government organizations that helped make our trip to China a huge success. Furthermore, I would like to thank Professor Danke Li for her book that fills a gap in the scholarship on women and their roles in the wars in Asia. Lastly, I gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions of Margot Landman, and the assistance of Samantha Rubin and Jeremy Knake in the preparation of this curriculum project.

² These works cover such themes as collaboration, heroism, and resistance. See, for example, Parks M. Coble, *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi, 1937-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); and Frederic Wakeman Jr., "Hanjian (Traitor)! Collaboration and Retribution in Wartime Shanghai," in Wen-Hsin Yeh, ed., *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 298-341.

³ See Xiaohua Ma, "Constructing a National Memory of War: War Museums in China, Japan, and the United States," in *The Unpredictability of the Past: Memories of the Asia-Pacific War in U.S.-East Asian Relations*, ed. Marc Gallicchio (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 155-200; Daqing Yang, "The Malleable and the Contested: The Nanjing Massacre in Postwar China and Japan," in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds. T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham and Duke: Duke University Press, 2001), 50-86; Joshua A. Fogel, ed. *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese*

Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame, trans. Karen Sandness (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); Hal Gold, *Unit 731 Testimony* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1996). Historian Danke Li attributed the lack of significant attention given to the Goumindang-controlled wartime capital of Chongqing in China's wartime history to its association with the Nationalist government. The latter lost to the Chinese Communists in 1949. Historian Daqing Yang noted that in the 1980s "the Chinese government began to reassess the wartime united front with the Nationalists," thereby downplaying the tension between CCP and GMD in the history and memory of war in China. Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 10; Yang, "Entangled Memories: China in American and Japanese Remembrances of World War II," in *The Unpredictability of the Past*, 292.

⁴ Federica Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement at War: Wartime Mobilisation and State Control in Chongqing and Chengdu, 1938-1942," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2012): 187-212; Joshua H. Howard, "Chongqing's Most Wanted: Worker Mobility and Resistance in China's Nationalist Arsenal, 1937-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (Oct. 2003): 955-997; Brian G. Martin, "Collaboration within Collaboration: Zhou Fohai's Relations with the Chongqing Government, 1942-1945," *Twentieth-Century China* 34, no. 2 (Apr. 2009): 55-88. Also see Joshua H. Howard, *Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenal, 1937-1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁵ See, for example, Lee McIsaac, "'Righteous Fraternities' and Honorable Men: Sworn Brotherhoods in Wartime Chongqing," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (December 2000): 1641-1655.

⁶ Norman Smith, *Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and the Japanese Occupation* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 204-214; and Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 163-164.

⁷ In this unit, “Chongqing women” include well-to-do and ordinary women who were originally from Chongqing, as well as those who migrated to the city during the war.

⁸ As Li pointed out, “only when both the public and private stories are heard and textual and oral histories are counted can we have a better and more complete understanding of China’s experiences during the War of Resistance.” Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Nicole Elizabeth Barnes, “Disease in the Capital: Nationalist Services and the ‘Sick [Wo]man of East Asia’ in Wartime Chongqing,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2012): 283-303; and Hannah Pakula, *The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 319, 356-357. In addition, Chongqing University professor Zhang Jin’s research project is on Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s war efforts in Chongqing. Following Danke Li’s usage in her book, in the body of this curriculum project Jiang Jieshi, the pinyin transliteration preferred in PRC, is used rather than the older transliteration Chiang Kai-shek.

¹¹ Li interviewed more than fifty Chinese women every summer from 1999 to 2007; the stories of twenty women that she interviewed were included in her book. Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 27.

¹² For a list of interviews used in this unit, see list of readings at the end of this curriculum

project.

¹³ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ Rhoads Murphey, *A History of Asia* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2009), 392-393.

¹⁶ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 16-17. On education in wartime China, also see C.M. Wei, *Education in Wartime China: Chungking Pamphlets no. 7* (Chungking, China: China Information Publishing Co., 1940). Chungking is the old name for Chongqing.

¹⁹ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 14. Wallace Crawford described the extensive air service for goods, people, and mail that linked Chongqing to southwest China during the war. See Wallace Crawford, *Transportation in Wartime China: Chungking Pamphlets no. 8* (Chungking, China: China Information Publishing Co., 1940), 6-8.

²⁰ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 9, 19.

²¹ Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, 195-196. On the PPC and how it encouraged feminist unity, see Edwards, 199-204.

²² Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 20-22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ Murphey, *A History of Asia*, 394.

²⁵ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 83-93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34; 78-83.

²⁸ Ibid., 99-106.

²⁹ Ibid., 96.

³⁰ Ibid., 38-51.

³¹ Ibid., 133-148.

³² Merry E. Wiesner, William Bruce Wheeler, Franklin M. Doeringer, and Kenneth R. Curtis, *Discovering the Global Past: A Look at Evidence*, vol. II, 2nd ed. (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 435.

³³ My thoughts here are influenced by Wiesner et al., *Discovering the Global Past*, 435-436.

³⁴ Another factor that students should think about when reflecting on these interviews is the place where they were conducted. Although it is unclear if some of the interviewees were based outside of China, students may consider how interviews with women based in Taiwan or the U.S. might have differed from those interviewed in China. Thanks to Margot Landman for this important point.

³⁵ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 31.

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LIST OF READINGS FROM LI'S *ECHOES OF CHONGQING*

Source 1: “Women from Poor Peasant Families: Li Shuhua, born in 1913 in Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 83-87.

Source 2: “Wang Shufen, born in 1920 in Tonglian, Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 88-93.

Source 3: “A Xiajiang Woman: Liu Qunying, born in 1921 in Hanchuan, Hubei Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 55-60.

Source 4: “A Woman from a Rich and Powerful Family: Chen Guojun, born in 1918 in Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 78-83.

Source 5: “Daughters: Wu Shuqun, born in 1923 in Jiangbei, Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 99-103.

Source 6: “Xu Chengzhen, born in 1923 in Fuling, Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 103-106.

Source 7: “Students: Zhu Shuqin, born in 1923 in Baxian, Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 38-51.

Source 8: “A Communist Woman Working for the XYCZFZW: Ren Zaiyi, born in 1920 in Yongchuan, Chongqing, Sichuan Province,” in Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*,” 133-148.