
Li’s new release fills a void in scholarship on how ordinary Chinese women lived, worked and coped during China’s War of Resistance against Japan in the wartime capital Chongqing. She uncovers the lesser-known, private experiences of death and suffering in the war by constructing oral histories of women from diverse backgrounds with varied wartime experiences. The book demonstrates how the war altered gender relations, culture, economics, and politics, and argues that women’s management of everyday survival also changed wartime social, political and economic systems. The introduction highlights the importance of women’s private voices in constructing everyday life in wartime from a gendered perspective and revealing the discrepancies between collective memories (national survival/masculine heroism) and individual ones (personal needs/feminine resilience). The first three parts deal with the respective social, economic and political impacts of gender in the war. Each one starts with an outline of the changes in that particular area and then analyses specific issues raised by the subsequent stories as well as the interplay between official history and women’s life experiences. Part IV is an epilogue on women and wartime memory.

The author argues in Part I that gender intersected with social class, family and educational background, political affiliation, personal awareness and public commitment to shape women’s wartime experiences. Ordinary women’s resourcefulness and survival skills kept the nation going. She finds that ordinary women turned to marriage, kinship, regional associations, and classmate relationship as survival networks in the face of bombardment, inflation and shortages of food and medical care. The stories of three students, Zhu Shuqin, Luo Fuhui, and Liu Qunying, suggest that their interactions with *xiajiang* (Lower Yangzi) teachers and classmates drew them into both the progressive resistance culture and socio-cultural modernity (fashion and new gender relations). The author notes that while the war only interrupted the parties of well-to-do Chen Guojun, it brought about inconvenient relocation, economic hardship, and new cultural experiences for Luo Fuhui. In the case of Liu Qunying, it caused the humiliations of trading sex for family survival, unwanted marriage and torture, and it deprived Cui Xiangyu of her husband and financial assistance, which led to the death of her son. The author emphasizes that poor women suffered the most: Li Shuhua had to survive by washing
clothes and transporting garbage for others, and was treated by police as an illegal resident; Wang Shufen worked as a servant, suffering injury and hunger due to Japanese bombardment. The author argues that wartime politics redefined Chinese women as patriotic mothers of the nation by emphasizing female-initiated wartime efforts: the Wartime Child Welfare Protection Association (Zhongguo zhanshi ertong baoyuhui, ZZEB) was established by women activists from all political camps under the leadership of Madame Chiang. Zhao Zhinan grew up in a ZZEB-run institution, and Yang Xianzhi was a ZZEB teacher.

In Part II, the author maintains that most women invented many informal economic activities (gardening, scavenging, selling goods) to feed their families. She finds that participation in production did not bring personal freedom and liberty to daughters: telephone operator Wu Shuqun lost her freedom and independence to an arranged marriage; textile worker Xu Chengzhen’s wage was paid to her father. The author acknowledges that the priority of most housewives was ensuring their family survived rather than war mobilization: Gong Xue was exhausted from keeping her family alive in the midst of bombardments and inflation; the abandoned Zeng Yongqing worked hard to keep her daughter and herself alive. Li points out that the Women’s Directive Committee of the New Life Movement (Xinyun fuzhihui) established a special economic zone in Songji; Gong Zhongxian worked in the modern textile factory there and met Madame Chiang once. She notes that the wartime economy provided opportunities for local leaders to undermine the Nationalist influence: the founder of Minsheng Shipping Company Lu Zuofu developed the Beipei district into a relatively independent industrial and intellectual center, where college graduate Chang Longyu worked as a financial analyst for Minsheng.

Part III studies gender’s political impact and argues that the struggle for political power in Chongqing catalyzed ordinary women into involvement in war mobilization at the grass roots level. The author argues that political activism rather than education determined whether a woman could assert her gender identity and redefine gender presentations during the war. The conflict provided women with a social and political context to link their search for personal liberation with the liberation of the nation. She found that school students were politically active and popular culture (street dramas, songs, and wall bulletins) played an important role in war mobilization and personal empowerment for women.
The author portrays the political activism of women from different political affiliations in Part III. Ren Zaiyi worked for the Women’s Directive Committee of the New Life Movement by posting wall bulletins, delivering public speeches, performing in drama troupe, editing a women’s journal, and helping families with soldiers in the military. Communist Bai Herong joined singing and theatrical groups to mobilize local people. She broke an arranged marriage and studied in Beipei, where she met and worked with her Communist lover for war mobilization. Luo Zhiyong was involved in patriotic activities organized by both the National Salvation Society (Jiuguohui) and the underground CCP before July 1937. Her turbulent relationship with her boyfriend did not stop her from participation in war mobilization when the hostilities began. CCP member Wang Su did everything for the party - stealing family money to get party members out of jail, fighting for her inheritance to invest in party work, protecting the party’s secret documents, and even accepting a husband arranged by the party.

The book sheds light on how ordinary people lived in wartime from a female perspective, and brings human touches to the official propaganda of a united front against Japan.

(Yuxin Ma, University of Louisville)