


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women's Activism and Mobilization in Wartime China: Cadre Training, National Economic Production, and Workers' Literacy (1937–1945)

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Abstract

The mobilization of women pursued by the Women's Advisory Committee (Funü zhidao weiyuanhui 婦女指導委員會) during the war against Japan (1937–1945) has mainly been associated with the wider war effort in the country and resistance to the enemy. This article takes a different viewpoint and argues that the programs implemented by women activists in this committee looked beyond the immediate wartime necessity and tried to secure also long-term gains for women. The mobilization transcended traditional gender roles of wives and mothers and paid particular attention to the involvement of middle- and lower-class women. This article examines women's activism and mobilization in the context of three main areas: first, the women's cadre training in the wartime capital Chongqing and in provinces and counties across China; second, the national economic production; and third, the literacy campaigns conducted among women factory workers. It concludes that women activists knowingly used the wartime crisis to provide fellow women with the tools for securing economic and social independence while addressing the wartime emergencies.

Keywords: women's activism; mobilization; Women's Advisory Committee; cadre training; national economic production; workers' literacy

[M]any disputes [among women workers] arose from small matters, but after receiving training for over a month, they have improved already, though the biased and narrow-minded kinship is not easy to wash clean. As for ourselves, of course, [we] shall use the greatest determination and willpower to motivate, enlighten,

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[and] enable them to understand the importance of [wartime] production and standing at the forefront of production!¹

These observations were voiced in 1939 by Ms. Li 李, an experienced rural service worker in charge of education at the textile factory at No. 8 Rural Services Center (nongcun fuwuqu 農村服務區)² located about 20 *li* from the city of Ji'an in Jiangxi province.³ Not only was she overseeing the education program at this factory, but she was responsible for education at the Center.⁴ Between 1934 and 1936, ten Rural Services Centers were set up across Jiangxi and were directed by missionary Zhang Fuliang 張福良. They were part of a larger economic and social development program funded by the League of Nations, national institutions and governmental bodies, and were conceived for furthering the development of local agriculture, economic cooperation, health, and education.⁵ On paper, the Centers were a separate endeavor, but their rationale, aims and funding often overlapped with Chiang Kai-Shek and Song Meiling's program of rural regeneration which was implemented in the areas previously occupied by the Communists, and was an integral part of the New Life Movement's ideology and mobilization.⁶ In 1939, the Jiangxi provincial government opened two factories that employed refugees fleeing war-torn areas, one in Dunhou village 敦厚村 in the outskirts of Ji'an and one in Gan County. They employed 1,500 refugees and the staff came from the Rural Services Centers' personnel evacuated from the north to the south of the province following the Japanese advance.⁷

Ms. Li certainly cast herself as being a cut above the women workers who were employed at the factory. She was also keenly aware of the different mindsets of her contemporary women activists and the workers. Like her, such activists were consciously committed to the goal of wartime production, while the latter group's outlook was self-ish and rooted in family interest. She associated the act of changing women's ideas for the common good with the notions of self-improvement and progress. Moreover, Li used the metaphor of "washing clean" women's mindsets to draw a line between the notion of a clean mind: one that was rid of old customs, and the new. What surfaces from Li's words is an obvious sense of mission, almost akin to missionary zeal, to

¹Wei Yuan 魏媛, "Ji'an nanmin gongchang" 江西難民工廠, originally published in *Jiangxi funü*, 1, 1939.1, in *Zhongguo jinxiandai nüxing qikan huibian* 中國僅限女性 期刊 會變 (hereafter, ZJNQH), (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2008), vol. 1, 191. All future page references are to the 2008 edition.

²Alternative translations are: Rural Welfare Centers and New Life Centers; William Wei, *Counterrevolution in China: The Nationalists in Jiangxi during the Soviet Period*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), Table A-11, 168; Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 167; and James C. Thomson, Jr, *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928–1937*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 265n61.

³Wei Yuan, "Ji'an nanmin gongchang," 189.

⁴Wei Yuan, "Ji'an nanmin gongchang," 191.

⁵Zhang Fuliang 張福良, "Jiangxi zhi nongcun fuwu" 江西之農村服務, in *Ganzheng shinian* 贛政十年, edited by Ganzheng shinian bianji weiyuanhui, (no pub.: December 1941), 1–4; Zanasi, *Saving the Nation*, 167–68.

⁶On the New Life Movement ideology, rural programs in Jiangxi, and Christian cooperation, see Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counter-Revolution," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34.4 (1975), 945–80; Thomson, *While China Faced West*, 175–192; Federica Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province, 1934–1938," *Modern Asian Studies* 44.5 (2010), 972–77.

⁷Zhang Fuliang, "Jiangxi zhi nongcun fuwu," 1–5.

civilizing women workers who otherwise were unable to change their ways. Li's mindset was not exceptional among the Rural Service Centers' workforce. Moreover, it was shared by a cohort of elite women, well-educated and in prominent positions, who worked for the Women's Advisory Committee (Funü zhidao weiyuanhui 婦女指導委員會, hereafter WAC) and felt both duty-bound and held the strong belief that they could play a pivotal role in obtaining long-term material and social gains for women.⁸

Ms. Li's opinion was relayed by Wei Yuan 魏媛, a member of the Women's Advisory Committee's office who was visiting the factory and published her report in the periodical *Jiangxi Women* (Jiangxi Funü 江西婦女). The committee was founded in February 1936, and was directed by Song Meiling, Chiang Kai-shek's wife. It was part of the Nationalists' General Association for the Promotion of the New Life Movement (Xin shenghuo yundong cujin zonghui 新生活運動促進總會) with the specific purpose of implementing women's mobilization. By 1939, it had set up branches across China and was the central organization that dealt with wartime mobilization of women.⁹

The quotation is a useful starting point for this article because it illustrates very aptly the dual purpose of women's mobilization during the wartime period: relief, on the one hand, and training (xunlian 訓練), on the other. This article argues that women's mobilization during the wartime period worked essentially like a Trojan horse. Wrapped up in the wartime work that came out of genuine daily emergencies, women's organizations sought to educate and, more specifically, "train" women by pushing the development of women's leadership skills, economic independence, and literacy. This approach was championed by women not only to transcend the traditional gender roles of wives and mothers, but also to secure long-lasting changes in women's living standard and place in society. The records show that the WAC and their working teams articulated openly the link between shouldering wartime responsibilities and gradually gaining power and putting an end to society's discrimination and contempt towards all women's work. They viewed the training of "countless heroes, tenacious leaders and cadres" as means to achieve and cement such goals.¹⁰ It could be argued that women's mobilization before the wartime period had trodden similar paths, for instance women's campaigning for equal rights and access to education was at the heart of the suffrage and the May Fourth movements, however, there was a big shift in the wartime narrative and actions. Women were aware that the war created the space and conditions for a women-led movement nationwide: nationalistic, inclusive in its aims, and capable of engaging upper-level women who had never taken part in women's movements and mobilization.¹¹

Recent studies have emphasized the significance of women's activism and mobilization in Republican China, and the war against Japan is one of the most prolific periods

⁸Helen M. Schneider, "Mobilising Women: The Women's Advisory Council, Resistance and Reconstruction during China's War with Japan," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 11.2 (2012), 214–16, 223–31.

⁹Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province," 991, 998.

¹⁰Guomindang Historical Commission, Taipei, 483/31, "Xinyun funü gongzuo weiyuanhui ji Xin shenghuo funü gongzuo dui de jieshao" 新運婦女工作委員會及新生活婦女工作隊的介紹, in *Xinyun funü zhidao weiyuanhui san zhounian jinian tekan* 新運婦女指導委員會三周年紀念特刊, edited by Fuzhihui wenhua shiye zu (Chongqing: Funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu, July 1941), 68.

¹¹Guomindang Historical Commission, Taipei, 483/31, "Xinyun funü gongzuo weiyuanhui," 68.

of inquiry,¹² but only a handful of studies focused on the WAC either directly or tangentially, chiefly because it was an agency under the direct Nationalists' control and historians have underrated its significance and reach. Xia Rong 夏蓉's monograph focused on the WAC and argued that it "acted as the engine for women's national mobilization," and that their work was not limited to wartime issues. She mentioned, for instance, the advancement of women's constitutional rights and the focus on gender equality, and highlighted the main limitations, namely the top-down approach and the breakdown at the local level.¹³ Xia Rong's book is valuable for mapping out the WAC's structure and activities, and the leading personalities involved, but it is less forthcoming in pinpointing the involvement of middle- and lower-class women in the WAC's activities. Harriet Zundorfer and Helen Schneider analyzed respectively women's activism during the first period of the United Front in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Chongqing, and the work of the leaders in the WAC in the realms of rural reconstruction and women's health. Zundorfer maintained that the collaboration among women was the key to getting relief services off the ground between 1937 and 1940; while Schneider argued that progressive women in the WAC tackled social issues effectively and in some cases sought to acquire "political and social influence" through their organization and participation in wartime work.¹⁴ These articles engaged chiefly with women's involvement in the immediate relief of refugees, particularly children and aspects of the rural services that emphasized women's health and well-being, the so-called "gendered" tasks of caregivers that fit comfortably with the Guomindang's (Nationalist Party) ideology in the 1930s. Furthermore, they analyzed the involvement of urbanized women and personalities as well as leading figures who were both part of the establishment and remarkably well educated.¹⁵ They left written records in virtue of their public roles, but although they contributed greatly to women's mobilization, their involvement only offers partial clues regarding the scope of women's activism and mobilization and how they operated and affected local women across wartime unoccupied areas on the ground.

This article shifts the focus to unexplored areas of women's activities, with specific attention to the middle- and lower ranks of women activists in women's war mobilization. Women's experience of activism and mobilization differed: for instance, the WAC trained nearly 4,900 women in Chongqing and across Nationalist-held areas and employed them as cadres in the organization between 1939 and 1944.¹⁶

¹²Examples of recent monographs are Louise Edwards's analysis of women's activism and mobilization for attaining equal rights in Republican China: *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Danke Li's collection and analysis of oral histories about women's work experience in wartime factories: *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and Nicole Barnes's exploration of professional and volunteer women who worked in medicine and public health: *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 1–13. Barnes concluded that women's medical work promoted shared emotions and the formation of a modern national community.

¹³Xia Rong 夏蓉, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng* 婦女指道委員會與抗日戰爭 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2010), 1–10, quotation 3.

¹⁴Harriet T. Zundorfer, "Wartime Refugee Relief in Chinese cities and Women's Political Activism, 1937–1940," in *New Narratives of Urban Space in Republican Chinese Cities*, edited by Billy K.L. So and Madeleine Zelin (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 65–94; Schneider, "Mobilising Women," 213–36, quotation 214.

¹⁵See also Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, and Vivienne Xiangwei Guo, "Forging a Women's United Front: Chinese Elite Women's Networks for National Salvation and Resistance, 1932–1938," *Modern Asian Studies* 53.2 (2019), 483–511.

¹⁶Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 34, Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu, ed., *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui qi zhou jinian tekan*

Concurrently, it provided community-based women's training and mobilization for thousands (e.g., at district level and below, and factories) which only in part served the purpose of recruiting into the WAC, but focused largely on improving literacy, leadership skills, and supporting the war effort.¹⁷ The article also sets aside the logic of binary political affiliations for framing the work of women's activists and mobilization, as many activists worked within the framework and organization of the Nationalists but did not actively support the Guomindang or the Chinese Communist Party and joined in because of the wartime context and the call to arms. It uses, however, political affiliations to illustrate the breath of the WAC's leadership and the pressure deriving from the politically competitive environment of the Second United Front in which WAC's leaders and women activists had to operate. First, this article discusses the organization of the WAC, which oversaw the organization and coordination of women's mobilization across China during the war. The analysis demonstrates that the organization attracted women from a wide political and social spectrum. Second, it examines women's training as a cornerstone program of wartime mobilization. This was based on women activists' idea that for change to take hold, women in rural areas needed to become activists themselves. Training programs below the county level were launched with this purpose in mind. They defied the traditional family order, as shown by the criticism of husbands and mothers-in-law, and by equipping women with leadership skills. Third, this article examines women's involvement in the national economic production in factories and cooperatives under the WAC's control in the experimental districts (or zones) of Baisha 白紗, Songgai 松溉, and Leshan 樂山 in Sichuan province and across China. At a time when the Communists had yet to make an official policy of women's participation in the economic production in Yan'an,¹⁸ these projects demonstrate the attention devoted to fostering women's economic independence and promoting comprehensive social welfare and foreshadow the organization of the *danwei* and the communes in 1950s China. Last, this article explores the literacy campaigns that were conducted for women workers in textile factories, where women activists were unwelcomed by the factories' managers who feared that education would only stir up trouble. Overall, between 1939 and 1944, 20,629 women workers learned to read and 4,005 progressed to advanced courses.¹⁹

Drawing on these examples, the article concludes that women's mobilization during wartime was configured through the cooperation of women from different backgrounds

新生貨婦女指導委員會七周年紀念特刊 (Chongqing: Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu, 1945), Appendix, Table 1, 1.

¹⁷“Sheng funü zhidaochu xiaoxi” 省婦女指導處消息, *Jiangxi funü* 2, 1940.6 in ZJNQH, vol. 1, 524; The Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing 587(5)-6, “Xin shenghuo yundong cujin hui Henan funü gongzuo weiyuanhui shengchan shiye zu er yue gongzuo jihua shu,” 新生活運動促進會河南婦女工作委員會生產事業組二月工作計畫書, n.d.

¹⁸According to Stranahan Jackal, the Communists made participation in the economic “production” a “keystone” of their policy towards women and framed it as women's route to “liberation” in February 1943, in the context of the Great Economic Drive. From then onwards, government-owned textile factories increased, but the focus remained on “home industry” and handicraft cooperatives. Party cadres provided women the training to enable to take on textile work. Patricia Stranahan Jackal, “Changes in Policy for Yanan Women, 1935–1947,” *Modern China* 7, .1 (1981), 95–97, and “Labor Heroines of Yan'an,” *Modern China* 9, .2 (1983), 234–36.

¹⁹Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 34, Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu, ed., *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui qi zhou jinian tekan*, Appendix, Table 8, 5.

and programs that were meant to disengage women from traditional social roles. In this respect, women activists pursued an agenda that was much more than a response to the wartime emergencies, but one aiming at longer-term change. The political context of the Civil War and the Nationalists' defeat hindered the consolidation of the results achieved during the wartime mobilization. However, the wartime experience of women's mobilization served as a springboard for women's organizations and movements in post-1949 People's Republic of China and Taiwan, though still disappointingly within the constraints of one-party state systems.²⁰

Organizing Women's Wartime Mobilization under the Nationalists

Civilian mobilization is framed across 1930s governmental sources as steady and centralized. Therein, the prevailing narrative is that any governmental organization in Nationalist China operated under the watchful eye of the Nationalist Government and the party and was tightly regulated and controlled. This is correct, but only up to a point. An analysis of the WAC's structure and work shows that the picture was much more nuanced and there existed spaces for government-funded organizations to operate with a degree of autonomy. In the WAC's case, this was made possible by the combination of its high-profile director, Song Meiling, and the disruption brought by the war, which made blanket control utterly unrealistic. Moreover, the WAC involved women from different backgrounds, and this influenced its range of interests and activities, especially during the first years of the war. Nonetheless, the government's sponsorship did raise concern among women activists who joined the WAC, and this concern was never successfully dispelled. In a way, it was a tension that could never be completely resolved, as the WAC depended on government funding, and women activists needed the assistance and acceptance of local governments at the provincial and county levels as well as the gentry for projects to be implemented.

The WAC was a committee-branch of the General Association for the Promotion of the New Life Movement set up in 1936 in Nanjing. The NLM was a top-down mobilization deployed by the Nationalists during the Fifth Encirclement Campaign (1933–1934) against the Communists in Jiangxi to curb the radical mobilization developed by the Communists in the rural areas. It was also used as the ideological glue to keep a factionalist Guomindang and polarized society together by rekindling native ideas such as Confucianism and its principles and combining them with foreign ideologies such as fascism and Christian values, all wrapped up in self-strengthening and nationalist slogans. To achieve widespread mobilization, the government mandated the creation of local NLM committees, and from the very start, these in turn developed sections devoted to women's mobilization.²¹ Women's activism and mobilization was something that the NLM General Association had carried out before the WAC's formation, with projects that emphasized the improvement of women's lives.²²

²⁰The links with post-1949 are beyond the scope of this article and are still being explored. For preliminary reflections on the correlation with the women's movement in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan see, respectively, Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, Conclusion, 193–201 and Doris Chang, *Women's Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 66–75; for the WAC's work during the Civil War, Schneider, "Mobilising Women," 232–33.

²¹Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province," 961–1000.

²²Two early examples were the Nanchang Association for the Improvement of Women's Living Conditions (Nanchang funü shenghuo gaijin hui) established on 20 April 1935 and chaired by Gu Boyun, wife of Jiangxi

It is from this ideological and organizational background that the WAC emerged. However, the committee differed from its precursors in two regards. Firstly, the war provided the WAC with space to grow and women's leadership at a time when the government had more pressing preoccupations. This is proven by the relatively free-rein and the direction taken by the WAC since its re-organization following the Second United Front in 1937. In this committee, we find women in positions of influence who did not belong to the Guomindang circles, such as lawyer and human rights activist Shi Liang 史良, who played an important role in the organization of the relief effort at Wuhan in 1938;²³ the academic Wu Yifang 吳貽芳, who was the president of Jinling College and president of the National Christian Council of China (Zhonghua quanguo jidujiao xiejin hui 中華全國基督教協進會); and Liu Qingyang 劉清揚, the communist activist who was tasked by Song Meiling with the key job of recruiting and training WAC cadres.²⁴ Secondly, there was a change in the focus and geographical scope of recruits due to the United Front political context and the worsening of wartime emergencies that called for immediate responses by government-led organizations. By January 1938, thousands of refugees had reached the safety of Wuhan. This prompted the reorganization of the Relief Committee (Zhenjihui 賑濟會),²⁵ which signaled a move toward a centralized governmental structure tasked with handling the refugee emergency. Zurndorfer argues that early "management of the war's refugee crisis in ... three urban areas not only thrust women in leadership positions but also became an arena where women activists with diverse political loyalties put aside their differences and attempted to engender a certain force in China's state-building effort."²⁶ It was in this turmoil that the WAC initiated consultations with women's activists, rapidly leading to its reorganization. As a result, the objectives set up by this organization after the war started represented a compromise reached by women from across the political spectrum and society.

provincial governor Xiong Shihui; and the Shanghai County Women's Association for the promotion of the New Life Movement set up on 8 March 1935, on Women's Day. Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province," 989–91; Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, Table 1.7, 36; Guan Meirong 管梅瑤, "Jiangxi sheng funü shenghuo gaijin hui liang nian lai de gongzuo zong baogao" 江西省女生活改進會兩年來的工作總報告, *Jiangxi funü* 1, 1939.4, in *ZJNQH*, vol. 1, 111.

²³Mackinnon emphasized Shi Liang's role in the organization of the relief effort in Wuhan and her lobbying to involve the Song sisters and Song Meiling in particular. Conversely, Zurndorfer believed that Shi Liang's role may have been exaggerated, and that the relief effort was jointly shouldered by organizations on the ground. Stephen R. Mackinnon, *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 56–58; Zurndorfer, "Wartime Refugee Relief in Chinese Cities," 82n80 and 78–79.

²⁴Carol Lee Hamrin, "Wu Yifang," in *Stories of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/wu-yifang>, accessed 19/10/2022; Jin Feng, *The Making of a Family Saga: Ginling College* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 124–25; and Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, Table 2.1, 108–9. For the National Salvation Movement, see Parks Coble, "The National Salvation Movement and Social Networks in Republican Shanghai," in *At the Crossroads of Empires*, edited by Nara Dillon and Jean C. Oi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 110–30.

²⁵The Relief Committee was established in June 1929 and between February and April 1938 was reorganized to serve the needs of war relief. The Committee was subordinated to the Administrative Yuan. Han Wenchang 韩文昌 and Shao Ling 邵玲, eds., *Minguo shiqi zhongyang guojia jiguan zuzhi gaishu* 民國時期中央國家機關組織概述 (Beijing: Zhongguo Dang'an Chubanshe, 1994), 446; Harriet T. Zurndorfer "Wartime Refugee Relief in Chinese Cities," 78–79.

²⁶Harriet T. Zurndorfer "Wartime Refugee Relief in Chinese Cities," 72.

The Lushan Women's Talks (Lushan funü tanhua hui 廬山婦女談話會) held by Song Meiling at Lushan in Jiangxi from May 20 to 25, 1938 and a second round of talks at Hankou on July 1 brought women and existing women's organizations together to coordinate the response to the emergencies created by the war, agree on a joint program of women's training, focus on education and mobilization, and give and receive reassurance that women's work would be protected from political pressures. The WAC's composition was rejigged, with forty-six committee members to accommodate new members, ten in the standing committee and thirty-six advisors. Four of the advisors were from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Deng Yingchao 鄧穎超 and Meng Qingshu 孟慶樹, who had also attended the Lushan Talks, and Kang Keqing 康克清 and Cao Mengjun 曹孟君. Deng Yingchao was married to Zhou Enlai, Kang Keqing was Zhu De's wife, and Cao Mengjun was married to Wang Kunlun.²⁷ Between 1938 and 1945, the committee developed nine divisions: the combat area service, the rural service, children's welfare, comforting work, industrial production, life guidance, culture, training, and general affairs.²⁸ Some of these divisions were indeed connected directly to the wartime work, but others were a furtherance of the work undertaken by women activists—many of whom did not align with the Guomindang—before the war, at a time when their activities had already spread to the rural areas beyond the “poorest and oppressed urban women.”²⁹ This demonstrates that among women activists attention to the economic and social divide between urban and rural women was present even before cooperation with the CCP was sealed. It indicates also that a solid base for compromise and cooperation was possible on the back of the work that had already been implemented, and that views on the priorities among women from different backgrounds were not that far apart. The high profile of the communist members also suggest that participation was endorsed by the CCP.

Nonetheless, there was no getting around the fact that the NLM and its NLM General Association, to which the WAC was subordinated, were under the control of the Nationalists, and this was a problem. Public pronouncements reassured activists that their work would be insulated from political encroachment. Song Meiling, for instance, tried to dispel the idea that the General Association could have a political use or indeed dance to the tune of Guomindang. She insisted on the separation between the Nationalists' mobilization campaign (the NLM) and maintained that the NLM General Association was “serving the people.”³⁰ Obviously, the WAC's work was not totally insulated from political developments, but we need to be nuanced in assessing the circumstances and the balance of power under which organizations such as the WAC operated. The involvement of women such as Liu Qingyang proves that the WAC's decision-making process was autonomous. Chen Lifu, Chiang Kai-shek's right-hand man, opposed Song Meiling's nomination of Liu to the influential job of director

²⁷Xia Rong puts the latter also on the Communists' side. Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 100, 112, 121–22 and Table 2.2, 123.

²⁸The list is based on the organizational chart in Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 355. For the analysis of the work of the life guidance and rural service divisions in the WAC, see Schneider, “Mobilising Women,” 223–28.

²⁹One such example was the working plan implemented by the Jiangxi Association for the Improvement of Women's Living Conditions since spring 1937. This association was the Nanchang Association renamed (see note 22, above). Guan Meirong, “Jiangxi sheng funü shenghuo gaijinhui,” 111–12.

³⁰Song Meiling, “Funü tanhua hui yanjiangci,” *Funü shenghuo* [Women's life], 6.3 (5 June 1938), unpaginated, quoted in Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 112.

of the training program, on the grounds that she was a member of the CCP,³¹ but not even the extremely powerful Chen was able to prevent Liu's participation in the WAC.

Despite this, there were good reasons for concern among activists regarding the government's encroachment into their decisional autonomy, especially with regard to the organization of the local WAC structure through the NLM Women's Work Committees (Xinyun funü gongzuo weiyuanhui 新運婦女工作委員會). From September 1938 onward, provinces established such committees and even though formally they were not attached to the administrative structure, they still had to work in close contact with it.³² In some cases, this reorganization triggered a closer integration with administrative offices; for instance, between August and September 1938, the Jiangxi Association for the Improvement of Women's Living Conditions was reorganized into the Jiangxi WAC Office (Jiangxi sheng funü zhidao chu 江西婦女指導處) within the provincial government's Women's Work Department (Funü gongzuo bumen 婦女工作部門), and similar WAC offices were set up in twenty counties within the county governments.³³ The closer coordination with local governments was presented as an opportunity to improve the implementation of women-related programs, but it raised worries, which in the passage below, Xiong Zhi 熊芷,³⁴ an educationalist and well-respected figure in women's activism, sought to assuage from the pages of *Jiangxi Women*. She cautioned women to toe the line and improve their behavior:

[N]ow that the Jiangxi Women's Advisory Committee office is in the provincial administrative system [and] a pioneering women's administrative organ, I hope that we will not criticize others and start working on ourselves. Everyone must set an example and discard bad habits such as negligence, avoiding responsibility, and mixing personal issues with work, and ought to adopt democratic practice and fulfil our duty of being people's servants.³⁵

Collaboration with the local administration was necessary for the local WAC offices to operate, even if it meant additional scrutiny of their activities and reliance on the local officials. Conversely, the integration of the WAC's office in Jiangxi shows that the WAC's offices were needed by the local government for duties that otherwise would have fallen on them, be they wartime propaganda, children's and women's welfare, or the wartime effort. In other words, this was recognition that local governments were dependent on women's work.

³¹Liu Qingyang 劉清揚, "Huiyi Xin funü zhidao weiyuanhui xunlian zu" 回憶新運婦女指導委員會, in *Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi quanguo weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui bian*, edited by Wenshi ziliao xuan ji (Beijing: Wenshiziliao chubanshe, 1983, no. 85), 59.

³²For the list of NLM Women's Work Committees across the country, see Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, Table 4.11, 329–30.

³³Xiong Zhi 熊芷, "Jiangxi sheng Funü zhidao chu de chengli" 江西省婦女指導處的成立, *Jiangxi funü* 2, 1939.1, in *ZJNQH*, vol. 1, 248.

³⁴Xiong Zhi's profile is emblematic of the professionalism and dedication of some of the women active in Jiangxi at this time. Xiong was the daughter of Xiong Xiling a well-known and respected philanthropist who in 1918 had set up a children's home in Beijing's Western Hills. She studied early childhood education at Columbia University and, upon her return to China in 1933, took responsibility for one of the facilities at Fragrant Hills. Xiong Zhi was also among the advisors of the WAC in July 1938. Norman D. Apter, *Saving the Young: A History of the Child Relief Movement in Modern China* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 50, 163–64.

³⁵Xiong Zhi, "Jiangxi sheng Funü zhidaochu de chengli," 248–49.

Cadre Training

The training of “cadres” (ganbu 幹部) both at the central and local levels constituted one of the most ambitious undertakings of the WAC, with its emphasis on equipping women with leadership skills and knowledge. The training courses started in July 1938 in Wuhan under the directorship of Liu Qingyang and the WAC training division in Chongqing. Liu had been, for a long time, committed to work for women’s emancipation and mobilization. During the First United Front, she worked at the Guomindang Women’s Department in Wuhan. After the collapse of the United Front, she set up different anti-Japanese associations. She chaired the Beijing Women’s National Association until the war erupted, when she moved to Wuhan.³⁶ The training program ran efficiently between 1938 and 1940, but both Liu’s departure and the worsening of the war in Chongqing affected the number of women trained in the long run. Nonetheless, the training programs reached rural women directly: whereas the women trained at the central level were recruited into the WAC structure, the training at the local levels was used both to identify potential cadres and provided potted training with the purpose of mobilizing rural women more broadly towards goals set up by the WAC. We shall first examine how the actual recruitment worked and why it slowed down, and then discuss the training programs in Jiangxi and Henan provinces to show the issues women activists faced.

The number of women cadres trained between July 1938 and 1944 was relatively small compared to the range of activities managed by the WAC. During this period, 1,256 women underwent training and from 1,111 to 1,138 graduated.³⁷ Enrolment peaked between June 1939 and November 1940 with 882 women, among whom 832 graduated; recruitment lagged behind the years following with an intake of 234 women, of whom only 155 graduated.³⁸ Upon receiving their training, the women were organized in teams and dispatched to rural areas; while the WAC was in Wuhan, they were sent to counties across Hubei and Hunan; after the WAC moved to Chongqing, they engaged in rural work in Sichuan or were assigned to Sichuan factories and Chongqing.³⁹ Additionally, 278 women were trained and graduated at the NLM women’s handicraft cooperatives (Xinyun funü gongyishe 新運婦女工藝社), 1,413 at Songgai textile experimental district (Songgai fangzhi shiyan qu 松概紡織試驗區), and 2,049 at Leshan sericulture experimental district (Leshan cansi shiyan qu 樂山蠶絲試驗區).⁴⁰

Liu Qingyang’s recollection highlights the fragility of the cooperation during the Second United Front. Liu credits Song Meiling for her appointment and for sheltering the WAC’s work from Chen Lifu and Chen Cheng’s encroachment, but as the relationship between the Nationalists and the Communists became more strained, the WAC suffered. In winter 1940, Song Meiling considered the number of women trained

³⁶Sue Wiles, “Liu Qingyang”, in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, edited by Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), vol. 2, 358–59.

³⁷The higher number is recorded in Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 34, *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu*, ed., *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui qi zhou jinian tekan*, Appendix, Table 1, 1.

³⁸Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, Table 4.4, 283.

³⁹Liu Qingyang, “Huiyi Xin funü zhidao weiyuanhui xunlian zu,” 62, 64, 72–73.

⁴⁰Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 34, *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu*, ed., *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui qi zhou jinian tekan*, Appendix, Table 1, 1.

sufficient and tasked Liu instead with inspecting the women's teams on the ground. According to Liu, she was ready to leave WAC then, but Zhou Enlai asked her to stay put. In the end, the New Fourth Army Incident in January 1941 brought Liu's work to an end. Having obtained Zhou Enlai's permission, Liu left Chongqing and only when she reached the safety of Hong Kong in June 1941 handed in her resignation from the WAC.⁴¹

During Liu's directorship, more women received training, and perhaps her background attracted a wider pool of women. In describing the first intake of women in Wuhan, Liu remarked that their cultural level was high and that they all had attained a senior middle school or teaching training college diploma; in fact, two thirds of them were elementary school teachers in Wuhan.⁴² The transfer of the wartime capital to Chongqing and the worsening of the war produced fewer volunteers. Women were more reluctant to join, often constrained by economic pressure and family responsibility under increasingly unstable circumstances. Hence, recruitment dipped in the pool of candidates with a lower education level, such as with the cohort who joined the training courses between November 1941 and February 1942, and women found the training period challenging.⁴³ The drop in recruitment mattered because fewer cadres would then be available to train women activists at the local levels making, as we shall see, the recruitment and training more dependent on local administrative offices in some places.

If training was difficult at the central level, it was even worse outside Chongqing. The local NLM Women's Work Committees oversaw the training of local cadres. The creation of the WAC's infrastructure at the provincial level was commanded from above, as evidenced by the dates these committees were established, but the capacity to operate depended on local circumstances. Many of the local committees' activities were disrupted shortly after they were set up following the Japanese advance.⁴⁴ However, overall, women used the committees as springboards from which to mobilize other women, despite wartime disruption; their work extended well beyond the Chongqing area and urban based-educated women. For instance, in Jiangxi and Henan, approaches to recruitment differed, but the aim was consistently focused on women's training below the county level both for acquiring new cadres and generating women's mobilization.

The WAC's office at Ji'an, Jiangxi, was established in August 1938. The city became the temporary provincial capital city following the Japanese's occupation of Nanchang in late 1939; by then, Ji'an's population had swelled from 30,000 to 100,000.⁴⁵ The Ji'an office started conducting household visits to understand where their actions were needed the most and flush out talents who could be trained as cadres for implementing

⁴¹Liu Qingyang, "Huiyi Xin funü zhidao weiyuanhui xunlian zu," 59–60, 75–76.

⁴²Liu Qingyang, "Huiyi Xin funü zhidao weiyuanhui xunlian zu," 60.

⁴³Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 282–83.

⁴⁴For instance, in Hunan the committee was established in September 1939 at Changsha and during the war moved four times. In Guangdong the committee was launched in July 1938 but it could not even start its work because the Japanese occupied the province, and it resumed its work only later on. Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 196–97, 201, see also Table 4.11, 329–30.

⁴⁵The Jiangxi provincial government finally relocated further south to Taihe in the winter of 1939. "Ji'an funü zhidaochu qi ge yue lai de gongzuo gaikuang" 吉安婦女指導處七個月來的工作概況, *Jiangxi funü*, First Issue, 1939.6, in *ZJNQH*, vol. 1, 35; and Peter Merker, "The Guomintang Regions of Jiangxi," in *China at War: Regions of China, 1937–1945*, edited by Stephen R. Mackinnon, Diana Lary, and Ezra F. Vogel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 300–301.

the WAC's work. By the start of November 1938, twenty women were selected from the house visits, eight of whom had middle school education and the rest elementary school diplomas which shows that their level of education made them more receptive to the call of mobilization from recruiters with whom they shared similar background. The women received ten days of training on rural work and were thereafter assigned to the surrounding rural areas where they would select other women and train them. This work was conducted over three teaching periods in different areas between November 1938 and January 1939. It resulted in the selection and training of 723 women. Next, the office established 83 *bao* 保-level teams,⁴⁶ which involved 10,555 women, and the responsibility of heads-team fell on 83 women selected for their outstanding qualities among the pool of the 723 mentioned above.⁴⁷ The training of cadres at the local level was not separated from the center, and it could provide an opportunity for mobility. For instance, in 1940, there was a call from the WAC to select ten candidates from Jiangxi who would then attend courses for higher-level cadres in Chongqing.⁴⁸

The Henan NLM Women' Work Committee, unlike in Jiangxi province, adopted an uncompromising approach to the recruitment and training of women cadres, and specifically suggested the use of persuasion and coercion. The Henan Committee responded to the mission statement delivered by the WAC of mobilizing women to participate in the "War of Resistance" work and national construction by implementing the training and organization of all kinds of women, such as housewives, professionals, students, workers, peasants, and refugees. The overall objective was that of improving women's culture and material circumstances, as well as expanding women's professional boundaries.⁴⁹ However, the shortage of cadres within the NLM's women's local organization meant that they could not send cadres to the rural areas to perform wartime work, which in turn had an impact on the promotion of literacy campaigns and wartime production. The committee decided to ask the provincial government to contact county governments and required that they select three to five women comrades who, after undergoing a month of tailored training, would then mobilize women locally. The lower level of training would then take place at the *baojia* 保家 and *lianbao* (associated *bao* 聯保) levels, with a focus on involving housewives. The process was marked by a mix of persuasion and force; the teams of women established at the county would pay house visits in the *lianbao* to help women understand the significance of training, but the *baojia* heads were given the power to force mobilization. The one-month training course taught women the Three People's Principles, literacy, essential knowledge about the War of Resistance, and singing.⁵⁰ These subjects championed political loyalty and stoked up resistance, while providing women with the ability to understand and communicate independently; in addition, the inclusion of songs in women's basic training confirms the importance of this medium for informing and mobilizing the population.⁵¹

⁴⁶The *baojia* 保家 system was a mutual control and responsibility system reintroduced by the Nationalist Government. It was enforced through the organization of families on decimal basis below the village level.

⁴⁷"Ji'an funü zhidaochu," 35–36.

⁴⁸"Sheng funü zhidaochu xiaoxi," 524.

⁴⁹The Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing, 587(5)-1, "Xin shenghuo yundong cujin hui Henan funü gongzuo weiyuanhui gongzuo dagang" 新生活運動促進會河南婦女工作委員會工作大綱, n.d.

⁵⁰"Xin shenghuo yundong cujin hui Henan funü gongzuo weiyuanhui shengchan shiye zu er yue gongzuo jihua shu," n.d.

⁵¹Chang-Tai Hung has analyzed the centrality of songs in the Communists' mobilization and "shaping Chinese consciousness" before and during the war. Clearly, they were not the only ones to deploy this tool. Chang-Tai Hung, "The Politics of Songs: Myths and Symbols in the Chinese Communist War Music,

Conversely, in the Ji'an area in Jiangxi, women's activities proceeded carefully in order to avoid alienating local women. According to one report, in the rural areas, visits were preceded by deputy *bao* head-teams who prepared villages for activities such as check-ups on cleanliness, talks to improve knowledge on the War of Resistance, and collections of funds and goods. Mobilization was challenging as women activists were met with different reactions; during the first period of house visits and training, husbands and mothers-in-law resisted letting women in the family undergo training. Moreover, women feared that they would be selected to become soldiers or military nurses, an error that women activists learned to dispel quickly in the successive rounds of house visits.⁵² Summing up the shortcomings and positives of seven months' work, one report listed:

Shortcomings:

1. Inexperience.
2. Shortage of cadres, so work cannot be developed extensively.
3. Women's work and people's training are not well coordinated, as a result women's work is divorced from other departments' activities.
4. Public figures in society do not have an in-depth understanding of women's work. This is why we could not carry out adequate propaganda work.

Positives:

1. Fellow activists have all worked enthusiastically and relied on the plans before implementing their work.
2. Training and house visits have created close feelings between activists and the people. [We] can say that we identify with the people.

Besides the points [raised] above, there are important problems that [we] could not solve. We could not put an end to women's suffering. The work does not have a direct bearing on women, and because of this, we cannot stir women's strong enthusiasm, gain their trust, and avoid disappointment.⁵³

Reports from women on the ground do not shy away from manifesting feelings of frustration. In the case of Jiangxi, one can perceive disappointment at the inability to truly address women's source of "suffering," a problem that was connected only marginally to the war. Women activists in Jiangxi seemed less concerned with the cultural gap of trainees, instead, they emphasized issues surrounding coordination and support from "local public figures," whereas, in Henan, the lack of personnel was addressed by introducing forced recruitment using the county government structure. Yet, whatever the methods employed, women's training courses were instrumental in reaching women from different backgrounds and reached well beyond Chongqing and Sichuan province.

National Economic Production

The war prompted the reorganization and centralization of key areas of the wartime economy, such as the development of state-owned enterprises and welfare provisions

1937–1949," *Modern Asian Studies*, Special Issue: War in Modern China 30.4 (1996), 901–29, quotation 902.

⁵² "Ji'an funü zhidaochu," 36–37.

⁵³ "Ji'an funü zhidaochu," 37.

across the heavy industry sector.⁵⁴ Some features were introduced during the Nanjing decade when the government tried with mixed results to centralize the economy and change moral attitudes towards production and consumption.⁵⁵ These instances are well documented, but what remains underexplored are the wartime organization and production of consumer goods at factories and cooperatives that employed mostly displaced women. This section examines women's contribution to the national economic production in textile factories and cooperatives managed by the WAC and sheds light on its role in improving women's living and working conditions. In the factories managed directly by the WAC, workers received better treatment overall compared to those which were outside their remit. It is therefore a bittersweet story of resilience but also of exploitation, depending on the location and management of the factories in which women were employed.

During the wartime period, displaced women and, more broadly, families, were employed in factories to sustain the war effort. Circumstances varied: refugee workers could be newly employed, but also reallocated from evacuated factories or part of military personnel's family resettlement.⁵⁶ The wartime production programs were a front in which women activists were deeply involved; and the factories managed by the WAC, while addressing the problem of economic shortages, fostered women's self-reliance. The women's work in wartime production is first analyzed through the most prominent projects of the Baisha textile factory, and the Songgai and Leshan experimental districts. They tell a successful story of the WAC's ability to marry economic production with relief and women's economic self-reliance. However, it is important to note that similar programs were present in Shaanxi, Henan, and Jiangxi provinces. These different examples provide a convincing picture of consistency in the aims and broad impact of women's activism.

The WAC was at the heart of this wartime economy. The industrial production division oversaw the establishment and the administration of textile women's cooperatives, workshops, and factories. Wartime production is an understudied aspect of women's wartime work in comparison to the care of refugees, particularly children, and aspects of the rural services for women.⁵⁷ Danke Li argues that factories such as the one in the experimental district of Songgai, located not far from Chongqing in Yongchuan county, affected positively the lives of women who were employed there and contributed to the economic and social transformation of such areas. Li has equated the function of experimental districts in Sichuan to that of the special economic zones of the 1980s.⁵⁸ However, after analyzing the layout and organization of the experimental districts,

⁵⁴Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China the Dynamics of Institutional Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 127–52.

⁵⁵Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation* and “Frugal Modernity: Livelihood and Consumption in Republican China,” *The Journal of Asian studies* 74.2 (2015), 391–409; Felix Boecking, *No Great Wall: Trade, Tariffs, and Nationalism in Republican China, 1927–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017).

⁵⁶Federica Ferlanti, “The New Life Movement at War: Wartime Mobilisation and State Control in Chongqing and Chengdu, 1938–1942,” *The European Journal of East Asian Studies* 11.2 (2012), 203–5, 208.

⁵⁷See, for instance, Colette M. Plum, “Orphans in the Family: Family Reform and Children's Citizenship during the Anti-Japanese War, 1937–1945,” in *Beyond Suffering: Recounting War in Modern China*, edited by James Flath and Norman Smith (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 187–206, and Helen M. Schneider, “Women and Family Education Reform in Wartime China, 1937–45,” *The Chinese Historical Review* 20.2 (2013), 180–201.

⁵⁸Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 97–98.

there are further historical parallels that spring to mind: the collective settings of the urban *danwei* both in Nationalist and Communist China and the production and living units in the communes during the Great Leap Forward.⁵⁹

Centers for textile production—such as factories or handicrafts cooperatives—were opened and managed by the WAC, in collaboration with the central and local governments chiefly in Sichuan province between 1938 and 1940, and some in Jiangxi and Shaanxi. Moreover, plans for similar developments in Henan show that even though this model was not always implemented, it circulated extensively across China. Textile production was strategic. During the war, cotton products were in high demand across China; according to a 1942 report, the country was able to produce only one-third of what was actually needed. Although the main manufacturing line was set in the safety of Sichuan, cotton still needed to be transported in from the main cotton-growing areas of Henan and Shaanxi.⁶⁰

The textile experimental districts and factories managed by the WAC catered to multiple purposes, of which production was only one aspect. As we shall see below, it provided much needed jobs for local workers, refugees, and military personnel's family dependents. Factories also became centers for enhancing basic living conditions and for the implementation of literacy campaigns among workers. In other words, the production effort was linked to the WAC's broader agenda of improving women's conditions.

The Songgai textile experimental district was established in October 1938,⁶¹ Baisha NLM textile factory in January 1939, and Leshan sericulture experimental district also in October 1938; all districts and the NLM women's handicraft cooperative were located in Sichuan. The factories and cooperatives were equipped with various machines, such as reeling machines, looms, spinning jennies, and sewing and knitting machines, depending on the line of production.⁶² While Songgai and Baisha produced cotton and wool items—Baisha, for instance, produced cotton cloth, socks, towels, and terry cloth⁶³—Leshan, in the south of Sichuan, was chosen as the center for sericulture and silk production and became the most advanced of these places due to its scientific approach to cultivation. It oversaw the overhaul of old mulberry trees, the selection of improved quality silkworm eggs, and the upkeep of silkworm rearing houses.⁶⁴ At Leshan, all phases of silk production were taken care of: cultivation of mulberry saplings, improved silkworm eggs, production of raw silk, silk wadding, and quilts.⁶⁵

Songgai textile experimental district was well received by locals; after approval by the local gentry, several temples in the area were transformed into workshops. The complex employed initially 286 workers who were allocated to different workshops: preparation,

⁵⁹On the beginning of the *danwei* system in Nationalist China see Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System* and Wen-hsin Yeh, "Corporate Space, Communal Time: Everyday Life in Shanghai's Bank of China," *The American Historical Review* 100.1 (1995), 97–122.

⁶⁰Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 281–82.

⁶¹Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 190.

⁶²Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 34, *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu*, ed., *Xin shenghuo funü zhidao weiyuanhui qi zhou jinian tekan*, Appendix, Table 7, 4; and The Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing, 698–2906, Xingzheng yuan xinwen ju., ed., *Xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動 (Nanjing: Xingzheng yuan xinwenju, 1947), 24–25.

⁶³*Xin shenghuo yundong*, 24–25.

⁶⁴Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 192–93.

⁶⁵*Xin shenghuo yundong*, 24–25.

spinning, cloth and gauze weaving, gauze bandages, sorting and wool spinning. The district was a promotional center for the establishment of cooperatives. It staffed an Advisory Office whose purpose was to provide information for the management and organization of cooperatives that produced and marketed four types of products: cotton yarns, cotton cloth, towels, and wool. The cooperatives' structure counted 728 members. The cooperatives' production was diversified with workshops for collective and decentralized production. The latter suited women who could not leave the household; they collected the material and tools they needed from the cooperative and continued to be part of the cooperative enterprise from home. Songgai experimental district had also a working farm that extended over 200 *mu* of land and was organized in horticulture, crops, and animal husbandry and forestry divisions.⁶⁶

Gao Zhongxian's recollections of the work and living conditions at Songgai are overwhelmingly positive and render the vibrancy of the place that was transformed not only by business expansion but also by the arrival of "downriver" women and refugees who brought with them new dress fashions, hairstyles, and food. The factory provided employment for locals and refugees alike; it employed 800 people, the majority of who were local women (500). Working conditions were remarkably good compared to other factories; shifts lasted eight hours, workers had one day per week off, and forewomen were very kind to local workers. They were housed in dormitories and ate their meals in the canteen or converted them into a rice allowance that could be brought home. Songgai had a school, library, and clinic, and the workers were mainly sheltered from the horrors of the bombings that were taking place in Chongqing at the time. Song Meiling championed Songgai and visited it on several occasions. This meant that the place was given a great deal of attention and funding, and there was an evident attempt to abide to the NLM's principles.⁶⁷ Gao describes the high standards maintained in the complex:

The experimental zone authority made special efforts to beautify Songji⁶⁸ by planting many green bushes and colorful flowers in public places. Madame Jiang liked flowers, so she ordered the experimental zone authority to plant them. Big trucks shipped trees and flowering plants from other places to Songji; all the open spaces in our factory were decorated with flowers ... The factory was organized in military style, and we had to wear a badge to enter the factory. We were not issued uniforms, but a white cotton apron ... Every morning we had a flag ceremony and assembly before we marched in lines to work in our respective shops.⁶⁹

These production models were adopted by the NLM Women's Work Committees across China and were not limited to large scale projects who had powerful patrons. In Shaanxi, in January 1940, the committee established a cooperative that brought together twenty women. Thanks to fundraising that collected 30,000 yuan, in October 1940, the women's committee was able to open a textile factory that employed

⁶⁶Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 190–91.

⁶⁷Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 123–27.

⁶⁸Both Danke Li and Gao's recollection refer to Songji 松既 and not Songgai 松溉. Gao states that she is from the village of "Songji." The latter was the established name during the PRC period and only recently the name reverted to its former incarnation of Songgai.

⁶⁹Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 124.

around eighty family dependents of military personnel and women.⁷⁰ The Henan women's work committee's plan—while focusing on the aspects of propaganda, first aid, and consoling work—training, children's welfare, and culture, promoted the running of small model spinning mills and tailoring factories, and supported shoes' production destined for soldiers, along with rural and household production that involved soap and socks making. In addition, it proposed the creation of a work experimental zone as a model for the rest of the province.⁷¹ A more specific plan for production was issued for the month of February 1939; it included the opening of a textile factory staffed with refugees and destitute women and made provisions for shifts of ten hours, which would allow women to study each day for one hour and a half to two hours.⁷² Although some of the plans were not implemented, they indicated that the models endorsed by the WAC reached beyond Sichuan.

Women activists in Ji'an in Jiangxi were extremely positive about the establishment of such factories. Wei Yuan, a member of the local WAC's office, reported on her visit in 1939. It is unlikely that the tour given to WAC's members would have exposed any ill treatment, but the report is valuable in establishing that central models were closely rolled out locally. The textile factory in Dunhuo village was supported by the Relief Committee, which gave 70,000 *yuan* for its operation. In this case, the refugees did not come from outside the region: they were sent from Linchuan county and Ji'an, and many of them were originally from Jiujiang and Xingzi counties, all in Jiangxi. Half of the 1,003 refugees who were received in this area were women, and 150 were children; some women had reached safety with their families, but many had left their families behind or did not know what had happened to them. Typically, a household was considered a *danwei* and families could live together; but to qualify, the household had to have at least two people in a working capacity. Like the Songgai experimental district, the organization of the site bears strong resemblance to the communes and communal life. The factory was divided into seven divisions based on productive specialization, and the site had a canteen for communal meals, dormitories, a clinic, a school for the workers' children and an evening school, and a library. What Wei Yuan was keen to deliver to her readers here was the message that, although the circumstances were harsh—for instance, the meals provided were simple and there was a shortage of medicines—the workers' living and working conditions were acceptable.⁷³ Naturally, these positives messages tied in with the necessity of keeping people's spirits up and showcasing the success stories of fellow activists both locally and at the headquarters in Chongqing, but women activists did not shy away from reporting problems.

In contrast to the textile factories and cooperatives managed by the WAC, the story of ordinary factory workers was very different. Ye Qingbi's recollection of working in a textile factory in Chongqing exemplifies this. Ye worked at Yuhua textile factory in Chongqing as a thirteen-year-old child worker. She describes the militarized organization of factory workers with twelve-hour shifts and with only one day of rest every ten days. Work was conducted in a climate of abuse and exploitation from the managers

⁷⁰Xia Rong *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, 200–201.

⁷¹“Xin shenghuo yundong cujin hui Henan funü gongzuo weiyuanhui gongzuo dagang.”

⁷²“Xin shenghuo yundong cujin hui Henan funü gongzuo weiyuanhui shengchan shiye zu er yue gongzuo jihua shu.” Both plans are not dated but the Henan Women's Work Committee was established in November 1938, and they were devised very likely in 1939/1940; and Xia Rong, Xia Rong, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui*, Table 4.11, 329–30.

⁷³Wei Yuan, “Ji'an nanmin gongchang,” 189–91.

and foremen who ran the factory. Living conditions were extremely harsh; the dormitory was overcrowded and infested by bedbugs, and the food was of very poor quality or beyond safe consumption. Workers were essentially cut off from the outside world and did not have time to do anything except work.⁷⁴

Her story is certainly not unique; Howard discussed extensively the exploitation and abuse that male workers were exposed to in Chongqing arsenals and described the “military ambience” where “military punishments” of workers was common and meted on the basis of factory laws.⁷⁵ However, it is clear from the examples discussed so far that where the WAC had direct control over projects, things were run differently, and in the experimental districts set up and managed by the WAC the handling of the workers was more progressive than the norm. In short, it was possible to establish different conditions for working women and, more generally, for workers; and even where women activists were pretty much tolerated, such as in ordinary factories, the focus on the improvement of women’s lives was still pursued, not least through the implementation of literacy campaigns.

Workers’ Conditions and Literacy Campaigns

Women’s mobilization work in the realm of education took place at all levels of the WAC and rested upon the belief that literacy campaigns could trigger individual and broader social change. The social dimension of women’s activism is discussed through the example of literacy programs tailored for women workers in some Chongqing factories not managed by the WAC. The literacy programs championed by the WAC saw education as a way to foster autonomy, in keeping with the training programs previously examined. Women activists’ contacts with a wide range of women through activities and surveys enhanced their knowledge and had an impact on shaping their priorities. The focus on women’s education had several implications, but two aspects were considered paramount to break the cycle of women’s exploitation: the training of cadres and lifting women out of illiteracy. The book published in 1944 by the WAC concerning women textile factory workers in the Chongqing area was based on surveys and first hand work by the WAC’s service teams in factories (gongchang fuwudui 工廠服務隊) and provides us with the chance to explore women activists’ mindsets.⁷⁶ Women activists sent to the factories showed a thorough understanding of the reforms needed to improve working conditions; for instance, they supported the adoption of the “three eight system” (san ba zhi 三八制), which consisted of eight-hour shifts instead of the 10 to 12 hours women would usually work in factories, and were extremely critical of the shortcomings in workers’ nutrition, sanitation, and accommodation in the factories they visited.⁷⁷

The WAC’s activities, though responding to real wartime emergencies, were also trying to establish a legacy. Following the reorganization at Lushan, from 1939, the WAC appointed six service teams and assigned these to different textile factories. The teams were small, and each consisted of five women. Their objectives were to improve women’s culture and political standards, nurture a correct notion of production, and improve workers’ lives. A survey conducted among 3,100 women workers in the

⁷⁴Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, 121–26.

⁷⁵Joshua H. Howard, *Workers at War: Labor in China’s Arsenals, 1937–1953*, 205–7, 203.

⁷⁶Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Series New Life, Reel 3, Document 37.2, Xinyun funü zhidao weiyuanhui wenhua shiye zu, ed., *Zhanshi fangzhi nügong*, 戰時紡織女工 (June, 1944).

⁷⁷*Zhanshi fangzhi nügong*, 38–46.

Chongqing area ascertained that 1,209 women had sought factory employment because of economic pressure, 552 sought to learn a skill, and 156 declared they wanted to support the country's production efforts. The overwhelming majority (79 percent) were very young, between fourteen and twenty years old; only 1.7 percent were older than thirty; and only one was fourteen years old.⁷⁸ Bar a handful of workers who were evacuated from Wuhan, Shashi, and Yichang (only ninety-three), the majority were Sichuan country girls who retained "strong feudal characteristics" and believed in spirits. The WAC claimed that illiteracy was over 90 percent among female workers; but by 1943, following the implementation of literacy programs, this number had dropped to 52 percent.⁷⁹ Such claims should be read with caution, but even if the initial percentage was lower than asserted, it still is evidence of the scope of the educational work and objectives implemented by the service teams. Women were encouraged to sign up for classes that took place over three terms of three months each, with daily lessons of one hour either in the morning or evening; classes were arranged according to women's level of literacy. Women activists were also quick to introduce changes when they saw fit; for example, they devised new teaching materials on the grounds that the official textbook provided by the Ministry of Education was unsuitable because it failed to engage the students.⁸⁰

On another level, literacy classes were also the means through which teachers would impart moral and political content. The goal of creating fully well-rounded citizens was pursued by instilling a working ethos and patriotism. Topics in these classes varied according to the class level; for instance, at the most advanced level, the main subjects were party doctrine; general knowledge, which included the essentials of the NLM; maternity and infant hygiene; and history.⁸¹ Hence, political indoctrination was present, but overall, teaching content was aimed at neutralizing disputes among workers and fostering a conflict-free environment between workers and managers. A similar approach was pursued among male workers in Chongqing arsenals during the Nanjing decade and the war. According to Howard, the Nationalists attempted to defuse class divisions by invoking "spiritual unity and the national interest" but were not successful. Instead, workers used the "ideology of common sacrifice for the national good to criticize their own working conditions and demand more political rights."⁸²

In the case of women workers among whom WAC's teams were active, the picture is less clear-cut. The extract below is from an essay written by one of the students of the literacy classes and chosen by women activists to illustrate the literacy level that was attained. The content exposes the apparent introjection of the "good worker" philosophy promoted in classes:

⁷⁸Zhanshi fangzhi nügong, 1–4.

⁷⁹Zhanshi fangzhi nügong, 3, 6, 7. The percentage on women's illiteracy among workers who mainly came from the countryside is compatible with findings in Prosperity village in Bishan county, Sichuan, conducted between 1940 and 1941. According to the surveys 98 percent of women of fifteen years of age and older were illiterate. Isabel Brown Crook and Christina Kelley Gilmartin with Yu Xiji, compiled and edited by Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig, *Prosperity's Predicament: Identity, Reform, and Resistance in Rural Wartime China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 169, 179.

⁸⁰Zhanshi fangzhi nügong, 10–11.

⁸¹Zhanshi fangzhi nügong, 10.

⁸²Joshua H. Howard, *Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenals, 1937–1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 203.

In the factory, we must act as very good women workers. We must be respectful and courteous toward superiors, pleasant toward our sisters, friendly, and not quarrel. In the workshop, we must work hard, not be playful, and not stop work without reason.⁸³

The obedience exuding from the essay should not lead us to assume that women were just passive recipients in the education program. Howard, for instance, has argued that the education work carried out by the WAC between 1939 and 1943 “had the unintended effect of raising women worker’s expectations of better treatment.”⁸⁴ I would argue that this was far from unintentional. It is an issue that comes up circuitously, but women activists were fully aware of the consequences of improving women’s literacy and were not particularly concerned about it, as the passage below shows. If anything, they were critical of the reaction from factory managers:

There are probably people who think “What kind of education should workers receive? Are not illiterate workers still performing the same work? Actually, after studying [they will create] even more troubles.” Some in the factory own up to these words [and] do not like literate workers. Factory authorities adopt an unenthusiastic attitude toward women workers’ education, which affects the work of educating women workers.⁸⁵

Howard correctly linked the WAC’s work to the raising of women’s expectations, and this is a testament to the work pursued by women, but there is more to this. Cloaked in the support for wartime production, the WAC’s literacy programs in the factories were underpinned by a coherent articulation of the tools they thought women workers would need to emancipate themselves economically and intellectually. At the same time, they set benchmarks for women’s treatment inside and outside factories.

Conclusion

This article has focused on women’s activism and mobilization during the wartime period in China. The war created the conditions for different women’s groups and organizations to come together and work out a way in which their energy and convictions could be put at the service of the war effort. One major organization was the WAC, a government-sponsored branch of the NLM General Association, which was at the forefront of activities that came to the aid of the civilian population. The wartime period directly impacted people’s lives; displacement, death, and suffering are certainly common themes in every war, and in this context, the WAC’s work was pivotal with regard to general relief to the population, refugees, and children’s assistance, and support to the soldiers at the front.

However, this article tackled a less explored aspect of this period, that of women’s activism and mobilization in areas that challenged the traditional roles of wives, mothers and more broadly caregivers. It argues that this agenda was set by women and for women. This was not simply a by-product of wartime circumstances, but

⁸³Zhanshi fangzhi nügong, 13.

⁸⁴Joshua H. Howard, “The Politicization of Women Workers at War: Labour in Chongqing Cotton Mills during the Anti-Japanese War,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47.6 (2013), 1894.

⁸⁵Xinyun funü zhidao weiyuanhui shiye zu, ed., *Zhanshi fangzhi nügong*, 48.

it was an approach that was initiated before the war and found the space to develop and during the war. Women's work in the spheres of cadre training, economic production, and workers' conditions demonstrate that, notwithstanding the wartime emergencies, these programs were meant to produce lasting changes. Crucial to this was the contribution from women of diverse backgrounds and political conviction, even though cooperation withered under the weight of the political divisions as the war progressed. In addition, the article has thrown light on the scope of this movement, certainly initiated by establishment and well-educated women, but whose impact was felt beyond the more rarified environment of the Chongqing headquarters, with the training and mobilization of middle- to lower-ranks of cadres. Sources show that this work was carried out by ordinary women on the ground in many provinces across China.

The training of cadres was a cornerstone of the program carried out by women activists and was based on the idea that, for change to take root, local women needed to become activists and agents of change on the ground themselves. WAC's training served the purpose of recruiting cadres for its organization; however, the analysis has also shown that thousands of women were exposed to short training sessions aimed at improving literacy, leadership skills, and support of the war effort. Although it did not result in direct recruitment, it broadened the reach of women's activism and mobilization. Despite the divide between women activists and local women, in which the belief in change was accompanied by a feeling that local women needed to be "civilized," the training programs below the county level defied the traditional family order and, by extension, society's structure. This is exemplified by the resistance of mothers-in-law and husbands in the rural areas of Jiangxi, but still attained the objective of forming local cadres who were put in charge of local women's groups. At the same time, the symbiotic relationship between women activists and the local government at different administrative levels is significant. Women activists did not operate in a vacuum and had to work together with the administrative system. In Jiangxi, the WAC's office was integrated into the administration, while in Henan, women activists requested the intervention of the provincial government to find local candidates eligible for training, with a subtext of forcing rather than persuading women. Nonetheless, these programs reached women from different backgrounds and enhanced their leadership skills, albeit amid difficulties.

Furthermore, an analysis of wartime national production shows the WAC's centrality in managing large scale projects. That a women's organization was put in charge of what, in those years, may have been perceived as male occupations can be explained by the war contingencies. However, the organization of work and the workers' conditions that characterized experimental districts, factories, and cooperatives under the WAC's control are something distinctive. The projects were underpinned by a strong social agenda that fostered economic independence, rather than reliance. Although these examples come mainly from Sichuan province, where the textile industry was concentrated, these models were adopted elsewhere. The situation in ordinary textile factories in Chongqing was rather different, but even there, the commitment to improving workers' conditions through campaigning for fairer working hours and literacy programs were conscious steps for unlocking women's potential. Women activists in action in these factories were aware of the constraints, and even though their work was a source of contention with the factories' management, they used the framework of wartime support and effort to push an independent agenda. Overall, the examples provided in this article demonstrate that women activists' work was not defined narrowly by

wartime emergencies, nor confined to a narrow group of establishment women. It was a broader movement, which saw the participation of middle- to lower-ranking women cadres and was characterized by precise objectives.

Competing interests. The author declares none.