

# Reordering the Family, Society, and Nation. The Problem of the “Resistance-War Wife” in Postwar China

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**Abstract** This paper examines the post-WWII Chinese debate over the problem of the “resistance-war wife,” a term referring to intimate relationships formed during wartime displacement. Drawing on mass media sources, it argues that discussion of this issue created a key discursive arena in which the relations among family, nation, and society were contested in the aftermath of the War of Resistance against Japan. Melodramatic narratives cast the phenomenon as a moral crisis rooted in wartime upheaval, and expressed a popular longing for the restoration of familial order. In contrast, feminist voices redirected attention to structural gender inequalities in Chinese society and called for broader social reform. The “resistance-war wife” problem thus revealed competing visions of postwar reconstruction and illuminated how personal trauma, gendered expectations, and nationalist ideologies intersected in shaping public understandings of family and society during a moment of profound transition.

**Keywords** “Resistance-war wife”; family reconstruction; gender inequality; social reform; nationalism.

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## 1. Introduction

Aside from brutal combat and drastic political transformations, the Second World War in China, also known as the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), generated massive population displacement and prolonged separation of families, giving rise to notable wartime extramarital relationships and concerns about the restoration of the family in postwar China. In China’s postwar mass media, the term “resistance-war wife” (*kangzhan furen*) emerged as a popular term to describe women who had formed wartime intimate or marital relationships with men displaced to China’s vast rear areas, despite those men’s preexisting marriages. The term frequently appeared alongside “left-behind wife” (*liushou furen*) or “occupied-region wife” (*lunxian furen*), referring to the

original spouses who had remained in Japanese-occupied regions during the war. These media-driven designations of wartime intimate relationships captured the conflicts arising when wartime unions confronted prewar marital ties after 1945. When separated husbands returned home, encounters between “resistance-war wives” and “left-behind wives” sparked public debates over morality, legality, and the future of the family and of Chinese society at large. The postwar “resistance-war wife” problem thus became a highly visible manifestation of the social dislocations that persisted after China’s military victory over Japan.

While newspapers, journals, and cinema at that time, as shown in later sections, were loaded with indignant critiques of the “resistance-war wife” phenomenon, and propositions for restoring and defending the moral and legal principles of family life, I argue that the problem of the “resistance-war wife” also offered people at that time a channel for envisioning and elaborating alternative family models and gender relations to those proffered by the moral, legal, and political establishments. In other words, in addition to the “resistance-war wife” phenomenon as a social problem infringing on monogamy and causing traumatic experiences to those betrayed by their spouses, I also explore how the “resistance-war wife” discourse effectively magnified and navigated the internal tensions within the prevailing ideologies of gender, family, and the nation. Nationalist ideologies, conventional patriarchal moralities, traditional Chinese melodramatic literature, as well as feminist thinking, were all mobilized to address the postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife.” Instead of simply calling for a return to prewar social and familial orders disrupted by the war, postwar debates questioned the legitimacy of the prevailing wartime nationalist visions, and their domination over individual and family life. Participants in this debate proposed new or conventional moral and political frameworks for establishing anew the everydayness in the postwar era. In particular, feminist voices demanded a thorough reform of Chinese society to eliminate the deeply rooted gender inequality, instead of merely addressing the consequences of the war.

To appreciate the stakes of this intervention, it is necessary to situate the controversies over the “resistance-war wife” within the longer history of modern Chinese debates on the problem of the “family”. With the onset of China’s modernization in the mid-nineteenth century, triggered by the national crises such as foreign invasion, unequal treaties, and imposition of Western economic and intellectual forces upon Chinese society, late Qing and early Republican intellectuals condemned China’s traditional *jia* system, the

patriarchal clan (*jiazu*, *zongzu*, or *zongfa*) rather than a western-styled “family,” as a Confucian hierarchy that suppressed women, youth, and individual autonomy, and hindered the formation of modern citizenship. They therefore argued that the patriarchal clan must be dismantled to build China into a modern nation (Zhao 2020: 21–35; Hung 2003; Lv 2019). May Fourth reformers promoted the small family (*xiao jiating*) as a modern alternative to the patriarchal clan, framing it as a union of free individuals (Zhao 2020) yet also a socioeconomic unit serving national goals. As Susan Glosser shows, this ostensibly liberating model often reproduced existing gender hierarchies, redirected loyalty from kin to nation-state, and preserved the family as a site of moral regulation and political utility (Glosser 2013: 6–26). Early Communist activists also utilized calls for marriage and family reform to recruit youth while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal structures within revolutionary organizations (Gilmartin 1995: 16). Moving beyond institutional transformation of marriage and family, Lee Haiyan further argues that China’s modern subject emerged as a sentimental autonomous individual, while the modern nation was imagined as a community of sympathy. Lee maintains that discourses of romantic intimacy thus helped redirect individual loyalty from patriarchal clan to the nation by promoting ideals of free love, individual equality, and universal citizenship (Lee 2007: 7). In this sense, critiques of “feudal” clan<sup>1</sup> and call for romantic companionate marriage cannot be framed as purely personal emancipation; rather, the new familial ideals were embedded within broader projects of nation building and/or revolution where individuals had been freed from patriarchal clan yet were further regulated by and in a superior political community.

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<sup>1</sup> There were also conservative thinkers like Dai Jitao who valorized conventional Chinese *jia* system. They viewed China’s traditional patriarchal moral order as a source of social stability and national unity, which could counter the defects of Western capitalism such as individualism, exploitation, and class conflict. By preserving the Confucian *jia* as a cultural core, conservatives envisioned a mode of national development distinct from Western liberal individualism or Soviet-style collectivism. 施純純 (Chun-Chun Shih). “Tai Chi-t’ao’s Theory on Social Revolution, 1919–1920 (戴季陶的社會革命觀),” *The Journal of History, NCCU*, Vol.39, No.5 (2013): 145–182. For more on Nationalist conservative thinking, see in: Dirlik, Arif. “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (1975): 945–80. Liu, Wennan. “Redefining the Moral and Legal Roles of the State in Everyday Life: The New Life Movement in China in the Mid-1930s.” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 2, no. 2 (2013): 335–365. Yen, Hsiao-peï. “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement.” *Asian Studies Review* 29, no.2 (2005): 165–86. Brian Tsui. *China’s Conservative Revolution: The Quest for a New Order, 1927–1949*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

As elaborated in the next section, this structural linkage between family and nation in modern China would be further intensified during the national crisis (*guonan*) of Japanese invasion during 1931–1945. Wartime cultural works also incorporated and represented female bodies and experiences within the framework of national struggles against Japan. Whether cast as heroic warriors or victims of alien sexual violence (Hung 1989; Edwards 2013), women’s wartime trajectories were aligned with the moral and political demands of the nation.

It was against this backdrop that the post-1945 debates over the “resistance-war wife” unfolded. The wartime displacement and separation, and traumatic postwar reunions exposed the moral and emotional costs of subordinating intimate life to national causes. Participants in the postwar debates on the “resistance-war wife” issue thus questioned whether the nationalist framework itself had distorted justice within the family institution and entrenched gender inequality in the name of national survival. Unsettling the long-standing superiority of nationalist imperatives to intimate family life, the postwar debates over the “resistance-war wife” refocused the politics of the family from the nation to the lived experiences and desired reordering of domestic life.

Methodologically, I examine the stories and comments about the “resistance-war wife” in public discourse as “meaningful fabrication” – to use Robert Darnton’s term. That is, I do not check them as the “mirror-image of what actually happened” for their truthfulness and credibility, but rather as specific “versions of a happening” that give meaning to the “raw stuff of experience” (Darnton 1984: 78). What is investigated in this article is not the social realities of wartime and postwar intimacy patterns, but rather their postwar representation. This approach allows us to better position the problem of the “resistance-war wife” in the postwar ideologies of family, gender, and nationalism, and to grasp the vision of family life desired by Chinese people at that time. By analyzing how experts, editors, and columnists narrated the conflicts between men who escaped Japanese occupation, and the original wives and new lovers they abandoned during and after the war, this article thus highlights the discursive strategies that rendered war-related intimate injury publicly legible, and foregrounds the representational work that transformed individual grievances into symbolic commentary on moral corruption, social inequality, and the legitimacy of national recovery.

## 2. Intimate Relationships under National Crisis

Terms like “resistance-war wife” and “occupied-region wife” do not simply suggest the temporal and spatial features of the intimate relationships formed during and/or after the War of Resistance. As concepts widely circulated in postwar Chinese mass media and retrospectively used to address the problems of wartime intimacy and its postwar consequences, the “resistance-war wife” and relevant vocabularies suggested the redirection of postwar public attention onto the re-articulation of the relationship between individual life trajectories and the nationalist politics that had prevailed during and before the War of Resistance. The gender dynamics of wartime nationalist politics and the postwar deliberation on it, to be discussed in this and following sections, were also symbolically and effectively conveyed to the public through these terms’ discursive focus on women’s position during and after the war in the private domain. To fully understand the postwar visions of family, intimacy, and individual everyday life embedded in the “resistance-war wife” discourse, we should first examine the association of private intimate relationship with the “nation”, which had been established before and strengthened during the War of Resistance.

Despite the presence of other imperialist forces in China, Japan’s continuous military advance starting from the early 1930s and Manchuria constituted the core of China’s national crisis (*guonan*) until 1945. Reactions to the national crisis included not only political, military, and diplomatic maneuvers, but also a realignment of individual life with the national causes. The New Life Movement initiated by the Nationalist regime in 1934 was aimed to morally remold personal life and unite individual bodies into a national body governed by conservative values (Dirlik 1975; Liu 2013; Tsui 2018). The New Life Movement prepared the Republican state and society for the War of Resistance against Japan, and its organizations facilitated the Nationalists’ substantial wartime mobilization (Ferlanti 2010; 2012). People at that time who did not necessarily subscribe to the Nationalist ideologies or policies also highlighted intimate relationship as an essential part of this realignment between individual life and the nation-saving struggles in the context of national crisis.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in 1932, *World Daily* in Beiping [Peking] published a

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<sup>2</sup> Here the emphasis of intimate relationship is placed on private, emotional, and sexual connections between spouses, not the ritual and legal constructs of marriage. The Nationalist regime did promote group wedding as part of its New Life Movement in order to reduce waste from commercial weddings, surveil the liberal civil conjugal relations as well as the

debate (QiuHong 1932; Keluobo 1932) on marriage during the national crisis, featuring two contrasting perspectives. One argued that romantic relationships, driven by selfish love, were incompatible with the spirit of national self-sacrifice and called for individuals to postpone marriage in service of the nation - not the Nationalist regime, but the suffering people. The other viewed love as potentially selfless and transformative, capable of inspiring personal growth and contributing to national salvation. Despite their differences, both believed that individual choices of intimate relationship, which was fundamentally private and rooted in emotional attachment, should prioritize national salvation during *guonan*, rather than centering on individual pleasure.

Political parties and intellectuals also debated women's positions in the family, the society, and the nation-saving endeavors under national crisis. Conservatives, including the Nationalists, asked women to leave their social occupations and political engagements, and to "return to the family." For them, women serve the nation best in their role as wife/mothers, both the devoted and chaste "good wives and wise mothers (*xianqi liangmu*)" in the family and "the selfless nurturer and educators of the nation" (Edwards 2008: 185–188). On the other hand, leftists fiercely criticized the "good wives and wise mothers" model that confined women to their domestic roles and proactively called upon women to step out of the family and contribute direct service to the nation in their professional occupations and/or the resistance struggles. However, in practice, this vision of women's role under national crisis led to women's double burden as both housewives and the nation's mother (Wang & Wang 2021).

Unlike the *World Daily* pieces' visions of intimate relationship under national crisis, in both the conservative and leftist views above, family and marriage were not articulated as intimate associations between equal and heterosexual individuals, nor were individual nationals directly bound to the national community. Individuals, especially women, were expected by both the conservatives and leftists to serve the nation through fulfilling their gendered domestic roles in the family or undertaking their responsibilities for the nation

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reproduction of new citizens, and restructure the relationship between the state and individuals. For more on group wedding during New Life Movement, see in: Charlotte Cowden, "Wedding Culture in 1930s Shanghai: Consumerism, Ritual, and the Municipality," *Frontiers of History in China* 7, no. 1 (2012): 61–89; Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 129–32; Altehenger, Jennifer E. 2014. "Between State and Service Industry: Group and Collective Weddings in Communist Shanghai, 1949–1956." *Twentieth-Century China* 40 (1): 48–68.

in accordance with their domestic positions.<sup>3</sup> Individual physical and emotional experiences in the private space of the family, marriage or other forms of intimate relationships, either sufferings or pleasure, became secondary to the service for the nation under a national crisis. Despite all the differences between the visions above, the subjugation of individual life to the national causes of salvation was central to all the threads of articulation throughout the *guonan* period until 1945.

However, when the war was over and urban residents, press commentators, intellectuals, and women’s activists, among many others, started to reflect upon the wartime practices of intimate relationships. To restore the order of everyday family life disturbed by the war, they went far beyond a simple return to or restoration of the disrupted family-nation order under national crisis. China’s supposed completion of its nation-building upon victory in 1945 was not a natural solution to the various familial and marital issues caused by and during the war. In fact, the victory in the War of Resistance immediately left the Chinese nation-state broken and in chaos, with a civil war imminent and worsening hyperinflation. The Chinese family would further be troubled by more severe problems such as internal ideological confrontation under the Communist regime and prolonged separation across the Taiwan Strait after 1949. Despite the continuous war and social turbulence, the haphazard postwar voices from 1945 to 1949 on China’s problem of the family, especially those focused on the problem of the “resistance-war wife”, proved to be productive and transformative in articulating alternative visions of family, its internal dynamics and its relationship with the Chinese nation.

### 3. The Sour Reunion: Return of the “Resistance-War Wife” after the War

In the postwar era, as the sour reunions unfolded between family members who had been separated during the war, the terms of “resistance-war wife” and others gained wide circulation in mass media, becoming a focal point of public storytelling, commentary, and debate. In the stories narrated from the perspective of the “left-behind/occupied-region wives”, after eight years of suffering from material hardship and hard work of raising the children and caring for the husbands’ parents, the “left-behind wives” were usually greeted

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<sup>3</sup> Women taking logistical and supportive occupations during the war, like healthcare workers, also challenged male domination of China’s wartime regime. See in Nicole Elizabeth Barnes. *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (University of California Press, 2018).

by the unexpected appearance of the “resistance-war wives”, which would shatter their dreams of family reunification upon victory. Having lost their youth, beauty, economic sources, and spirits, the “occupied-region wives” were replaced by younger, more beautiful, and sometimes more cultured “resistance-war wives”, and were abandoned yet again by their husbands who had climbed the social ladder in the rear areas during the war.<sup>4</sup> The “resistance-war wives” were not always the beneficiaries of such marriage, though. Men were perfectly aware of their own marital status, but still married “resistance-war wives” nevertheless, taking advantage of their economic, social, and sexual resources, and sometimes abandoning their wartime spouses when or after they returned to the previously occupied coastal areas.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 is a satirical illustration of the varied wartime and postwar intimate relationships relevant to the problem of the “resistance-war wife”.



Figure 1: Satirical Comic: Abandon the old yellow-faced wife and search for “resistance-war wife.” After the victory and plundering takeover, find a new lover and build a new golden nest. Gongli, “Comic,” *147 Pictorial*, no.3 (1946): 1.

<sup>4</sup> Wenyng, “Reader’s Letter: On Resistance-War Wife,” *Women(妇女)*, no.3 (1946): 20. “Oftentimes, There is an Extra Resistance-War Wife,” *Essence(精华)*, vol.2, no.1 (1946): 8. “New Qin Xianglian: A Self-Told Story from a ‘Left-behind Wife,’” *147 Pictorial(一四七画报)*, vol.8, no.9 (1946): 9–10. Fei Lan. “Occupied-Region Wife,” *The Yangtze River Monthly(长江月刊)*, No.4 (1947): 33–36. “Reader’s Letter: On Resistance-War Wife,” *Xidian(西点)*, no.5 (1946): 88–89.

<sup>5</sup> “The Young Lady Who Committed Suicide in Town Turned out to Be a Resistance-War Wife,” *Xibao(锡报)*, Jan 26, 1947. “The Tragedy of a Resistance-War Wife,” *World Morning Newspaper(世界晨报)*, Oct 13, 1946. “Resistance-War Wife Committing Suicide in front of Zhang Zhizhong Mansion,” *Robinhood(罗宾汉)*, Nov 9, 1947.

Yet the abandonment of wives was not unprecedented in modern China. In the 1910s and 1920s, some male intellectuals had repudiated arranged wives in the name of free love and historical progress, framing such acts as a break with the “old” patriarchal order (Yu 2009: 219–251). In contrast, post-1945 abandonment did not present itself as a forward-looking cultural revolution; it emerged from wartime dislocation and fractured reunions, exposing intimate consequences of the nation-saving struggles.

The postwar bitter reunions and the sufferings of the abandoned or disillusioned women were deeply personal traumas.<sup>6</sup> As social consequences, they were not unique to the War of Resistance against Japan. In other words, the narrative patterns and temporal frameworks used to express and make sense of these experiences were not exclusively associated with the War of Resistance as a nation-saving struggle and its aftermath. In fact, the sour reunion between separated spouses after the war was constantly represented as the contemporary embodiment of a classic Chinese tragic melodrama, the story of Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei, which had appeared in Chinese crime-case (*gong'an*) fictions and operas since the Ming Dynasty.<sup>7</sup> Details of the plot vary in different versions, but the main body of the story remains mostly the same: A *xiucai* (junior scholar who has passed county-level civil exams) named Chen Shimei studies for the higher-level civil exams while his wife, Qin Xianglian takes care of the family and funds him; Chen Shimei leaves home to take the exam in the capital, ranks first in the royal-court exam, and marries the emperor’s sister. Meanwhile, Qin Xianglian raises their children and serves her in-laws alone; she goes to the capital to find Chen Shimei, only to be denied and banished by Chen; Qin Xianglian turns for redress to an incorruptible official for justice, and despite the princess and the emperor’s order for mercy, the official decapitates Chen Shimei after he refuses to take Qin Xianglian back.

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<sup>6</sup> While socioeconomic differences and mobilities formed part of the background to the “resistance-war wife” stories, their narrative focus lay less on class contrasts and conflicts than on the moral and emotional sufferings of women whose marriages had been unsettled by war and displacement.

<sup>7</sup> “秦氏还魂配世美” in *Baogong An (Cases by Master Bao Zheng)*, from Chinese text project, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=98109&remap=gb>, last access on August 25, 2025. 冯文龙. “《铡美案》故事的渊源流变与演进规律.” *戏剧丛刊*, no. 6 (2013): 18–19. Shaanxi Opera Research Institute. “铡美案,” online source: <http://www.sxqq.net/Information/news/5558>, last access on August 25, 2025. 秦剧学社. “略谈《铡美案》的改编,” online source: [https://www.sohu.com/a/376984533\\_528934](https://www.sohu.com/a/376984533_528934), last access on August 25, 2025.

In the story of Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei, the core conflict resides in a man's moral decline as he climbs up the social ladder. Though the story also involves prolonged spatial separation between spouses, war or social chaos is not part of the setting. Therefore, applying the narrative framework of Qin Xianglian's story to the "resistance-war wife" stories would further downplay the political implications and social consequences of the War of Resistance, and represent the problem of the "resistance-war wife" as an emotionally loaded contemporary melodrama so that it could appeal to the individual audiences in the postwar era. In 1946, the journal *147 Pictorial* published a reader's letter, titled "New Qin Xianglian: A Self-Told Story from a 'Left-behind Wife'" (*147 Pictorial* 1946: 9–10). To briefly summarize the letter, the narrator said that she and her husband were cousins, and they got married when they were twenty years old. Although her husband went to college in Shanghai and she stayed with his big traditional family, they maintained a sweet relationship through correspondence, and had two kids. Shortly after he graduated, the all-out war against Japan broke out. Despite her in-laws' objection, she supported her husband's decision to join the resistance and assured him that she would take care of the family while he was "sacrificing for the nation and accomplishing great achievements." She lost contact with her husband during the eight years, and she lived harmoniously with her in-laws, endeavoring to manage family affairs, educate the kids, take care of the sick in-laws, and obey the traditional womanly morality by rarely going out. Upon victory, she looked forward to her husband's return, while mourning for the loss of her youth, death of her in-laws and the worsening economic scarcity. Her husband returned but lived in a fancy hotel. She went to see him with joy, only to be greeted by a mean-looking modern woman standing beside him. He said that he had become a high-ranking official in Nanjing, capital of Republican China, and her poor social skills would obstruct his career. Only wanting her husband back, she refused the thirty-million-*yuan* cheque and was on the edge of mental breakdown due to the loss of her husband. The eight years of dream of family reunion was shattered, and she did not know what to do except to write this letter to *147 Pictorial*.

The title "New Qin Xianglian" was formulated by the pictorial's editor and Qin Xianglian is not mentioned in the main text. The editor also added some rhyming and/or antithetical lines that could catch readers' eyes and summarize the content of the piece for readers before they read the lengthy letter. Right beside the subheading, the editor added a line rhyming in Chinese "Victory and reunion are both illusion, (I) regret letting (my) husband seek for

honor and office,” next to which is another antithetical line “(I was) willing to stay chaste, bury father-in-law, and raise the kid, only to learn that the wicked husband breaks up with me.” There are more editorial comments like these to be found inserted into the letter text, reminding readers of the resemblance of the “resistance-war wife” story with that of Qin Xianglian. In this narrative framework, instead of a moment of national struggle and reconstruction, the wartime service and postwar homecoming became an opportunity for men to ascend to higher social, political, and economic status. They took or abandoned their spouses, including the “resistance-war wife,” the “left-behind wife,” and in some cases also the “victory wife,” exclusively based on their career needs during and after the War of Resistance, without regard to marital morality, emotional bonds or women’s sufferings. The abandoned wives in such stories, having endured all the emotional and material hardship and maintained their loyalty to both their husbands/in-laws and the nation, experienced further disillusionment of both their intimate relationships and the national victory (and in the original Qin Xianglian case, disillusionment about her husband’s intellectual success in the palace exams).

In the previously occupied region, the Qin Xianglian style of the “resistance-war wife” stories could certainly appeal to the public sentiment, and therefore attract more audience for the mass media products centered on this issue. This can be exemplified by the commercial success of the film *A Spring Water Flows East*, “a family drama that adapted the traditional story of ‘Execution of Chen Shimei (*zhameian* 铡美案)’ to the setting of the War of Resistance” (Chen 2014:242). Compared with the story published in *147 Pictorial*, *Spring Water*’s storyline includes an extra “victory wife” which the male protagonist, a former teacher name Zhang Zhongliang, tried to take after the war in addition to his “resistance-war wife”. The abandoned “left-behind wife,” Sufen, Zhang Zhongliang’s official wife wedded before the war, instead of writing to the press, surrendered her life to Shanghai’s Huangpu River. Over five hundred thousand people viewed this film during the first seven weeks of its premiere, and the film was also a box-office hit in Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup>

The melodramatic representation of the “resistance-war wife” stories positioned the men living and working under the resistance regime as predators for social status, economic profit and sexual resources, and highlighted the unresolvable predicaments of the virtuous women. But the commercial success of such films on the “resistance-war wife”, as Pickowicz explains (Pickowicz

<sup>8</sup> “Record of Shanghai Viewers of *A Spring Water Flows East*,” *Dongfang Daily*, 1947.12.4.  
 “*A Spring Water Flows East*, A Box Office Smash in Southeast Asia,” *Peace Daily*, 1948.3.3.

2000: 390–396), cannot be explained by the leftist stances of their producers and the seemingly progressive storytelling. These films might be intended to be critical of postwar realities, but they were far from radical, progressive or revolutionary. The disillusionment in the national causes in these Qin-Xianglian-styled narratives of the “resistance-war wife” were used to express neither the patriots’ disappointment at the unfilled nation-building project after victory nor the feminist criticism of the nationalist politics, but rather to spotlight a broader moral and social crisis in Chinese society where the conventional values governing individual life, and the family institution were profoundly interrupted. This made the audience of *Spring Water* find the narrative “to be both moving and realistic as far as their own experience was concerned” (McGrath 2022: 121). Perhaps from the perspective of the leftist producers, even without an explicit articulation of a revolutionary future at the end of the story, the melodramatic accounts of the “resistance-war wife” could still be directed toward fostering a broad awareness of social revolution. But the audience and readers watched men betraying conventional family values, and were moved by the female figures staying faithful to the traditional family values and loyal to the patriarchal seniors (Pickowicz 2000: 392–393). Therefore, the “resistance-war wife” stories represented in the Qin Xianglian narrative style deviated from both the nationalist and revolutionary visions of China’s postwar future, and were directed toward a return to and restoration of the patriarchal family traditions as the moral foundation of the postwar everyday.

The postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife” thus signified a major disruption to China’s preexisting social order centered on the institution of the family. The national causes indicated by the problem’s nominal connection with the War of Resistance were downplayed while individual, especially women’s, experiences of displacement from the conventional familial order were placed at the center of public sentiment and anxiety. In the “resistance-war wife” stories analyzed above, a restoration of such an order, instead of the association between individual life and the national cause, was presented by editors and filmmakers to the public as a desired future.

#### **4. Engendering the Nation, Carving Women’s Way out**

In stark contrast to the melodramatic representation of the “resistance-war wife” phenomena, a feminist stance emerged in China’s postwar media with gender inequality at its center, and redirected the emphasis of this issue onto a general reform of the Chinese society, instead of a restoration of or return to the

conservative values and conventional practices of family which was considered to have been disrupted by the war.

In 1945, a conference record of “The Roundtable on the Problem of the Resistance-War Wife” was published in *Women’s Voices* (*Nüsheng*) in Shanghai (*Nüsheng*, 1945). Voices from both sexes and varied professions converged in this panel record regarding the “resistance-war wife” phenomena. *Nüsheng*’s editor introduced the phenomena of the “resistance-war wife” not as a reciprocal relationship premised upon the wartime complicity between displaced men and women, but rather as a highly gendered problem. She noted:

Eight years of Resistance War is not a short period, and the uncertainty in the world has greatly impacted every person and family. We have long been hearing that in the vast rear area, many people abandoned their wives who had been left behind in the occupied regions, and married the so-called ‘wartime wife’ or ‘resistance-war wife’, establishing the so-called ‘pseudo-organization’ in the family. This phenomenon must have caused broad dispute, so [we organized this roundtable] (*Nüsheng* 1945: 8).

First, the editor narrowed the abnormal wartime marital practices down to the men abandoning their spouses left behind in the occupied region and marrying wartime wives. Women – both the wives left behind and the wartime wives taken in the vast rear areas – in such relationships were simply passive victims. Second, the editor’s opening shifted the focus of the problem of wartime marital issues from restoring certain moral principles that were crucial to the nation, to the human cost of the war, especially women’s sufferings due to the wartime extramarital relationships and the awkward postwar reunion. Third, a gendered dichotomy, not hierarchy, between the wartime resistance regime and occupied China was established through the depiction of men as moving inland and women as left behind and silenced. As a liberal feminist journal affiliated with neither the CPC nor the GMD and aimed at a female audience, *Nüsheng* reframed the discussion away from partisan politics centered on the nation and revolution, and toward the gendered consequences of the war, foregrounding the issue of women’s wartime experiences and postwar survival,<sup>9</sup> as would be shown by their following discussion.

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<sup>9</sup> The panelists included the lawyer Mr. Ge, Ms. Ouyang Meirong, Ms. Huang Xinming, Mr. Bao Zhongting, and *Nüsheng*’s editor Ms. Wang, most likely Wang Yiwei, the magazine’s chief editor. Identities of the participants cannot be determined. The editor’s voice was rather prominent in this roundtable. Wang Yiwei, chief editor of *Nüsheng*, was a leftist feminist journalist affiliated with neither the CPC nor the GMD. In the postwar years, *Nüsheng* published many articles by women and/or on patriotic women in the War of Resistance,

With women's experiences at the center of the "resistance-war wife" issue, the nation, once considered as the supreme principle of individual behavior, was presented as the flimsy excuse for men's wartime extramarital relationships. Mr. Bao said that men were burdened with onerous work in the vast rear areas, and that they were depressed both emotionally and physically without their families' company. The editor maintained that all citizens were doing their parts during the war, and that unfulfilled sexual desire was nothing compared with the soldiers' sacrifice of their life in the battlefield. Those who could not stand the loneliness during the war, the editor said, were not qualified to be citizens. Another excuse for men taking wartime wives was to boost population growth to make up for China's enormous population loss during the war. To this, *Nüsheng's* editor said that the nation needs population increase in both quality and quantity, and that those who only cared about their sexual pleasure without considering others' happiness could not raise children with a sound life philosophy (*Nüsheng* 1945: 8). This eugenicist view, rather than reducing women to the role of the nation's biological reproducers who were passively subjected to male exploitation of their sexuality and reproductive force, emphasized women's autonomy and right to choose qualified sexual partners (Barlow 2004: 129-154). Thus, taking wartime wives was no longer justifiable by the national causes.

A general social reform, instead of simple completion of the nation-building process, became the central focus of the debate over the "resistance-war wife" problem. The *Nüsheng* panelists put the emphasis of their discussion on saving women from their miserable relationships, and highlighted women's general socioeconomic disadvantages in China's postwar society. Panelists maintained that both insufficient economic opportunities and the moral stigmatization of divorced women would prevent women from considering the legal approach to the "resistance-war wife" problem, and that the "semi-feudal" nature of the Chinese society, namely the patriarchal order and moralities, was still suppressing women's independence, subjectivity, and free choice of marriage. Therefore, divorce was a courageous but tough choice for women

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regardless of their political background. Wang Yiwei said that *Nüsheng* often "printed exposés of men who abandoned their wives and married young beautiful women, of intellectual women who broke up other families in order to live a luxurious life, and of rascally literary men who philandered with women in the name of courtship." Therefore, the journal was criticized for "narrow womanism," and disliked and/or ignored by both the CPC and the GMD. She was one of the interviewees of Wang Zheng's oral history project. See in: Wang Zheng. "Wang Yiwei (1905–1993): Editor in Chief." In *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (University of California Press, 1999), 221–258.

involved in the “resistance-war wife” cases. Solutions to the “resistance-war wife” problem, the roundtable thus decided, included women’s economic independence, legal support for women, and help from women’s organization. More fundamentally, a thorough social reform was needed and women should play a key role in it (*Nüsheng* 1945: 9). *Nüsheng*’s editor concluded:

... The moral degeneration of wartime society is the biggest reason [for ‘resistance-war wife’]. Now we only ask for reasonable political progress as fast as possible, to rebuild a normal social life and restore social moralities. Women should voluntarily participate in such a social reform. (*Nüsheng* 1945: 9).

Here, the concept of nation which had been prevalent under national crisis was replaced by the concept of society that did not necessarily bear innate political significance over individual life. In fact, the wartime representation of the Chinese nation – the vast rear area under the Chongqing Nationalist Government – was implicitly accused of immorality that led to the postwar social chaos. Therefore, the desired political and moral order of the postwar society, though not clearly articulated here, would require some serious reflection on unchecked nationalism as well as the cessation of the “feudal” moralities that positioned men and women unequally in social, political, and economic life.

*Nüsheng*’s roundtable redirected the focus of the anxiety about the “resistance-war wife” from the morality and legality of private intimate relationships and their alignment with the nation, to the unequal gender relationships embedded in both Chinese society and China’s nationalist ideologies. Like *Nüsheng*’s editor, the editor of *Women (Funü)*, a journal affiliated with the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in China, responded to Wenying, a reader who faced the “resistance-war wife” problem and wrote a letter for help:

... In our current society centered on men’s power, it is tacitly tolerated, facilitated and indulged for men to engage in a dissolute life with three wives and four concubines (*sanqi siqie*),<sup>10</sup> while women are not allowed to

<sup>10</sup> Here concubine is mentioned as part of an idiom 三妻四妾, which spotlights men’s infidelity in marriage, not literally the action of taking many concubines. Although the 1930 Republican Civil Code formally prohibited bigamy, it did not explicitly ban the taking of concubines. Concubines taken before 1930 did not constitute legal grounds for divorce, and a wife’s petition for divorce could be denied if she failed to file within six months of discovering the concubinage. Judicial records further indicate that cases involving concubinage often resulted

remarry under the rule of lifelong loyalty to one husband... During the chaos of wartime, men can openly take extra partners with the excuse of separation from their wives... It is inevitable for women to experience such misfortune in a society where women must rely on men for survival due to inequalities in educational and career opportunities. We can only struggle for the earlier realization of a gender-equal society to save ourselves and countless sisters from the miserable situation...(*Funü* 1946: 20)

Despite women's broad participation in and great contribution to the struggle of resistance against Japan, the War of Resistance magnified the profound gender inequality of Chinese society and family institutions. *Women's* editor also identified women's lack of opportunities and their dependence on men as the root cause for the problem of the "resistance-war wife," but they further called not simply for general social reform and political progress, but also for the collective activism and identities among women as "sisters" in the struggle to eliminate the social inequality premised upon the dichotomy between men and women. In other words, they not only highlighted gender inequality as a fundamental feature of Chinese society, but also adopted gender, or *nannü* (man/woman), as a critical category of analyzing and reshaping social grouping. The editor of *Women* recommended that Wenying register at the unemployment department of YWCA in Shanghai, or join its department of handicraft to learn some skills if she needed to feed her family. For Wenying, the editor wrote, the Association would not only benefit her economically, but also would be a place where she could meet new friends and have her sorrow eased through "mutual help and mutual aid" with other women (*Funü* 1946: 20).

Different threads of postwar feminism shared their advocacy for promotion of women's economic, educational, and political rights, but this piece on the "resistance-war wife" in YWCA's *Women/Funü* journal demonstrates some nuances between its own call and the positions of other more prominent feminists during the postwar years. On the Nationalist side, the broad participation of both sexes in the patriotic struggle against Japan strengthened women's roles as female patriots, encouraged women from a wide social spectrum to join the feminist movements, and "provided fertile ground for feminist activists to press their case for... a minimum quota of seats for

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in separation rather than formal divorce. In litigation, husbands frequently invoked the wife's "consent" as a means of legitimizing the arrangement. See in Margaret Kuo. *Intolerable Cruelty: Marriage, Law, and Society in Early Twentieth-Century China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

women in the national legislative bodies” (Edwards 2008: 204–407). On the Communist side, the Party on the one hand painstakingly mobilized women out of the domestic sphere into political activities where both sexes were involved, despite the peasants’ suspicion of the sexual morality of women who showed up in public occasions. On the other hand, the long-standing contradiction between the class oppression and sexual oppression led the party to subjugate women’s demand for political rights into the class struggle for socialism and to prioritize women’s rights to work over their political participation, even though women had always been working within the bounds set by China’s patriarchal system (Edwards 2008: 225–229). For both the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, gender as a political category was secondary to a more fundamental one, nation and/or class. For the YWCA, at least in the piece discussed here, the unequal gender relationship was defined as a core feature of Chinese society and the root cause for women’s sufferings, and the War of Resistance was considered a time when such structure was reinforced. The problem of the “resistance-war wife” thus constituted a discursive space for the editor to radically advocate for the concept of gender as the most basic category of social grouping and association, and to envision a women’s community outside the family institution where not only women’s well-being but also their collective identity could be advanced to free them from their traumatizing intimate relationships in the postwar years.

## 5. Conclusion

The problem of the “resistance-war wife” was long treated as a minor issue of personal morality, and retrospectively deployed to illustrate the moral corruption of the Nationalist regime (Chen 1982: 1–2). As a result, the gendered consequences of the War of Resistance were relegated to the margins of a teleological narrative that positioned the founding of the People’s Republic of China as the inevitable culmination of China’s twentieth-century history.<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>11</sup> This approach of postwar Chinese political and social history can be found in: Odd Arne Westad. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Suzanne Pepper. *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945–1949* (University of California Press, 1980). Lloyd E. Eastman. *Seeds of destruction: Nationalist China in war and revolution, 1937–1949* (Stanford University Press, 1984). Edmund S. K Fung. *In Search of Chinese Democracy: Civil Opposition in Nationalist China, 1929–1949* ((Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter 8 and 9.

In 1991, Andrew Nathan had already identified a critical shift in English-language scholarship on Republican China. He observed that newly emerging works, shaped in light of China’s

interpretive framework has obscured the lived wartime and postwar experiences of ordinary people, as well as the alternative visions of nation, society, and gender relations that emerged during the postwar years. As Toby Lincoln states in his piece on postwar urban reconstruction in China, “clean water, electricity, a roof that kept the rain out, food to eat, and a job,” in a word, a life to be reconstructed after eight years of War of Resistance, deserves scholarly attention, and the legacy of Cold War has prevented scholars from exploring how people tried to rebuild such a life in the postwar years (Lincoln 2025).

Restoration and renewal of the family order lie at the center of this postwar reconstruction endeavor. This article demonstrates that the postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife” formed a dynamic discursive space not just for ordinary Chinese people to grieve for their own wartime and postwar traumas in the domestic domain, but also for diverse visions of China’s postwar social and familial reconstruction to converge. Its prevalence in postwar Chinese mass media on the one hand indicated the broad apprehension about the dissolution of conventional Chinese family ethics, while on the other hand motivated feminists to refocus the problem in the domestic domain onto the basic gender inequality in Chinese society and patriarchy, and to envision new forms of women’s association with their domestic partners as well as the broader society. At the critical historical moment of postwar years, overshadowed by the peak of nationalism upon victory over Japan and the fierce Civil War between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, the mass media representation of the “resistance-war wife” issue placed gender inequality and human experiences at the center of the discussion. It thus not only destabilized the firm association of family life

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retreat from Maoist orthodoxy, challenged the older view that CPC victory was inevitable and rooted in broad popular support, a teleological narrative that dominated earlier historiography. For Nathan, this newly developed scholarship signaled the maturation of the field, foregrounding the role of coercion in Communist base-building, highlighting the limits of worker mobilization, and, crucially, refocusing attention on the strategic and political failures of the GMD, thus suggesting that military dynamics and Nationalist weakness were decisive in shaping the war’s outcome. Andrew J. Nathan. “Some Trends in the Historiography of Republican China.” *Republican China* 17, no. 1 (1991): 117–131.

However, until today, much of the scholarship on postwar China continues to reproduce a teleological framing: while it has shifted from celebrating the CPC’s victory to emphasizing the GMD’s weaknesses and missed opportunities, it still directs historical interpretation toward the same predetermined endpoint, the Communist triumph in 1949.

with the national causes under the national crisis, but also challenged the gender biases embedded in social conventions and nationalist ideologies.

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