

“WE ARE ONE FAMILY”:

WOMAN WORK IN THE CHINESE ANTI-JAPANESE COMMUNIST BASES

(1937-1945)

By

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Introduction

During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Chinese Communists accumulated strength incrementally and established anti-Japanese bases village by village primarily in northern and northwestern China. On 25 July 1939, the *Xinzhonghua bao* (New China newspaper) published Mao Zedong’s speech at the opening ceremony of Yan’an Chinese Women’s College (Yan’an Zhongguo nüzi daxue).¹ His statement, “The day the women throughout our nation stand up is the day when Chinese revolution succeeds,” reveals that the mobilization of women was not only part of, but also essential, for the Chinese Communist revolution.² The Chinese Communists viewed women as a vast reservoir of support for the revolution “because they were among those who could benefit the most from it.”³ What strategies did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopt to politicize the peasant women in anti-Japanese bases governed by the party? What was the nature of the CCP’s women mobilization and to what extent was this mobilization successful?

¹*Xinzhonghua bao* was the official newspaper of the CCP in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region during the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was distributed in the anti-Japanese bases established by the CCP. On 15 May 1941, it was renamed as *Jiefang ribao* (Liberation daily).

²Cai Chang, Deng Yingchao, Kang Keqing funü jiefang wenti wenxuan, ed., *Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui, Selective works on women emancipation by Cai Chang, Deng Yingchao, and Kang Keqing, 1938-1987* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1988), 494.

³Patricia Stranahan, *Yan'an Women and the Communist Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 3.

This paper aims to answer these questions by examining several vital aspects of the Party's policies regarding women and the limits of the CCP's woman work (*funü gongzuo*).⁴ It argues that the CCP's multiple methods of women's mobilization were, in effect, family reforms aimed at reshaping the peasants' conception of family and womanhood through celebrating the ideal of one big family. Although these reforms did not lead to full emancipation of women, they were significant in that they furthered the Party's efforts to penetrate its influence deeper into the everyday life of peasant families by playing the roles of educator and mediator.

This paper will also seek dialogue with previous scholarship on the rise of the CCP during the War and on wartime women's movements led by the party. In his classic account of the rise of Chinese Communist power, Chalmers Johnson explains how the CCP successfully rallied social support and forged an alliance with uprooted peasants during the war. In Johnson's view, the Japanese invasion, especially its mopping-up campaigns, reshaped the politically indifferent peasants and cultivated a sense of national defense. Taking advantage of wartime conditions that "broke the hold of parochialism on the Chinese peasant," the CCP expanded its territory and power, especially in vast rural areas of northern and central China by two means: by promoting its propaganda strategy with a sole focus on national salvation rather than class warfare and radical property redistribution, and by uniting Communist-led, rural-recruited partisan armies under the banners of national defense.⁵

Johnson is correct in arguing that nationalism was essential to the CCP's political propaganda and social mobilization. However, he overestimates the strength of national consciousness among the peasants. His thesis of wartime Communist-peasant alliance

⁴"Woman work" is a term borrowed from Delia Davin's study which in turn took it from CCP records. Davin explains that woman work "covers all sorts of activities among women, including mobilizing them for revolutionary struggle, production, literacy, hygiene campaigns, social reform, and so on." See Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 17.

⁵Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: the Emergence of Revolutionary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 5.

obscures the complicated motivations and commitments of both the Party and peasant women. This paper tries to reveal the tension within the Communist-peasant alliance by examining the CCP's mobilization strategies and difficulties faced by the Party.

Studies of the women's movement in Party development have revealed the CCP's inconsistent policies toward women's emancipation. In *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* published in 1976, Delia Davin, a specialist in social and economic development and gender issues in China, demonstrates that mobilization of women was subject to the leadership and socioeconomic priorities of the Party prior to 1949. The Communists considered the politicization and emancipation of women as an important task of general popular mobilization, but the reform of marriage and family institutions was profoundly threatening to the male peasantry, whose support was essential to the survival of the Communists. As a result, the Party had to advocate productive work participation as the sole means for which women were to gain social equality and independence. Patricia Stranahan's study *Yan'an Women and the Communist Party* further explores the tension between the Party's feminist agenda and its military and political needs for popular support, by revealing the different stages in the Party's development of women's policies.⁶

I accept the argument that the CCP's wartime policies regarding women's emancipation were inconsistent, as stated by both Davin and Stranahan. However, it is not the goal of this paper to show different foci of the Party's women policies in different periods. Instead, I argue that the CCP's policies toward women's education, production,

⁶ According to Stranahan, between 1937 and 1941 party cadres organized women into women's associations and encouraged women to attack people who had oppressed them or to obtain divorces. When party leaders recognized that their program for emancipating women conflicted with the larger goals of winning their war of resistance and in establishing complete control of base areas, they began to search for a more workable policy. Between 1942 and 1945, the party called for women's larger participation in productive work to make the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region self-sufficient. Women were educated to play a positive and constructive role to ensure the family's stability.

military training, and soldiers' dependents all represented the Party's efforts to reshape the peasants' womanhood and their conception of family.

This paper draws mainly upon primary materials from two kinds of sources: 1) classic accounts of wartime Chinese Communist bases written by foreign observers, and 2) collections of CCP policies and reports, as well as the direct accounts of the Communist leadership. The first group of sources provides a vivid account of social life in the base areas, especially pertaining to how the Party leaders and common peasants thought and behaved. These firsthand sources begin in the summer of 1936 (only several months before the Xi'an Incident, which led the Nationalists and the Communists to make peace and negotiate a united front against the increasing threat posed by Japan), and end in the summer of 1944 when investigators consisting of six foreign and nine Chinese reporters visited Yan'an with Jiang Jieshi's permission. The second group of sources contains information on the Party's specific policies toward social mobilization and strategies, achievements and difficulties of their woman work. The collection of CCP policies and CCP leaders' talks, writings, and reports covers both the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931-1934) and the Second Sino-Japanese War period.

Mobilization and Response: The CCP's Roles As Trainers and Educators

In the 1920s, the Chinese peasant family remained the primary economic unit, and it retained the right to exercise authority over women who were dependent on it. The tradition of women's subordination to men through law, custom, and a lack of opportunity to challenge the system had seen little change since the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, which overthrew the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). In the Nobel Prize classic *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck vividly describes the way Chinese peasants in the 1920s were touched very little by the changing economy, Western technology, and new social movements.⁷ The peasants'

⁷ Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: The John Day Company, 1931).

response to the CCP's women mobilization during the Second Sino-Japanese War revealed that social lives in the anti-Japanese bases governed by the CCP during the war did not experience a fundamental change from the society described by Buck. As Stranahan points out, when the Communist Party initiated its program for social change in the Jiangxi Soviet (1931-1934) and the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region during the anti-Japanese war, "it began almost from scratch."⁸

CCP leaders took the orthodox Marxist position on female emancipation as the theoretical basis for their gender policy. In *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels wrote: "To emancipate woman and make her equal of man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time."⁹ The CCP, under the immediate realities of resisting Japanese invasion and building new democracy in the base areas, further developed Engels' view by mobilizing women's participation in both economic production and public affairs.

On 18 May 1938, Deng Yingchao, leader of the Women's Department of the CCP's Changjiang Bureau (*Zhonggong zhongyang changjiangju*), established in Wuhan in December 1937, attended the Lushan Women's *Conversazione* (*Lushan funü tanhuahui*) as a representative of women's associations in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region.¹⁰ In the report submitted to the *Conversazione*, she illustrated that the principal direction and central task of the CCP's wartime woman work was to help the government and army win the resistance war. Specific

⁸Stranahan, *Yan'an Women and the Communist Party*, 19.

⁹Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 148.

¹⁰In May 1938, Madame Song Meiling held a *conversazione* in Lu Mountain, Jiangxi. Over fifty women representatives attended the *conversazione*, including female party members of the Nationalist Party, wives and daughters of key leaders of the Nationalist governments on the provincial and municipal levels, representatives from women's associations in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, and other patriotic women activists with no formal affiliation with either the CCP or the Nationalist Party.

tasks cleared for women included helping the government recruit army soldiers, assisting army soldiers in delivering mail, washing clothes, cooking and nursing, prying into the enemies' information, destroying the enemies' transportation system, participating in production more actively, and receiving military training. Deng outlined that the prerequisites of mobilizing women for the war effort were to improve women's literacy and life conditions and to allow them to participate in politics. In terms of occupations, women workers could join worker unions, village women could join peasant associations, and female students could join student unions. In terms of specific tasks, women could be organized into nurse groups (*bushi dui*), song-singing groups (*geyong dui*), laundry-doing groups (*xiyi dui*), character-learning groups (*shizi zu*), and soldiers' dependent groups (*kangzhan jiaoshu zu*), among others.¹¹

Deng's report provided a clear outline of the Party's gender policies. The specific responsibilities women should shoulder as their contributions to the war, as pointed out in the report, showed that the CCP still advocated women's domestic roles in the home. However, the people who could benefit directly from women's service were not merely a woman's own family members but the CCP's soldiers as a whole. Women's work and service was not expected for a single family under patriarchal control, but for a large family consisting of the Party's soldiers and led by the Party. Women's contributions to the war in this way should have been the new standard for "virtuous wives and good mothers" (*xianqi liangmu*).¹² Deng illustrates the new ideal of "virtuous wives and good mothers" more completely in her later article titled "Guanyu 'Weilan zhong yidian andan' de pipan"

¹¹Deng Yingchao, "Women duiyu zhanshi funü gongzuo de yijian" (Our advice on wartime woman work), in Cai Chang, 12-13.

¹²Deng, "Our advice on wartime woman work," 7. In the Chinese language, the phrase "virtuous wives and good mothers" (*xianqi liangmu*) has been shorthand for traditional women's roles ever since the May Fourth period, and it is often assumed to be traditional and Chinese in origin. However, Sally Taylor Lieberman points out in her study that this phrase "was originally coined by the Japanese educational reformer Nakamura Masanao (1832-1891) in the mid-nineteenth century and was introduced into the Chinese language during the late Qing by promoters of Japanese-style education for girls." See Sally Taylor Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 27.

(Criticism on the article “Darkness in Blue”) published in 1940. This article claims that Deng opposed the opinion argued by a writer named Duan Mu that “women had their right to enjoy themselves in their own happy families by being a good housewife and mother and being satisfied with managing a small family.”¹³ Deng emphasized that women’s liberation could not be separated from social and national emancipation. She writes, “women should step out of their small families and establish the sense of big social family.”¹⁴ Deng called upon women to be a vanguard and role models of resisting Japanese invasion by being “virtuous wives and mothers” of the whole nation, not of one single husband and one single son. Harrison Fortman, an American correspondent who visited Yan’an in 1944, observed that in Yan’an University, established in 1941, children stayed with their mothers in women’s dormitories, and mothers set up a labor-exchange unit (*biangong dui*) in which they took turns looking after children.¹⁵ The CCP’s programs of mobilizing women for wartime efforts aimed to reshape the peasants’ understanding of womanhood and their conception of family.

The CCP encouraged women to receive military training, 80% of young women with unbound feet in northern Shaanxi joined women’s self-defense armies (*ziweijun*). Most foreign residents in China reached the conclusion that Chinese women had more masculine characteristics than the men.¹⁶ The presence of women in the CCP’s army was also confirmed by the enemy. A Japanese brigade commander wrote in his war diary: “Communist influence is the foundation of anti-Japanese thought... Around here even these Chinese women join the war and throw hand grenades.”¹⁷ However, women were expected to play only a secondary role in fighting by performing supplementary roles such as collecting information and destroying communication systems. Edgar Snow’s wife Nym

¹³Deng Yingchao, “Guanyu ‘Weilan zhong yidian andan’ de pipan” (Criticism on the article “Darkness in Blue”), in Cai Chang, 63.

¹⁴Ibid., 68.

¹⁵Harrison Forman, *Report from Red China* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1945), 89.

¹⁶Nym Wales, *Inside Red China* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1939), 169.

¹⁷Agnes Smedley, *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1938), 58.

Wales, an American journalist who reported from China in the 1930s, once asked Zhu De, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, why he had no female regiments in his main army.

Zhu replied:

Many women are very anxious to join the Red Army, but we can't take them in. The main problem is one of discipline. Then, too, the Red Army is so mobile that they cannot keep up with such fast marching as our maneuvering requires in fighting, nor carry the necessary burdens easily, and also they get sick more often than men, as the life is extremely hard. However, their fighting spirit is good, and they would make good soldiers for any ordinary army. There have been many brave women in the partisan groups. In Kiangsi women were organized into fighting units, but never engaged in formal warfare, but only in sporadic skirmishes. They were good at capturing the enemy's supplies and arms and defeated one or two enemy regiments.¹⁸

Zhu's reply confirmed that the CCP's program of organizing women in fighting units, as outlined in Deng's report, did elicit an active response from women themselves. Party reports showed that sometimes "after one woman in the peasantry joined the self-defense army, other women were all influenced and joined together."¹⁹ This militarized femininity reshaped peasant women's self-perception, but it was not allowed to constitute a threat to the masculinity of the Party's soldiers, since joining the formal armies was still considered a male privilege.

Women were urged by CCP leaders like Deng Yingchao to contribute to the resistance war by receiving an education. When interviewed by Nym Wales, Li Chün-chen, the head of the Women's Department of the CCP's Central Bureau, said: "In the villages women are organized into family groups and small clubs called 'Clubs for Learning Characters' (*shixi zu*), or 'Clubs for Reading Newspapers' (*dubao zu*). And under our instruction the women have

¹⁸Wales, 174.

¹⁹Tao Han, ed., *Xibei tequ de zhanshi zongdongyuan* (Wartime mobilization in the northwestern bases) (Washington: Center for Chinese Research Materials, Association of Research Libraries, 1970), 2.

developed politically through Marxist clubs and classes. These groups exist in all Soviet districts.”²⁰

However, the CCP’s program of female education did not achieve great success. Stranahan’s research shows that “Most people found the educational programs too political and irrelevant to their immediate needs; educational policy during the United Front was directed toward the war effort and paid little attention to more practical matters such as the economy.”²¹ This view is supported from Edgar Snow’s description of how the Communists tried to find a quicker medium for bringing literacy to the masses:

Even in social education the soviet aims were primarily political. There was no time or occasion to be teaching farmers literature or flower arrangement. The Reds were practical people. To the Lenin clubs, the Communist Youth leagues, the Partisans, and the village soviets they sent simple, crudely illustrated *Shih-tzu* (“Know Characters”) texts, and helped mass organizations form self-study groups of their own, with some Communist or literate among them as a leader. When the youths, or sometimes even aged peasants, began droning of the short sentences, they found themselves absorbing ideas along with their ideographs....When farmers and farmers’ sons and daughters finished the book they could not only read for the first time in their lives, but they knew who had taught them, and why. They had grasped the basic fighting ideas of Chinese communism.²²

Snow’s description reveals how the party integrated its goals of political education and ideological cultivation into its efforts to enhance the literacy standard of the peasantry. A July 1937 manifesto stated that all “newspapers, books and magazines, films, plays, literature and art should serve national defense.”²³ This manifesto reveals that nationalistic appeal was a consistent theme in the Party’s propaganda and cultural productions.

²⁰Nym Wales mis-romanized the name Li Chün-chen. It should be Li Chian-chen or Li Jianzhen. For the rest of this paper I will use Li Jianzhen. Wales, 192.

²¹Stranahan, 39.

²²Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 236.

²³Peter Seybolt, “The Yen’an Revolution in Mass Education,” *China Quarterly* 48 (1971): 646-647.

Johnson maintains that nationalism, a key element in defining the nature of Chinese communism, powerfully evoked the peasants' patriotism. However, Peter Seybolt suggests that the role of nationalism in social mobilization should not be overestimated. According to Seybolt, CCP policy makers mistakenly believed that appealing to people's patriotism could encourage their political participation. He argues "such a strategy might have worked in an area under direct Japanese attack; but it had only minimal appeal in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, where little fighting took place."²⁴ The general lack of interest in education among peasants was also partly due to the peasants still holding strongly traditional views that women should be secluded. Men did not want their wives to leave the house for community activity because "they feared that once women were educated they would no longer want to do housework and might consider divorce."²⁵ The new ideal of an educated and potentially independent woman was too advanced or at the least too frightening, a prospect for many peasant men.

Another key strategy of the CCP's social mobilization was to encourage women to participate in production by organizing them into mutual aid teams. The CCP's production movement sought to make organized labor exchanges - like cooperatives and mutual-aid teams - the fundamental agricultural units in the base areas. In the mutual-aid teams "a peasant worked for only nominal wages or no wages at all in exchange for some cultivation rights, the use of draft animals, or other benefits."²⁶ Edgar Snow, the American journalist, reported on a system of "Saturday Brigades" in which "not only all the children's organizations but every Soviet official, Red partisan, Red Guard, women's organization member, and any Red Army detachment that happened to be nearby, were mobilized to work at least one day at farming tasks."²⁷ Snow comments that the nature of this system was

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Stranahan, 39.

²⁶ Yung-fa Chen, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 215.

²⁷ Snow, 225.

that the Reds were introducing among the peasants “the germs of the drastically revolutionary idea of collective effort.”²⁸

The Party’s program of expanding a variety of cooperatives and mutual aid teams failed, however, because it conflicted with the peasants’ conservative belief that family should be the primary productive unit. “Cooperative farms (agricultural production cooperatives proper) were extraordinarily rare,” writes Peter Schran.²⁹ Male peasants did not welcome the Party’s program of teaching village women how to weave and spin, because they were afraid that “although they could make some money, they might lose their wives.”³⁰ Peasant women were also indifferent to the call because they did not want to “be sent outside [of the] home to work in the factories,” or simply because they were not smart enough or too busy.³¹ Indeed, mutual aid teams which imposed new responsibilities on the peasants and challenged their understanding of family became a source of conflict: “It is easy to work by oneself. It just causes trouble to have too many people working together. Even blood brothers quarrel with each other and have a hard time getting along. How can different families get a long in a cooperative?”³² Since a peasant in mutual aid teams worked for no charge with the goal of showing gratitude and friendship, these teams “mostly benefited gangsters, hoodlums, and landlords’ agents, because a peasant dared not decline a request for help.”³³ The scholar Wei Hongyun also provides some examples of difficulties with the development and expansion of the system of mutual aid teams and work groups:

Peasants lacked experience in sustained cooperation and some mutual aid teams were not well organized. Some labor exchange groups did not record

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Peter Schran, *Guerrilla Economy: The Development of the Shen-Kan-Ning Border Region, 1937-1945* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), 73.

³⁰ Cai Chang, “Yingjie funü gongzuo de xin fangxiang” (To welcome the new direction of woman work), in Cai Chang, 85.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Wang Yunzhao and Song Jun, quoted in Chen, *Making Revolution*, 216.

³³ Ibid., 215.

work points and were slow to settle accounts, so that labor exchange alienated the more productive or simply collapses. In others, cadres coerced participation with disastrous results. Under such circumstances cooperation was often short-lived.³⁴

Because of the peasants' reluctance in participating in collective production in 1943 and after, rapid economic production was coupled with decentralization.³⁵

Mobilization and Response: The CCP's Roles As Organizers, Mediators, and Helpers

Earlier, Deng's report suggested that women should be mobilized into different organizations according to their occupations and special tasks. The organizations created among the peasantry were "what Red Army soldiers called three-in-one: economic, political, and cultural in their utility."³⁶ As the focus of the Communist drive shifted from land revolution to united front, orders were issued in the autumn of 1936 to abandon use of the name Communist Party at the subdistrict level and replace it with that of the Anti-Japanese National Salvation Association (*Kangri jinguo hui*).³⁷ In other words, the Party could not start with the Communist discourse when they implemented the policies of women mobilization on the practical level. According to the CCP report on the Liberated Areas, more than 70% of women in the base areas joined the Women's National Salvation Associations.³⁸

While this membership number is remarkable, women's actual participation was another matter. Li Jianzhen admitted that among 130,000 women who participated in

³⁴Wei Hongyun, "Social Reform and Value Change in the Jin Cha Ji Anti-Japanese Border Region," ed. Chongyi Feng and David Goodman, in *North China at War: The Social Ecology of Revolution, 1937-1845* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 107.

³⁵Mark Selden, *The Yen-an Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 260.

³⁶Snow, 225.

³⁷Selden, 116.

³⁸*Kangri zhanzheng shiqi jiefangqu gaikuang* (General situation in the Liberation Areas during the anti-Japanese war) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1953), 13.

women's associations, only 80,000 could be depended upon to attend all meetings.³⁹ David S. G. Goodman, in his study on the Sixth Trigram Movement (a local sect of peasant rebellion against the county government on 12 October 1941) in Licheng (a county in the Jin Ji Lu Yu [Shanxi-Hebei-Henan-Shandong] Border Region), shows that 47% of membership in the local peasant rebellion consisted of women, but the proportion of women who were members of all anti-Japanese mass organizations was only 20%.⁴⁰ Anti-Japanese nationalism did not automatically strengthen peasant women's enthusiasm in participating in political organizations. The CCP leaders had to admit that the best way to mobilize women was not to propagandize national salvation but to appeal to their natural feelings and comply with local customs. Sister associations (*jiemei hui*) and mother associations (*mama tuan*) needed to be established first before they were transformed into Women's National Salvation Associations.⁴¹ As the paper shows, by organizing Women's National Salvation Associations, the CCP obscured Communist discourse and advocated the nationalist appeal to the peasants. The plan of action to organize sister and mother associations first and then transform them into Women's National Salvation Associations revealed that the nationalist appeal could not serve as the starting point when the CCP implemented the policies of women mobilization. The CCP's technique of establishing various women's organizations represented its effort to politicize women's self-identities and publicize womanhood.

Not only were women's self-identities exposed to the CCP's redefinition, but the peasants' marriage and family lives also were targets of the CCP's regulation. "*Shaan-Gan-Ning bianqu hunyin tiaolü*" (Marriage statutes in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region) was passed by the CCP in 1939, which sought the realization of "free union and divorce, the equality of men and women, and an end to mercenary marriages and child brides

³⁹Wales, 192.

⁴⁰David S. G. Goodman, "Resistance and Revolution, Religion, and Rebellion," ed. Chongyi Feng and David Goodman, in *North China at War: The Social Ecology of Revolution, 1937-1845* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 141.

⁴¹Kang Keqing, "Sannian lai de huabei funü yundong" (Women's movement in north China during the last three years), in Cai Chang, 49.

(*tongyangxi*).”⁴² This was a principle that was already established in “*Zhonghua Sunwei’ ai gongheguo bunyinfǎ*” (Marriage law in the Chinese Soviet Republic), published by the CCP in 1934. The marriage statutes, which intended to enhance women’s status, had an amusing result in that the price of brides grew cheaper. “Peasant Li” once said to Anna Louise Strong that he got a wife from the revolution for only twenty dollars, though he could never have hoped to get a wife before. When Strong asked him how the revolution made wives cheaper, Li said “A wife can leave a man now if she does not like him, so people will not pay so much.”⁴³ The stubborn resistance of the peasantry to the new policies forced the Communists to design a new approach by changing the slogan in rural districts from “free marriage” and “women’s equality” to “save the babies” and “for a prosperous family.”⁴⁴ Cai Chang, leader of the Women’s Department of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, admitted that “we made a mistake when we emphasized women’s rights to such an extent that we antagonized the peasants.”⁴⁵ Under the new slogan, women were given education in child care and were taught to spin and weave to produce the family clothing. The slogan change shows that the CCP considered enhancing the reproductive and productive roles of women as the primary means to raise their economic weight in the home.

The CCP intervened in the peasants’ family life not only by issuing new marriage laws, but also by regulating the household management of the peasant family. For example, to oppose wife beating as a form of oppression was not only a way to improve women’s status, but also an opportunity for the Party to restructure the power relations within the peasant family. The American journalist Agnes Smedley once described, in her wartime report, how the women’s association checked the patriarchal authority:

⁴²Wei, 108.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 171.

⁴⁵Ibid.

If the women's association could not persuade the husband to act humanely, they might call a "struggle meeting" and inform the village of his oppressive acts. A notice would appear on the village news board: "Wang—beats his wife; let him stop or we'll see to it," signed by the women's association of the village.⁴⁶

The CCP's social mobilization strategies such as holding the "struggle meetings," were also adopted by the peasants in their household management. As Anna Louise Strong observed, a new type of family began to develop in the Liberated Areas:

A large family consisting of parents, several sons with their wives, and many grandchildren, often became "democratic families." They have family councils, elect a head, and set quotas of work for each member. Any output above the quota is divided, four fifths to the producer and one fifth to the family fund. These "democratic families" even have "three-year plan" in terms of increased crops and livestock.⁴⁷

Harrison Forman also describes a model of family meeting in a border village. After a family election, the father Li was elected as head of the whole family, the oldest son as the head of the male group, and his wife as the head of the female group. The Li family held family meetings regularly, pointing out the shortcomings of themselves and others and working out production plans together.⁴⁸ This "democratic" family model was not a challenge to traditional family values, because the father was still the head of the whole family and wives were still assigned the tasks of housework and childcare. The patriarchal tradition was still strong in the minds of peasants.

The group representing soldiers' dependents (*junshu*, soldiers' wives and mothers) remains largely unaddressed in previous scholarship on the CCP's wartime social mobilization. The latter part of this paper attempts to consolidate the thesis of family reform undertaken by the CCP in anti-Japanese base areas by focusing on soldiers' dependents.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Forman, 70.

As early as the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931-1934), the CCP decided that the most central task of woman work was to mobilize women into encouraging their husbands and sons to join the Red Army.⁴⁹ The CCP popularized this slogan among the peasants: “Great honor to be a soldier’s wife, huge shame to be reluctant to leave the husband.”⁵⁰ To rally women’s support in soldier recruitment, the CCP formulated policies of special treatment to soldiers’ dependents. The principle of favorably treating soldiers’ dependents during the Jiangxi Soviet period continued into the anti-Japanese bases, and was even established by the CCP as “the obligation of the masses.”⁵¹ The policies specified in “*Shaan-Gan-Ning tequ kangri junren youdai tiaoli*” (Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region’s statutes of favorably treating soldiers fighting against the Japanese) issued in December 1937 largely copied “*Zhongguo gongnong hongjun youdai tiaoli*” (Statutes of favorably treating the Red Army of Chinese workers and peasants) in 1931, with only a few subtle revisions. According to “*Shaan-Gan-Ning tequ kangri junren youdai tiaoli*,” the policies of preferential treatment of soldiers’ dependents included “exemption from all taxes in the base areas, free rent in houses owned by the state, one percent discount in stores owned by the state, priority in purchasing scarce commodities, free tuition for children’s education, and help from other people with farming in the case of lack of labor.”⁵² The statutes also wrote that “Young children and siblings of the dead or disabled soldiers could enter schools of revolutionary disabled armymen established by the government and get jobs assigned by the government after eighteen.”⁵³

⁴⁹“Xiangganbian suqu funü gongzuo jue’an, 1931/9/14” (Decisions on the woman work in the Xiang-Gan Border Region, 14 September 1931), in *Xianggan geming genjudi* (Xiang-Gan revolutionary bases), Volume One, ed. Xianggan geming genjudi dangshi ziliao zhengji xiezuo xiaozu (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1990), 97.

⁵⁰“Zhonggong xianggan shengwei funübu gei zhongyang funübu de baogao, 1933/1/7” (The Report from the Women’s Department of Xiang-Gan Provinces to the Women’s Department of central Communist Party, 7 January 1933), in *Xianggan geming genjudi sbiliao xuanbian* (Selective collection of historical sources on the Xiang-Gan revolutionary bases), Volume Two, ed. Jiangxisheng dang’anguan (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1984), 221.

⁵¹Tao Han, ed., *Xibei tequ de zhanshi zongdongyuan*, 50.

⁵²Ibid., 59-61.

⁵³Ibid.

Although these policies brought social benefits to soldiers' dependents, their fundamental aim of the well-treatment of dependents was, in actuality, to enlarge and consolidate the CCP army. Moreover, while supposedly improving women's lives, the policies in effect reinforced women's identities as belonging to and depending on their husbands, through the subordination of woman work to man work. These special policies toward soldiers' dependents did reshape the womanhood of the soldiers' wives by enhancing their prestige among other women. The women encouraged their men to join the army, and all who did not send their husbands to the front were despised by others.⁵⁴ When husbands signed up to join the army, wives felt very proud among others and believed that they were the most honorable people.⁵⁵ Harrison Forman once participated in a women's meeting. One speaker said that she had received a letter from her soldier husband and she felt so proud because her husband was fighting for a New Democratic China.⁵⁶ An old lady 'Zheng' sent her three sons to join the Eighth Route Army and she received an honorable title from the masses as a proud mother.⁵⁷ If a soldier left the army irresponsibly, it was considered a shame on his family.⁵⁸

The policy of mobilizing other women to help the soldiers' dependents with agricultural work also aimed to cultivate a sense of one extended family among the peasants. Female government workers and peasant women were expected to provide regular service to the families of the soldiers who fought against the Japanese.⁵⁹ This inevitably caused conflicts with peasants, especially women of old age. A girl whom Strong calls Sweet Jasmine Chen, who joined the women's association of her village in 1941, organized a special girls' team to care for the families of absent militia by carrying water, washing clothes, and cutting

⁵⁴Wales, 195.

⁵⁵Deng Yingchao, "Shaan-Gan-Ning bianqu funü yundong gaikuang" (General situation of women's movement in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region), in Cai Chang, 18.

⁵⁶Forman, 201.

⁵⁷Kang Keqing, 52.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Deng Yingchao, 18.

firewood. When the older women opposed the team, the girls had to work in their own home much harder than before.⁶⁰

Chen Yung-fa argues that the party managed to improve the prestige of soldiers by improving the prestige of their dependents. Chen cites one cadre's eagerness to ascertain the effects of the Party's drive for contributions in T'aihsien in 1944 as an example to show peasant thinking on the issue:

1. Now the military dependent has prestige. He appears as if he were three meters taller than us, a height enabling him to reach the eaves of the houses.
2. It is great to have a son in the army. You will not worry about life if this is the case.
3. His son is fighting outside. It is not much for us to give some help and gifts.
4. The New Fourth Army repairs the unkempt graveyard. It buries the dead soldiers with coffins. It even built a memorial tower for them. It is better to [join the army] than to stay home [where no one will take care of your funeral].⁶¹

The comments from this cadre suggest that the Party's efforts to elevate the status of soldiers' dependents were successful. However, the reason why the peasants responded positively to the Party's call of treating the soldiers' dependents well was not that they embraced the idea of one big family. As Chen argues, the remaking of the soldier's image succeeded due to "rural people's concerns about face, old age, and death."⁶²

Conclusion

Since the sources on the CCP's policies used in this paper are not systematic, this paper does not aim at a comprehensive review of the CCP's women-related policies and the effectiveness of its woman work. The focus here is to explore the party's actual interaction

⁶⁰ Anna Louise Strong, *The Chinese Conquer China* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1949), 174.

⁶¹ Chen, 390.

⁶² Ibid.

with peasants in village settings by highlighting some examples of the CCP's mobilization strategies and the peasants' responses to them, both positive and negative.

Theoretically, the party grounded its gender policies on a combination of two ideologies: an orthodox Marxist position on female emancipation, advocating the significance of women's wider participation in social production; and the nationalistic appeal of maintaining the united front between male and female peasants to resist the Japanese invasion. However, when the party implemented the policies of women mobilization on the practical level, they had to start from neither the Communist discourse nor the nationalist appeal. Although a variety of women's associations were organized in the base areas, none of them were in the name of the Communists. So, even in the effort to mobilize women's participation in war service, the party tried to organize women into associations of widely diverse categories by resorting to women's familial identities as mothers and sisters, and their occupational identities as teachers, nurses, and students.

This paper concludes that in mobilizing women in education, collective production, military training, and requiring women to help soldiers' dependents, the Party infiltrated the peasant family in the capacity of helpers, negotiators, mediators, role-definers, and educators. Women were expected to be "virtuous wives and mothers" for a big social family by taking care of each other's children, participating in organized cooperative production, and joining various types of associations. Womanhood was reshaped on the basis of a new view of family. The private affairs of the peasant family were exposed to public criticism in "struggle meetings." Foreign eyewitness accounts of social lives in the base areas have shown that this "democratic" method even influenced the peasants' own household management style; family councils were held to elect family leaders and decide production plans and labor division.

The peasants' indifferent response to and complaints regarding the CCP's women mobilization, from another perspective, corroborated the argument that the CCP's women policies actually tried to reshape the peasants' traditional family values. The CCP's call for

women's participation in education, military training, and cooperative production conflicted with the peasants' traditional view that women should only serve their families and be secluded from the outside world. Even women themselves sometimes did not welcome the CCP's call to action. Many preferred to work at home instead of in mutual-aid teams. Women of old age also criticized girls who spent too much time in mutual-aid teams but less time in doing their own work at home.

Despite the CCP's efforts in women mobilization, women were still expected to play a secondary role in the war effort. The CCP maintained a hierarchy between femininity and masculinity in the army by discouraging women from fighting in formal warfare with men. The CCP did not risk threatening the interest of male peasants and losing their support, especially in light of the new marriage law. Therefore, Party leaders had to compromise their feminist agenda with urgent political and military needs and change the slogan to a "prosperous family," in which the women's main responsibilities should be production and reproduction.

The examination of the CCP's policies toward the soldiers' dependents shows that the CCP intended to politicize more peasant families by asking them to help the soldiers' families. The Party attempted to cultivate the sense that "we are one family" among the peasants. By enhancing the image of the soldiers' dependents, the CCP also tried to bring social prestige to the soldiers' masculinity. By requiring other peasant women to help those married to the CCP's army soldiers, the CCP established a hierarchy between femininity of women who married and depended on the Party's soldiers, and the femininity of the common masses. The woman work led by the Party was carried out as a means to support the party's man work.

This paper has shown how the CCP sought to heighten the peasants' political consciousness and reshape their womanhood and their conception of family with one husband and one son. The CCP's women mobilization was an effort to slowly inject the concept of a broader vision of social reality into the peasant mentality. However, this effort

did not always succeed because the idea of educated, potentially independent females and the view of one big family conflicted with the peasants' own interests and beliefs.