“Permanent Waves and Weird Clothes are not Allowed: Unofficial Pictures of Women in Canton During the Early Phase of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1938

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Abstract
In many contemporary propaganda and official narratives, Chinese/Cantonese women were/are depicted as dedicated patriots and a formidable force of resistance in the Second Sino-Japanese War. This is, however, a much simplified picture of Cantonese women’s war-time experiences. Women in Canton were so diverse that their responses towards the war were divided and variegated. Did most women participate enthusiastically in the war effort? How did the approaching war affect (or un-affect) their work, love, marriage, etc? By studying contemporary newspapers, women's magazines, and women's reminiscences from this period, the impact of the war on women could be better revealed.
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The 70th anniversary of China’s victory over “Japanese Fascists’ brutal invasion” was “celebrated” conspicuously in China throughout the year 2015. This important historical event was commemorated in a number of ways all over the country: military parade, commemorative feasts for the war veterans held in five-star hotels, academic conferences for historians/party officials/veterans, special lectures in schools and universities, music concerts paying tribute to China’s victory, public exhibitions of wartime relics and photographs, public meetings of citizens and war veterans in city squares or memorial parks, evening gala held for war veterans, not to mention those tons of publicity materials which were hung up in the most visible locations in cities all over China.

I was in Canton (Guangzhou) when the year-long ‘celebration’ of the Victory was in full swing. What struck me most was the flooding, so to speak, of drama series based on the theme of the War of Resistance which were broadcast on nearly all national and provincial television channels. These TV wartime drama series shared very similar themes and even cinematic techniques: that they all unmistakably highlighted the evilness of those Japanese fascists/militarists and hence all Japanese soldiers (and their Chinese collaborators of course) are depicted as cruel creatures who (or ‘which’) did nothing other than killing innocent Chinese people and raped their women; that all Chinese people are described as living in the most horrible conditions and every one suffered under the “iron saddle” of the Japanese invaders; that the heroism of both Chinese people and, in particular, the Red Army and Chinese Communist Party (hereafter as CCP)-led guerillas helped resisting, always successfully, against these Japanese Fascists and their military invasion.
To commemorate this war, a large number of historical monographs and pictorials on the theme of anti-Japanese Fascist invasion of China and Asia have been published in the past few years. Among these publications are no shortage of books and articles about the sufferings of Chinese women in these difficult years of the war, their selfless sacrifice and commendable acts bravery (particularly the Soong sisters, those women warriors who had joined the army and fought in the front, those female organizers of anti-Japanese campaigns in the rear, high-school and university female students who participated actively in the war efforts), and, above all, the war crime of “comfort women”. These are the “standard” frame or areas of historical enquiry which historians, particularly those patriotic ones, are expected to work within. In the watchful eyes of the Chinese authorities, this is the “set menu”, so to speak, for any Chinese (and foreigners too) who want to read and learn about, or to conduct research on, women in China during the war. All these nationalistic publications by patriotic authors (who are professional academics, historians, writers in official or semi-official organizations, etc) speak the language and ideology of the party-state; their standardized portrayals of the war are what people in China are expected and required to learn about from this war. Dominance of the party-state in this discourse and grand narratives of the war is clear and non-negotiable.

But how was life like in a wartime city, such as Canton, at the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War? The focus of this article is women in Canton during the first year of the war, before the fall of the city on October 20, 1938. It will look at how people in general, but women in particular, reacted to the approaching war, and the extent of impacts of the approaching war on the life of ordinary women in this city. When facing the threat of an approaching war, what did the government do in mobilizing the urban populace including women? How successful were these mobilization efforts? What were the major concerns of women in this city? How preoccupied were they by the approaching war? Were they all proactively helping the government in “defending Greater Guangdong”? What did women hope for at that time? These questions, though simple, are not so easy to be answered satisfactorily.

The Enthusiasts

According to an “authoritative” work about the history of women’s movement (fu nu yun dong 婦女運動) in Guangdong, soon after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident broke out on 7th July in 1937, women’s associations from different professions, as a part of the anti-Japanese war resistance efforts, were organized into “work teams” and started “penetrating deep into factories and villages to found evening schools [in which they] publicized [the message of] resisting against Japan [and] saving the
country”. This is apparently propaganda cliché, which intends to impress its readers with the quick response and strong determination of the Chinese people, women without exception, in fighting against the “Japanese Fascists”. Of the few available newspapers published in Canton at that time and which I have consulted while preparing for this paper, 7th July was just another ordinary day to most Chinese in China. It was not an uneventful day of course; but the military clash at Marco Polo Bridge was hardly anywhere on the news in Canton. The Incident had become important national news in Canton only five days after its outbreak. Initial public response was largely lukewarm. In Canton, it was neither the government nor any women’s association which had taken the initiative in responding to the news; it was the Cantonese Opera Guild (The Eight-Harmonies Guild 八和會館) which launched a fund-raising event for the families of the ‘fallen heroes’ of the 29th Army, and that was the first recorded “people’s reaction” against the Japanese invasion of China in Canton in the summer of 1937.3

Cantonese women’s associations of various kinds soon rode along this momentum of patriotic feats by organizing their own campaigns in no small number. The Women Committee of Canton (廣州市婦女委員會), the United Association of All Women in Guangdong Province (廣東省女界聯合會), the Guangdong Women’s National Salvation Work Team (廣東婦女御侮救亡工作團), and many other bodies, all of them controlled directly or indirectly by either Kuomintang (hereafter as KMT) or CCP, mobilized their members to taking part in successive publicity and mobilization campaigns in support of the government’s call for participation in the war efforts. These activities had been reported fairly often in official (or the Party’s) newspapers, and also occasionally in non-official daily in Canton; the followings are some randomly picked examples:

1) On July 27th, 1937, a KMT-led Guangdong Women’s Work Committee (Guangdong fu nu gong zuo wei yuan hui 廣東婦女工作委員會) announced the detailed plan of organizing nurse teams in all counties of Guangdong. Every township and village, within one month of the announcement, was required to select and enlist to these teams one female between 16 and 35 year of age.3

2) On August 5th, 1937, a few tens of women from various social/occupational stratum (ge jie 各界) met in the office of the United Association of All Women in Guangdong Province (Guangdong sheng

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3 Zhongshan Ri bao (hereafter as ZSRB), 27/7/1937. There is no information, however, on whether this scheme had ever been enforced.
nu jie lian he hui (廣東省女界聯合會) in Canton to discuss the plan of founding a sub-association whose main task was to organize members into “consolation teams” (wei lao dui 慰勞隊) which were to be sent off to the front to comfort wounded soldiers, to help them write letters home, and to bring them gifts as token of the people’s appreciation and support. The decision of founding a women’s association dedicated to consoling “the warriors in the War of Resistance” was inspired by a likewise organization initiated by Madame Song Meiling (First Lady of the Republic of China). On August 16th, 1937, a Guangdong branch of the Association of Chinese Women’s Consolation [Team] for Soldiers in the War of Self-defence and Resistance (Zhongguo fu nu wei lai zhi wei kang chan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui 中國婦女慰勞自衛抗戰将士廣東分會) was founded with the full support of the central and provincial governments as well as spouses of top government officials and social notables in Canton. Between August 1937 and May 1938, branches of the Chinese Women’s Consolation [Teams] Association from different parts of the province had organized public donation campaigns in Canton and other cities in Guangdong. The campaigns succeed, reportedly, in collecting large quantity of non-military supplies (such as cotton-pad jackets, clothing, medicated herbal oil, cotton pads and bandages, cakes, biscuits, cash, canned condense milk, coffee, rice, underwear, soaps, tooth brushes, towels, candies, etc.), most of them were donated by government offices and local schools.  

3) In late December, 1937, a Wartime Women’s Service Work Committee (Zhan shi fu nu fu wu gong zuo wei yuan hui 戰時婦女服務工作委員會) under the United Association of All Women in Guangdong Province had met for revising the regulations governing the organization of its Rescue Teams, Refugee Service Teams, Local Women Supervision Teams, and Hygiene Supervision Teams. It was decided that all team members should be trained before they were sent off to train other civilian women; this would, it is stated, help strengthen the “[people’s] power in the War of Resistance” in Guangdong. It was also announced that a policewomen training course would soon be introduced in Canton. In mid-January, 1938, a Wartime Services Corp of Guangdong Women’s Federation (Guangdong fu nu lian he hui chan shi fu wu tuan 廣東婦女聯合會戰時服務團) was founded in Guangdong Women’s Federation (Guangdong fen hui 廣東分會) was founded in Guangdong Province during the period May 1937 to May 1938; the “auxiliary services (xian hui fu zhi fu” 優惠互助功能) of the association included the collection of funds and the providing of places for members to live in. In the fall of 1938, the association was dissolved until mid-January 1939; it was then decided that only the “private home service (zuo ren hui fu zhi fu) 私人互助功能” of the association would be continued and all other activities would be terminated. 

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4 ZSRB, 7/8/1937.
5 Zhongguo fu nu wei lai zhi wei kang chan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui gong zuo gai kuang (N.P.: c.1938), chapter 2, pp.2-3.
6 ZSRB, 17/8/1937.
7 ZSRB, August 1937 to May 1938, passim; Yue hua bao (hereafter as YHB), 1/11/1937.
8 ZSRB, 31/12/1937.
reportedly speeding up the formation of six women’s work teams in the following areas of non-combatant work as a war preparation effort: nursing, rescue, hygiene, refugee care, supervision of women, transportation, and knitting.9

4) On February 8th, 1938, members of Guangdong Women’s Federation performed patriotic drama in a theatre, a public park and a public street in Canton; they also delivered patriotic speeches on a busy street in the administrative heart of the city as one of the programmes of an Anti-Aggression Publicity Week.10

5) On March 8th, 1938, Women’s Day in Canton was celebrated in a public park in the city with reportedly 5,000 participants, mainly female students, women workers, housewives, professional women, and even old ladies with grand-children in their laps. Politicians and military commanders delivered patriotic speeches to the congregated crowds, participants sang patriotic songs, and important provisional resolutions were passed in this mass meeting, such as: to expand and strengthen military training of women workers, to expand the organization of “Battle-ground Wounded Soldier and Refugee Services Teams” (Zhan di shang bing nan min fu wu dui 战地傷兵難民服務隊), to enhance the organization of women peasants. The participants then marched through the commercial and administrative hearts of Canton, carrying with them large anti-Japanese and pro-resistance placards, propaganda drawings, small flags, and singing patriotic songs along the way. In the words of a reporter, such a “large-scale parade with so many woman participants was the first time in Canton in decades. Sisters of Guangdong have understood that the only means of liberation is to take part in the War of Resistance”.11

6) In late September, 1937, a group of women in Canton founded a National Salvation Bonds Promotion Committee (Quan mo jiu guo gong zai hui yuan hui 募慕救國公債委員會). Members were drawn from seven different women’s associations in the city.12 In April, 1938, a Guangdong Women Comrades Anti-Enemy Association (Guangdong fu nu kan di tong ji hui 廣東婦女抗敵同志會) initiated a fund-raising campaign which aimed at asking female employees in all businesses to donate to the government ten cents each for purchasing warplanes.

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9 ZSRB, 13/1/1938.
10 ZSRB, 8/2/1938.
12 ZSRB, 22/9/1937 and 5/12/1937.
Female workers in tea houses in Canton were reportedly the most enthusiastic group of women who contributed more than the others; women workers in a Wen Yuan Tea House donated over 30 yuans. Meanwhile, female workers in the hair-dressing business announced their plan of donating their income on a particular date to the noble cause of buying the National Defence Bonds.13

7) In mid May, 1938, a social notable, Ms. Chen Shuming, led a team of 20 women members of the Guangdong Women Comrades Anti-Enemy Association on a “consolation visit” to frontline soldiers in Fort Tigris (Humen yao sai, 虎門要塞) at the mouth of the Pearl River. In the County of Nanhai, a Nanhai Women’s Resistance Association announced its plan of forming two regiments of women militia (zhuang ding tuan 壯丁團, a term which is normally referred to male militia) for those who were eager to take a more militant approach to save their country.15 In Canton, a team of 20 middle-school female students visited a refugee camp where they distributed towels and soaps to inmates, and canned milk to those who had children. This was the third time, since March, that this prestigious girls’ school (i.e. First Kwangtung Provinical Girls’ Normal School 广東省立第一師範學校) had sent out consolation teams to serve refugees in this camp.16 Meanwhile, in the Pearl River Delta county of Jiujiang, about two hundred women and students took part in an anti-Japanese parade in the city, which was organized by the county’s Women’s Association Against Japanese Invasion.17

8) Madame Sun Yatsen, Madame Zhou Enlai and other women leaders in Canton met and founded a Guangdong Women’s Association for Coordinating Resistance Work Against the Enemy (Guangdong fu nu tuan ti kang di gong zuo xie jing hui 廣東婦女團體抗敵工作協進會) in mid September, 1938. This organization was composed of 19 members, each represented one women’s association or profession in Canton, including female students from Sun Yat-sen University, policewomen, nurses, Children Welfare Association, etc.. The founding of this association was reportedly an important step in centralizing, under one single body, all previously divided anti-Japanese-invasion activities undertaken by women in this city.18

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15 Yue hua bao (hereafter YHB), 21/5/1938.
16 YHB, 23/5/1938.
17 YHB, 24/5/1938.
Before the fall of Canton on 21st October, 1938, similar reports of activities orchestrated by different groups of patriotic women in Canton and other parts of Guangdong had been published, from time to time, in local newspapers and, particularly, those official ones. Elite women played a respectable role in organizing this mobilization effort in Canton; they included female cadres of KMT, spouses of high-ranking local officials and social notables, as well as young women from high schools or universities, were said to have actively involved in promoting and running these activities. To these “politically awakened” women, the country could only be saved by an immediate total mobilization of its countrymen, and women’s support to the cause could help reinforce both the front and the home-front. But there were also “ordinary women” who responded enthusiastically to the call for saving their country. One woman, for example, threatened to kill herself when her husband, in compliance with the government’s call for evacuating women and children to the safety of their native villages, ordered her to leave Canton with him for his native village. She was angry because she insisted that her husband, whom she described as a coward, should stay in Canton to help defend the country. In the case of a 16-year-old female student, she ran away from home to join the army after learning about her parents’ decision of arranging a marriage for her. She left a note to comfort her parents, stating that she had that idea of serving her country for a long time and that “how can we have a home when the ‘dwarf-slaves’ [i.e. Japanese] are yet annihilated?” Another 16-year-old girl in Canton committed suicide after her parents refused to let her enlisting as a nurse in the city’s voluntary first-aid team; she was fortunately saved. In Canton, two patriotically passionate women, who were neighbours, volunteered themselves to help raise donations from local residents for the government’s anti-Japanese war efforts. They, however, competed fanatically to raise the largest amount and consequently hated each other. One day, when competing for favour of a potential donor, they first quarrelled and then broke into a fist fight, and eventually calmed down only when local policemen intervened. In the Pear River delta county of Shunde, a group of elderly spinsters

19 For example, spouses of three prominent KMT officials and military commander had launched a fund raising campaign in Hong Kong and happily announced that they had collected over 100,000 yuan. ZSRB, 27/8/1937. Spouses of social notables in Canton had also donated cash as well as their personal collection of jewelry and gold-made accessories in response to the government’s call for “money donation campaign”. ZSRB, August and September 1937 passim.
20 The cases cited here are from a popular daily in Canton. Since there are no biographical details about those women whose stories were reported, and the fact that the reporters of these stories did not mention about their ‘elitist’ status, which they normally did in the cases of social notables, it is quite safe to assume that these women came from non-elite social backgrounds.
21 YHB, 22/8/1937.
23 YHB, 25/6/1938.
24 YHB, 22/8/1937.
had announced their decision of selling 6 mou of their vegetarian-hall owned farmland and to use the money for buying the “national salvation bonds”.25

Up to here, it seems that the public, including women’s, response to the general mobilization in Canton and the province was indisputably, largely and extensively positive. This, however, was only one side of a much larger picture of the reality.

The Indifferent

To many residents in Canton, and also in other parts of the province, the war was approaching closer each and everyday. Frequent Japanese air raids on the cities,26 the government’s massive publicity campaigns against the Japanese invasion,27 the much publicized mass mobilization effort to instigate people’s support for the Nationalist army and the wartime government and so on, were reminders of the urgency of the situation. And yet, the war was so far away that many others had chosen to distant themselves from the government’s call for fulfilling their “duty” as responsible nationals. It is impossible to tell precisely how the majority of men and women in this city responded to the approaching war in this early phase of the war, or how representative were those examples of commendable women, whose stories of their committed participations in the war efforts were regularly printed on local newspapers. What was clear is that not everyone in Canton reacted to the war in one predominant manner---i.e. unfailingly answered the call for mobilization against the invaders---as it is commonly portrayed in official propaganda at that time and

26 News of Japanese air raids in Canton, its vicinity and other areas in the province can be read in Hua zi ri bao (hereafter as HZRB) and YHB from August 1937 to October 1938, passim. These air raids, often portrayed in official Chinese propaganda and news reports as strong evidence of Japanese “atrocious killing of innocent Chinese people”, is problematic because those reports were all written in highly emotional language, and full of exaggerated descriptions about the extent of damage inflicted on the city and the people. This is an important but much misunderstood issue. See Virgil K.Y. Ho’s “Bombing madly, shelling unnecessarily: A Preliminary study of rhetoric and reality of Japanese aerial bombing of Canton, 1937-8”, paper delivered in a conference entitled “The War with Japan and the Social, Political and Economic Transformation of Asia-Pacific” held at the University of Queensland, 25-26/8/2018.
27 Since late July 1937, the Canton Municipal Radio Broadcast Station was filling the air wave with a variety of anti-Japanese pro-resistance patriotic programmes. Women’s organizations were also invited to play a role in it. For example, a 40-minute-long programme called “Women’s Programme”, which was prepared and delivered by Guangdong Women’s Federation, was broadcast in late morning at that time. See YHB, 14/4/1938 for the schedule of radio broadcast programmes for that specific date. Schedules of daily radio broadcast in Canton can be read on every issue of YHB until 18th October 1938, one day before the fall of Canton.
nationalistic history texts in recent years.\textsuperscript{28} Mobilization and war preparation were definitely going on with some discernible success and also with citizens’ support. The big question, however, is how successful were all these mobilization efforts, or, to relate more appropriately to our focus here, how responsive were women in Canton (and its vicinity) to the government’s call for dedicating themselves to the defense of their country? A certain degree of success is beyond doubt. It is, however, indubitable that success was not unlimited. Much evidence indicates that not a small number of women in Canton (and Guangdong) were not transformed by the approaching war, nor had responded positively to those resistance-related activities feverishly promoted by official or civilian women’s associations. They were more occupied with their personal private matters than the approaching war or answering to the call for mobilization.

It must be mentioned in passing that those encouraging reports about the enthusiastic responses of Cantonese women that appeared in local newspapers reveal, if studied more closely, a picture which was not as rosy as they appear. First of all, in most of these newspaper reports, as well as public statements or press releases issued by government offices and different women’s associations, there is a strange and suspicious silence on the numerical scale of these war mobilization campaigns or related activities. Besides the names of prominent office-bearers, rarely

\textsuperscript{28} Many recent publications about women’s lives in wartime China are unfailingly focusing on some of the following aspects: women enthusiastically joined the army (mainly in the CCP-led New Fourth Army or the Eighth Route Army) or guerilla, served in the front (or the rear) as nurses or in “consolation teams”, volunteered to take care of refugees, organized fund-raising teams/activities and patriotic parades in cities, school girls formed anti-Japanese publicity teams which paraded and performed in city’s streets and suburban communities, and so on. All these publications are meant to highlight the important roles played by Chinese women in the War of Resistance. A complete list of these literature is too lengthy to cite in full here, and the following titles are only some of those which have been consulted during the preparation for this article: Guangzhou si fu yun shi liao xiao zu, Kang ri chan zheng shi chi Guangzhou fu nu yun dong gai kuang (抗日戰爭時期廣州婦女運動概況) (Guangzhou: N.p., 1983); Pan Yihong (潘以紅), “Never a Man’s War: The Self-Reflections of the Women Soldiers of the New Fourth Army in the War of Resistance against Japan, 1937-45” (“戰爭從來不只是男人的事業: 解讀新四軍女兵回憶錄”) (in Chinese), in Research on Women in Modern Chinese History (Taipei: Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica), No.24 (2013); Deng Xiufang (鄧秀芳), “Kang chan bao fa qian hou de Danshui Sheng Huo Du Shu Hui” (“抗戰爆發前後的淡水生活讀書會”), and Wu Kunshun (伍坤順), “Zai Guangdong Fu Kang Hui’ de chan dou sui yue” (“在廣東婦抗會的戰斗歲月”), in Guangdong dang shi zi liao (廣東黨史資料), Vol. 14 (1988); Alex T Primm, “Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China”, in The Oral History Review, Vol. 38(2) (2011); Danke Li, Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Liang Huijin (梁惠錦), “Kang chan shi chi de fu nu zu zhi” (“抗戰時期的婦女組織”), in Bao Jialin (鮑家麟) ed., Zhongguo fu nu shi lun ji (中國婦女史論集) (Taipei: Dao xiang chu ban she, 1991); Ono Kazuko, Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Judith Stacey, Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983). Women, in these works, are generally portrayed as heroines, warriors, patriots, and good citizens who were actively responsive to the government’s call for general mobilization and war efforts.
mentioned is the number of participants in many of these women-targetted mobilization campaigns organized by official and semi-official organisations. “Silence” does not mean total absence. Numbers were indeed occasionally mentioned in passing, but rarely with detail or exactitude, and always sketchy.\footnote{For example, when the Party’s newspaper ZSRB reported about the official opening of Guangdong Women Anti-Enemy Association, it mentioned that: “According to hearsay, about 500 to 600 women who were enthusiastic at saving the country have already joined the association” (italics by the author). ZSRB, 2/2/1938. In another example, a participant in a training camp ran by the Kuomintang-controlled Women’s Social Training Teams (She xun dui 訓訓隊) contributed an article to a pro-Communist newspaper in which she mentioned in passing that her batch was consisted of slightly over one hundred women. 

\textit{Jiu wang ri bao}, 20/2/1938. In the annual review of the situation of women cadre training work done in “free Guangdong” in 1940, it is reported that a total of 122 women cadres had gone through the training programme. Each graduated cadre was in turn charged with the duty of running 24 training classes, resulted in producing 1,827 trained personnel in that year, a number, according to the writer of that report, which was “very small”. Huang Quanyang, “Yi nian lai ben hui di xun nian gong zuo”, in GDFNZL, vol. 2, pp.226-43. It must be noted that the data in the last example above are showing at best the numerical scale of the training courses for women cadres, but not revealing any true extent of the success of women’s war mobilization campaigns in Canton and the province.

\textit{ZSRB}, 19/1/1938.} Number is a display of strength, and the absence of it in publicity and propaganda seemingly spoke for something not so worthy of mentioning, which was, in this case, most likely the weak public (or, in our concern here, women’s) response to these calls for mobilization or fulfilling ones’ patriotic duty of saving the country.

Secondly, many of these reports are so vague that they could hardly provide us with precise detail of the actual strength of these women and the work teams they were serving on. It is not uncommon for a report phrased as follows:

To sustain and protect women’s work in saving the country from extinction, women leaders in the province, including a Ms. Chen and the others, are calling for organizing a Guangdong Women’s Anti-Enemy Comrades Association; \textit{a number of women} have already agreed to join. Its major task is to unite female intellectuals, and also to organize \textit{women in the lower social stratum} to participate in the resistance work against the enemies and to save the country from extinction. Its first meeting is scheduled to be held at the assembly hall of the municipal government at 3 p.m. today.\footnote{ZSRB, 19/1/1938.} (italics by the author)

In another report about women’s participation in an Anti-Invasion Publicity Week, it reads:

\ldots a representative from the Provincial Women Federation\ldots was sent to deliver a speech at the Municipal Radio Station\ldots Meanwhile, \textit{numerous}
Members from the Wartime Services Teams were sent to deliver speeches on current affairs [topics] at New China Theatre at 6 p.m., and at Golden Sound Theatre at 9 p.m.; in Hanmin Park at 8 p.m....[they] played and sang national salvation songs, performed street drama, delivering speeches, as ways to broaden [the effect of] publicity.\textsuperscript{31} (italics by the author)

Reports like these do not reveal how many women (as performers or spectators) took part in these events, nor any hint on the extent of popular reception to these political actions orchestrated by these “awakened women” in the city. It is interesting to note in passing that sometimes even professional diplomat wrote in this kind of impressionistic language when describing the political activism of women in this part of China. In a monthly political report prepared by the Consul of Portugal in Canton, women in China were described as being gradually and systematically organized, under the leadership of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, to lend their support to the nation’s army. These modern-day Chinese women, according to this seemingly observant consul, dedicated themselves selflessly to the task of national salvation. Women of all ages, regardless of their occupations, marital status, social strata, and financial situation, all came forward to contribute to this national effort of empowerment in the following areas: nursing, first aid, postal services, educating war orphans, refugees care, counter-espionage, driving and transportation, managing their families frugally, and so on. The aim of Madame Chiang, according to this Portuguese consul, was to mobilize two million women in China to contribute to the war efforts either as guerrillas or non-combatant volunteers.\textsuperscript{32} Number, albeit given in this case, does not help very much either.

Thirdly, reports about these women’s work were published mainly in Zhongshan ri bao, a KMT-controlled daily; their appearance in Yue hua bao, a non-official and highly popular daily in Canton, was much less frequent by comparison (to be elaborated below). Moreover, most of these reports published in Zhongshan ri bao are quite brief, sometimes just a few lines long; lengthy reports were also published, but only occasionally. Furthermore, the frequency of news appearing in Zhongshan ri bao about women’s participation in the war efforts is not so high; between July 1937 and September 1938, news of this kind did not appear everyday, or even every other day. For instance, there are respectively 13 and 21 pieces of news reports on that topic in Zhongshan ri bao in September and October, 1937. Given the fact that many of these reports are fairly brief, as we have seen from an example in the above, and also most of them are neither put on headline nor conspicuous part of the pages, these numbers are not as impressive as they appear. There were indeed

\textsuperscript{31} ZSRB, 8/2/1938.

\textsuperscript{32} Antonio Vasconcelos de Saldanha ed., \textit{A Guerra vista de Cantão} (Macau : Instituto Portugues do Oriente, 1998), p.81.
women who took active part in various war-effort activities in Canton and other county towns in the province, but the extent of these activities and the number of women took part in them must not be exaggerated.

Apparently, not every woman in Canton responded enthusiastically to those patriotic campaigns engineered and undertaken by the government and the Party. Where were those “other women” who did not take any part in these activities which were targeting at them? This is a most difficult question to be answered satisfactorily. Contemporary newspapers provide us with a channel to learn more about the world of Cantonese women at that time. A popular newspaper in Canton, Yue hua bao (越華報), published news about women throughout this period, including occasionally news about women’s participation in the war mobilization efforts. Most of these news reports, however, are not about women’s selfless dedication to the war effort, or anything about how they responded actively to the call by women’s associations for volunteering themselves to defend their country. Instead, they are mainly about a long list of assorted matters, private and personal mainly, which are neither concerned with, nor reflecting, ordinary women’s patriotic commitment to the defence of Canton or their country. The followings are some randomly picked examples, but deserve to be cited in some details:

1) A Ms. Cai was arrested by the police and charged for hiring an assassin to kill her husband Zhang Xin and his concubine. Cai, the wife of Zhang, was reportedly on very bad terms with the concubine. The assassin, a 22-year-old Mr. Jen, used to work at Zhang’s street cleaning company and when the incident occurred he was unemployed but staying in Zhang’s place and worked as helper. Jen, according to police interrogation record, claimed that he was enticed by Cai into the plot, who had promised him as reward a certain amount of money that he needed to open his own shop, as well as to “raise him” (yang huo) for the rest of his life. On the night of the incident, Jen sneaked into Zhang’s bedroom and stabbed him repeatedly. He did not hurt Zhang’s concubine because he was “not able to bear it” (bu ren). Pretending that he was woken up by the noise of fighting, he then

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33 The choice of Yue hua bao is based on two major reasons. First, it was one of the best-selling and respectable newspapers in Canton in this period. Its respectability is perhaps best reflected by the fact that it was one of those local dailies on which government’s official announcements and advertisement were regularly published. Most of its reported stories concerning with women in Canton and its vicinity counties were in fact cases from local police or legal court and henceforth arguably credulous. Secondly, Yue hua bao is one of the very few extant Cantonese newspapers which covers the period under studied and is available for consultation during the preparation of this research paper. The other alternative is Zhongshan ri bao, which was the official mouthpiece of the local KMT and apparently was not interested in covering as much “social news” (she hui xin wen) as commercial newspapers such as Yue hua bao.
dashed to the nearest police precinct for help. The next day, after learning that Zhang survived the attack, he packed and left for his native village, and that aroused the suspicion of the police and subsequently led to his arrest.³⁴

Another police case in Canton tells the story of a Ms. Kuang, who was married to a Mr. Diao for a few years, before her husband took a Ms. Xie as concubine. At home, the concubine, who was Diao’s favourite, often physically abused the principal wife. One night, over an argument, Kuang was forced onto the ground by her husband, the concubine then hit her head hard repeatedly with a brick. Kuang, however, miraculously survived and was rescued by passerby. In the preliminary trial, however, the couple was found not guilty, probably because of the lack of evidence. Kuang then submitted an appeal to Canton’s High Court.³⁵

2) The widower father of sixteen-year-old Miss Jen Yuxian was killed in a Japanese aerial bombing of Canton. The orphaned teenager, feeling helpless, moved to live with her father’s sister, the only relative of hers in Canton. Her aunt and uncle, however, received Yuxian with great reluctance because they looked down upon her as an unwelcome woman who brought bad luck to her family. At home, Yuxian was fed only with plain congee once a day, and was often subject to physical and verbal abuses. One evening, at a slightest excuse, her aunt beat her so badly that Yuxian jumped into Pearl River, trying to kill herself. She was rescued by passersby and taken to a police precinct. The old couple was summoned to the police station and admonished.³⁶

3) Ms. Liu Qun, 18-year-old daughter of the owner of a noodle factory in Canton, fell in love with a 20-year-old shop assistant, Mr. Chen Zhong. For months, the young couple met secretly. When Liu Qun’s father found out about this, he stopped her from seeing Chen, who was subsequently dismissed and returned to his native village. Unable to convince her father of the true love between them, Qun ran away from home and lived with Chen in his village. Out of desperation, Qun’s father held a close relative of Chen, who was also an employee in his noodle factory, responsible for abducting his daughter and reported her to the police. Eventually, the young couple returned to Canton and surrendered themselves to the police; Chen was arrested and charged

³⁵ YHB, 19/6/1938.
³⁶ YHB, 9/7/1938.
for abduction. The case was heard in the municipal court of Canton. During the hearing, the young couple told the judge that they were already married, although their marriage was not formally approved by Qun’s father. They bowed on their knees and begged tearfully to the judge, asking him to allow them to be formally married because they were truly in love. The judge, though being sympathetic, told the couple that he could not pass any verdict before listening to Mr. Liu’s view. When he declared the adjournment of the court, Qun shouted tearfully at her “husband” telling him that if they were not allowed to get married, she would kill herself to show her commitment to him.\(^37\)

4) Nineteen-year-old Miss Zhu Lixing was a high-school student in Canton. An admirer of modern urban lifestyle, she left Taishan, a county town in Pearl River delta, for Canton after graduated from primary school. At her school in Canton, she fell in love with a classmate and both agreed to get marry. However, Zhu’s mother, who was a conservative person in regard of marriage matter, refused to give her blessing because she believed that modern romantic liaison like that, which was not arranged through a matchmaker and without the prior consent of the couple’s parents, would disgrace her family. Failed repeatedly in persuading her mother, Zhu tried to take her own life by swallowing opium. Luckily her moaning caught her parents’ attention and she was subsequently rescued and hospitalized.\(^38\)

5) Twenty-year-old married woman Mo Xiangping filed a divorce application to the judicial court in Canton. According to her statement, she was married to a Mr. Du when she was seventeen and gave birth to two sons. Forced by circumstances, Du had left Canton for Hong Kong searching for work, but without success. He returned to Canton with newly acquired bad habits of opium smoking and gambling. She found him leading an “increasingly despicable life” (日趨下流) because of these bad habits. Du became an abusive husband and stopped providing his family with food and money. To survive, Mo stayed with her own parents. Ignoring Mo’s strong objection, Du sold their youngest son to a family at the price of 50 yuan. From that point onward, Mo decided to leave him for good and raised her elder son by

\(^{37}\) YHB, 6/4/1938. Zhao Ma, in her work Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937-1949 (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), gives a lot of comparable cases of elopement in wartime Beijing. It should be added, however, that elopement or runaway wives, in the context of Canton and Guangdong, was not something new and could be predated to years before the outbreak of the war in 1937; the war only provided these desperate couples with an ‘ideal” confusing socio-political environment in which they could elope more easily.

\(^{38}\) YHB, 6/11/1937.
working as waitress in a tea-house restaurant in Sansui County. She pleaded the court to consider her divorce application favourably.\textsuperscript{39}

6) A divorce announcement was published on a daily. Zeng Rong, the woman who released this announcement, publicized her unilateral decision on divorcing her husband whom she claimed had never given her any maintenance money since they were married in 1931. Moreover, she claimed that her husband had abused her from time to time. If her husband disagrees with her unilateral decision, he has to raise his objection to the judiciary court by a certain date.\textsuperscript{40} In another case, a woman named Li Xiuyong filed to the district court of Canton for divorcing her husband whom she had been married since 1930. The plaintiff claimed that since the wedding night, her husband found all sorts of excuse to avoid consummating their marriage. Not long after the wedding, her husband left for Hong Kong to work there and returned to Canton only for a few days a year. During his stay at home, he failed to “fulfil the obligation of humanity” (bu neng ren dao 不能人道) and therefore for eight long years they did not have sex. She, therefore, was convinced that he was sexually impotent and their relations deteriorated ever since. Moreover, during his absence from home, her mother-in-law often physically abused her and eventually kicked her out from home. Li Xiuyong sought refuge from her mother in Canton and took the matter to court.\textsuperscript{41}

7) News of the suicide of 18-year-old Chen Yueying, also known as “queen of restaurant waitress” (nu shi huang hou 女侍皇后), was said to have shocked the city. The charming and sociable Yueying was much sought after by male clients of the restaurant she worked in. Her heart was eventually won by 22-year-old Mr. Mong, a well-off and fashionable son of a brick shop-owner. Mong, however, was already married. The young couple cohabited surreptitiously. When Mong’s father discovered this clandestine affair, because his son was so distracted from his work that the shop’s business dwindled badly, Mong was commanded by his father and his wife to leave Yueying, who eventually was forced by circumstances to work in restaurant again. Due to her popularity among male restaurant-goers, she earned a substantial income, so much so that she not only could maintain a lavish lifestyle, but also moved into a flat of her own where the young couple continued to see each other. Mong, however, was a womanizer.

\textsuperscript{39} YHB, 8/11/1937.
\textsuperscript{40} YHB, 3/4/1938.
\textsuperscript{41} YHB, 5/4/1938.
When Yueying found out that he was seeing other women, she fell into a depression. To worsen her emotional health, there grew in her body a malignant tumor which was resistant to medication. One evening, Yueying tried to kill herself by overdosing sleeping pills. She was rescued, luckily. This story was published with a photograph of Yueying.42

8) A Mr. Huang was engaged to 18-year-old cloth weaver Miss He Youhuan. A few months before their wedding, Huang found out that Youhuan was having an affair with a young man, a Mr. Yu. Huang caught the couple red-handedly in Queen’s Hotel, and police was called in to have the couple arrested on adultery charge. Appeared before court hearing, Youhuan explained to the residing judge that she was not Huang’s wife because they had never been married; she also expressed to the judge her objection against this “blindly” arranged engagement. Youhuan described Yu as her true lover and she “has the freedom of loving him”. She, therefore, pleaded not guilty.43

9) Nineteen-year-old Guan Meirong was the only daughter of a wealthy overseas returnee-couple who lived in the township of Kaiping in the Pearl River delta. Meirong attended a high school in Kaiping where she met and fell in love with her school mate, 21-year-old Sito Zong, who was described as a diligent student from a poor family. The young lovers vowed to marry each other, but only secretly behind the back of Meirong’s obsequious father, who despised Zong because of his family background and ordered Meirong to withdraw from the school to stop them from seeing each other. One day, taking the opportunity of great chaos during the bombing of Kaiping by Japanese warplanes, Meirong eloped to Canton with 1,800 yuan in cash which she stole from her father. After a long search, her father tracked them down in Canton. With police assistance, Zong was arrested and charged of abduction. In the police station, Zong denied all charges and told the officers that they eloped because they genuinely loved each other. Meirong also defended her boyfriend by saying that her decision of elopement was not enticed by him, and that marriage was too important to a couple’s lifelong felicity to be left to the forceful decision of their parents. If her father did not forgive them, then she

42 YHB, 8/11/1937. On the same issue is another story of a young lady who tried but failed to kill herself after her mother had denied her of “the rights of freedom of love”. Ibid.
43 YHB, 8/11/1937.
would ask the judge to put her in prison too, so that the two of them could stay together as a couple in prison.\textsuperscript{44}

10) When a husband told his 48-year-old wife about his plan of keeping a concubine because she was not able to bear him a child, the desperate wife sought help from a spirit-medium who eventually introduced her to a middle-aged rickshaw man with whom she copulated a few times in weeks, in the hope of conceiving a child. When her husband found out this and also that most of his wife’s savings was allegedly swindled by this “seed loaner”, he invited police intervention and had the illegitimate couple arrested.\textsuperscript{45}

11) A 37-year-old widower, Chen Jie, had been married to Ms. Liu for about one year but found her increasingly unpleasant because of her laziness and gluttony. Since rice price soared since the war began, Liu’s big appetite for rice, about one kilogram a day, became a topic of constant argument between the couple. One day, she packed up and intended to leave her husband whom she complained for failing to feed her adequately. Her husband tried to stop her from leaving and the couple ended up in a fight on a street. As a result, both of them were arrested by the police.\textsuperscript{46}

12) In 1937, twenty-six-year-old Ms. Du Yuanfen was married to 46-year-old Mr. Guo Xiaoqiu as concubine. For one year, Guo had rarely stayed with Du because he was afraid of his ferocious and jealous principal wife who did not allow her husband staying with Du. Due to loneliness, Yuanfen started an affair with a young man. One evening, the couple was caught red-handedly by Guo in a hotel room, with the assistance of policemen. Instead of feeling ashamed, the Yuanfen scolded at her husband, inside the police precincts, for neglecting her ever since they were married, for being a coward and fearful at his ferocious wife, so much so that she herself was leading the life of a widow and henceforth her desire to “seek pleasure secretly” both understandable and justifiable.\textsuperscript{47}

13) In Canton, 37-year-old peddler Tang Asui married 31-year-old Ms. Deng after his first wife had passed away. Deng, according to Asui’s statement given to the police, was both “ferocious and lustful” (han qie

\textsuperscript{44} YHB, 3/11/1937.
\textsuperscript{45} YHB, 22/5/1938.
\textsuperscript{46} YHB, 14/4/1938.
\textsuperscript{47} YHB, 14/4/1938.
dang 烠且 蕨) because she always “fooled around” (ye you冶游) with different men. Asui had tried to stop her from behaving like that, but to no avail; big quarrels between the couple had become nearly a daily occurrence. One day, returning early from work, Asui found his wife was going out and he tried to stop her but failed. That evening, according to Asui’s statement to the police, Deng sneaked into their bedroom and stabbed him repeatedly in his head. His crying for help alerted the neighbourhood police who came to his rescue. Deng’s side of the story, however, is markedly different. She claimed that their marriage was unhappy because Asui always quarreled with her. In that evening, she intended to commit suicide by stabbing herself, but she was stopped violently by Asui, and the wounds on his head were self-inflicted by him who framed her for murdering him.48

14) Twenty-four-year-old Lai Caizheng was an unhappy married woman. Her husband, Zeng Qiuyun, son of the owner of a herbal medicine shop in Canton, started working in his shop in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a few months after their wedding. Before long, Caizheng found out that her husband was living with another woman in Cambodia. She, therefore, filed a divorce application to Canton judicial court, stressing, in her statement, that she needed to protect her reputation as a faithful wife, and that she had enough of unhappiness in her 7 years of marriage. She requested the court to order her husband to return to her all her dowry and jewelry.49

15) Thirty-six-year-old businessman Li Ji had been a widower with a 6-year-old son, before he married his second wife, 32-year-old Ms. Gan. Li travelled a lot and hence Gan was left with her stepson in Canton most of the time. According to Li’s testimony to the police, Gan was “ferocious and lustful”. While he was on business trips, she not only maltreated her stepson, but also invited home her paramours. The young boy had informed his father about his stepmother’s unchaste behaviour, but he did not do anything else besides scolding her, since there was no proof to substantiate the boy’s allegation. In retaliation, Gan attempted to kill the boy by putting poison in his sweet almond soup. The plot failed because of the unannounced return of Li to Canton on that same day. Suspecting that his wife had attempted to take his son’s life (the report does not explain how he discovered the plot), he reported his wife to the police. Gan, however, repeatedly

49 YHB, 8/4/1938.
denied any wrongdoing. On the same day, in western Canton, a married woman was caught red-handedly in bed with her paramour in her house. The woman, 30-year-old Ms. Zhu, was married to a Mr. Zhan who was a travelling merchant and stayed in Canton only occasionally. As a result, his wife was having an affair with a 42-year-old man, Wu, who was a neighbour. Their liaison, however, was so open that someone had eventually alerted her husband. Zhan sought the police for assistance. At the appointed time, Zhan climbed over the roof and descended to the bedroom where the “immoral couple” was sleeping, and the police guarded the exit so that nobody could run away. In his defence, Wu told the police that he and Zhu had a relationship for some time and they were in love with each other, and that he had never been aware of the adulterous nature of their romance because Zhu told him that she was a widow and would like to marry him as his wife. The couple was eventually taken to the police station for further interrogation.

16) Thirty-one-year-old accountant Yao Xianghao was sued by his 30-year-old “wife”, Guo Jingfen, for raping her, cheating her into a marriage with him, inflicting bodily harm on her, and abandoning her unlawfully. Since they met in 1936, Yao had been persistent in chasing her, and tried to win her sympathy by lying to Guo that he was a new widower and the father of a 5-year-old boy who desperately in need of maternal love and care. They couple then co-habitated, without gone through any wedding ceremony. Since then, Yao stopped giving her money for household expenses. Even worse, Guo found out that Yao’s “dead wife” was very much alive was sending letters to him regularly. To avoid this unfaithful liaison from being known to other people, Yao asked Guo to leave him. When she refused, he started beating her up often. Throughout the trial, Yao denied the charge of inflicting bodily harm on Guo who also failed to provide any physical evidence of observable wound. He also insisted that since he and the plaintiff had never been lawfully married in the first place, but only had co-habited before breaking up, the charge of tricking Guo into marriage was not on substantial grounds. In the end, Yao was acquitted on all charges, and Guo was cautioned by the court for her initial failure of appearing in court.

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50 YHB, 9/4/1938.
52 YHB, 7/4/1938.
17) Tang Moxian, 26-year-old widow of deceased lawyer Liu Jianwen, filed a court case against her late husband’s brother and mistress for unlawful possession of her late-husband’s, and her, properties and valuables. Jianwen was married to Moxian in 1932, after the latter had graduated from high school in Canton. One year later, she gave birth to a son. After Jianwen had graduated from law school and started working as a lawyer in the city, they moved to a respectable and central area in Canton. On the occasion of a Double Tenth anniversary celebration of the 1911 Revolution, Jianwen met Ms. Rong Ishan, a hotel clerk in Canton, and the pair started an affair and soon co-habituated. His relations with Moxian deteriorated fast as a consequence. One day, Jianwen fell so ill that he eventually passed away in Ishan’s apartment. At that point, Liu Zuozhou, a distant brother of Jianwen, emerged into the scene. According to Moxian’s statement in court, Zuozhou colluded with Ishan to usurp everything valuable which Jianwen had bequeathed to his wife. On the evening of Jianwen’s death, Zuozhou broke the news to Moxian and asked her to take her son to Ishan’s apartment paying their last respect to Jianwen. Taking the chance of her absence from her apartment, Moxian accused, they broke into her flat, opened the safe with a spare key and removed everything inside, including land deeds, cash, and valuables. A few days later, the helpless Moxian and her son were shocked when workers, sent by Zouzhou, came to remove furniture and other miscellaneous items from their flat. She sought help from the police who, however, did not stop them (no reason given in her statement). She, therefore, sought legal help from a lawyer and filed a lawsuit against her late-husband’s brother and mistress, for mistreating a widow and unlawful appropriation of her valuables and properties.53

18) Fourteen year-old Ms. Tan Simei was adopted and raised by a Mrs. Yang in Canton since she was a child. Fearful of their safety because of frequent night raids by Japanese warplanes, Yang decided to seek refuge at her native village in Nanhai County. One day before embarking on their journey, she was shocked to find out that her adopted daughter had already runaway with all her savings, clothes, and other valuables.54 At about the same time, another teenager girl in Canton was reported “disappeared” when her family was about to embark a ferry heading towards their native village in the Pearl River delta, seeking for safe haven from the Japanese air raids. When she was founded by her parents a few days later in southern Canton, she was

53 YHB, 2/6/1938.
54 YHB, 13/6/1938.
staying with her boyfriend, who was a neighbour. Under police interrogation, she told the officers that her elopement was planned when her parents announced their decision to leave Canton. Fearing that she would not see her lover again, the young couple took the advantage of chaos at the pier, when hundreds of people were desperately scrambling for a place on the docked vessels, sneak away with some cash stolen from her parents. In the police station, they vowed not to be separated, and told the officers repeatedly that they truly loved each other. 55

19) Twenty-six-year-old Ms. Chen was married to 46-year-old Cheng Zhaonian. Displeased with her husband’s “old age”, Chen started an affair with a Mr. Hu who was sharing the flat with the couple. One evening when the air raid siren was on, Cheng urged his wife to leave the flat for an air raid shelter nearby. She, however, insisted on staying in the flat. During her husband’s absence, she and Hu copulated. Returning home earlier than expected, Cheng caught the pair red-handedly in bed. Policemen were called in to have them arrested. At the police precinct, Chen begged her husband for forgiveness and pledged that she would never see Hu again. To avoid further complication especially in time of war, her husband agreed not to press charge on them; the illegitimate couple was subsequently released after being reprimanded by the police officers. 56

20) The following two pieces of news are published on 19th October, 1938, two days before Canton fell to the invading Japanese forces. (I) Twenty-eight-year-old Ms. Xie Aso was married to Wu Bao in 1928. The couple was said to be leading a happy life until recently, when Aso had “changed in temperament” and started befriending a number of men despite her husband’s displeasure. She particularly fancied Yuan Xinhua with whom she eventually started an adulterous relationship. One evening, Wu Bao was tipped off about the couple was staying in a hotel in Canton. Caught red-handedly, he shouted for police interference and the pair was arrested. The illegitimate couple was summoned to court hearing in the early evening of 18th August (less than 24 hours before the fall of Canton). During the hearing, Aso told the prosecutor that her marriage had been a happy one until four months ago, after her husband became abusive to her, and was later found living with another woman and paid no further attention to her. To revenge his infidelity, she decided to sleep with Yuan, but only

55 YHB, 14/6/1938.
56 YHB, 15/6/1938.
once. She regretted for her misbehaviour and wish only for a fair judgement. In his statement, Yuan Xinhua told the court he did not know Aso was already married and he knew her only through the arrangement of a hotel assistant. (II) In 1931, Ms. Huang Xiaozhen was married to Lai Qian, a farmer in northern Guangdong. The couple had a son. Xiaozhen despised her husband because he was ugly; she eventually fell with her husband’s uncle. The illegitimate pair then eloped and settled in Canton for some time before the “ugly husband” found them and have them arrested by the police. When the case was heard in court, the plaintiff asked the judge for a favour: to allow him divorcing his unfaithful wife.57

The approaching war seemingly did not distract these women (and men too) from their more-important private-life issues or personal affairs and henceforth there is no shortage of this kind of newspaper reports (with women as protagonists) in Canton. Yue hua bao (越華報), for instance, a popular daily in Canton, published on every issue in this period at least half a dozen of this kind of “social news” (she hui xin wen 社會新聞) about women (and men) in Canton and its vicinity. By comparison, news about local women’s positive response to the official and non-official calls for supporting the war efforts was far fewer in number. Between mid May and mid June, 1938, for example, there are at least 184 pieces of news reports about women in Yue hua bao on such a range of topics and issues as domestic violence, marital problems, extra-marital affairs, elopement, attempted suicides, and so on. In the same period, there are only about 20 pieces of report about Cantonese women’s participation in war efforts or other related patriotic activities such as anti-Japanese parade, selling or buying “national salvation bonds” and so on. It must be noted that such imbalance was not unique to these randomly picked 30 days in 1938, but fairly typical of the entire early wartime period from July 1937 to October 1938. There are, of course, many plausible ways to interpret these numerical differences. Perhaps the people in Canton, or more accurately readers of this popular newspaper, were more interested in this kind of social news or glimpses of personal and private lives of ordinary women (and men) than information about women’s involvement in war preparatory activities; this sort of somewhat voyeuristic nosy social news served as an escapist outlet for readers who wanted to forget, at least for a while, about the hardship of their own life in a city which was under the threat of an approaching war. Or, perhaps, it was just simply because urban women’s participation in patriotic activities on the home front was only occasional events and in fact not so plentiful as conventionally assumed. One may wonder if this is due to the nature of this newspaper; after all Yue hua bao was a commercial paper and hence it was most natural for the paper to accommodate to the popular taste of its readers.

57 YHB, 19/10/1938.
This, however, may not be necessarily true because news coverage of local women’s participation in the war effort on the home front was also not substantially more in the Party-controlled official daily Zhongshan ri bao, despite the fact that news on this subject matter was comparatively more noticeable on this paper than that of Yue hua bao. The true scale of local women’s participation in, and contribution to, the city’s war preparation was apparently not as impressive as it seems.

It is not possible to penetrate behind the minds of these “women on the news” and hence it is difficult to say with absolute certainty about their attitude towards the approaching war, or how deep were their patriotic feelings and commitments, if any, to their country. However sketchy (but still somewhat informative) these stories of ordinary (or extraordinary depending on one’s moral stance or perspective) Cantonese women are, they still remind us that wartime mobilization was hardly something high on their priority list. Although the war was closing in, and yet the war was also seemingly remote from them because they were fighting a different kind of war themselves, “war” which was literally at home and hence much closer and also more important than the one on the front.\(^58\) Patriotic journalists, reporters and article contributors of Yue Hua Bao were apparently anxious to publish encouraging news and stories about “good citizens” (men and women, young and old alike) who dedicated themselves to the effort of mobilization too. However, the absence of any hint of such commendable behaviour from the news stories of those women aforementioned suggests that the approaching war was not (perhaps not yet) a concern which weighed less than their romance, sexual liaisons, marital relations, and countless other personal matters. The sad case of Jen Yuxian (“Indifferent” Case No. 2), for instance, indicates that this teenager orphan, despite the fact that her father was killed in a Japanese aerial bombing, had apparently never considered the option of vengeance by volunteering herself to any war preparatory activity. Her relatives, instead of helping her to overcome the imminent difficulty of life in time of national crisis, saw her as a curse and burden so much so that they maltreated her badly. The approaching war, in this case, and like so many others, did not touch the

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\(^{58}\) Japanese aerial bombing of Canton and different parts of the province, mainly targeting railroads and other strategic facilities, had been almost a daily event since August 1937. With the exception of a few occasions, which amounted to about one week (June 1938) throughout the year-long attacks on the city, most of these aerial attacks on Canton, however, were neither indiscriminate nor massive and hence did not inflict a high level of destruction to the city and civilians which is comparable to that of many aerial bombings in the Second World War, such as the bombing of Tokyo and Dresden by the Allied forces, and London by the German (for details, see Sven Lindqvist, A History of Bombing (London: Granta Books, 2001)). As a result, it is not infrequent to come across newspapers reports (e.g. YHB 5/9/1937, 31/8/1937, 14/4/1938) about how life went on as usual even when Japanese warplanes were dropping bombs on strategic targets (mainly communication network and military installations). For more details, see Virgil K. Y. Ho, “‘Mad and Indiscriminate Bombing’: Rhetoric and Reality of Japanese Atrocious Aerial Bombing of Canton and Southern China, 1937-38”, conference paper delivered at University of Queensland, 25\(^{th}\) August, 2018.
hearts of many women, nor transforming them into dedicated warriors, in ways that they were described in official propaganda.

The Partisans

Another way to gauge how women in Canton had responded to the approaching war is by referring to the records kept by local political activists who were charged with the duty of mobilizing women for the war efforts in the city and countryside. These internal reports contain cadres’ assessments of the popularity of war-effort activities among women in Canton and its vicinity.

In late June 1938, nearly one year after the outbreak of the war, about 60 women activists and KMT cadres from Canton and other parts of the province gathered at the Young Women Christian Association in Canton. In this meeting, the women participants explored different ways of lending support to the forces of resistance and “to save the country from extinction”. Of the four resolutions which were passed at that meeting, one was about advocating the government to recruit and to train many more women cadres whose service was urgently needed in organizing women into active patriots. Participants at this conference all shared the view that the government had not done enough to lure and mobilize women in its war preparation campaigns, and women did not respond well to the government’s repeated call for mobilization.59

In an article published on KMT-funded newspaper Jiu wang ri bao (救亡日報) in 1938, its author succinctly summarizes the various problems facing “women [mobilization] work” (fu nu gong zuo婦女工作) since the outbreak of the war in summer 1937, and that these problems have to be addressed urgently. They include: 1) a lack of planning on how to reach out and influence women in different social stratum; 2) unsatisfactory accomplishments in “women work” as a result of insufficient training (cultural, educational and political) provided for cadres in particular, and the public in general; 3) high-level leaders and senior cadres in many local “women’s national salvation teams” were so divided that they failed to cooperate with each other; 4) serious problem of communication existed within and among many women’s associations which were founded during the first seven months of the War, so much so that they were antagonistic to each other and some of them even had conflicts (mo cha摩擦) between themselves.60 With an inadequate leadership at the top, women’s war mobilization work in Canton and the province, even in face of an increasingly menacing war, did not look promising at all.

59 ZSRB, 28/6/1938.
Similar pessimistic view was echoed in another article, which reviewed the progress of mobilization work on women, published in an official daily in Canton. After a predictable appraisal on the progress and accomplishments (esp. in the areas of promoting the donation of money and garments, purchasing ‘national defense bonds’ (guo fang zhai quan 防債卷), and the formation of ‘consolation teams’), the author lists out the obstacles which were deterring women’s mobilization work: 1) the focus of “work on women” (i.e. women’s mobilization) was confined too narrowly to publicizing women’s effort in promoting public donations to the war chest and participating in visitation of wounded soldiers in the home front; 2) little had been done on fixing the loose organizational structure of women’s associations; 3) organizers of women’s movement did not plan to reach out for the support of women in the lower strata of the society; 4) the women themselves were disunited and deeply territorial; 5) short supply of new and capable cadres due to negligence in training any; 6) insufficient political training of women participants in war effort activities; 7) little attention was paid to “women mobilization work” in the countryside; 8) the long working hours for many female workers, and factory bosses’ refusal to release them from work, hindered them from taking part in war preparatory activities, and so on.61 In the observation of this author, the potentials of women as a mighty force of national salvation was neither sufficiently released nor utilized, and both the government and political activists were responsible for that.62

The limited accomplishments of a high-profile wartime women’s organization, namely the Guangdong Branch of the Association of Chinese Women’s Consolation [Team] for Soldiers in the War of Self-defence and Resistance (Zhongguo fu nu wei lao zi wei kang zhan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui 中國婦女慰勞自衛抗戰將士廣東分会) provides us with a case in point. This organization was initiated by Madame Soong, China’s First Lady then, in Nanjing; spouses of high-level party, government and military leaders in different provinces soon followed suit faithfully by founding branches in different localities. In its Guangdong Branch, nearly all the spouses of top government, Party and military officials were members and played the important role of managing this association. Within the first nine months of its running, fifteen sub-branches were established in 15 counties in the province. According to a report published by the main branch of this body, its major areas of work were fund raising and distributing “consolation items” (wei lao pin 慰勞品 such as ointment for skin trouble, confectioneries, cotton balls and clothes, rain

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62 Similarly, the combined problems of a serious shortage of government resources in terms of political activists, and the general political apathy of most women, posed strong challenges to the the early CCP-led municipal government in Beijing in mobilizing women in that city, despite its much stronger political control over the people comparing with that of the KMT in 1937-8 Canton,. Ma Zhao, Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937-1949 (Harvard, Mass.: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), pp.324-333.
clothes, straw sandals, etc.) to comfort wounded soldiers in the rear, and to boost the morale of soldiers at the front by its consolation teams. Commendable work, no doubt, was accomplished. For instances, in a fund-raising event, some women’s associations in Canton were mobilized and as a result 20 “door-to-door fund raising teams” (yan men quan mo duì 沿門勸募隊) were dispatched to work in Canton. In another event whose aim was to ask the public to donate new or used cotton clothes for soldiers in the frontline, a total of 48 counties and 157 schools had responded and over 20,000 pieces of clothes were collected.\(^6\) However, it should be noted that the scope of activities were narrowly limited to these two aspects only, and the “women” who were responsive to these activities were mainly active members of established women’s associations in Canton and the 15 participant counties, and also middle-school students, most of them girls. Details of the donation lists, however, reveal that individuals’ responses to these campaigns were neither extensive nor enthusiastic as the report claims. For examples, the Association had mobilized students of various girls’ schools, bought them threads and asked them to weave clothes for warplanes pilots. As a result of their “enthusiasm”, the report states, over 200 pieces of knitwear were made,\(^6\) which is hardly an impressive achievement, considering that that was the total output of months’ long work. From a different angle, it indicates that enthusiasts were by far and few. Moreover, from the list of number of items donated by each participant unit (mainly schools, shops, government offices and to a lesser extent individuals), it is clear that the donors’ zeal varied significantly. In the “clothes donation campaign”, for instance, while enthusiasts in a handful of schools were so numerous that they succeed in collecting a few hundreds pieces of garments, most students in other schools, however, contributed only a few tens, and not uncommonly single-digit number, of clothes; in some schools, only one or two pieces of clothes were collected, including the prestigious Zhixin School (執信學校) in Canton.\(^6\) In spite of its many high-profile members and the heavy-weight political support endowed by a long list of social notables, the work accomplished by this Association, though by no means unnoticeable or unimportant, apparently failed to attract or engage a larger number of girls and women to the war effort.

Instances of similar apathy were discerned in other “patriotic activities” organised by or for women. In late February 1938, nearly 8 months since the outbreak of the war, the government in Canton announced the implementation of the scheme of forming the province’s first-ever “women militia” (nu zhuang ding 女壯丁). Despite much publicity for months, only 150 women had “enrolled” (but more

\(^6\) Zhongguo fu nu we liao zhi wei kuang zhan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui gong zuo gai kuang (N.P.: c.1938), chapters 1-4.
\(^6\) Zhongguo fu nu we liao zhi wei kuang zhan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui gong zuo gai kuang (N.P.: c.1938), chapter 3b, p.12.
\(^6\) Zhongguo fu nu we liao zhi wei kung zhan jiang shi Guangdong fen hui gong zuo gai kuang (N.P.: c.1938), chapter 3b, p.21.
accurately were mobilised to enroll); this small number look apathetic and was by no means a promising sign if comparing it with what the Russian women had done during the defence of Moscow in face of an imminent German invasion in 1941.\footnote{Guo hua bao, 25/2/1938. In face of the German advance in 1941, “over one hundred thousand men in Moscow were mobilized as militia, and a quarter of a million civilians, mostly women, were marched out to dig anti-tank ditches”. Antony Beevor, Stalingrad (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.35.} On the day of the city-wide celebration of “Women’s Day” in March 1938, a total of 286 “women and female students” were organised into publicity teams and sent off to different parts of the city to propagate the messages of boycotting Japanese goods, making donations to the government for buying weapons, and encouraging voluntary enlistment of men into the army. This number of 286 active participants, although already better than the number of recruits to the “women militia” mentioned above, was still hardly an impressive figure and a sign of weak support to this city-wide event, even though it was reportedly “well participated by the spouses of many senior officials in the city” and considered as “one of the biggest events” of this kind organised by and for women in Canton.\footnote{Jiu wang ri bao, 8/3/1938; Guo hua bao, 9/3/1938.}

Women’s own priority could be very different from the ones imposed on them by the state, even among those politically active women. In an article published on a KMT magazine Guangdong fu nu (Guangdong Women), its author, You Fa, expresses his (?) concerns about the many problems existing in the province’s “women’s movement”. The article, entitled “The Directions that Women’s Movement in China Should Take” (Zhongguo fu yun ying you de fang xiang), points out that many women in China, including women cadres who were active in “women’s movement”, shared one major shortcoming: that they failed to understand the real goal of this War of Resistance, which was not just about women and their liberation, but, more importantly, about national salvation. As a result, in You’s observation, many of these politically active women cadres were concerned only with their fight for gender equality and hence “standing on the opposite side of men, upholding the concept and standpoint of scrambling for the rights and interests [of women from men] when they are undertaking women’s movement”. This “mistake of individualism”, which was said to be common among many women activists since the May-Fourth times, was a hindrance to a truly successful mobilization of women in the time of war. You Fa further criticized that most “works on women” fell into the hands of a small group of activists, all of them urban intellectuals, who failed in expanding the mobilization work horizontally and vertically, and unable to understand the “true goal” of their work. They did only “a superficial job, taking advantage of their position, wearing a mask to hide their real intention, mixing with people and indulging themselves in the dreamy and drunken world of red neon-lights and green liquors”. Women’s mobilization work, in his view, was deprived of two important elements: a capable leadership and a “healthy”
organizational structure. There were women who did take an active role in the auxiliary services in the frontlines and the rear-areas; there were, however, also many women who did not understand the true meaning of this “holy war of resistance”, which should be about the liberation of the entire Chinese race, but not Chinese women only. These women, in You Fa’s view, cared merely about their own interests; they were uncooperative with each other, and occupied themselves unilaterally with the search for women’s freedom and equality with men.68 You Fa did not substantiate his criticisms with details and hence we are not able to know exactly how bad the situation was. It suffices to say here that many women activists did not do a “good job” in mobilizing their “sisters” in way that the party-state would want them to, and that the state succeed partially at best in mobilizing women both in the cities and countryside.

This situation of general apathy is corroborated by remembrances of women who were there at that time. In the reminiscences of Ms. Yong, Mrs. Liang and Mrs. Mok, all of them young teenagers living in Canton in the early years of the war, could not recall any female members in their family who had participated enthusiastically in any women’s mobilization. Before the outbreak of the war in July 1937, Ms. Yong had finished her junior high school education and entered into a local nursing school in hope of becoming a nurse one day. Before long, however, she realized that she was sometimes too afraid of human blood. One day when being asked by a teacher to practice blood test, she fainted in front of the whole class; she later decided to withdraw from the programme. Not long after, the war broke out. She was aware of the government’s campaign of mobilizing women to support the war efforts, but she did not take part in it. Before Canton fell, she and her younger sister had departed for Hong Kong where they have been staying ever since. To Mrs. Liang, her “participation” in the war effort was limited to singing the national anthem and shouting anti-Japanese slogans in morning assemblies at school. For Mrs. Mok, her memory of the war is mainly about the chaotic exodus of people from Canton, her parents’ fear of Japanese soldiers (but also anecdotes about their not-so-bad treatment of local people), hunger due to a shortage of food at some time, and a largely merry and peaceful life in the neutral Portuguese colony of Macao; in her reminiscences, there is no mentioning of any enthusiastic participation in, or support of, war mobilization effort run by any women’s associations.69 A Cantonese woman Wu Li’ngo recalls in her autobiography cases of Japanese soldiery misbehaviour against Chinese civilians in different places in Guangdong where she had taken refuge during the war. The tone of her writing is both emotional and nationalistic. When the war broke out, she was a somewhat rebellious, hot-temper and seemingly


69 Ms. Yong, Mrs. Liang and Mrs. Mok were all born in Canton and they were in their eighties when being interviewed by the author in Hong Kong in the early 2000s.
patriotic 23-year-old worker in Canton. Despite of that, she, instead of answering to the call for mobilization, chose to pack up and left Canton for a quiet little town in the Pearl River Delta before moving to Macao and then Hong Kong.\(^{70}\) Wu Li’ngo’s experience was shared by a great many other Cantonese women in different parts of the Pearl River Delta. In a collection of oral-history interviews of 11 elderly women, most of them were of humble origins and raised in ordinary families in Canton and different parts of Guangdong, none of them indicates that she had taken any part in any of these mobilization activities described in the earlier part of this article.\(^{71}\)

Failure was not exclusive to the Nationalist Party and its women’s units; the CCP-led women’s movement also faced similar challenge and difficulty. Under the auspices of the United Front, CCP branches in Guangdong were actively organizing mass movement, with women’s movement as one part of it, in the “free areas” and the war zones in the province. There were, of course, some commendable accomplishments which are often cited and boasted in state-censored narratives. One often cited example is a province-wide anti-Japanese association called Guangdong Women Comrades Anti-Enemy Association (Guangdong fu nu kan di tong ji hui 廣東婦女抗敵同志會), which was founded in February 1938 by a group of undercover CCP women activists in Canton, in “collaboration” with the spouses of a few high-ranking KMT officials in the city, including the spouse of Guangdong’s KMT Party Secretary who was described as “pacifistic and hostile to CCP”. At its peak, this Association is said to have mobilized about 800 members who had engaged actively in a variety of “anti-enemy work” such as publicity and propaganda, nurses and first aid, fund raising and so on. It was described as “successful” in engaging with women workers in different trades in Canton, especially among those young good-looking waitresses at Canton’s famous tea-house restaurants,\(^{72}\) many of them are said to have been mobilized to support the War of Resistance and, of course, the cause of Communism.\(^{73}\) These accomplishments, however, must not be taken lightly as evidence of this association’s “great success” in mobilising women in Canton. At its peak, this association boasted a membership of “over 800 people”, which was still a substantial rise from its initial 300 when it was founded. Eight hundred, however, was hardly a remarkably impressive number considering the fact that there were over 543,000 women in the city of Canton alone.\(^{74}\) Take the example of women workers at tea-

\(^{70}\) Wu Li-ngo, Min yun di yun mie you yu (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiao yu chu ban she, 1992), pp.58-74.

\(^{71}\) These eleven cases are collected in Xin fu nu xie jin hui ed., You xian you xiao: A po kou shu li shi (Hong Kong: Xin fu nu xie jin hui, 1998).

\(^{72}\) Jiujiang ri bao, 4/5/1938.


\(^{74}\) According to Guangdong Provincial Police, in September 1937, the female population in the city of Canton was 543,976 (and 672,136 male). Guangzhou shi wen shi yan jiu guan ed., Guangzhou bai nian das hi ji (Guangzhou: 1984), vol. 2, p.489.
house restaurants who are hailed as one of the major supporters of this association. In a get-together meeting of these women workers held in May 1938, only “over 50 people” attended. In this meeting, women cadres encouraged their “waitress sister” members to unite together and to be more diligent at anti-Japanese work. Attending members decided that “every member should recruit 3 to 5 workers as new members [in the near future]”, but it is not known if this pledge has ever been fulfilled.

In the early months of the War, the initial optimism of the local CCP in its projected mobilization of women had soon given way to a more realistic sense of pessimism. In a detailed report on an internal forum for CCP members dedicated to the issue of how to mobilize women in Canton to the work of national salvation held in late November 1937, the attendees agreed that despite the early “success” of women in supporting the war effort particularly in the fields of propaganda, first-aid and nursing, donation of cotton piece goods, and so on, “women’s work” however was “full of inadequacy”. First of all, there was a serious disunity among different women’s associations in Canton. Even under the “leadership” of the local CCP, there was no “tight contact” among these associations, nor was there any consensual plan for unified action. As a consequence, each association was “only and aimlessly concerned with isolated unimportant businesses” of its own, and its office-bearers were indifferent to the work of mobilizing women, a job that they did most perfunctorily. Secondly, there was a serious shortage of activists who were willing to “get closer to the women”; none of them tried to reach out to the “women masses” (fu nu da zhong 婦女大衆). Thirdly, many office-bearers were found leaving these women’s associations because “there was no work for them to do”. The report mentioned that women in Canton (also China) needed urgently to be “organized and educated” because they, being “oppressed by the forces of feudalism for thousands of years”, were clearly uninterested in knowing anything about their nation or the state.77

These problems persisted into the later phase of the War. The Chinese Communist Party’s difficulty in mobilizing women in Guangdong for the war efforts is detailed in another lengthy report of the Party entitled “Guangdong ba ge yue lai

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di fu nu gong zuo bao gao” (A Report on Women’s Work in Guangdong in the Past Eight Months) dated October 1939. After boasting how successful was the CCP-led women’s mobilization work, particularly those targeting at the lower stratum of women in the countryside, the report ended with an honest and critical review of their work in which some major shortcomings are identified and elaborated. The “weakest parts in mobilizing the masses [i.e. women] in Guangdong”, the report stated, were its “lack of depth, [its] unpopularity, and [its] loss of balance”. Of all the women workers and peasants in Guangdong, only an extremely small portion of them had joined the Party, whereas a large number of women in different occupations and in many parts of the province remained un-mobilized and hence disunited. Mobilization work done by cadres was also criticized for being “too politicized” and as a result had neither met the need nor the interest of women who were described as “generally backward in terms of ideological consciousness”. Women, the report points out, were forced to join anti-Japanese-war associations despite their lack of commitment, and their incapability (because of their poor education background) of understanding whom their enemies were, why there was a war of resistance, and so on. Even though these issues had been explained to them by cadres “three to five times”, they were still not convinced and always retorted that resistance had “nothing to do with their lives”. Most ordinary women were not interested in discussing politics and their “political knowledge was thin and weak”. The author of this report lamented that it was not easy to discuss with them (i.e. “ordinary women”) any political matter, and that they were rarely responsive to discussion about political affairs. The report further points out the problem of “weak attachment” amongst members of many women’s organizations: many women were members only in name because they had neither attended any meeting nor had participated in any mobilization work. When confronted by enemy’s attack, they just scattered instead of facing the war positively by engaging themselves in more extensive mobilization work, and as a consequence of that these associations collapsed. In many localities of central Guangdong where women’s mobilization work was professedly more active, there were at most 20 to 30 women in each of these places who consistently and actively took part in the war effort and mobilization work. Poor response from ordinary women (also those relatively active members of local women’s associations) to the call of general mobilization was blamed on the powerful “feudalistic forces” existing in these women’s family which effectively “enslaved” them at homes and made it very difficult for them to take any part in social or public activities. Moreover, since women were generally “low in cultural level”, it was “not easy to arouse their enthusiasm for [the cause of] national salvation”. Personal weaknesses and psychological traits of women, such as

78 “Guangdong ba ge yue lai di fu nu gong zuo bao gao” (October 1939), GDFNZL, vol. 2, p. 115.
80 “Guangdong ba ge yue lai di fu nu gong zuo bao gao” (October 1939), GDFNZL, vol. 2, p. 118.
81 “Guangdong ba ge yue lai di fu nu gong zuo bao gao” (October 1939), GDFNZL, vol. 2, pp. 115-6.
weak-mindedness, un-accommodating, exceedingly suspicious and emotional, were said to be detrimental to their receptiveness to mobilization. To make the situation worse, the report adds, mobilization of women was neither important nor urgent work in the eyes of many senior cadres on different levels of the bureaucracy as well as local-level women cadres and comrades, because their old contempt against women was still very strong, so much so that women and “women’s work” (fu nu gong zuo) were considered dismissible and given a low priority.  

In a lengthy self-assessment report on the situation of "women’s work" prepared by the CCP Women’s Committee of Guangdong in August 1940, it gave a no less pessimistic picture of the difficulty in mobilising women in the province. The report stated rather straightforwardly that the “entire Party has not always been paying attention to [the organisation of] women’s work”, and that “comrades in general do look down upon women’s work”, and women cadres who advocated for promoting women’s mobilisation were all criticised for being “feministic” and as a rule transferred to other units so that they could not organise themselves into a somewhat "network" for promoting “women’s work”. The CCP Women's Committee in Guangdong was criticized in the report for failing to devise any overall plan for its work, nor showing any interest in conducting systematic research on women’s issues in the province. The report also stated that cadres neglected school girls as their target of mobilisation, and that they also failed to mobilise ordinary women because of the overtly politicised contents in their publicity—these women were uninterested in "important national affairs" which only drove them further away from the Party. The women themselves in this part of south China were also to be blamed. Many of them were uneducated, backward in consciousness, weak in will, overtly emotional, narrow minded, strongly suspicious, pessimistic, cowardice, fatalistic, and so on. In northern GD, the report added, women, in addition to all those negative characteristics listed above, were also highly superstitious and faithful worshippers of Goddess go Mercy and Jade Emperor; they were very difficult to be "mobilised". In the war zones in GD, the report continued, women were afraid of Japanese soldiers for their brutality. But instead of taking an active part in the general mobilisation or enlisting into the army, they resolved to offering paper-made tanks and warplanes to their gods in the hope of enlisting and strengthening their supernatural power for fighting against the Japanese. These

82 “Guangdong ba ge yue lai di fu nu gong zuo bao gao” (October 1939), GDFNZL, vol. 2, pp. 102, 104, 118-20.
84 Ibid., pp.394-5.
85 Ibid., pp.385-6.
86 Ibid., p.388.
stupid acts were the best they could do in expressing their nationalistic feelings. 87 The report also provides figures on the number of women who had joined in resistance-related organisations such as self-defence militia or support teams in the parts of GD where the CCP had established some sort of influence. The numbers, however, were not that impressive at all. For instance, in the "Southern District" (nan lu) of GD, where the number of those politically active women topped the chart, only "over 1,000 people (i.e. women)" were said to be members of organisations for women; in Guangning (in the East River region) and Gaoyao (in the West River district), which had been strongholds of radical peasant movement in the 1920s, there were barely 40 women who joined in each of the two newly found groups dedicated to resistance. 88

Perhaps the most disheartening thing to these patriots and activists was the harsh fact that some women were not only apathetic to the war effort, but also actively helping the enemy. Newspapers in Canton and Hong Kong published news about the arrest of traitors, though usually without much details, probably because of trying not to frighten their readers too much. 89 Nonetheless, these news reports, however sketchy and brief, still provide us with a picture of the scale of the problem. The scare of traitor and spy had been reported about one month after the outbreak of the war in August 1937. There were reports about how the authorities in Guangdong had raised their alertness and tightened measures against sabotage and espionage by traitors. From time to time, some of these alleged traitors were arrested and publicly executed. 90 Since traitors and spies were believed to permeate Canton and the province, the military authorities asked the public repeatedly to be vigilant and to report anyone suspicious. 91 In a lengthy article about what people in the war zones should be aware of, its journalist author wrote that some kinds of people were more easily bought by the enemy and became traitors: coolies, unemployed rickshaw pullers, hoodlums, village women, and woman beggars. Since most of these people were “unclear in [their] mind” (tou nao bu qing 頭腦不清), they cared only about money and did not have any idea of what a nation was, they could be bought easily and willingly. 92 In March 1938, a reporter was told by a senior official in Canton that the enemy had trained and organized a number of Taiwanese prostitutes into a network of espionage. These women traitors were already working actively in Xiamen, Fuzhou (both in Fujian province) and Swatow, and were found moving into

87 Ibid., pp.375-6.
88 Ibid., pp.376-7.
89 Hua zi ri bao (華字日報) (HZRB) is one of the best, and also most popular, newspapers in southern China at that time. One big regret about this newspaper as a source of reference is that the extant copy of this daily is incomplete and henceforth all the issues between May and December 1938 are unavailable to the author.
91 HZRB and YHB, August to November, 1937, passim.
92 HZRB, 7/1/1938, supplement.
Canton. In the same month, a convicted “woman traitor” was publicly executed in Canton. The young woman, a Guangdongese from the county of Yinzhou, was said to have grown up in Japan. She was well trained by Japanese secret service and dispatched to Canton in January, 1938. Since then, she had actively liaised with a lot of men in the city and became a regular of all the big hotels in Canton. When she was arrested, she had in possession a detailed map of Guangdong with special marks scribbled on it. In May 1938, a local newspaper published an announcement by Canton’s KMT office alerting the people to beware of “female traitors” who were well trained and their presence were spotted in many other parts of China too. One report mentioned that “the presence of numerous Chinese traitors [in Canton and Guangdong] is attributed to the fact that most people have not received proper [political and military] training”. In June 1938, “a number of Chinese women” in the county of Sanshui were caught for supplying provisions to the Japanese navy, whose warships were cruising around the mouth of Pearl River. The group was reportedly led by a professional female smuggler who had been active in this clandestine business in this region for a long time. Not everyone was a patriot, no exception for women.

In Canton and Guangdong, both the state and the parties were apparently not so successful in mobilizing women in general to support the war effort. To those relatively patriotic women who did respond favourably to the call of mobilization to save their country, they were not always able to meet public expectations. In a contributed article to a popular daily in Canton in mid 1938, its author recorded what he (?) saw and criticised some young female volunteers, who roamed the busy streets in Canton publicizing the official call for austerity and frugal lifestyle in wartime, for failing to put theory into practice. These young women, the author mocked, were ironically wearing heavy make-up and luxurious clothes while pleading to the passersby for observing the wartime code of “to wear simply, to eat frugally” (jie yi su 節衣縮食); they, including their male counterparts, also smoked cigarettes while doing their publicity work, and rushed to tea-house restaurants or wine houses during meal time where they enjoyed a “big feast” and played finger guessing game boisterously. It seems that quite a number of these “mobilized women” paid lip service to the wartime dress code and chose to retain and express their individualism, as an autonomous woman, without succumbing themselves to the attempt of the state to control them, or more precisely, their bodies. In an article published in an official KMT magazine for women in 1940, its author

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94 HZRB, 29/3/1938.
95 YHB, 5/5/1938.
96 HZRB, 8/11/1937.
97 YHB, 12/6/1938.
98 YHB, 3/8/1938. Finger guessing game is a drinking game or party game which was and still is very popular among Chinese drinkers.
welcomed an order issued by the highest military authorities in the province stipulating that female soldiers were not allowed to wear make-up or keeping long hair. This order was hailed as giving an “extremely important…admonition” to those women who joined the army but defying the soldier’s dress code. Wearing make-up and keeping long hair, which were apparently common among “women warriors” at that time, were denounced as “bad habits” that were backward, wasteful, narcissistic, luxury-obsessed, and hence contradictory to the principles of solemnity and humility for the proper attires and outlook of a soldier. Female soldiers with make-up and long hair “does not only harm military discipline, but also affect women’s status in the army and hinders the important enterprise of women’s liberation”. Make-up, long hair, and perm, the concerned author concluded, have to be banned on all women, military personnel and civilians alike, in a time when supply of resources was scarce.99

It is, however, not known if this ban had ever been effectively enforced in the army. It is clear, however, that the ban was not imposed on civilian women, probably because the state did not have the manpower to enforce it in time of war, when priority was naturally given to more urgent matters. Evidence of persistence of this “problem” of “improvident lifestyle” is plentiful in contemporary newspapers and magazines. For instance, a Cantonese writer composed a vernacular folk song and had it published in a popular daily, Yue hua bao. This concerned writer noticed that despite the government’s repeated appeals to citizens for frugal consumption, a substantial number of women in the city ignored the plea by following the fashion of permanent waves, so much so that he expressed his disappointment by composing a Cantonese ballad lamenting that “house wives and young ladies” should have used “this huge sum of money [spent on perming their hair] on the more meaningful purpose of purchasing the “national salvation bonds”.100 Another example is drawn from Li Hanyun, Commander-in-Chief of the Nationalist army in Guangdong, who delivered a speech in a meeting in 1941 on the

99 Quan Yang, “Guan yu pi fa tao ji”, Guangdong fu nu, Vol.1, no.10 (May 1940), cited from GDFNZL, vol. 7, p.3. Of course, not every politically active woman was similarly defiant. In a report published in an official KMT women’s magazine, its author wrote joyfully about what he saw in the mountainous county of Long Cun in southwestern Guangdong. There, some women responded positively to the call of mobilization by enlisting into Women’s Training Class organized by the women’s unit under the county’s New Life Movement Promotion Society. These enlisted women were not only enthusiastic participants in political activities such as commemorative events and consolation teams for wounded soldiers, but also capable of observing the principle of austere living because none of them, according to the author, wore make-up, perm, high heels, fashionable cloths, or “displayed any modern temper”; their soldier-like clothing was ordinary in style and made of humble fabric. Zhang Jianchao, “Huo yue cu di Long Cun xin nu xing”, Guangdong fu nu, Vol.3, no.12 (August 1942), in GDFNZL, vol. 7, pp.524-5. It must be added, however, that the number of these “well trained” women in that county was fairly small, at merely “a few tens”, as the same report shows.

100 YHB, 9/4/1938, in the section “Kang Ri ge tan”.

subject of “women’s work” in the province, in which he gave his views on the responsibilities that women should shoulder in the “new stage of politics”. In his speech, Commander Li emphasized that women have to play a leading role in the “austerity campaign”, implying that women were the biggest obstacle to promoting frugal consumption in wartime Guangdong. Being frugal, in Li’s authoritative words, meant stop using imported goods, stop wearing “strange fashion and weird cloth”, stop wearing permanent wave, stop selling and buying all kinds of luxury goods, and so on. Commander Li, however, made it clear that force would not be employed to submit women to these codes of conduct. Persuasion was believed to be more powerful than brute force because women would be then convinced and truly understood the good intention of the state and the socio-political purpose and importance of leading a frugal life.101 Also in 1941, an article published in an officially funded women’s magazine lamented that some women in the home front, despite living in a time of general economic hardship, were “still leading a dissipating life of lavish spending on extravagant fashion, wearing make-up, attending expensive feasts, squandering away money unrestrainedly regardless of the meager income of their husbands”. These unproductive women, the author grieved, were indeed big burdens to their families and the country.102 By the time the war reached its fifth anniversary in 1942, female staff working in the provincial government were apparently still so commonly having their hair permed and putting on “weird fashion” that the provincial administration had once again imposed a regulation banning its female staff from wearing “permanent waves and weird fashion”.103 In a lengthy article commemorating the “Eighth of March: Women’s Day” published in a newspaper in 1942, its author lamented that despite years after the outbreak of the war with Japan, and also years since the government and Madame Chiang Kai-shek had been working hard towards the mobilization of women in China to the war efforts, including the much publicized and rigorously implemented New Life Movement in the “free areas” of Guangdong, many women were still wearing heavy make-up, putting on weird cloths, and blatantly sought publicity by swaggering through the streets. To attain ultimate victory in this War of Resistance, the author pleaded despondently, it was the perseverance and hard work of “our beloved sisters” that China desperately needed, not their fashionable appearances.104 One year after, a contributor to a women’s magazine wrote about a similar concern. The writer was utterly disappointed by the fact that despite taking an active part in the war efforts both in the front and the rear since the outbreak of the War of Resistance, women continued to be looked down upon and treated unfairly by their male counterparts, even within the government: in the front they were denied any administrative position in the army, in the rear government offices

104 Da guang bao, 8/3/1942.
did not employ married women and female staff were always the target and victims of official austerity measure because they were generally considered as “flower vase” (i.e. good for looking but unimportant), and their work performance appraisal was hinged on whether their office heads fancied them. In this writer’s eye, the women themselves have to be also blamed for their own “downfall” (dou luo 墮落) because many women were spending their meager resources (i.e. time and money) unwisely on “gratifying their beauty-loving nature (ai mei tian xing 愛美天性) and their animal instinct (dong wu ben neng 動物本能) of having a comfortable life”, and these “decadent and hopeless women existed not in small number”. 105 All these journalists’ admonitions indicated to the fact that many women in Canton and Guangdong, military personnel or civilians alike, were able to differentiate and to keep a distance between patriotism and individualism, between the demand by an expansive state for greater regulation of their individuality and body in the name of nationalism and the preservation of their rights of choice and personal freedom; it also cast serious doubt on the much-publicized official legend that Chinese women in Canton, or South China in general, were largely patriotic and hence actively participated in the War of Resistance, both in the front and the rear.

In 1943, an official Chinese publication for women states proudly that “under the Party’s leadership, women in Canton [during the war] have grown immensely in power”, partly as a result of their rising political consciousness, but mainly because of their active participation in a wide range of patriotic activities related to the war effort. 106 The extent of influence of political parties, and even the state, on women in this part of China in this period was not unlimited and hence must not be exaggerated. “Party’s leadership” did not accomplish much in terms of empowering women in Canton and Guangdong by means of war-mobilization effort. Five years after the outbreak of the war, an article in a women’s magazine published in “free Guangdong” still lamented about women continued to be deprived by men of their “rights of profession” (zhi ye quan 職業權) and hence many were denied even by government offices of any white-collar job, including some central government departments in the wartime capital city of Chongqing, such as the Central Post Office, which decreed against recruiting married women. 107 On the other hand, women in Canton and its vicinity were not so easily manipulated, or “mobilized”, by the Party or the state. In this sense, women were not truly powerless, and their power was best seen in their ability of being indifferent to repeated demands by the Party and the state for greater involvement in war effort, in their ability of wearing permanent waves or “weird fashion”, in their indulgence in romantic affairs, and in

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their determination with resolving their personal or domestic problems in ways they saw fit.

Conclusion

In an article about Chinese women’s associations during the war, its author argues that the invasion of China by the Japanese had invoked a strong feeling of hatred against a “brutal and bullish Japan” inside the heart-minds of many Chinese men and women, so much so that they, regardless of age and gender, unfailingly took part in anti-Japanese mobilization efforts; “tens of thousands of patriotic women had, therefore, dedicated themselves spontaneously and actively to the anti-Japanese nation-building movement.”\(^{108}\) Exactly four months before the Japanese army marched into Canton, a Cantonese newspaper published a report, which was claimed to be adapted from a Japanese source in Osaka, boasting about the strong determination and hence the prowess of Guangdonese in defending their home province. The report claims that even its original Japanese author was troubled by “the fact” that the military authorities in Guangdong was actively mobilizing 3 million able men and drilling them into combative militia, and women were also being organised and drilled into army and militia; they were a most formidable force of defence.\(^{109}\)

This detour into the realm of women in Canton and its vicinity during the early phase of the War serves humbly as a reminder, which is often forgotten or played down, of the inherent complexity of China and its people, including women. Our knowledge of how Chinese women had reacted to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War is heavily influenced by the writings of contemporary women patriots and party officials who were in-charge of “women’s affairs” or “women’s movement”. In those narratives, Chinese (Cantonese included) women are as a rule depicted as dedicated patriots who were smoothly mobilized into a formidable force of resistance. Female students were praised for organizing themselves into nursing corps, propaganda teams, etc., which helped mobilize the otherwise apathetic masses to the noble cause of resistance.\(^{110}\) When writers or historians wrote about women in this war, they generally focused either on their “roles” in the war mobilization efforts, or their bitter experiences as victims of soldierly misconduct, as if these were the only experiences that women went through in wartime. By restricting the narratives to these limited aspects of women’s experiences, their


\(^{109}\) YHB, 19/6/1938.

\(^{110}\) Works which give similar view are too plentiful to be cited in full here. One randomly picked example is by Zheng Sheng, “Preface”, pp. 1-2, in He Bangtai ed., Guangzhou kan zhan ji shi (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1995).
reconstructed stories of Chinese women have become a kind of “imagined knowledge”, in the sense that women’s lives in the war years were reduced into predictable and limited patterns as outlined in the state’s narratives: patriotic, heroic, and ready to sacrifice themselves for national salvation. This is, however, a much simplified and “imagined” picture of Cantonese women’s wartime experiences because patriotic activism was only enacted by one small segment of women in Canton.

In the early phase of the war, there were roughly 12-million women in Guangdong, and over half-a-million of them in the city of Canton; it is next to impossible to reconstruct a full picture of how these millions of human souls had responded in ways of their own to the approaching war. Most of the cases recorded in contemporary sources and are cited in this article, however, point to the fact that the approaching war did not arouse successfully strong patriotic feeling among a substantial number of women in Canton (and other parts of the province); Cantonese women did not respond enthusiastically to the government’s call for participating in anti-Japanese war effort in any predominantly and predictably nationalistic way, but in many different manners, sometimes remarkably individualistic, but definitely not always as patriotically as it is conventionally described in official propaganda or nationalistic history texts. In this part of south China, women’s responses were more complicate than it seems.

When the war was gradually approaching Canton, residents in this city, women included, responded to it in diverse ways: some responded favourably to the government’s call for participating in war-preparation auxiliary services, some joined the army and fought in the front, but some simply packed-and-left, leaving the city for the safety in their native villages, some chose to stay in Canton, whereas many others were forced to stay because they did not have anywhere to go.

Patriotic women did take active part in the numerous war preparatory activities organized by the government, local guilds, chambers of commerce, student associations, schools, and even many ad-hoc groups such as those which were formed by employees of tea-house restaurants, by licensed prostitutes from a few brothels, by worshipers of some local temples, members of clans, etc.. Women had reportedly played a significant role in donation campaigns teams, in consolation teams for the wounded and soldiers in the front, as volunteers in publicity teams; Canton YWCA and female students in local high schools/universities, for instance, visited women workers in factories to publicize and the message of anti-Japanese

war and the importance of war mobilization, and school students played a major role in the cloth-weaving donation campaigns.112

However, there were apparently not a small number of women in Canton whose concerns had little to do with this war. To them, the war, though near, was still at some distance away. This is reflected by the generally poor response of women to the call for war-preparatory mobilization. For example, some women’s associations in Canton and other parts of Guangdong were reportedly “responding enthusiastically” to the government’s call for donating cotton-pad jackets and other garments to soldiers in the frontlines. They launched a publicity campaign and appealed to women of different social classes in Canton and its vicinity to support the operation. Although the donation target was eventually met, it was accomplished only partly by spontaneous donation from women, but largely by fixed quota imposed on various official and semi-official women’s associations and government offices in Canton and the province. Genuinely spontaneous public response, particularly from ordinary women, was poor. Similar problem was also found in a campaign initiated by the Association of Chinese Women’s Consolation aiming at collecting from people’s donation 10,000 pieces of winter garments and accessories for Chinese soldiers at the front. The campaign was kicked off in mid October, 1937, and was reportedly achieving success by winning the support of social notables, spouses of prominent members of the provincial and municipal government and the army, high-school students, semi-official organizations and concerned individuals in Canton as well as the province.113 Over one month after the launching of the campaign, a Cantonese newspaper published a report about its accomplishment, adopting the sensational heading: “A Huge Amount of Cotton Clothes and Donations”. The report, however, indicated that only about one thousand pieces of garments had been received by the Association, more than one month after the campaign’s kick-off, which was hardly an encouraging figure. It is probably because of this unimpressive result that the Department of Education of the provincial government issued an order to all high schools and tertiary institutions in Guangdong, requiring every female student to make at least one of the following items: one piece of cotton cloth or vest, one pair of cotton trousers or cotton shoes and socks. All materials have to be produced in China and supplied “voluntarily” by the female students themselves; sewing work was to be made at schools under teachers’ supervision, and these works were credit-bearing.114 Although the Association boasted that the campaign was a big success, extant material does not allow us to verify this claim. It was reported that about 5,000 pieces of cotton garments and accessories had been dispatched to different army

113 Guo hua bao, 13/10/1937, 27/11/1937.
114 Guo hua bao, 28/11/1937.
units in the front, but it is not clear if all these clothes were indeed handicraft works of these young ladies, or items donated by good citizens, or bought from market with money donated by the enthusiasts.\textsuperscript{115} Women’s enthusiasm was clearly visible in this campaign, but its scale must not be exaggerated.\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, in a series of official campaigns promoting austerity in Canton, women, being housewives and hence considered playing an important role of domestic budget controller, were targeted. They, however, were not enthusiastic about that. The limited success of this austerity campaign was best reflected by the fact that similar calls for women to be frugal in spending and to lead a simpler lifestyle had been reiterated time and again throughout this period.\textsuperscript{117}

Women whose stories were made to the news in Canton’s newspapers were not only patriots or heroines who had dedicated in their own ways to the War of Resistance; in fact these women and their stories were not always able making to the news. Most news coverage about women in unofficial newspapers were about their private lives, which are atomistic and have little to do with either the approaching war or their heroic act of self sacrifice for their country. Women in Canton and its vicinity were preoccupied with their own private personal matters, the approaching war was not at the top on their priority list, and that list was long and far more variegated than just patriotic duty: adulterous affair with lovers, troubled marriages, conflicts with parents or in-laws, emotional crises, attempt on their husbands’ lives, suicide, lawsuits against their “men” over a wide range of issues, brawls over money matters with neighbours, friends and close relatives, indulgent in illegal gambling, practicing “superstitious idolatry”, theatre-going, wearing a perm in defiance of government’s call for austerity, and displaying their beauty as much as their freedom and autonomy over their own bodies by roaming in public in “weird clothes” which were consistently denounced by a concerned government. The war was seemingly not their most imminent worry; not yet.

This general apathy towards the war among Cantonese women was so noticeable that it became a big concern to the patriots. One of them was a creative writer who composed a vernacular Cantonese ballad, entitled “Xiu qi chou zhuang zi” (“To Divorce [my] Wife in order to Fulfill [my] Commendable Wish”), which was

\textsuperscript{115} Guo hua bao, 23, 29/12/1937.

\textsuperscript{116} Li Qishan, a CCP activist who was trying to help mobilize women for the war efforts in Canton in late 1937, was advised by a local activist, who was a key figure in the city’s women’s movement, that she should not expect much result from the various women’s associations in Canton because their “effectiveness” was proven to be far poorer than that of school girls; the latter were at least able to have weaved plenty of cotton and woolen clothes. Li Qishan, “Cong mou yi jiao du tou shi Guangzhou fu yun”, in Jiu wang hu sheng, vol.2, no.2 (Dec. 1937), in Zhong yang yang dan an guan and Guangdong sheng dang an guan eds., Guangdong ge ming li shi wen jian hui ji, 1937-1940 (Guangzhou, n.p.: 1987), vol. 39, pp.179-80.

\textsuperscript{117} For examples, see ZSRB, 3/6/1938, 22/7/1938, 20/9/1938, 12/10/1938.
published in the column “Kang Ri ge tang” (“Forum of Songs for the Anti-Japanese War”) in a popular local daily. The song, which was written in witty vernacular Cantonese, is about a young couple who bickers over whether the husband should give up his family and possession by joining the army to fight against the Japanese in the front. The patriotic husband is so angered by the atrocious massacre of innocent Chinese in the waves of Japanese indiscriminate aerial bombing of Canton that he decides “to take revenge for my compatriots [and] to fight for my country [and] my race”. His wife, however, thinks very differently. She persuades her husband to abandon that silly thought by reminding him that: “People out there are fighting life-and-death battles which has nothing to do with you...Let them fight as long as they like in the front, it will be a long time before [the war] will come to the rear. Why then do you need to worry about it?...Do you, my beloved husband, have any idea of how dangerous war can be? How can we live together forever, like a pair of mandarin ducks, if you don’t listen to me? I do not like any of those medals or high reputation [bestowed on a hero]; I only want my beloved husband beside me, to travel with me, for the rest of my life. My dear husband, how could you be so stupid by jumping yourself into a fire pitch?” The patriotic husband is infuriated and tries to persuade his wife to respect his decision. When it is clear that his self-centred wife is beyond reasoning, the infuriated husband sings aloud: “I am furious! I am furious! Woman like you do not know what shame is. Instead of showing support to her husband for joining the army, she keeps stopping me from doing that. How could we possibly still be husband and wife to the days when our hair turn grey? Why do not we go our different ways, and stop interfering into the business of others?” When his wife hears this, she jumps up in joy, singing “Separation! Separation! This is exactly what I want in my heart-mind! You think you are smart, but I am not stupid either.” In the final part of this song, the infuriated husband sings: “[You are] as stupid as a swine, as mean as a dog. What a shameless creature you are! Go away before my anger explodes!...Ancient wisdom is right about that good-looking women is a source of trouble. You care only about your happy life, and stop me from joining the army. I would rather live without any woman than having a mean and immoral woman like you. To fulfill my noble wishes [of fighting the Japanese], I decided to divorce her....”

In early June, 1938, as the Japanese air raids had become increasingly frequent, Wu Tiecheng, chairman of the provincial government, encouraged “women and children” (fu yu) to evacuate Canton for safety in their native villages. It is not known how many women had eventually left Canton after taking the chairman’s advice, but it was widely reported that women had already started leaving the city well before the chairman’s statement was published in local newspapers. In either case, the number of evacuees was apparently quite substantial. Newspaper reports

118 YHB, 9/7/1938.
119 YHB, 5-7/6/1938.
contain vivid accounts of desperate women, old and young, congregating in huge number along the western Bund, where ferries plying between Canton and other popular port cities docked, hours before the arrival of these steamers. Many were so determined to scramble for a space on the heavily over-booked vessels that they stayed afloat on small sampans on Pearl River, at some considerable distance away from the piers in Canton city, waiting for the arrival of the ships; and when a steamer arrived, they raced towards it, and then climbed up to it to secure a place before it could be properly docked. One reporter wrote that pitiable noises from women’s shouting, crying and moaning filled the air.120 In late August 1938, Ling Shifen, Secretary of Guangdong-Guangxi Foreign Affairs Special Bureau, spoke to journalists in Canton that he was deeply concerned about the exodus of women from Canton. He criticized particularly those women who sought safety in Hong Kong and Macau because many of them were well-educated and well-off and hence should have been capable of leading and mobilizing a great many people for the important task of national salvation in Canton as well as China. Being a visceral part of the nation, he wrote angrily, these women were responsible for helping their country to overcome the current national crisis, like their male counterparts were. 121 By the fall of Canton in October 1938, most women who were staying behind in Canton and the vicinity were apparently still unenthusiastic towards the government’s repeated and desperate call for mobilization. In the last fortnight before the fall of Canton on 19th October, there was hardly any news on local newspapers, such as Yue hua bao, about women’s war preparatory activity. One exception is a brief report about a regular meeting held by a KMT-backed women’s war-supporting group in which its members discussed on how to motivate people to donate more money to support the war effort. This report also mentioned that the attended members were disappointed with many sub-committees members who had failed to submit in this meeting “action plans of projected activities for the immediate future”.122 Women, as well as men, were not only indifferent to the repeated call for taking part in the war efforts, but were also commonly found violating “air raid regulations”. Instead of running for shelter during air strikes, many continued working in workshops, let the machines running and from which smoke emitting from chimneys and became noticeable targets for Japanese aerial bombing; others were seen climbing up to roof tops watching enemy’s bombers and their “dog fight” with Chinese warplanes at great risk of their own lives; many left colourful bed sheets or other launderies laid out widely to dry which became obvious targets for enemy’s bombers; not a few strolled along the city’s streets as if nothing was happening, etc.123 Four months before the city’s fall, Wu Tiecheng publicly pleaded that the young and the able who were still in Canton “must regard hiding

120 YHB, 8/6/1938.
122 YHB, 13/10/1938.
123 YHB, 6/6/1938.
and drag out an ignoble living as something shameful”.

The lackluster result of women’s mobilization was also attributed to the inadequacy of political activists themselves. Many contemporary reviews on women’s movement during the early phase of the war noted that official, semi-official and even unofficial organizations in-charge of “women’s work”, regardless of political persuasions, were generally suffered from poor leadership. Women activists were criticized for their shortsightedness, without well-thought plan of action, divided and territorial among themselves and hence unintended to cooperate with each other, etc. As a result of all this, they failed to mobilize any substantial number of women. If women’s responses outlined in this paper were representative of that of the general populace in Canton and the province, then it is not surprising to see that the fall of Canton into the hands of the Japanese army was accomplished so effortlessly.

To reconstruct a history of women in wartime South China is not as easy as it seems. During the course of writing this article, I have conducted oral interviews with war survivors in different parts of Guangdong. Unlike Li Danke, whose *Echoes of Chongqing* is a great success in helping us to understand the lives of twenty women survivors of the war in Chongqing, I was exceedingly unlucky in finding informants who are old enough to recount their experiences first-handedly, healthy enough to remember accurately things in the past, strong enough to be interviewed for hours, sociable enough to be willing to share their experiences with an inquisitive historian, and understandable enough to be unsuspicious of my curiosity about their lives in the past. Among all the elderly ladies with whom I have spoken while researching on this paper, none of them was able to provide me with detailed information/recollection of their lives some 70 years ago. Most of the information I gathered from them are sketchy, sometimes incoherent and even self-contradictory, though not necessarily unreliable either. When being asked about their experiences during the war, most of them gave fairly impressionistic answers such as “life was harsh”, “rape by Japanese soldiers was commonplace”, “people had nothing to eat and many died of starvation on the streets”, “cannibalism was common”, and “Japanese warplanes bombed the cities severely”, and so on. But when being pressed further for details of those issues and asked if they knew about all these mishap by their own personal experiences or acquaintance with victims, most of them admitted that they had learnt about these from hearsays of their relatives or neighbours, and stopped me from pursuing any further, they always emphasized that when the Japanese invaded and occupied Canton/South China, they were very young and hence their memories of things happened in that period have now become flimsy and vague. Among all the elderly ladies with whom I have spoken, not every one of them had experienced first-handedly these horrors of war, though a

124 YHB, 7/6/1938.
couple of them said that they had seen corpses abandoned on streets awaiting undertakers’ collection, and most recalled that they did not have enough food to eat, but only “at a certain period of time” instead of throughout the war years. One problem with oral history on this topic is that women informants tend to focus anxiously on the most miserable part of their wartime experiences, or to exaggerate somewhat their suffering, and not uncommonly to reconstruct their “personal stories” based upon hearsays rather than from their own experiences. Those popular narratives of “rape by Japanese soldiers”, “common practice of cannibalism driven by starvation”, “indiscriminate aerial bombing by the Japanese”, which many elderly informants seem to enjoy telling their curious listeners, are not recalled from their own personal eye-witness encounter or observation. How possible, therefore, is it to reconstruct an accurate history of women in this period in Canton and South China by relying merely on oral history? Are textual historical records better? Yes, in a way. But this article also reveals some weaknesses of the textual materials I worked with. Newspapers are an important source of information on women’s experiences; their stories are always intriguing. Newspaper stories, however, are mostly “one shot” and follow-up on a story rare. Government archives, though in a way useful, do not always provide historians with impartial information or details that they could comfortably rely on to reconstruct the stories of women in this period.

The findings in this paper points to new insights in understanding the impact of war on Chinese society in general, and on ordinary women in Canton in particular. Women’s dedication and contribution to the war efforts were, and still are, greatly exaggerated in official Chinese grand narratives about this war, and also in contemporary propaganda and patriotic journalists’ reports. This distorted picture is also accepted uncritically as historical truth by many historians who are writing about Chinese women during the war, as well as by patriots and nationalistic broadcasters who are propagating the image of Chinese women (and men) as heroic fighters against the Japanese invaders. The approaching war, however, did not transform the mindset of most women in Canton and its vicinity. Many women chose to stay out of it and continued to occupy themselves with their own private lives or personal agenda. Some did join the nursing or consolation teams, or enlisted into militia, but they were by no means the majority. Cantonese women responded to the war in multifarious ways, and political activism being only one of them. Women’s indifference to patriotic activism was persistently strong, not only in occupied Canton and other parts of the province, but also in the “free Guangdong” during the subsequent years of the war. As late as spring 1944, a concerned writer, who wrote for an official women’s magazine published in “free Guangdong”, lamented that although the War of Resistance had awakened many Chinese women who then started participating in “practical work [of resistance]”, it was still very clear that “not every woman has joined in the war of resistance, either directly or indirectly”; in fact, “most women have never taken any part in this [War of
Resistance] front”. 126 This entrenched political culture of apathy remained unbroken even at a time when the war was escalating and the Nationalist government crying for greater public support of its war mobilization efforts in order to save the endangered country.

126 Pan, “Ru he kai zhan xian jie duan di fu yun gong zuo”, Guangdong fu nu, vol.5, no.6 (Feb., 1944), in GDFNZL, vol. 8, pp.252-3.