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Patriotic Maternity in Wartime China (1937-1945):

The Story of Wu Jufang and the Rescue of War Orphans

by

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Abstract: The paper examines women's wartime mobilization in Nationalist China through the case of Wu Jufang (1911–1999), director of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools. Drawing on Wu's writings, contemporary newspapers and the memoir of her daughter, the study reconstructs the gendered practices and leadership strategies that shaped child relief work during the War of Resistance against Japan. Situating Wu within recent scholarship on women's mobilization and transnational representations of Chinese women and war orphans, the article highlights how patriotic motherhood served as both a source of constraint and a vehicle for agency. Through maternal rhetoric, women entered public life, assumed administrative authority, and oversaw the care and education of thousands of displaced children. The article argues that relief work enabled Nationalist women to participate in wartime state-building and to craft new forms of gendered citizenship. By recovering Wu Jufang's contributions – largely marginalized in postwar political narratives – the study highlights the central role of child welfare in China's wartime reconstruction.

Introduction

The War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) profoundly reshaped gendered labor, political participation, and the moral economy of care in Republican China. Among the most symbolically charged sites of wartime mobilization was the rescue and education of war orphans, who came to embody both the nation's vulnerability and its capacity for regeneration. Nationalist rhetoric consistently invoked motherhood as a patriotic duty, portraying women's caregiving labor as a natural extension of traditional gender roles and an indispensable contribution to national survival. Yet maternalism in wartime China was never merely a reaffirma-

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tion of domestic femininity. It also created new avenues for women's public authority by legitimizing their participation in relief work, moral education, community organization, and institutional leadership.

The present research examines these dynamics through the case of Wu Jufang 吴菊芳 (1911-2000), director of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools and one of the most significant yet understudied regional women engaged in wartime child relief.[1] Her writings, speeches, and administrative work offer a lens into how women navigated the political, emotional, and ideological pressures of wartime caregiving, and how maternalist discourses enabled forms of agency that have not been sufficiently recognized in existing scholarship. While historians have examined women's mobilization in urban centers and national organizations – most notably the Women's Advisory Council (WAC), Song Meiling's patriotic leadership, and the New Life Movement – regional actors like Wu have remained largely absent from the historiography, despite their substantial roles in shaping child welfare and women's public activism. Recent scholarship has provided important frameworks for understanding the gendered politics of wartime China. For instance, Helen Schneider has shown how the WAC mobilized women through a discourse that both empowered and constrained them, legitimizing women's leadership primarily within gendered spheres of care, moral supervision, and humanitarian labor (Helen M. Schneider 2012). Vivienne Guo's work on the New Life Movement further demonstrates how elite women used moral reform to integrate female activism into state-building projects grounded in discipline and civic virtue (Vivienne Xiangwei Guo 2019). Louise Edwards and Diana Lary have emphasized how wartime gender ideology cast women as moral guardians of the nation while simultaneously exploiting their labor to support military and civilian mobilization (Louise Edwards 2008; Diana Lary 2010). At the same time, scholars have increasingly examined women's broader participation in the wartime state. Federica Ferlanti has shown that women's activism during the War of Resistance against Japan extended well beyond relief work, encompassing cadre training, workers' literacy, and participation in national economic production. Her findings highlight the depth and diversity of women's mobilization and illustrate how wartime conditions fostered new forms of political and social agency (Federica Ferlanti 2025). Complementing this approach, Zhang Dewen's study on the making of "national women" during the Anti-Japanese War traces how gendered nationalism shaped female identities, legitimized women's public participation, and embedded them within broader political and social mobilization campaigns. Together, these works highlight the multidimensional nature of women's engagement in the wartime state and the ideological frameworks that defined it (Zhang Dewen 2013). In addition to domestic scholarship, transnational perspectives have illuminated how representations of Chinese women and children circulated globally during the conflict. Jasmine Calver's analysis of the *Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme* highlights how "warphans" and "quiet heroines" were depicted in international an-

[1] This article represents a preliminary analysis of a broader research project currently in progress. The arguments and interpretations presented here form part of an ongoing investigation into women's wartime mobilization, maternalist nationalism, and regional relief networks in Republican China.

tifascist campaigns, revealing the centrality of maternal imagery and humanitarian narratives to global efforts to mobilize sympathy for China's war effort. Her work underscores the broader ideological function of women's and children's suffering in shaping international perceptions of the conflict, adding an important global dimension to the study of wartime gender politics (Jasmine Calver 2022). In parallel, scholars such as Laura De Giorgi**,** Stephen MacKinnon, and Danke Li have highlighted the centrality of children and refugee populations to wartime humanitarian and propaganda efforts, though their research rarely foregrounds the women administrators who ran orphanages or shaped the pedagogical programs for displaced children (Stephen Mackinnon, 1996; Diana Lary and Stephen MacKinnon, 2001; Danke Li, 2008; Laura De Giorgi, 2014). Recent scholarship has also highlighted the methodological value of life histories and retrospective narratives in reconstructing women's subjectivities and forms of agency in Republican China. Jennifer Bond's oral history of missionary schoolgirls, for example, demonstrates how women's memories of education, discipline, and aspiration illuminate the intersection of gender, nationalism, and emotional experience, offering an important framework for interpreting autobiographical testimony in the study of women's wartime activism (Jennifer Bond 2024). Within this growing body of literature, the figure of Wu Jufang – operating at the intersection of maternalism, nationalism, and regional relief work – fills a notable gap.

This study, therefore, asks how wartime nationalist discourses of maternal duty both constrained and enabled women's public leadership in Republican China, and what the activism of Wu Jufang revealed about the political and emotional dimensions of this gendered labor. In order to answer this question, the article integrates institutional, cultural, and emotional histories of wartime welfare with a close reading of Wu's own writings. The methodological approach combines textual analysis of primary materials – Wu's essays in *Guangdong Funü* 广东妇女 (Guangdong Women), *Jiuwang Ribao* 救亡日报 (National Salvation Daily), and *Zhongshan Ribao*中山日报 (Zhongshan Daily); her 1946 pamphlet *Funü Yundong de Xinlu* 妇女运动的新路 (A New Path for the Women's Movement) and wartime publications such as *Kangzhan ertong* 抗战儿童 (Children of the Resistance) – with insights drawn from the autobiographical testimony preserved in her daughter Virginia Li's memoir *From One Root, Many Flowers*. Although memoirs are subjective, they provide rare access to the emotional registers and personal motivations of women whose institutional records are often fragmentary. These sources are supplemented by contemporary newspaper coverage, wartime relief documentation where available, and the secondary scholarship on gender, nationalism, and child welfare.

Triangulating these materials reveals how Wu strategically employed maternal rhetoric grounded both in personal experience and in prevailing nationalist ideology. Her leadership of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools aims to reveal how women transformed state-directed maternalist expectations into opportunities for institutional authority, pedagogical innovation, and community mobilization. By examining Wu's activism in its emotional as well as political dimensions, this

article highlights that maternalist nationalism functioned not only as a mechanism of gendered control but also as a foundation from which women carved out meaningful public roles in a moment of profound national crisis.

Educating Future Citizens of China: Motherhood, War Orphans, and the Nation

The outbreak of full-scale hostilities between China and Japan produced vast social dislocation. As territorial losses mounted and entire regions were devastated, millions of civilians fled their homes in search of safety. Yet, in the early phase of the conflict, the Nationalist government lacked the institutional capacity to organize the orderly relocation and resettlement of these populations (Diana Lary 2010). Many civilians were thus compelled to determine independently whether to flee to unfamiliar areas or remain in place under increasingly precarious circumstances. Those with financial resources or strong community connections were generally more capable of relocating inland, often following the Nationalist government's retreat. By contrast, poorer households and rural peasants lacked the means to undertake such journeys and were therefore disproportionately forced to remain in dangerous and unstable environments (Lu Fangshang 呂芳上 1993).

A striking proportion of these refugees were children. According to data compiled by the Chinese Association for Preschool Children (*Zhonghua ziyou hui* 中华自由会), approximately half a million parentless refugee children required immediate assistance (*Zhanshi funü shouce* 战时妇女手册 1939, pp. 51). Relief initiatives involved a broad constellation of actors, including commercial councils, native-place associations (*tongxiang hui* 同乡会), missionaries, and provincial and municipal authorities.[2] In Wuhan – the wartime provisional capital – women's associations in particular played a dynamic leadership role, spearheading voluntary relief programs that attempted to respond to the escalating crisis (Mackinnon 1996).

The urgency of the refugee emergency attracted the attention of intellectuals, suffragists, radical activists, international observers, and Nationalist officials. In this context, Song Meiling 宋美龄 (1898-2003), wife of Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975), convened a national conference of leading women from diverse political, religious, and social backgrounds.[3] Held in Kuling in May 1938, the meeting gathered fifty women activists representing the Nationalist, Communist, and Democratic parties, the Patriotic Women's Association for National Salvation, as well as numerous politically unaffiliated figures. Its objective was to build a coor-

[2] Women's activism in military campaigns was also evident in other historical periods. For example, they had already demonstrated considerable skill in organizing nursing activities for wartime relief, managing logistical supplies, recruiting soldiers, and conducting propaganda work. For further research on the role of women during the Northern Expedition, see Christina Kelley Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

[3] For the debate on Shi Liang's role in refugee relief during the early years of the war, see Mackinnon, pp. 118–35.

dinated relief network under centralized Nationalist leadership, maximizing the impact of limited resources (Hollington Tong 1943, pp. 761). In urging Chinese women to contribute to wartime relief efforts, Song Meiling declared:

> During the war, men are the fighters, while women must bear the weight of everything else behind the lines. We must encourage the men, let them know that we are holding out and not letting them down; that we are ready to give up everything – even our lives – to support our fighters at the front … The determined morale of our men at the front depends on the support they receive from those in the rear (Chiang May-Ling Soong 2008, pp. 2).

Her speeches linked women directly to the military effort, casting them as essential to sustaining morale and ensuring the overall viability of the war of resistance. Drawing on revered historical examples – such as the mothers of Mencius 孟子, Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修, Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹, and Yue Fei 岳飞 – Song celebrated widows who, "despite poverty and unrelenting hardship, raised their sons alone and turned them into great men" (Soong 2008, pp. 41).[4] Through these invocations, she reaffirmed a moral framework in which a mother's worth was measured by the civic virtue and accomplishments of her children. The ten-day conference institutionalized this maternalist ideology by designating the Women's Advisory Committee of the New Life Movement as the central coordinating body for women's wartime mobilization and reconstruction.

The precarious situation of refugee children, combined with their symbolic significance as the nation's future, made war orphans a matter of urgent political concern. Shen Junru 沈钧儒 (1875-1963), a prominent lawyer and politician, articulated this vision clearly:

> Children are the citizens and soldiers of tomorrow for national liberation. To achieve the country's independence and build a democratic state where our people can live free and happy lives, we must begin with our children, caring for them! Beyond care and education, we should prepare them for nation-building, instill a national consciousness, and instruct them in communal living and education that reflects our times (Luo Jiurong羅久蓉, You Jianming黃銘明 and Qiu Huijun 丘慧君 2004, p.28).

Shen's remarks articulated an optimistic vision of Chinese victory, aligning closely with the broader project of constructing a modern nation. The path toward national independence, democratic governance, and social prosperity was framed

[4] Mencius 孟子 (372-290 a.C.) was a significant figure in the development of Confucian thought. One of his most influential ideas was the belief that human beings are born with a benevolent nature and that everyone possesses a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Mencius advocated for rulers to govern with benevolence (仁, *ren*), to the extent that his proposal eventually became a popular political strategy adopted by Chinese emperors and later combined with the doctrine of the Legalist school. Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007-1072) was an important scholar during the Northern Song period. He was best known for his literary reform, which emphasized a more concrete reflection on political and social realities. Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹(989-1052) was a prominent political and literary figure of the Northern Song dynasty. He was renowned for his political efforts to renew the Song government and for leading military campaigns to defend the northwestern borders. Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142) was a military general during the Southern Song period who fought against the Jurchen invasion of the Jin dynasty. After being falsely accused by his political enemies, he was executed by the emperor despite his efforts to defend the dynasty from its foes. Since then, he has been regarded as an exemplary model of loyalty and patriotism.

in terms of historical continuity, with a particular emphasis on the well-being and development of future generations. Within this framework, children were conceived as the nation's long-term hope, while women assumed the dual role of caregivers: nurturing the young not only during times of peace but also amid the disruptions and uncertainties of wartime.

The magazine *Kangzhan ertong* 抗战儿童 (Children of the Resistance) was founded precisely to nurture children's resilience during the war and to teach them how to confront its challenges. Its editors regarded education as the fundamental right of every child, but they also acknowledged that wartime realities required a reorientation of educational goals. With the family – traditionally the primary site of moral and social instruction – shattered for many children, educators had to devise new mechanisms to cultivate emotional stability, civic consciousness, and communal belonging. As Laura De Giorgi has argued, the urgency of national survival reinforced the modernist conviction that child education was central to state-building, an idea that gained even greater momentum after the Nationalist government lost control of eastern China within six months of the war's outbreak (Laura De Giorgi 2014).

The figure of the mother acquired heightened symbolic value as the embodiment of China's capacity to reproduce and nurture future generations. For Nationalist policymakers and women activists alike, maternal responsibility became a powerful ideological tool: women were encouraged to dedicate themselves to children's welfare not only out of compassion but also out of patriotic duty. Child relief thus became a gateway for women's public engagement, enabling them to transform traditional maternal responsibilities into forms of social action and professional identity. As women linked "their traditional duties to care for orphans" with the long-term project of national reconstruction, childcare evolved into a public sphere in which women could pursue new careers and reframe both children's rights and women's rights (Tong 1943, pp. 702). Amid ongoing military conflict, issues concerning street children, war orphans, refugee families, and access to education attracted widespread concern. Women emphasized the importance of formal schooling as a means to integrate refugee children into broader social and civic communities, beyond the fragmented family structures disrupted by war. This commitment reflected a form of social entrepreneurship: women collectively imagined new ways of connecting education, childhood, and national revitalization. An'er 安尔, author of the Official Song of the Wartime Children's Association, expressed this ethos, emphasizing self-reliance, patriotic commitment, and collective responsibility:

We have left our father, we have left our mother;
We have lost our land, we have lost our hometown;
The enemy is Japanese imperialism and its recruits –
We must defeat it,
...
We do not rely on our father,
Nor do we depend on our mother;
We seek new knowledge

And build new homes.
Our brave friends have fled from the Japanese fire.
We must help them, help them
To defeat the enemy and return home;
We must help them
To visit mother and father again;
To help them,
Together, we build a new China[5].

The writings of Wu Jufang 吴菊芳, president of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools, which will be closely examined in the next section, echoed these themes. In her 1941 message for Children's Day, she described children:

> Little friends, you were born in a difficult era and are growing up amidst historical adversity. You have overcome youthful weakness and courageously marched with the current of our time… You children who have fled the fire of war inspire us with your enthusiasm and creativity, building a society where you plan your lives around education and hard work to meet our country's needs and resist the enemy… We should begin to unite all the children of Guangdong and, from now on, all the children of China. What great strength we will have! (Wu Jufang 吴菊芳 1990, pp. 346-347)

She urged unity among all children in Guangdong and, ultimately, throughout China, suggesting that their collective strength would be essential to the country's future. In this vision, children were not merely passive victims of war but active participants in national survival, whose education required careful cultivation.

Political leaders also contributed to this discourse. General Feng Yuxiang 冯玉祥 (1882-1948), in a short letter titled *Shei Shuo Nimen Xiao* 谁说你们小 (Who Says You Are Small), praised children's patriotic capacity, asserting that their hearts "could not be bigger" and that they possessed the determination necessary to "drive away the Japanese devils" (De Giorgi 2014, pp. 20-21). Such messages reinforced the idea that even the youngest members of society played a meaningful role in the war effort, thereby elevating the political significance of education, discipline, and childcare.

Educators viewed schools and Homes-Schools as having particular responsibility for protecting and nurturing children's physical and emotional well-being. With daily life compressed into a single institutional setting, the demand to create environments conducive to health, stability, and moral development became paramount. Wartime curricula emphasized patriotic instruction, awareness of the destruction wrought by Japanese invasion, and preparation for participation in the Resistance. Education extended beyond the classroom, incorporating group-based learning, collective labor, air-raid assistance, and service activities designed to cultivate civic responsibility and discipline. Students were taught the importance of unity, determination, efficiency, and preparedness – values understood as essential to China's long-term survival (Virginia C. Li 2003, pp. 68).

The Homes-Schools functioned simultaneously as a home, school, factory, and training ground. Its guiding principles – discipline (管 guan), education (教 jiao),

[5] An'Er安尔 2008, pp. 60-61.

promotion (养 yang), and defense (卫 wei) – reflected the integration of moral, academic, vocational, and military instruction (Li 2003, pp. 61). Children learned literacy, music, art, and mathematics; acquired practical skills designed to ensure future economic independence; and engaged in physical and military training intended to cultivate strength and readiness. Teachers and staff acted as parental figures, life mentors, academic instructors, and military trainers, creating a collective environment in which refugee children, educators, and workers formed close bonds.

Refugee child relief should not be understood as a simple triumph of nationalism over feminism. Rather, it highlights how women consciously adopted activism as a strategy for survival – both personal and collective. Their writings reveal that they viewed themselves as essential participants in the national struggle, forming voluntary associations that blended maternal devotion with civic duty. They and the children under their care survived through mutual support, forging relationships that were often crucial for emotional endurance and physical survival.

Women, War, and Care: The Story of Wu Jufang and Her Relief Work for War Orphans

The intensification of the national crisis highlighted women's maternal roles, encouraging them to draw on traditionally feminine attributes to support wartime relief and national salvation. Understanding why women identified so deeply with this national crisis requires attention to both political ideology and lived experience. If the modern nation is, as Benedict Anderson suggests, an "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson 1991), women's sense of belonging to this collective was shaped not only by propaganda but also by personal histories of suffering, resilience, and aspiration. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of Wu Jufang, whose life story – reconstructed through her own writings and those of her daughter, Virginia Li – offers insight into how the emotional and psychological dimensions of maternity informed women's wartime activism.

Wu Jufang was born in 1911 in Yichang, Hubei Province, into a family structured by hierarchical marital relations. Her mother, a secondary wife, endured social marginalization and little institutional protection. Wu's birth occurred under conditions of extreme deprivation: displaced by warfare, her mother gave birth in a pigsty because local households refused to admit a woman considered socially "impure." When Wu was fourteen months old, her mother died by suicide following false accusations of impropriety made by her mother-in-law. Soon afterward, Wu's nanny also passed away. Her father, who adhered strictly to prevailing patriarchal norms, taught her that grief was permissible only for biological parents, reinforcing the emotional constraints imposed on her early life (Li 2003, pp. 40).

As a girl, Wu faced considerable hardship. Her father opposed the modern education increasingly accessible to girls in the early twentieth century, preferring instead to maintain traditional boundaries (Suzanne Pepper 2000). His frequent absences, involvement in brothels, and opium use left her unprotected and socially isolated. Yet her yearning for education remained strong, intensifying her sense of injustice at the gender discrimination that shaped her life. These early experiences

formed the moral and emotional foundation for her later activism, motivating her to alleviate the suffering of children and women exposed to similar vulnerabilities.

Despite her father's resistance, formal education became transformative for Wu. She attended Yichang Girls' Middle School and later a Catholic school, receiving a modern education that informed her sense of civic responsibility. As revolutionary movements spread across China, she participated in student groups, celebrated Nationalist military victories, and joined protests against Japanese aggression, including boycotts of Japanese goods. Motivated by the conviction that China, as a predominantly agrarian country, required scientific agricultural expertise, she sought admission to Sun Yat-sen Agricultural University. After intensive preparation, she became the institution's first female student. Higher education provided her with the intellectual tools to craft a new political and personal identity – one rooted in the belief that women must participate alongside men in China's reconstruction (Wu Jufang 吴菊芳 1946, pp. 17).

Wu's marriage to Li Hanhun 李汉魂 (1894-1987), a Nationalist general and later governor of Guangdong Province, became another formative influence. Her husband's letters from the front described shortages of medical supplies and the suffering of soldiers, intensifying her resolve to contribute to the war effort (Hsi-sheng Ch'I 1982). Wu participated in patriotic initiatives that included fundraising, procuring medical supplies, and visiting troops at the front – travelling to the De'an and Nanxun battlefields alongside other members of the Hunan and Jiangxi Women's Relief Association. Although her appointment as director of the Women's New Life Commission was linked to her husband's political position, Wu quickly demonstrated her capacity for independent leadership. She helped reorganize the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools, an institution of seven branch schools – including middle schools, elementary schools, and vocational factories – that served over one thousand resident children and employed more than six hundred staff members. Over the course of the war, more than twenty thousand refugee children received shelter, food, education, and basic medical care under her direction. By 1939, as the institution expanded, Wu – now mother of three – relied on domestic staff to balance family responsibilities with her demanding administrative, academic, and fieldwork commitments. She wrote for women's magazines, pursued a degree in agricultural economics at Zhongshan University, and directed child relief operations across the province. She completed her degree in 1941 while simultaneously serving as head of women's affairs in Guangdong. Her leadership was widely recognized: in 1947, she was elected among the first group of female representatives to the National Congress, the same year that the Republic of China Constitution granted women the right to vote after decades of suffragist activism (Louise Edwards 2000, pp. 617).

The Homes-Schools, like many wartime institutions, faced constant challenges: financial shortages, aerial bombings, and epidemics frequently threatened both the viability of the organization and the lives of the children. Yet Wu's leadership ensured the preservation and expansion of its programs. Her alignment with the Nationalist government did not entail passive acceptance of male-dominated political structures. She openly supported suffragists' demands and promoted women's economic and political rights. Nevertheless, when her husband was removed from of-

fice after the war, she was forced to relinquish her position; the institution was transferred to the authority of the new governor's wife.

Years later, living in the United States, Wu recounted these experiences to her children, reflecting particularly on the emotional toll of losing her five-year-old son shortly after assuming responsibility for refugee children:

> I was not yet thirty years old. What drove me forward was the tragedy of that time and my commitment to do my part for Guangdong and the country, my youthful energy, and my naivety. I lost my five-year-old son to illness just a few months after I had taken on the responsibility of caring for war orphans. I thought of myself; my son received the best care at that time, but I was unable to save him. These refugee children have no parents. That thought gave me determination and courage, so I began to work and smile, even though I often cried inside. I understood the anguish of parents who had lost their precious children and of children without parents because I too had lost my mother at the age of two. I pulled myself together to do what had to be done and did my best for them. The establishment of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools was formally inaugurated with a ceremony in Sun Yat-sen Park one week after the burial of my son Shao (Li 2003, pp. 139).

The tragedy instilled a profound sense of mutual trust among members of a community that had been essentially devastated. Her words were permeated with the full range of emotions experienced by a woman who was both daughter and mother, at the same time, during such a critical moment for her country. She referred explicitly to her own sorrowful loss to illustrate how, despite everything, she remained determined to provide services for children during wartime. Her efforts to awaken national consciousness about relief work through writing continued after she was appointed President of the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools. Newspapers became the principal means of communication for women activists, and Wu published her speeches and essays in periodicals such as the *Jiuwang Ribao*救亡日报 *(National Salvation Daily*), *Jiuwang Husheng* 救亡呼声 *(Voices of Salvation*), *Zhongshan Ribao*中山日报 *(Zhongshan Daily*), and *Guangdong Funü*广东妇女 (*Guangdong Women*). These publications covered a wide range of topics including child education, the women's movement, especially in relation to war relief, women's organizations, and their rights. She also authored a pamphlet for the Chinese Women's Movement entitled *Funü Yundong de Xinlu* 妇女运动的新路 *(A New Path for the Women's Movement*), in which she argued for the necessity of linking the Chinese Women's Movement with the construction of a new China. She asserted that:

> The task of national construction rests on the shoulders of every citizen; men and women are equally important. Therefore, women should assume half of the responsibilities … The issue of childcare must be addressed collectively. We need to establish a social plan for the care and education of children through the construction of a multidimensional schooling system, so that we may share the social responsibilities of motherhood (Wu 1946, pp. 20-21).

Despite her work during the war, Wu Jufang was not allowed to choose her path after her husband was removed from his position as provincial governor, and most of the children's homes passed under the direction of the new governor's wife. Having joined a community of patriotic women, Wu had attained a new level of personal autonomy. She had also become a public figure, advocating for women's

labor rights and economic independence, achieving considerable success. This is evidenced by the writings of Wu Jufang's daughter, Virginia Li, who recounted her mother's meeting in 1992, when she was already eighty-one, with a group of elderly individuals aged between sixty and seventy:

> When all the speeches had ended, applause followed her to the door. She stopped at the exit and embraced each of them as they passed by. They returned the embrace, reluctant to let her go, saying: 'Mother, without you I would not have survived... Today I would not be alive.' 'Mother, take care of yourself.' Among them were teachers, journalists, officials, as well as a director of a light industry office and a chief justice of the Guangdong Supreme Court. After the banquet, which lasted nearly two hours, gray-haired men and women took to the stage and sang old songs from their childhood.
>
> The next morning, the children came to see their Mother off at the train station, bringing along their own children and grandchildren. Seven red banners, each three meters long, bearing white characters, were held aloft – symbols of the Seven Children's Homes that had been established during the war years... Then they sang: 'Mother, now we say goodbye...' The singing started from the back and then everyone joined in. It was the same song sung by the refugee children more than half a century earlier... Those gray-haired men and women clung to their Mother as children do on their first day of school.[6]

Dr. Virginia Li's affectionate and vividly rendered memoir of her mother restores a chapter of history long overshadowed in mainland China by the political hostilities between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. The hundreds of elderly individuals who came to bid farewell to their "Mama" were once "warphans" – a term used during the war to describe the displaced and orphaned children whose suffering was one of the most immediate consequences of the conflict between 1937 and 1945. The legacies of the Civil War (1946-1949) and the political campaigns of the subsequent three decades profoundly shaped the contours of collective and individual memory, resulting in the deliberate suppression of certain historical experiences. While the humanitarian efforts of prominent Communist women such as Deng Yingchao and Song Qingling were incorporated into official narratives, the contributions of Nationalist and non–party-affiliated women who rescued, fed, and educated thousands of war orphans remained largely excluded. Consequently, much less is known about how these women mobilized resources, structured institutions, and sustained the daily welfare of the children under their care.

The wartime Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools – an institution almost absent from established historiography – illustrates the scale and organizational sophistication that such women were capable of achieving. Under Wu Jufang's direction, it became a coordinated network of shelters, schools, and training facilities that offered stability, education, and protection to tens of thousands of vulnerable children. The scenes described by Li – of elderly former refugees embracing the woman they still called "Mother" – evoke not only the celebration of motherhood but also the reconstruction of familial bonds and communal belonging forged amid displacement and loss. It is significant that so many former war orphans recognized

[6] This was Wu Jufang's third and final meeting with those who had once been her orphans. She passed away in her New York apartment on December 10, 1999.

in Wu a shared symbolic mother, a figure whose influence extended far beyond the boundaries of her institution.

These recollections illuminate a dimension of wartime relief work often absent from official accounts: the emotional communities forged through caregiving, the sense of solidarity cultivated among children and their caretakers, and the moral authority women wielded through their roles as surrogate mothers. They reveal the centrality of women's agency in constructing new social relationships, sustaining local welfare infrastructures, and embodying the values of patriotic motherhood in ways that profoundly shaped children's lives. In recovering these memories, Li's account restores a lost strand of China's wartime history – one in which women's compassion, organizational skill, and political commitment left an enduring mark on a generation of displaced children and on the broader project of Chinese nation-building.

Conclusion

The story of Wu Jufang and the Guangdong Children's Homes and Schools offers a revealing lens through which to reconsider the gendered dynamics of wartime China. Her experience demonstrates that women's participation in the War of Resistance against Japan cannot be understood merely as a derivative extension of state ideology or domestic femininity. Instead, it constituted a complex negotiation between nationalist expectations, personal histories, emotional labor, and emerging forms of public authority. Wartime maternalism, though deeply rooted in traditional gender norms, provided women like Wu with new opportunities to exercise leadership, administer institutions, and shape the moral and civic education of future citizens. This duality – of empowerment and constraint – is central to understanding how Chinese women engaged with the national crisis and contributed meaningfully to the war effort.

Wu's writings and actions reveal that maternalist discourse was not simply imposed from above, nor was it passively internalized. Rather, it was strategically adapted, infused with personal significance, and transformed into a framework through which women could justify their public engagement. Wu's own early experiences of deprivation and loss, coupled with her modern education and exposure to new political currents, shaped her belief that caregiving carried civic value and that women bore responsibility for the nation's moral reconstruction. Her leadership of the Homes-Schools – an institution that simultaneously functioned as shelter, school, factory, and training ground – illustrates how maternalism could be translated into innovative organizational practices that addressed both the immediate needs of refugee children and the long-term demands of national rebuilding.

More broadly, Wu's activism highlights the importance of moving beyond elite, metropolitan narratives of Nationalist women's mobilization. While the contributions of Song Meiling, the Women's Advisory Council, and the New Life Movement have been well documented, the work of regional women administrators has received far less scholarly attention. Wu's case intervenes in this gap, revealing how provincial actors shaped relief infrastructures, designed pedagogical programs, and sustained extensive welfare networks under conditions of extreme scarcity and

danger. Her experience underscores the central role that local actors played in mediating state policy, mobilizing community resources, and crafting pragmatic solutions to the challenges posed by mass displacement.Wu's life also illuminates the often-overlooked emotional dimensions of wartime activism. Her reflections on the death of her son and her empathy for orphaned children reveal the depth of affective commitment that underpinned her work. This emotional history complicates rigid interpretations of wartime maternalism as solely a tool of state propaganda. Instead, it suggests that women's engagement in child relief emerged from an intimate interplay of grief, responsibility, and moral conviction – experiences that shaped their sense of agency in ways that traditional political histories often fail to capture. As Danke Li and others have argued, emotional labor constituted a vital component of women's wartime survival strategies. Wu's testimony offers a powerful southern example of this broader phenomenon.

In the decades following the war, political rupture and ideological polarization obscured the history of Nationalist women's humanitarian work. The Civil War and subsequent political campaigns in the People's Republic of China privileged Communist narratives of female heroism while marginalizing the contributions of Nationalist-affiliated women. As a result, the efforts of figures like Wu remained largely absent from state-sponsored histories and public memory. The reunions described by her daughter, in which elderly former orphans embraced "Mother Wu," testify to the enduring impact of her work and highlight the importance of recovering these submerged histories. Their survival, success, and emotional attachment to her leadership constitute living archives that challenge post-1949 silences and enrich our understanding of wartime society. Ultimately, Wu Jufang's relief work reveals the extent to which women were able to navigate and sometimes reshape the boundaries of gendered citizenship in Republican China. Her leadership embodied an emergent feminist consciousness – rooted not in explicit political resistance but in a redefinition of motherhood as a civic vocation and public responsibility. By caring for the most vulnerable members of society, organizing extensive institutional networks, and articulating a vision of national reconstruction grounded in shared responsibility, Wu and other wartime women expanded the meaning of female citizenship. Their activism demonstrates that maternal labor could serve not only as a symbol of national endurance but also as a vehicle for women's social transformation.

By reinserting Wu's story into the historiography of wartime China, this article underscores the necessity of broadening the geographic, social, and emotional scope of studies on women's wartime participation. It invites a rethinking of how gender, war, and nationalism intersected in everyday life and how ordinary women – through institutions, caregiving, and community leadership – participated in forging the moral and civic foundations of modern China. Wu's legacy, preserved in the memories of thousands of former orphans and in the writings she left behind, stands as a testament to the transformative power of maternalist activism and to the profound, though often unrecognized, contributions of women in times of national crisis.

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