

Forging a Women's United Front: Chinese elite women's networks for national salvation and resistance, 1932–1938

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Abstract

Focusing on Chinese elite women who gravitated towards national affairs in the pre-war urban sites of eastern China and who migrated to Wuhan after the outbreak of the War of Resistance (1937–1945), this article analyses the emergence, development, and integration of their sociopolitical networks for the purpose of promoting women's participation in national salvation, against a backdrop of the deepening national crisis in the 1930s. I argue that two years before the Second Kuomintang-Chinese Communist Party (KMT-CCP) United Front was officially formed, these elite women, hailing from diverse social and political backgrounds and different professions, had already established their own leadership during the national salvation movement and called for a women's united front. Therefore, rather than being simply political rhetoric enhanced under the auspices of the KMT-CCP alliance, the women's united front served as an important institution with which Chinese elite women identified and through which they empowered themselves at a local and then national level, across and beyond geopolitical boundaries. I conclude that the birth and evolution of this women's united front, which have been neglected in the historiography of China's War of Resistance, are crucial to an understanding of unsettling negotiations, communication, and cooperation between the various forces signed up to the cause of national salvation in the 1930s, and to the interpretation of popular resistance before the war.

Introduction

In 1937, the War of Resistance (1937–1945) in China abruptly changed the geopolitical landscape of the lower Yangtze region. In less than half a year, both Shanghai and Nanjing fell to Japanese troops, and the Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek was

temporarily moved to Wuhan, a tri-city complex of Hankou, Wuchang, and Hanyang in the eastern Jiangnan plain in central China. The Japanese occupation of Shanghai and Nanjing in late 1937 not only caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians but also created approximately half a million refugees who poured into the nearby provinces in the hinterland. Among those who fled Shanghai and Nanjing to follow the Nationalist government to Wuhan were the country's most prominent intellectuals and social elites.¹ Examining the populace that defended Greater Wuhan in 1938, Stephen MacKinnon notes the extraordinarily high number of educated elites who arrived in the city, including most of the important names in the worlds of Chinese literature, art, drama, and academic scholarship of the time.² Wuhan therefore not only symbolized a hopelessly 'romantic and heroic defence', but also the opening up of a political and cultural space in which the Chinese elite could reidentify with their present and most urgent national duties, and reposition themselves in the fast-changing geopolitical landscape of wartime China.³

Like their male peers, those elite women who converged on the city also engaged in political mobilization in the cause of national resistance and in the production and dissemination of resistance ideologies. Travelling across the geographic borders from one city to another—from the occupied coastal areas to China's interior, and from their home town to a completely new place and novel environment—to a great extent facilitated their crossing the political and gender divide.⁴ Along with the many and various united fronts formed among resistance activists from different political parties, social circles, and professions, a women's united front (妇女界的联合战线) was promoted by those elite women who migrated to Wuhan.⁵ When

¹ S. MacKinnon, 'Refugee flight at the outset of Anti-Japanese War', in *Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China*, D. Lary and S. MacKinnon (eds), UBS Press, Vancouver, 2001, p. 119.

² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³ S. MacKinnon, *Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, p. 54.

⁴ As Judge argues, travelling to a new and foreign environment far from home made it easier for elite women to escape family duties, challenge gender boundaries, and participate in nationalist movements. Please see J. Judge, 'The culturally contested student body: Nü xuesheng at the turn of the twentieth century', in *Performing 'Nation': Gender Politics in Literature, Theatre, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880–1940*, D. Croissant, C. V. Yeh and J. S. Mostow (eds), Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2008, pp. 122–128.

⁵ As pointed out by P. M. Coble, an array of organizations in 1930s Shanghai—student groups, chambers of commerce, banking associations, bar associations, the

Shen Ziju, the leader of the Women's National Salvation Association (妇女界救国会, WNSA) and editor of the famous Shanghai journal *Women's Life* (妇女生活), arrived in Wuhan in 1938, she was excited about the possibilities to be discovered and unravelled for forging unity among Chinese women in the cause of national salvation and resistance:

Hankou now is such a sea of people gathering together from different places, that you could be surprized by whom you meet [...] The Japanese enemies have driven us together from different places and positions, and perhaps the real unity of Chinese women will become a reality. In the past, there were antagonisms among us both in theory and in practice, but now it becomes possible for us to overcome the barriers to communicate with each other and to fight against enemies from outside.⁶

By 'the antagonisms among us both in theory and in practice', Shen Ziju acknowledged the tension between women leaders in the Kuomintang (or the Nationalist Party, hereafter the KMT) and women salvationists, many of whom were affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This tension was due to Chiang Kai-shek's tenacious interest in annihilating communists and his unwillingness to fight Japan before 1937. With the worsening national crisis, Chiang's non-resistance government was not only challenged by salvation activists like Shen Ziju in the heart of KMT-controlled eastern China, but also by the military alliance comprising the Manchurian forces led by General Zhang Xueliang, the North-western force led by General Yang Hucheng, and the communist forces. The military advances of Japan, and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in particular, finally forced Chiang to abandon his non-resistance policy and to accept an anti-Japanese United Front composed of all political parties, including his long-time enemy, the CCP, by the end of 1937.⁷ Therefore, during

Young Men's Christian Association, and even the Green Gang—formed their own united fronts and joined the national salvation movements. P. M. Coble, 'The national salvation movement and social networks in Republican Shanghai', in *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks and State-Building in Republican Shanghai*, N. Dillon and J. C. Oi (eds), Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008, pp. 118–130.

⁶ Z. Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai' (I left Shanghai), in *Kangzhan zhongde nüzhangshi* (*Women Warriors in the War of Resistance*), Z. Shen (ed.), Wartime Press, 1938, pp. 113–114.

⁷ For more information about Chiang Kai-shek's non-resistance policy and the formation of the Second KMT-CCP United Front, please see H. J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China 1925–1945*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pp. 170–203.

the heroic defence of Greater Wuhan, a united wartime mobilization under the auspices the Second KMT-CCP United Front further facilitated elite women's political engagement and cooperation.

However, the women's united front claimed by Shen Zijiu and her peers who migrated to Wuhan in 1938 should not be perceived simply as resulting from the official KMT-CCP alliance. This article attempts to argue that, long before the outbreak of the war and with the nation's crisis looming large, elite women in the urban sites of eastern China had already gravitated towards national affairs. Like Shen Zijiu, these elite women became activists or salvationists during the national salvation movement and, despite their different professional and sociopolitical backgrounds, by the end of 1935 had formed their own leadership and integrated their networks in the cause of national salvation. Through circulating their salvation networks and ideas during the 1930s, Chinese elite women not only empowered themselves both socially and politically, but also called for a women's united front that surpassed the boundaries of gender and class, and that crossed China's geopolitical borders.⁸

The existing scholarship already notes women's activism during the War of Resistance, highlighting their participation in a variety of wartime political parties, organizations, and institutions. Louise Edwards' *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, Li Danke's *Echoes of Chongqing*, and Xia Rong's *The 'New Life Movement' Women's Advisory Council and the War of Resistance* make significant contributions in this regard.⁹ However, very little attention has been paid to pre-war communication

⁸ In this article 'salvation networks' refer to all the women's organizations, societies, and groups, official or unofficial, established during this period for the purpose of saving China from the threat of Japanese invasion and occupation, as well as the complex sociopolitical relationships maintained and developed by elite women to sustain these organizations.

⁹ D. Li's research, using oral histories, into the roles of women in wartime Chongqing examines their political activism within the underground CCP, the National Salvation Association, and the Women's Advisory Council. R. Xia's monograph on the Women's Advisory Council provides detailed information on the activities of women participants between 1938 and 1945. L. Edwards' research on women's suffrage shows women leaders' perseverance in negotiating for equal political rights for women and more seats for women on the People's Political Council, the so-called China's 'wartime parliament', during the War of Resistance. See D. Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2010; R. Xia, *Funiu zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng (The 'New Life Movement' Women's Advisory Council and the War of Resistance)*, People's Press, Beijing, 2010; and L. Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2008, pp. 195–231.

and networking among women in response to the exigencies of the national crisis: how were new spaces opened up in the urban sites of eastern China for women's social and political activism? Who became the activists or salvationists? And how did these women salvationists, despite their diverse social and political backgrounds and different professions, expand and connect their networks to advocate for unity among women in the cause of national salvation and resistance?

Indeed, when scholars discuss popular resistance before the war, their focus has been mainly on the leadership of the CCP in promoting the national salvation movement and cultivating the Second KMT-CCP United Front.¹⁰ Based on the oral account of a communist woman, Wang Zheng points out that, 'with the worsening national crisis, increasing numbers of city dwellers—especially the educated people—were attracted to the CCP call for resistance as well as to its nationalism'.¹¹ And when the enlargement of social space in the national salvation movement conflated women's self-interest and that of the nation, many elite women also responded to and supported the CCP's line within the movement.¹² Therefore, from a party-political perspective, it appears only natural that, after the KMT-CCP United Front had been established, elite women from different political backgrounds would automatically unite together and that therefore their united front was merely a by-product of the official military-political alliance formed between the two major parties at the time.

Since the status of Chinese women has long been deeply interwoven with discourses of national liberation, it is no great surprise that their history has been shaped by the jostling between Nationalist interests and Communist interests for control of the narrative—with each party, at various times, gaining the ideological upper hand.¹³ Discussing the

¹⁰ In 1935, the CCP published the '1 August Announcement', which proposed an anti-Japanese alliance between different political parties and forces, and stimulated the nationwide movements for national salvation and resistance. For more information, see G. Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 2–3; and K. Shum, *The Chinese Communists' Road to Power: The Anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935–1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, pp. 21–58.

¹¹ Z. Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999, p. 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 248–252.

¹³ G. Hershatter and Z. Wang, 'Chinese history: A useful category of gender analysis'. *American Historical Review*, vol. 113, issue 5, 2008, pp. 1404–1421.

uneasy relationship between nationalism, communism, and feminism in the history of Chinese women, Elisabeth Croll and Christina Gilmartin both acknowledge that women's roles and identities were constantly redefined and reconstructed to serve the political needs of the Communist Party.¹⁴ Louise Edwards further claims that Chinese women activists viewed political parties as the foundation of power and saw them as fundamental to their own development and to their nation's survival.¹⁵

This party-political perspective, when applied to elite women's political activism before the war, also focuses on the rivalry between the KMT and the CCP, rather than on the role of women in the ongoing political communication, negotiation, and cooperation between the two. In this respect, the mobilization of women is often examined with a presumption that it was either a process initiated by the communist revolution or the result of political manoeuvring by the KMT leadership.¹⁶ The dynamics of the national salvation movement, during which different women's forces co-opted each other for their own social and political empowerment, have not yet been thoroughly researched. Largely neglected, too, are the elite women's networks that had already emerged and evolved in the 1930s, and which eventually extended well beyond the political structures provided by either the KMT or the CCP. Focusing on these diverse but interwoven networks initiated by Chinese elite women, this article aims to eschew a confining party-political perspective and is instead committed, as Li Danke puts it, to moving the modern history of women in China 'beyond the dichotomy of CCP versus KMT'.¹⁷

¹⁴ E. J. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, Routledge, USA and Canada, 2013, pp. 1–5; and C. K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

¹⁵ L. Edwards, 'Moving from the vote into citizenship: crafting Chinese women's political citizenship', in *Women and Gender in Chinese Studies*, N. Spakowski and C. Milwertz (eds), Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2006, p. 12.

¹⁶ For instance, when writing about women's political mobilization on the eve of the May Thirtieth Movement, Gilmartin emphasizes the absolute leadership of the communist leader Xiang Jingyu in developing a network among women students. And Croll, in her examination of the development of the Women's Advisory Council, identifies this growing women's network as merely a KMT organization whose agendas were tailored to fit the party's political programmes and ideologies. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, pp. 122–131; Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, pp. 178–184.

¹⁷ Li, *Echoes of Chongqing*, p. 9.

The term 'elite women' is used to convey a combined meaning of two Chinese terms: upper-class women (上层妇女) and well-educated and intelligent women (知识妇女), which were used interchangeably in 1930s China, in contrast with more generally defined lower-class women (下层妇女) or working-class women (劳动妇女).¹⁸ I use this term to distinguish a group of educated women who grew up in middle- and upper-class families, were educated to at least college level, and who were therefore equipped to actively and independently participate in public affairs. Indeed, as Louise Edwards points out, the excellent, albeit scarce, scholarship on Chinese women's movements in the years prior to 1949, for a number of reasons, marginalizes these elite women's activities. Denigrating them as examples of 'bourgeois feminism', it focuses instead on women workers or those who were involved in the communist movement.¹⁹ The existing literature on the topic of women's emancipation in modern China further separates the Chinese elite and Chinese women, seeing them as two unrelated social groups. The former, represented by educated, socially influential, and politically powerful men, are seen as the producers and reformers of social norms and ideologies, while the latter are frequently presented as the passive bystanders of various social and political campaigns. Therefore, when featured in their own history, Chinese elite women are either carelessly subsumed into the study of wider male-dominated intelligentsias or simply categorized as subordinated women.²⁰

This article seeks to identify Chinese elite women both collectively and individually in the enlarged urban spaces in relation to their knowledge-making, network-building, and political engagement, against the backdrop of national salvation and resistance in 1930s China. As teachers, writers, lawyers, artists, politicians, civil servants, and wives of higher government officials, they developed sophisticated social and political networks in China's growing metropolises long before the outbreak of the war. Although the agendas and memberships of their networks were extremely diverse in the early

¹⁸ For example, as revealed in a contemporary document, 'our guest Shi Liang pointed out the different tasks for intelligent women (知识妇女) and for lower-class women (下层妇女) during the War of Resistance': W. Zhu, 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue' (The short summary of the inaugural meeting of the Chinese Women's Community). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, October 1937, p. 421.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, p. 16.

²⁰ Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 13; Y. Ma, *Women Journalists and Feminism in China, 1898-1937*, Cambria Press, Amherst, 2010, pp. 7-8.

1930s—some were reading and publishing societies developed by female writers and editors, some were political-studies networks dominated by female political activists, and some were simply ‘housewife’ networks composed of the wives of the most prominent political and cultural figures—they gradually intersected, overlapped, and merged as the national crisis deepened. From Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan, these elite women expanded and integrated their networks, first within the WNSA and later in the Women’s Advisory Council (妇女指导委员会, WAC). And by doing so, they firmly presented their own united front at a local and then national level, across and beyond China’s geopolitical boundaries. To understand this ‘women’s united front’ not simply as wartime political rhetoric, but as an evolving institution with which Shen Zijiu and her peers identified and through which they empowered themselves, we need to begin with the first network Shen formed in Shanghai—the *Women’s Life* society.

Shanghai 1932–1937: Shen Zijiu and *Women’s Life* society

With a degree in fine art from Japan, Shen Zijiu returned to China in 1926. She became a teacher first in Hangzhou High School and then in Songjiang Girl’s Normal School in Jiangsu Province, teaching art and home economics. Like many educated women of her age who had experienced the May Fourth movement in 1919 and had been educated abroad, Shen supported women’s independence in society and understood that the nation had been thrown into crisis by events in Manchuria. In Hangzhou and Songjiang, Shen inspired many of her female students who shared her ambitions and then followed in her footsteps; Ji Hong, Peng Zigang, and Hu Ziyang were all Shen’s students who later assisted her with her journal *Women’s Life* in Shanghai and became prominent women activists during the war.

According to her students, Shen Zijiu was more than just a teacher who taught girls how to manage their houses and beautify themselves. Going against the patriarchal trend of ‘Women going back home’ endorsed by the KMT’s New Life Movement in the 1930s, Shen insisted that her students meet regularly at school reading societies to discuss the active roles women could play in attempting to tackle the national crisis.²¹ It was in those reading societies on campus that

²¹ For more information about the KMT New Life Movement and its impact on the women’s movement, see Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy*, pp. 185–188.

young educated women such as Shen Zijiū, Hu Ziying, and Ji Hong established their early connections and uncovered their ambition to achieve something more in life than just managing their homes.²²

After the 28 January Incident in 1932, Shanghai was no longer the paradise it had been for entertainment, leisure, and selfish pleasures.²³ Although the overwhelming number of commercials in *Shen Bao* (申报), the most influential newspaper in Shanghai, still tried to sell the city's luxurious lifestyle even after Manchuria fell to Japan, newspapers in Shanghai became important media and spaces for public communication as they were transformed day by day in the shadow of the war.²⁴ Shi Liangcai, the chief manager of *Shen Bao* and a famous bourgeois patriot in the city, decided to launch a supplement called *Free Talk* (自由谈) to circulate and discuss public opinions on the deepening national crisis. *Free Talk* quickly turned into an open forum for the most critical minds in Shanghai, to which many famous writers in town, including Lu Xun and Mao Dun, contributed articles and commented on current national affairs.²⁵ In early 1934, encouraged by the responses and support from not only male but also increasing numbers of female readers, Shi Liangcai decided to change the Sunday edition of *Free Talk* into a women's forum named *Women's Garden* (妇女园地); this new space for public discussion was opened directly to the women readers of *Shen Bao*. As a loyal reader and enthusiastic contributor, Shen Zijiū was then employed by Shi as the chief editor of *Women's Garden*. On 21 February, the first issue was launched and soon became a platform for Shanghai women to make their own voices heard and express their concerns regarding both women's and the nation's future destiny.²⁶

²² H. Ji, 'Zijiū laoshi yu Funü Shenghuo' (Shen Zijiū and *Women's Life*), in *Nüjie wenhua zhanshi Shen Zijiū (Shen Zijiū: A Female Warrior of Culture)*, B. Dong (ed.), Chinese Women's Press, Beijing, 1991, p. 41; and J. Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue—Shen Zijiū yu Funü Shenghuo' (Life as wind and cloud—Shen Zijiū and *Women's Life*). *Xinguancha (New Observation)*, vol. 18, 1983, p. 52.

²³ On 28 January 1932, Japanese marines invaded Shanghai and encountered resistance from the KMT's Nineteenth Route Army; this became known as the Shanghai Incident. The military conflict lasted from 28 January to 3 March. On 5 May 1932, the Songhu Truce Agreement was signed after negotiations and mediation between China, Japan, the UK, the USA, France, and other countries. See C. Herriot, 'Beyond glory: civilians, combatants, and society during the Battle of Shanghai'. *War and Society*, vol. 31, 2012, pp. 106–135.

²⁴ *Shen Bao*, copies between 1932 and 1934, Shanghai Library Collections.

²⁵ Z. Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiū' (Shen Zijiū: the example of extraordinary women). *Gujintan (Past and Present Forum)*, vol. 4, 2007, p. 45.

²⁶ Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue', pp. 52–53.

Becoming an editor was an important step for Shen to develop a women's network, not only in terms of the topics she wrote about and discussed, but also in relation to the communication she started with other elite women from different professional and political backgrounds. Such networking demonstrates that political diversity already existed in women's societies long before the Second United Front was officially formed. One evening in late February of 1934—not long after the first issue of *Women's Garden* was published—a young woman found Shen Zijiu's residence and introduced herself to her. Described by Shen as a 'slim and elegant young lady in her half-old dark brown qipao dress', Du Junhui, a communist activist who had joined the Communist Party in 1928, came to offer her assistance.²⁷ Without explaining to Shen her political views, Du introduced herself with a 100,000-word essay entitled 'A speech on current women's issues', which was soon published in *Women's Garden* as a serial. Du Junhui then introduced Luo Qiong, another pro-communist activist, to Shen Zijiu. Given their shared desire for an active role for women in public and national affairs, both Du and Luo were quickly absorbed into the editorial team of *Women's Garden*.²⁸

However, just when Shen Zijiu's network based on *Women's Garden* started to expand, Shi Liangcai was assassinated by KMT secret agents for his criticism of its non-resistance policy and his sympathy for salvation forces, including the CCP.²⁹ As a consequence, *Women's Garden* was closed down. As *Shen Bao* could no longer support their salvation ideas and networks, Shen Zijiu, Du Junhui, and Luo Qiong decided to establish an independent women's journal. On 1 July 1935, the advertisement for the inaugural issue of *Women's Life* was posted in *Shen Bao*. For the launch issue, articles were received from many famous names in Shanghai, including, among others, writers Mao Dun and Bai Wei and film director Shen Xilin. Themes and topics covered by these articles included 'Should women return to the home?', 'Modern marriage and divorce', and 'Women and war'.³⁰ In the foreword to this launch issue, Shen Zijiu articulated the goal of *Women's Life*:

Chinese women are currently living under double oppressions: externally caused by the imperialist invasion which has been intensified day by day; and

²⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁹ Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiu', p. 45.

³⁰ *Shen Bao*, 1 July 1935, p. 17.

internally due to the reviving patriarchal trend [...] however, the obedience of women is not the solution to national crisis.

Facing these two oppressions, how should a woman live an independent life, how should she position herself in the crisis-torn society, and how can all women join hands towards a better future? These are the questions *Women's Life* attempts to answer.³¹

Instead of seeking financial support from either the KMT or any other political parties, Shen Zijiu affiliated *Women's Life* with the Life Bookstore (生活书). This popular publisher and bookseller in 1930s Shanghai was run by the influential journalist and editor Zou Taofen, who was also a staunch supporter of national salvation and resistance.³² The smooth and successful transition from *Women's Garden* to the independent *Women's Life* shows that elite women in Shanghai had already secured an effective network to protect and advertise their publications. Through publishing and the resultant communication between editors, contributors, and readers, Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* constituted an important forum for women in Shanghai to associate their worries and anxieties about everyday life with burgeoning warfare after the Shanghai Incident. It also brought together elite women from different professional and political backgrounds who shared the same view on women's responsibility for national salvation. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this article, women's reading and publishing societies, such as *Women's Life*, were essential in facilitating an expansion and integration of their salvation networks.

Apart from the development of women's publishing and reading societies, early 1930s Shanghai also saw the emergence of a variety of women's career groups and 'Taitai' clubs (太太俱乐部, clubs for privileged and upper-class wives), which had overlapping memberships and leaderships. It was common at the time for women members of one society to participate in activities organized by other societies. Some groups and organizations eventually merged with one another in order to enhance the leadership structures and pursue a new agenda. In her memoir, Hu Xiaqing specifically mentioned a women's organization in Shanghai called the Association for Housewives. Despite its name,

³¹ Z. Shen, 'Foreword', *Women's Life*, vol. 1, issue 1, 1935, p. 2.

³² Yang, 'Nüjie yinghao Shen Zijiu', p. 46. For more information about Zou Taofen and the Life Bookstore, please see W. Yeh, 'Progressive journalism and Shanghai's petty urbanities: Zou Taofen and the Shenghuo Enterprise, 1926–1945', in *Shanghai Sojourners*, F. Jr. Wakeman and W. Yeh (eds), Institute of East Asian Studies, Berkeley, 1992, pp. 186–238.

this ‘Taitai’ club attracted many educated professionals such as the aforementioned Shen Ziju, Luo Qiong, Luo Shuzhang, and Ding Huihan, and it maintained close ties with the editorial staff of *Women’s Garden* and *Women’s Life*. By the end of 1935, this ‘Taitai’ club had already been transformed into a research society that concerned itself with women’s issues and current national affairs.³³ Another ‘Taitai’ club, the Bee Club, which became the Young Women’s Club at the end of 1936, also absorbed members from different professional and political backgrounds, including actresses Chen Bo’er, Yu Liquan (married to the famous writer Guo Moruo in 1939), and Lan Ping (Jiang Qing, who married Mao Zedong in 1938), the well-known female writer Bai Wei and communist activists Du Junhui and Zhu Wenyang. As soon as the WNSA was established in Shanghai, the Young Women’s Club also supported Shen Ziju’s leadership and organized demonstrations to mobilize local women to participate in the national salvation movement.³⁴

These diverse women’s organizations and societies in Shanghai served not only as channels for career women and privileged upper-class wives to enhance their social standing, but also as platforms for them to expand their connections with not just one but a variety of political parties and factions for advocating national salvation. For example, the Chinese Women’s Community (中华妇女互助会)—established by Tian Shujun, a concubine of the Shanghai Garrison commander Yang Hu, and sponsored by the rich wives of high-ranking KMT officials—was not a club exclusively for rich KMT wives to socialize with each other and enjoy their leisure time. When Tian Shujun first decided to establish a women’s organization, she was only hoping that it would be a solution to her endangered marriage. As one of Yang Hu’s eight wives, Tian’s position at home was frequently threatened by her husband’s other concubines.³⁵ For Tian, initiating a women’s organization in pre-war Shanghai was aimed more at lifting herself up in wider social arenas than advocating for political unification and national salvation. Nevertheless, according to Zhu Wenyang’s memoir, both the CCP and the KMT’s Central Club (CC) clique infiltrated this organization, despite its seemingly

³³ ‘The extract from Hu Xiaqing’s memoirs’. Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, pp. 88–92.

³⁴ ‘Qingnian funü julebu jianjie’ (A brief introduction to the Shanghai Young Women’s Club). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, p. 25.

³⁵ ‘Tian Shujun qiren’ (About Tian Shujun). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, undated, p. 424.

non-political appearance and agenda.³⁶ Also involved in this Chinese Women's Community were salvation activists Ding Huihan, Han Xuezhang, and Zhu Wenyang herself, who utilized the new social and political links they made to protect and expand their salvation network. By late 1937, the Chinese Women's Community had also been transformed into a salvation organization which dedicated itself to making winter vests for Chinese forces defending Shanghai.³⁷

These diverse but interconnected networks being developed among Chinese elite women in pre-war Shanghai proved to be essential to the dissemination of their salvation ideas, especially because the hitherto non-resistance government adhered to strict press censorship to control public opinion. Although at this early stage these elite women, who hailed from diverse backgrounds, had not yet merged their shared concerns into a united women's organization for national salvation, it is evident that salvationists like Shen Zijiu already received support not only from her communist friends, but also from KMT insiders and even Shanghai's powerful gangsters. As Shen Zijiu noted:

In order to make the publication of *Women's Life* escape the strict KMT censorship, we sent some of our friends to deal with KMT officials so that they would only pick up several small problems but allow the whole article to be published. Also, we managed to gain some important contacts with Du Yuesheng's Green Gang (青帮), and managed to build a direct connection with a Mrs He, a head in the Red Gang (洪帮).³⁸ Because of our wide connections, we could always solve problems by ourselves.³⁹

By the time of the 13 August Shanghai Incident in 1937,⁴⁰ there were already over 20 women's societies, groups, and organizations

³⁶ The CC, or the Central Club, clique was one of the political factions within the KMT. It was led by the brothers Chen Guofu and Chen Lifu who were friends of Chiang Kai-shek. For more information, please see L. E. Eastman, J. Chen, S. Pepper and L. P. Van Slyke, *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 27.

³⁷ 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui jianshi' (A short history of the Chinese Women's Community). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-260, August 1937, pp. 416-418; Zhu, 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue', pp. 421-422.

³⁸ The Green Gang and the Red Gang have a long history that can be traced back to the early Qing Dynasty. The Red Gang was founded earlier than the Green Gang, originally as a secret society created to revolt against the Qing government. For more information, please see B. G. Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919-1937*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996.

³⁹ 'Huiyi Funü Yuandi yu Funü Shenghuo' (Memories about *Women's Garden* and *Women's Life*). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, p. 16.

⁴⁰ On 13 August 1937, Japanese troops invaded Shanghai, thus starting the three month-long Battle of Shanghai. On 12 November 1937, Shanghai fell to Japan. For

in Shanghai.⁴¹ The social and political relations reflected in their memberships were, as demonstrated above, extremely sophisticated. It is therefore clear that on the eve of the War of Resistance, elite women—whether they were non-aligned career women, KMT wives, undercover communists, salvationists, or the so-called CC women of the right-wing KMT—were committed to the expansion of their networks in order to empower themselves both socially and politically. The extension of their networks and the dissemination of their ideas were not confined by political boundaries nor, as we shall now see, by geographic borders. Not far from Shanghai, in Nanjing, the capital of the Nationalist government, there was a second hub of elite women's networks, which was to be the centre of the later far-reaching national salvation movement.

Nanjing 1933–1937: Cao Mengjun and *New Women* society

As in Shanghai, the salvation networks of elite women in Nanjing also originated from local reading and publishing societies that discussed current affairs, especially the deepening national crisis. In the autumn of 1933, the KMT legislator Wang Kunlun, his sister Wang Feng, and his girlfriend Cao Mengjun, among a few other intellectuals and scholars in Nanjing, secretly founded a reading society to study Marxism and to analyse national and international matters. In order to develop this political-studies network among knowledgeable women in the capital, Cao Mengjun and Wang Feng soon invited Tan Tiwu, a female civil servant working at the KMT Ministry of the Interior, and female journalists Ji Hong, Hu Jibang, and Tan Dexian to join their group.⁴² While Cao Mengjun and Tan Tiwu knew each other from university, the others had previously worked together at Madame Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement Women's Advisory Council.⁴³ Again, like those in Shanghai, local women's societies in Nanjing were not directly supported by any political parties in the early 1930s but

more information, please see F. Jr. Wakeman, *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime 1937–1941*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 6.

⁴¹ Zhu, 'Zhonghua funü huzhuhui chenglidahui jilue', p. 421.

⁴² H. Lu, 'Jieshao liwei Tan Tiwu nüshi' (About Tan Tiwu, a member of the Legislative Committee). *Xiandian Funü (Modern Women)*, vol. 9, issue 5, 1947, pp. 9–10.

⁴³ X. Li, 'Ding Ling, Gu Jiegang yanzhongde Tan Tiwu' (Tan Tiwu in the eyes of Ding Ling and Gu Jiegang). *Book Town Editorial*, vol. 3, 2010, pp. 61–63.

emerged through the interconnected friendships, relationships, and kinships of their members.

Cao Mengjun in Nanjing, like Shen Zijiu in Shanghai, became a key figure in local elite women's networks. With gentle eyes, thin lips, and a slim figure—'a true beauty' in Shen Zijiu's words—Cao Mengjun did not believe that the goal of life was to find a rich husband like so many beautiful Chinese women in the 1930s did.⁴⁴ Instead, she impressed her friends and colleagues with her character and strong desire to develop her own career. In her friend Tan Dexian's eyes, Cao Mengjun was born to be a women's leader:

She is an advocate of education for women's independence and strong character [...] She would never let love or relationship hamper her career. When she is working, she devotes full effort no matter the task is big or small. And within a group, she is always the one who catches people's attention. She speaks fast and works fast; she handles everything efficiently and prudently. She has the same incredible passion for learning as for working!⁴⁵

With her 'incredible passion for learning as for working', Cao Mengjun became the leader of the women's reading society in Nanjing. However, compared with those in Shanghai, women's groups and societies in the Nationalist capital were more strictly monitored and controlled. KMT women's leader Tang Guozhen, who headed the KMT Nanjing Municipal Women's Community (南京市妇女会) under the jurisdiction of the KMT Central Mass Movement Directory Committee, attempted to supervise other women's organizations in the city and to contain women's salvation activities.⁴⁶ Dissatisfied with the performance of the Nanjing Municipal Women's Community, Cao Mengjun and her peers in the reading society decided to challenge its authority and force it to reform for the purpose of national salvation. The reading society therefore organized a public election campaign among women in Nanjing to vote against the leadership of Tang Guozhen. Unfortunately, the election was sabotaged by Tang, who brought a number of school pupils to vote against Cao. As a result, Cao Mengjun decided to establish an independent women's organization in Nanjing to promote her own agenda.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ D. Tan, 'Cao Mengjun yinxiangji' (My impression of Cao Mengjun). *Women's Life*, vol. 3, issue 1, 1936, p. 46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁶ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi 1919-1949 (The Historical Documents of the Women's Movement in Jiangsu 1919-1949)*, Zhongguo funü Press, Beijing, 1995, p. 137.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Competition such as this was often interpreted in CCP historiographies as the ‘contradiction’ between ‘power-craving’ KMT stalwarts, such as Tang Guozhen, and so-called ‘progressive women’ (进步妇女), such as Cao Mengjun. And Cao, a salvation activist who had been affiliated with the CCP since 1925, seemed to fit the profile of a ‘progressive’ undercover communist who firmly fought against the ‘devious’ KMT women leaders. However, overstressing these elite women’s political affiliations with either the ruling KMT or the underground CCP would lead to just a partial understanding of their intertwined salvation networks before the war. Despite the prevailing tension between some women leaders in the KMT and the salvationists affiliated with the CCP during the national salvation movement, party-political cleavage was never a defining feature of elite women’s public communication and engagement in the 1930s.

Although Cao Mengjun joined the CCP in 1925 when she was enrolled at Peking University, her social and political relations were never confined to the CCP. During the period of the National Revolution (1924–1927), both the KMT and the CCP saw a rapid increase in their female membership and these women political activists formed interconnected working relationships and friendships under the aegis of the KMT Central Women’s Department.⁴⁸ After the National Revolution failed in 1927, Cao Mengjun went to Nanjing, where she worked for the KMT Ministry of Industry, while her close friend and former schoolmate from Peking University Tan Tiwu worked for the Ministry of the Interior as a KMT civil servant.⁴⁹ Cao’s personal relationship with Wang Kunlun further helped her to extend her networks across different political parties and groups. The couple made friends with many prominent politicians and social figures in the capital city, including the famous ex-warlord General Feng Yuxiang and his wife Li Dequan.⁵⁰ It would have been unthinkable for Cao Mengjun to challenge Tang Guozhen’s leadership at the Nanjing Municipal Women’s Community without the broad personal links she had already forged in Nanjing. The fact that Cao could immediately and successfully register her independent organization with the KMT Nanjing Municipal Social Bureau further indicates that she, like Shen

⁴⁸ Ma, *Women Journalists and Feminism in China 1898–1937*, p. 205. C. K. Gilmartin, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 195–225.

⁴⁹ Li, ‘Ding Ling, Gu Jiegang yanzhongde Tan Tiwu’, pp. 61–63.

⁵⁰ Z. Wang, *Wang Kunlun*, Huashan Wenyi Press, Hebei, 1997, p. 122.

Zijiu in Shanghai, had a sophisticated network of social and political relations to endorse the dissemination of her salvation ideas.

On 2 September 1934, Cao Mengjun's Nanjing Women's Association for Cultural Promotion (南京妇女文化促进会, WACP) was established in the capital, with its office set up at Number 80 Dashugen near the beautiful Xuanwu Lake. Just as Shen Zijiu had expanded her network in Shanghai by publishing *Women's Life*, Cao Mengjun also sought to enhance the influence and connections of the WACP through publishing. In 1935, *New Women* (新妇女) was launched as a weekly supplement to the popular Nanjing newspaper *Xinmin Bao* (新民报) and functioned as an organ of the WACP. Over 100 women activists from different professions and political backgrounds gradually gravitated towards Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society for the purpose of studying national affairs, researching women's issues, and reforming women's lives.⁵¹ It soon echoed Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* in criticizing traditional gender mores and advocating for women's participation in national salvation. At the one-year anniversary meeting of the WACP, Cao Mengjun made it clear that staying at home as a good wife and wise mother was not what women should be doing during a national crisis:

In the face of national crisis, we need every citizen's effort to save the nation. However, there are still stubborn and wicked thoughts trying to stop us from our duties and forcing us back home to become good mothers and wives—don't they [the ideas of women going back home] sound ridiculous at this moment? For the future of the women's movement, we women must not slow down; and for our participation in national salvation we must conquer all the difficulties.⁵²

The development of Shen Zijiu's *Women's Life* society in Shanghai and Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society in Nanjing demonstrates Chinese elite women's own initiatives in protesting against the 'women going back home' agenda endorsed by the KMT's New Life Movement and in participating in public discussions of national affairs, despite the lukewarm or, at times, hostile response of the government. Instead of aligning their societies to any political parties, Shen Zijiu and Cao Mengjun relied on their diverse but interwoven networks to transcend party lines and to disseminate their salvation ideas. With the deepening national crisis, the urban sites of Shanghai and Nanjing

⁵¹ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi 1919-1949*, p. 137.

⁵² M. Cao, '1935 nian de huigu' (The summary of the year 1935). *Xinmin Bao*, 1 January 1936.

also provided these professional elites—teachers, writers, editors, journalists, lawyers, publishers, and civil servants—with an enlarged space in which to empower themselves through publishing, knowledge-making, and network-building. It is therefore no coincidence that, as we will see in the remainder of this article, through the establishment of the Women's National Salvation Association in Shanghai and Nanjing, Chinese elite women not only further aligned their feminist concerns with their duties towards the nation, but also connected and integrated their networks to form a women's united front.

A tale of two cities: the Women's National Salvation Association

Parks M. Coble has argued that a 'personal network of connections was as critical to jump-starting the salvationist campaign as enlisting formal organisations'.⁵³ The development of the Women's National Salvation Association in Nanjing and Shanghai indeed benefited from the close personal networks among salvation activists between the two cities. And their 'tale of two cities' all began with Wang Kunlun's 'family get-together for peach tasting'.

Like many KMT higher officials living and working in Nanjing, Wang Kunlun also had a residence in Shanghai, which served as his 'salon de conversation' for socializing and discussing political affairs with his close friends. Shen Ziji and Hu Ziyang were both Wang's acquaintances in Shanghai.⁵⁴ It is likely that through him in the early 1930s, Wang Kunlun's relatives Wang Feng and Cao Mengjun had already made contact with those prominent women salvationists in Shanghai. In the summer of 1935, Ji Hong, the journalist who had been an active member of Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society, decided to leave Nanjing for Shanghai to assist Shen Ziji, her former teacher at Songjiang Girl's School. She soon joined Shen's reading society and became an editor of *Women's Life*.⁵⁵ The personal relationship between Shen Ziji and Ji Hong was another important link between elite women in Nanjing and Shanghai. Through publishing and the expansion of their reading societies, connections between women's networks in the two cities were gradually forged, and elite women from

⁵³ Coble, 'The national salvation movement', p. 118.

⁵⁴ Wang, *Wang Kunlun*, p. 110.

⁵⁵ Huang, 'Fengyun suiyue', p. 56.

different professional and political backgrounds started to synchronize their actions for national salvation.

On occasion, these connections were cemented through the social events that occurred on the sidelines of more formal, male-dominated political gatherings. In August 1935, Wang Kunlun and members of his Marxist study group were invited by the Culture Working Committee (文化工作委员会) of the CCP to discuss its call to 'stop domestic conflicts and unite against Japan', a call that led to the actual establishment of the Second KMT-CCP United Front. In the name of a 'family get-together to taste peaches' among Wang Kunlun's families and friends, a private and exclusive meeting was organized at Wanfang House (万方楼) on Tai Lake of Wuxi city. This meeting provided elite women in eastern China with an excellent opportunity to meet one other in person. Cao Mengjun, Wang Feng, and Hu Jibang from Nanjing, and Shen Ziju and Chen Bo'er from Shanghai all joined in the discussion. They reported on the achievements made by women's societies in Nanjing and Shanghai, and proposed tightening the links between the two cities under a women's united front for national salvation and resistance. These elite women came up with the idea of establishing a Women's National Salvation Association (WNSA) in both Nanjing and Shanghai.⁵⁶

On 30 November 1935, Cao Mengjun's *New Women* society organized a public forum in Nanjing to discuss the formation of a women's association for national salvation and resistance against Japan. The forum attracted about 400 women representatives from all walks of life and resulted in the founding of the Nanjing WNSA.⁵⁷ Soon after its establishment, Cao Mengjun and Hu Jibang travelled to Shanghai to meet with Shen Ziju, Du Junhui, and Hu Ziyang, the leading members of the *Women's Life* society, as well as the well-known female lawyer Shi Liang, who at the end of 1935 had formed a preparatory committee for the founding of the Shanghai WNSA.⁵⁸

The urban spaces of eastern China conveniently lent themselves to the development of elite women's salvation networks. The same social strata in which these educated women elites moved and their similar interests played important roles in their early communication

⁵⁶ *Jiangsu funü yundongshi*, p. 139.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ W. Ding, 'Guotongqu funü jiuguohui he kangri jiuwang yundong' (Women's Salvation Association and the national resistance movement in the KMT-controlled areas). *Jilin University Journal of Social Science*, vol. 6, 1993, p. 68.

and networking for national salvation, regardless of the differences in their professional and political backgrounds. The majority of elite women active in 1930s Shanghai and Nanjing, such as Shen Ziju and Cao Mengjun, were all socially well connected and financially well off. They regularly managed their activities in the most expensive places in the city. Casual meetings at home and dinners out provided them with opportunities to meet other women activists and social elites in this region. The Shanghai Godly Vegetarian Restaurant located on Huanghe Road became one of the places where they met regularly to exchange ideas and make new friends. Apart from meeting at restaurants and cafés, they often hosted events at Ding Huihan's house on Xiafei Road (Avenue Joffre, nicknamed Shanghai's Avenue des Champs-Élysées) in the French Concession to avoid suspicion of conducting communist activities.⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that while the urban spaces functioned as essential nodal points through which public engagement and networking among Chinese elite women became more expansive, they still operated, in another sense, to confine such activities. As Shi Liang remembered, the preparatory committee of the Shanghai WNSA chose Godly Vegetarian Restaurant in Shanghai as their meeting place, not only because an old friend worked there and the prices were reasonable, but also because they did not have many other options, as they realized that no native place (会馆/同乡会) was willing to provide them with a venue for their meetings.⁶⁰ Although Shi Liang did not clarify why the ubiquitous native places in Shanghai had all refused to host them, one possible explanation is that the conservative communities in Shanghai still held negative attitudes towards women's activities in public.⁶¹ Consequently, the committee members organized their preparatory meetings either at the Godly or at a member's home until they officially established the Shanghai WNSA on 20 December 1935 and set up an office at the Young Men's Christian Association on Sichuan Road.⁶²

By the end of 1935, despite the government's persistent non-resistance policy and the occasional gender barrier they encountered

⁵⁹ 'The extract from Hu Xiaqing's memoirs', pp. 88–92.

⁶⁰ L. Shi, *Shi Liang Zishu (Shi Liang's Autobiography)*, Zhongguo wenshi Press, Beijing, 1987, p. 22.

⁶¹ B. Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853–1937*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, p. 308.

⁶² 'The extract from Hu Xiaqing's memoirs', pp. 88–92.

in the still-conservative Chinese communities, Chinese elite women had already expanded their salvation networks across the major cities in eastern China. Cao Mengjun, Tan Tiwu, and Ji Hong from Nanjing; Shen Zijiu, Shi Liang, Du Junhui, Luo Qiong, and Luo Shuzhang from Shanghai, and Liu Qingyang from Beiping gradually connected their local networks through the national salvation movement and declared their political goals:

To firmly maintain the integrity of Chinese territory and sovereignty;
 To denounce secret foreign affairs and to deny any pacts or agreements that would harm the integrity of Chinese territory and sovereignty;
 To denounce any executive organizations controlled by foreigners inside of China;
 To centralize military forces and financial means to resist the enemies, to take down puppet authorities and to recover the lost territory in Manchuria;
 To harshly punish traitors;
 To claim the right to freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of association;
 To request immediate release of patriotic students in Beiping and punishment upon the military police who perpetrated the arrests and violence;
 To mobilize all women of the nation to unite together and to implement our propositions for national salvation.⁶³

Following the establishment of branches of the WNSA in Nanjing and Shanghai, a national leadership committee was finalized on 31 May 1936 to promote the national salvation movement more broadly. Women salvationists Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang, and Liu Qingyang, as well as the political socialites Song Qingling (the elder sister of Madame Chiang and the widow of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China), and He Xiangning (the widow of KMT leader Liao Zhongkai) gained their positions on the 15-people standing committee of the All-China National Salvation Association (NSA).⁶⁴ At this stage, the NSA was a loose political organization which opened its doors to almost every patriotic Chinese citizen regardless of their occupation and political alignment.⁶⁵ As one contemporary source recorded,

⁶³ 'Shanghai funü jiuguo lianhehui xuanyan, 21-12-1935' (The statement of the Shanghai Women's National Salvation Association, 21 December 1935). Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, 1936, pp. 58-59.

⁶⁴ J. Zhang, *Zhongguo minzhu dangpai shi (The History of Chinese Democratic Parties)*, Heilongjiang People's Press, Harbin, 2006, p. 140.

⁶⁵ For more information about the National Salvation Association, please see P. M. Coble, *Facing Japan: Chinese Politics and Japanese Imperialism, 1931-1937*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 335-342.

‘apart from the majority membership being non-partisans, members of the KMT, the CCP, the National Socialist Party, the National Revolutionary League and the Third Party all have taken part’.⁶⁶

For elite women, the NSA’s multi-party political framework provided an inclusive path through which they could participate in national salvation. Given its dedication to, and concrete practice of, saving the Chinese nation in the face of Japanese aggression, it appealed to elite women as a platform to extend their networks outside the direct aegis of the KMT and the CCP.⁶⁷ Thus nearly two years before the anti-Japanese United Front was officially formed between the KMT and the CCP, Chinese elite women had already established their own organization for national salvation and proclaimed their duties towards their country. As suggested by the founding statement of the WNSA, despite their different professional, social, and political backgrounds, Chinese elite women were ready to realize a women’s united front and to mobilize all the nation’s women in the cause of national salvation. And with the outbreak of the War of Resistance, the heroic defence of Wuhan in 1938 provided them with the perfect opportunity to formalize their united front at the national level.

Wuhan 1938: formalizing a women’s united front

After the fall of Shanghai and Nanjing in December 1937, for ten months Wuhan became the unofficial capital of an independent wartime China and the centre of national resistance. Here, the Nationalist government finally committed itself to a unified mobilization for national resistance. Not only was the geopolitical landscape reshaped for resistance during the wartime mobilization and migration, but so was mass culture. Through choral singing, drama performances, and various journals and newspapers—ranging from the communist newspaper *Xinhua Ribao* (新华日报) to the KMT-supporting *Kangzhan Xiangdao* (抗战向导) and publications in between from liberal intellectuals such as Zou Taofen’s *Life* volumes—people

⁶⁶ Z. Zhang, *Kangzhan zhongde zhengdang he paibie* (*The Parties and Factions during the War of Resistance*), Dushu and Shenghuo Press, Shanghai, 1939, p. 107.

⁶⁷ N. Zhang, ‘Wo he jiuhuohui’ (I and the National Salvation Association). *Zhonghuaminguo shiliao congkao* (*The Collection of Historical Materials on Republican China*), no. 6, 1980, p. 34.

from all walks of life were included in the formation of a 'resistance' culture.⁶⁸ Wuhan became a centre for such nationalist political and cultural production and, likewise, an enlarging space that was crucial to Chinese elite women, who also moved there one after another between late 1937 and early 1938.

Indeed, the tri-city became a veritable Mecca for wartime women's activism. The Chinese Women's Association of War Relief and Self-defence for the Army in Resistance (中国妇女慰劳抗敌将士总会) moved there from Shanghai, with branches set up in Hankou and Wuchang. The Hubei Provincial Women's Wartime Service Group (湖北省妇女战时工作团) established itself in Wuchang, while the Young Women's Christian Association (基督教女青年会, YWCA), the Wuhan Women's Resistance Support Association (武汉妇女抗敌后援会), and the Hankou branch of the Hubei Provincial Women's Wartime Service Group (湖北省妇女战时工作团汉口分团) also became active in Hankou.⁶⁹ To cooperate militarily and politically with the KMT in the Nationalist-run areas, the CCP established the Wuhan Office of the Eighth Route Army and the Yangtze Bureau. On 18 December 1937, Zhou Enlai, Bo Gu, Deng Yingchao, and Meng Qingshu arrived in Wuhan to lead the CCP Wuhan Office. To assist with women's mobilization in this region, communist women leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu also formed a women's committee under the auspices of the Yangtze Bureau.⁷⁰

Arriving in January 1938, Shen Zijiu took her journal *Women's Life* all the way from Shanghai to Wuhan. Approximately a month later Shi Liang also arrived after a short stay in Hong Kong, where she helped to establish local women's salvation organizations.⁷¹ Liu Qingyang from Tianjin, Peng Zigang from Beiping, Cao Mengjun, and Ji Hong from Nanjing had already arrived in Wuhan by the end of 1937. Other members of the *Women's Life* society such as Du Junhui, Chen Bo'er, Luo Qiong, and Luo Shuzhang subsequently joined them in the city. Local women leaders and activists in Wuhan such as Li Wenyi and

⁶⁸ D. Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937–1945*, Cambridge University Press, USA, 2010, pp. 54–56; and MacKinnon, *Wuhan, 1938*, pp. 62–82.

⁶⁹ Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', pp. 112–113.

⁷⁰ G. Li, 'Kangzhan chuqi changjiangju lingdao xiade funü Gongzuo' (Women's work led by the Yangtze Bureau at the beginning of the War of Resistance). *Funü Xueyue (Women's Academy)*, vol. 4, 1991, pp. 29–30.

⁷¹ 'The introduction of Shi Liang', materials collected by Y. Fei. Shanghai Municipal Archives, C31-6-258, undated, pp. 72–76.

Yang Moxia were also quickly absorbed into this expanding women's network for national salvation and resistance.⁷²

Wuhan became thus a city of national unification for elite women, who were forced to converge on it as the Japanese occupied more and more of eastern China. The freezing temperatures of January 1938 and an unfamiliar environment did not prevent these newcomers from meeting each other frequently. Shen Zijiu ran into old friends from Shanghai and Nanjing, with whom she soon restored her *Women's Life* forums at the YWCA in Wuhan:

How could I expect to see Ms. Tang Guozhen again in Wuhan after our last meeting in Nanjing before Manchuria fell to Japan? Ms. Tang introduced me to Ms. Xu Kairui from the KMT Central Women's Department, as well as other KMT women leaders from the Chinese Women's Association of War Relief and Self-defence for the Army in Resistance . . .⁷³

From Shen Zijiu's point of view, the only obstacle that had thwarted a women's united front—the previous antagonisms between KMT leaders and women salvationists—seemed to have disappeared in Wuhan. Tang Guozhen, the aforementioned KMT 'stalwart' who had confronted Cao Mengjun in Nanjing, was also absorbed into this growing women's united front for national resistance. One explanation could be that KMT women leaders only became willing to co-opt other women's forces after the official anti-Japanese United Front had been formed. But it is important to note that Tang Guozhen had never been an outsider in the extensive social and political networks maintained by women salvationists in the early 1930s. Not only did Tang meet with Shen Zijiu in the early 1930s, she was also one of Cao Mengjun's acquaintances within the KMT before the fall of the capital. In this regard, their pre-war antagonisms should be understood as an integral component of the women's united front that was evolving through the unsettling negotiation, communication, and cooperation between the various women's forces in the 1930s.

Instead of being forced upon them by either the KMT or the CCP after the outbreak of the war, this women's united front was expanded by Shen Zijiu and her peers based on their own substantial salvation networks. Luo Qiong recalled how Shen Zijiu used various social events to refresh her old contacts and attract new ones: 'As the chief editor of *Women's Life*, Shen Zijiu organized meetings of

⁷² Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', pp. 112–113.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

different scales and types amongst upper-class women in Wuhan; she also participated in various forums and tea parties to expand social connections with women from different professions.⁷⁴ It was at one of these tea parties organized by the National Council on Foreign Relations that communist women leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu were introduced to Shen:

At this moment, someone introduced a new friend to me, 'this is Ms. Deng Yingchao.' In front of me was a lady who appeared to be firm and robust [...] Then she pointed at another lady who was in her military uniform and looked very pretty, 'this is Ms. Meng Qingshu, the wife of Chen Shaoyu (Wang Ming).' I could feel my blood fluxing in my body and rushing toward my cheeks. After the meeting, Ji Hong asked why I looked so excited, I told her: 'today's meeting is so fascinating. Here we met KMT women leaders, CCP women leaders as well as local women activists in Wuhan. Their passion is burning me; don't you feel the same?'⁷⁵

Propelled by such passion, Chinese elite women who had migrated from the urban sites of eastern China to Wuhan further formalized their united front at the national level. In May 1938, Madame Chiang Kai-shek organized a national women's forum in the Lushan Mountain, a beautiful resort about 300 kilometres from Wuhan. Women leaders and activists from different regions and political backgrounds were invited, including 18 from Hankou; eight from Nanchang; six from Hong Kong; four each from Chongqing, Changsha, and Guangzhou; three each from Chengdu and Guangxi; and two each from Yunnan, Guizhou, Fujian, and Guling—58 women in all.⁷⁶ The aforementioned WNSA leaders Shen Zijiu, Shi Liang, and Liu Qingyang; KMT leaders Tang Guozhen and Xu Kairui; communist leaders Deng Yingchao and Meng Qingshu, as well as a number of non-partisan professionals were all invited to this forum to contribute their ideas.⁷⁷

Based on the agreement reached at the Lushan Women's Summit, Madame Chiang's Women's Advisory Council (WAC) was transformed from the New Life Movement to a cross-party national women's organization for national resistance in Wuhan. The primary focus of the WAC was changed from 'improving women's lives and directing their personal development' to 'directing women on the

⁷⁴ Q. Luo, 'Shen Zijiu zai Shanghai he Wuhan de rizi li' (Shen Zijiu in Shanghai and Wuhan). *Qunyan (Popular Tribune)*, vol. 10, 1989, p. 28.

⁷⁵ Shen, 'Wo zouchu le Shanghai', p. 114.

⁷⁶ 'Funü tanhuaui gongzuobaogao' (The work report of the Women's Forum), 20 May 1938, Chongqing Library Republican-era Collections.

⁷⁷ Xia, *Funü zhidao weiyuanhui yu kangri zhanzheng*, pp. 108–111.

TABLE 1.
*The chief directors of WAC departments and their political backgrounds, 1938.*⁷⁸

WAC department	Chief director	Political background
Culture	Shen Ziju	WNSA
Liaison	Shi Liang	WNSA
Training	Liu Qingyang	WNSA
Release	Tang Guozhen	KMT
Battlefield service	Chen Yiyun	KMT
Life guidance	Huang Peilan	KMT
Administration	Xie Lanyu	Non-partisan
Production	Yu Yingtang	Non-partisan
Refugee children	Niu Minhua	Non-partisan

issues of resistance and national reconstruction'.⁷⁹ New departments were created to improve the functioning of the WAC in the areas of war release, member training, cultural undertakings, battlefield service, and communication. Significant changes were also made to the organization's personnel arrangements: CCP members Deng Yingchao, Meng Qingshu, and Kang Keqing were selected to form part of the ten-person standing committee, while WNSA members Shen Ziju, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang, and Liu Qingyang became part of its directory committee composed of 36 members. Despite the leadership of Madame Chiang, the restructured WAC was not dominated by KMT women leaders. Only three of its nine departments were chaired by KMT members, the rest were directed by women leaders from the WNSA and non-aligned elite women: Shi Liang was appointed as the director of the Liaison Committee, Liu Qingyang as the director in charge of member training, and Shen Ziju, given her great contribution to the *Women's Life* society, was appointed as the director of public cultural undertakings.⁸⁰

The reorganization and expansion of the WAC marked the institutionalization of the women's united front for national salvation and resistance. A declaration of women's unity was formally made by Madame Chiang at the Lushan Women's Summit:

Today gathered together are the most eminent women intellectuals and elites, who are the leaders of Chinese women. All of us have undertaken

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸⁰ *Nanfangju dangshi ziliao 5 (The Historical Documents of the CCP South Bureau, Volume 5)*, Chongqing Press, Chongqing, 1986, pp. 464–465.

different work in society to help our country achieve the final victory. We all shoulder great responsibilities for leading Chinese women from all walks of life . . .

If all Chinese women are willing to unite and to influence our nation with our *esprit de corps*, I believe all our compatriots will abolish prejudice and unite for the interests of the nation [. . .] I am confident that through the WAC, we will be able to fulfil our responsibilities and achieve our goals.⁸¹

By integrating their networks into the WAC and by undertaking greater responsibilities for mobilizing, educating, and training more women to save the nation from its deep crisis, Chinese elite women further proclaimed their leadership in national salvation and resistance, and enhanced their positions of authority. It is evident that, through forging a women's united front, Shen Zijiu, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang, and their peers not only became salvationists, but also grew to be real leaders, mediators, and experts in different fields during the wartime mobilization and popular resistance. Their growing salvation networks were not confined to any party framework and were therefore able to bridge the different political divides. They played an important role in the establishment of the WNSA in Shanghai and Nanjing and the reorganization of the WAC in Wuhan. And as the War of Resistance stretched on into the 1940s, their networks continued to channel Chinese women's independent social and political activism, beyond the geopolitical borders of wartime China.

Conclusions

From schoolteacher in Songjiang to chief editor of *Women's Life* in Shanghai, and then involvement in the WNSA and WAC leadership in Wuhan, Shen Zijiu, as well as the other elite women of her kind, empowered themselves in the expanding cultural, social, and political spaces for national salvation and resistance in 1930s China. From Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan, these elite women—as well as those from the previously marginalized social and political groups under the KMT's rule such as teachers and journalists, housewives and concubines, undercover communists, and even Shanghai's infamous

⁸¹ 'Lushan funü tanhuahui kaimuci' (The opening speech at the Lushan Women's Summit). *Women's Life*, vol. 6, issue 3, 1938, in *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao—minguo zhengfu juan 1912–1949* (*Historical Documents of Women's Movements—the Republican Government 1912–1949 Volume 2*), The No. 2 National Historical Archives and the ACWF Institute of Women's Study, 2011, pp. 581–583.

gangsters—connected their networks and gained political leverage during the national salvation movement. Despite their diverse origins, patrons, and agendas, these networks not only facilitated the dissemination of women's voices and concerns for the nation's future, they also enhanced the communication between political parties and across different regions.

Having expanded and integrated their networks first into the Women's National Salvation Association and two years later in the Women's Advisory Council, Chinese elite women gradually formed a group of women leaders in the national salvation movement and called for a women's united front at a local and then national level. The convergence of their attitudes and actions as they migrated from Shanghai and Nanjing to Wuhan in 1938 was not a sudden one born out of political convenience, nor was it merely the product of top-down party decision-making. Rather, as this article has shown, it had its origins in the relatively inclusive social and political milieus in China's metropolises in the early 1930s, where elite women from various backgrounds had already taken the initiative to network with one another and to protest against the social and political status quo, long before the official alliance between the KMT and the CCP was established. The birth and evolution of their united front were not only marked by their persistent challenges of the boundary between private and public spheres, but also by their consistent communication, negotiation, and cooperation across party lines, and beyond the geographic borders of wartime China.

However, despite their call for a sweeping women's united front that 'mobilizes all women of the nation', the actual one forged among these émigré elites from the urban sites of eastern China to the hinterland was not a class-blind institution. The elitist mode of communication maintained among these women professionals and activists—through their reading and publishing societies, forums, research seminars, and casual social events—distanced them from the large population of working-class and peasant women. Benefiting from their professions, and therefore in a good personal financial situation, Shen Zijiu, Cao Mengjun, Shi Liang, and their peers could afford the time and costs involved in organizing the various forums, attending meetings, and throwing parties in order to keep and refresh their contacts. As in Shanghai where they held their get-togethers at the Godly restaurant, in Wuhan they also met regularly at the YWCA or in the city's numerous cafés, sometimes for talks and seminars given by famous scholars, and sometimes simply for dinners or small-scale tea parties

among friends. As the urban spaces and the intellectual circles were essential to elite women's communication and networking, it was inevitable that the less educated working-class and peasant women were largely left out.

Having examined the social networks in Shanghai during the national salvation movement, Coble concludes that 'the array of non-governmental organizations was a relatively new phenomenon in China and one which would not last. The outbreak of war in 1937 and the occupation by Japan was the beginning of the end.'⁸² However, 1937 was clearly not the 'beginning of the end' for the wartime organization and activism of those elite women we have explored in this article. After the fall of Shanghai and Nanjing, they expanded and integrated their networks first in Wuhan and later in Chongqing, the wartime capital of the Nationalist government between 1938 and 1946. During China's eight-year war against Japan, Madame Chiang, popular not only at home but also overseas, was acclaimed as a symbol of women's power, achievement, and war effort in Chongqing. As the head of the WAC and the leader of national resistance, she was hailed by American newspapers as representing 'the advancements women were making into positions of authority'.⁸³ Long forgotten, however, were Madame Chiang's friends, colleagues, and also her one-time enemies—those prominent elite women hailing from different political and professional backgrounds who had already joined forces and forged a women's united front for national salvation before the war. This women's united front provided Madame Chiang and the Nationalist government with crucial social and political resources for consolidating authority during China's War of Resistance against Japan, at both the national and global level.

⁸² Coble, 'The national salvation movement', p. 117.

⁸³ T. C. Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931–1949*, Stanford University Press, California, 1999, p. 97.