# 5

# Regulatory Regimes, 1928–37

Gender was central to the state-building projects of the new Nationalist government. In the decade between 1928 and Japan's full-scale invasion of China in 1937, the Nationalist Party had the most extensive control over Chinese territory it was ever to enjoy. From the new capital of Nanjing, the Party's national government attempted to protect China's sovereignty and govern effectively. The state issued a revised legal code in 1930. It sought to broaden educational access, improve public health, prevent flooding and drought, and raise agricultural and industrial productivity. Leaders wanted a disciplined population that understood the rights and duties of a modern citizen. The Nationalist Party was to guide and educate the people in a period of political tutelage that would, in the indefinite future, be replaced by constitutional government. Social revolution was off the agenda.

The Nationalist Party was not united internally. Some leaders emphasized military elimination of the Communists, who had begun to build a rural base in Jiangxi (see chapter 6). Other leaders advocated rural reconstruction and urban industrial development, in the belief that economic expansion was the best way to avoid the perils of a revolution. As Japanese invasion loomed, the Nationalist Party drew on some features of European fascism to promote popular militarism, autarkic economic development, and the anti-Communist New Life Movement.[1]

State visions of Woman incorporated elements of the late Qing reforms and the May Fourth critique, minus the popular activism. State planners envisioned men and women who could be mobilized for economic production and patriotic displays—not oppositional activity.[2]

Determined to minimize social conflicts of all sorts, Nationalist authorities did not seek a thoroughgoing change in women's work, political activity, and domestic roles.

Instead, state authorities approached the woman question by means of regulation. They aimed to produce woman citizens whose most fundamental role was to be modern, educated, productive wives and mothers. New civil and criminal laws introduced changes in marriage, divorce, and women's property rights. The state attempted to modernize childbirth through licensing midwives, ban prostitution by withdrawing brothel licenses, and specify some features of women's dress and adornment. Much of this regulation was ineffective because the state's reach beyond the capital was limited. But the idea that modern gender practices could be regulated into existence persisted into the war years and the establishment of the People's Republic (see chapters 6 and 7).

By the Nanjing Decade, acknowledgment of women's labor outside the home was routine. The educated and employed New Woman was less controversial than she had been a decade earlier. But her mischievous younger sister—the irresponsible, seductive, and duplicitous Modern Girl—emerged as a new figure of unease on the urban cultural landscape. In rural areas, the reach of the state and the lure of New Womanhood and Modern Girlhood were limited. But village life was changing, too, as many rural women produced goods for export, suffered the effects of the Great Depression, and coped with a growing outflow of male laborers from farming.

State projects and broader social change during the Nanjing Decade were disrupted repeatedly. Political factionalism, remnant warlord powers, endemic banditry, major and minor natural disasters, global economic depression, an extended military campaign against the Communists, Japanese occupation of Northeast China (Manchuria) in 1931, and constant Japanese incursions into north China all limited the effectiveness of the Nationalist regulatory regime. But the vision of state-directed social development, and the centrality of women to that vision, remained important well beyond 1937.

## LIVING WITHIN THE LAW: LEGAL CHANGES AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

### Regulating Marriage and Divorce

Even after it purged the Communists in 1927, the Nationalist state retained some traces of the New Culture movement that had informed the United Front agenda. Like New Culture thinkers, Nationalist officials

regarded marriage reform as one way to improve the quality of the Chinese people. Their views drew upon the eugenic thinking popular in China and much of the rest of the world at that time. Pan Guangdan, an American-educated professor who was dubbed the "Father of Chinese Eugenics," argued in the 1930s that the only way for China to improve the quality of its citizens was to encourage genetically superior people to marry early and produce many children.[3] Arranged marriage was seen as an obstacle to eugenic progress: one Nationalist lawmaker believed that it "had resulted in many, many unfortunate couplings in which talented women were hitched to idiotic men and led to the production of subpar offspring." Free marriage, lawmakers hoped, would strengthen the Chinese nation, one improved child at a time.[4] The Nationalist government loosened the control of the patriarchal family over marriage. It claimed the authority to issue marriage certificates and monitor the conditions under which marriages were contracted and dissolved.[5]

The Chinese Civil Code, passed in 1930 and implemented in May 1931, granted women equal status with men and displaced the patriline from its central status in the law, replacing it with rights-bearing individuals and the conjugal unit of husband and wife. Daughters were given equal rights to inherit family property, although in practice this seldom happened, and widows were now entitled to a share of their husbands' property.[6] Both parents had rights over children, although in the case of a divorce the husband became the default guardian unless the couple agreed on another arrangement.[7]

In contrast to the provisions of the Qing code, women as well as men could initiate a divorce. The new code specified ten grounds: "bigamy, adultery, spousal intolerable cruelty, in-law intolerable cruelty, abandonment, intent or attempt to murder a spouse, incurable physical disease, incurable mental disease, lengthy disappearance, and imprisonment or the commission of an infamous crime."[8] The definition of intolerable cruelty was expanded beyond inflicting serious physical damage to include other actions that made conjugal life miserable.[9]

Lawsuits filed by women rose in the 1930s and the 1940s, suggesting that ordinary women used the courts to pursue the goal of women's emancipation—not as an abstract ideal but as they wanted to enjoy it in their own families.[10] Intolerable cruelty was often cited in divorce suits initiated by wives. Proving this charge was not easy. Women had to produce witnesses, or provide hospital or police records of abuse, and show that their own improper conduct had not provoked a beating. Even with such evidence, the courts often refused to grant divorces on these grounds.[11] Alimony was possible, but the court charged higher fees for a case involving alimony, discouraging most women from seeking support.[12]

When men initiated lawsuits, they most often were attempting to compel wives who had left an abusive or economically untenable situation to return. Runaway wives often went back to their families of origin. It was no longer a crime for a wife to leave, as it had been under Qing law. Now it was a matter of civil contract, in which the court could order a woman to return. But a runaway wife might find employment in another city, refusing to return home even when a court ordered her to do so.[13]

Republican law did not mention concubines at all, leaving it to the courts to sort out their status. The judges concluded, as Lisa Tran puts it, that "concubinage was to be prohibited, but concubines were to be protected."[14] Courts treated concubines as family members. Whereas Qing law had given a principal wife parental authority over a concubine's children, Republican legal practice gave a concubine full parental rights. Under Qing law, a concubine could be expelled from the household at any time, but in the Republican period she could not be expelled except under one of the legal grounds for divorce. She could, however, demand to leave at will and successfully sue for support after a relationship had ended, as long as her conduct had not been the cause of the separation. If she remained a household member, a concubine also had the right to demand support from the man's wife after his death.[15] Sometimes concubines tried to gain legal recognition as wives in court by proving that they had been married in a ceremony with at least two witnesses, which was the definition under the law of a valid marriage.[16]

Although concubines now enjoyed increased legal protection, for a man to take a concubine became less acceptable. The new code effectively regarded it as adultery on his part.[17] Thus, a wife could divorce her husband if he took a concubine after the Civil Code went into effect in May 1931, but not if he took a concubine before that date. Although a wife could not force a husband to abandon his concubine, she could seek a judicial separation rather than a divorce, so that she would not have to live under the same roof with him but would not be stigmatized as a divorcée.[18] By 1935, pressure from women's groups opposed to concubinage resulted in adultery being named as a criminal offense in the revised Criminal Code for men as well as women. But the courts showed little inclination to prosecute men who took concubines.[19]

Under the 1931 Civil Code, women, just like men, were now rights-bearing subjects who possessed "legal personhood." Drafters of the code hoped that categorizing women as persons with legal status would help to reinforce the move toward women's rights. And yet, even as the Civil Code did away with older gender distinctions based on the patrilineal family, it installed new gender distinctions based on biology and the conjugal tie between husbands and wives. Men had to attain the minimum age of eighteen in order to marry, but for women the age was sixteen. (The

gender gap persists in contemporary Chinese marriage law, although the ages have been raised to twenty-two and twenty, respectively.) The reasoning behind this was eugenic: it was assumed that females reached sexual maturity earlier than males and that marriage before sexual maturity might adversely affect one's body, the quality of one's offspring, and one's ability to support them.

The revised Civil Code did not challenge the prevailing practice of patrilocal residence. Given the fact that a wife often lived with her husband's family, intolerable cruelty by in-laws effectively became a gendered ground for divorce. No one thought it was necessary to specify that a man could seek a divorce if his in-laws mistreated him. Men also retained more control over marital property, exclusively on the basis of gender.[20] Nevertheless, in urban areas notions of what a marriage should be began to change, and women's access to the courts improved.

In the countryside, where more than 80 percent of the population lived, the Civil Code's marriage provisions had very little effect on women. The sale of women, arranged marriages, forced remarriage of widows, the purchase of child daughters-in-law, and sons' primary claim to inheritance of property remained common. Rural marriage reform started later, under the aegis of the CCP, and took decades to change social practice.

**Regulating Reproduction**

Like other modern states, the Nationalist government linked the health of citizens directly to the health of the nation. New public health measures tried to regulate the bodies of Chinese citizens, promoting what Ruth Rogaski calls "hygienic modernity." In the cities, officials created municipal health departments and public hospitals. They campaigned to vaccinate the public and provide health care to the poor. They lectured about the bacteria that caused cholera and the need for quarantines during epidemics. This was a new realm of state regulation, even though it was limited by lack of funding and inconsistent administration.[21]

In the countryside, the state's reach was much more limited and intermittent, and nongovernmental reform played a larger role. One ambitious experiment was in Ding County in Hebei Province, a model reform site partly funded by private American foundations. A Chinese-run organization called the Mass Education Movement (MEM) directed its efforts mainly at rural women, who were identified as key participants in bringing modernity to the villages. MEM took new health practices to every village home: treatment of trachoma and ringworm in school children, epidemic control, an opium detox program, and rural clinic construction. Health workers trained local community volunteers in first aid, vaccination, digging wells far from the latrines, and moving livestock out of the

**Photo 5.1. Church of the Brethren missionary, Nettie Senger, local officials, and graduates of her women's literacy class, Qinzhou 1932. The women studied mass education primers on new citizenship.**

*Source*: Photograph courtesy of Joseph Wampler. Used with permission of the Brethren Historical Library and Archives, Elgin, Illinois.

house. The emphasis on clean, ventilated, well-lit homes brought the principles of home economics out to the countryside.[22]

One central question for rural health reformers was how best to manage pregnancy and childbirth. Fetal education (*taijiao*)—the practice of exposing the unborn child to beneficial influences—had a long history in Chinese medicine. But by the 1930s, as Nicole Richardson comments, the modern discourse of fetal education "incorporated the language of eugenics and nationalism," drawing upon biology, psychology, and European theories of sex difference. It was said that women were more emotional than men because they had fewer red blood cells per cubic meter and their reproductive organs, especially the womb, controlled their emotions. Popular writings continued to warn that pregnant women needed to control their emotions, because a woman's emotional state could affect her body and thus the health of her fetus.[23] New strictures on pregnant women were recommended: stay away from violent scenes in films, hang portraits of famous people in the bedroom, take medications such as Three Friends Nourishing Pills to enhance fetal health, and avoid heavy farm labor—a virtual impossibility for rural women. As Frank Dikötter

comments, "women were given a responsibility over the uterine environment," but they were also installed at the lower end of a gender hierarchy now believed to be scientifically grounded in reproductive biology.[24]

Government officials and reformers regarded rural childbirth practices as particularly backward and unsanitary.[25] Rural women gave birth at home, either unattended or under the supervision of an older woman relative or a midwife. Village midwives were usually women who had borne children themselves and who had learned how to deliver babies from relatives or older midwives. Formal training in midwifery was rare, and complications from difficult births, postpartum bleeding, and the use of folk remedies were common.[26] Neonatal tetanus, often caused by cutting the umbilical cord with an unsterilized instrument, was a leading cause of infant death and maternal infection.[27] Public health personnel denounced old-style midwives as charlatans who were ignorant of sterile practice and apt to resort to brutal and even lethal methods of extracting a baby. Government reports, medical journals, and the popular press criticized common midwifery practices such as using cow dung to dress the umbilical cord. But in most rural areas, local midwives were the only medical personnel available to deliver babies.[28]

In response, the Nationalist government established a National Midwifery Board and announced its intention to standardize midwifery training across the country. Yang Chongrui, a woman obstetrician and public health official, directed the First National Midwifery School in Beijing. Her agenda was to train midwives who could, in turn, train others to staff a comprehensive network of rural clinics. Most midwives who received training, unlike the village midwives, were young, unmarried women from educated, urban backgrounds. Some old-style midwives took short retraining courses. They were taught sterile technique and how to identify and get medical help with difficult births.

Midwives were supposed to pass state examinations and be entered in a registry, but this law was unenforceable even in the cities, let alone the rural areas.[29] In Ding County, the MEM hired a woman nurse, only to find that the villagers would not accept a young woman as a midwife. Retraining older midwives turned out to be somewhat more effective, just as it would be for the People's Republic government in rural areas after 1949 (see chapter 8).[30] A 1935 study of Ding County found that more than 90 percent of births were attended by old-style midwives.[31] Even in Beijing, the epicenter of new midwife training, half of all babies were delivered by untrained midwives and another quarter by relatives.[32] The Nationalist government's transformative visions for the field of midwifery loomed much larger on paper than they did in practice.

The government public health program also included family planning, a novel concept that did not spread widely during the Republican era.

Cultural norms called for the production of sons to carry on the patriline. In Ding County, young women and men responded favorably to information about birth control methods such as douching with soap or using a tampon soaked in vinegar to swab a woman's vagina before and after intercourse. But diaphragms, available in the cities, were regarded in rural areas as too expensive, and other methods such as condoms, pessaries, and intrauterine devices were not part of the rural conversation. MEM public health workers found that rural men and women were receptive to the idea of birth control, but its effective practice often remained beyond their reach.[33]

Women did attempt to limit their pregnancies, as poverty created pressure to restrict family size. In addition to practicing infanticide, they turned to folk remedies that were often ineffective or downright harmful. Some ate large amounts of water chestnuts to prevent a pregnancy. Others drank herbal concoctions that were supposed to induce sterility. Some women tried to induce miscarriage by repeatedly pulling the beater bar of a handloom with great force against their abdomens.[34] Abortion was against the law but commonly performed by means including chopsticks, long needles placed in acupuncture points, and abortifacients of poisonous insects, musk, and other ingredients. Often bleeding and infection were the result.[35]

**Regulating Indigence**

Women refugees and beggars featured prominently in Nationalist efforts to regulate the poor. The Nationalist capital of Nanjing was supposed to be a showcase city with modern infrastructure and amenities, inhabited by well-educated, productive citizens.[36] But Nanjing had a housing shortage, deadly respiratory illnesses, low wages (especially for women laborers), and an unemployment rate of about 50 percent.[37] Early in the Nanjing Decade, the municipal government began campaigns to label and reform the many residents who did not live up to its ideal. It tried to prevent refugees from entering the city, demolish squatter settlements, control the activities of disorderly rickshaw pullers, and abolish prostitution. None of these efforts was successful.

Refugees by the thousands, including large numbers of women and children, streamed into the city after a drought in Henan and Anhui, and again after floods in the summer of 1931. The overwhelmed and underfunded municipal government first distributed limited amounts of relief and then began to deport refugees back to their devastated home provinces. Some managed to stay, putting strain on limited housing stock: a fifth of the capital's population lived in shantytown huts made of straw and scrap materials. City planners wanted to relocate them to more

remote areas where they would not ruin the visual image of a modern city. But poor people resisted these attempts because they wanted to stay where they might find work as peddlers, rickshaw pullers, junk recyclers, launderers, and day laborers.

The city also had a sizable population of beggars. Some were well organized into professional begging guilds. Others, including women and children, had been forced into mendicancy by family disaster. The municipality sought to remove them from city streets and tourist sites and offer them job training in a newly established Vocational Training Institute for Vagrants. But the blurry line between refugees and beggars confounded their efforts. A 1929 municipal report commented, "Now there is no big street or small alley that doesn't have [the] elderly, [the] weak, women and children, scattered about like stars, begging along the roads."[38] Attempts to corral them into shelters preoccupied the city government throughout the decade.

The aim of regulating the poor was to prevent them from becoming a source of social instability and reform them into productive citizens.[39] The effect was to stigmatize and even criminalize large numbers of people. In 1930 about 15 percent of Beijing's population, more than 247,000 residents, were classified as "very poor." The Nanjing Decade brought to the poor what Janet Chen calls "an uneasy combination of charity and coercion, help and punishment." The state found them, in her words, "guilty of indigence."[40]

Indigent women presented the authorities with a special set of problems. Poor women were reportedly two-thirds of the clientele of Beijing soup kitchens in the winter of 1931–32. Some social critics worried about men and women mixing inappropriately in the soup lines. Beijing city authorities tried to create a relief home with separate workhouses for men, women, and children, where each group could receive vocational training. Women beggars, drug addicts, and prostitutes were referred by the police or charities to the Women's Welfare Institute.[41] Other poor women, unable to support themselves, applied to enter the home voluntarily. Some, whose husbands had disappeared, brought along their young children. Their days were highly regulated in the same manner as jail inmates, with daily work requirements, communal meals and bath times, and limits on visits by outsiders.

When the residents wanted to leave, they had to petition for release and prove that they would be able to support themselves, usually by marrying someone. Marriages were arranged by the institute, which displayed photographs of eligible women residents for men who were seeking wives to inspect. The underlying assumption was that the institute could contribute to the greater social good by providing poor men with inexpensive brides who could contribute their labor to the household economy.

Marriage ceremonies were performed at the institute after a background check of the prospective grooms. The institute agreed to take women back if the marriages proved abusive.[42] Most of these arrangements anticipated methods that the Communist government used in reforming prostitutes in the early 1950s (see chapter 8). During the Nanjing Decade, however, relief efforts reached only a tiny fraction of women and were not always welcomed by the poor.

**Regulating Prostitution**

The 1930s saw a decline in the courtesan houses, with their expensive ritualized encounters. Meanwhile cheaper sex-for-money transactions featuring streetwalkers, flophouses, and thinly disguised forms of sex work performed by masseuses and waitresses expanded.[43] Working as a prostitute under the Nationalist criminal code was not against the law, as it had been under the Qing.[44] But it was only legal to be a prostitute in a licensed brothel, and police regularly targeted street soliciting and unlicensed establishments.[45]

Throughout the Nanjing Decade, women's groups and other reformers argued that prostitution demeaned women, threatened public health, and injured national strength. In the would-be model capital of Nanjing, the city attempted to ban prostitution outright in 1928.[46] The mayor proposed to put prostitutes to work in textile factories, encourage them to get married, or shelter them in a Women's Relief Institute. But the financially strapped municipal government did not provide adequate funding for clinics and rehabilitation facilities. After the ban went into effect, prostitutes could be seen selling sexual services in every neighborhood of the city. Arrested prostitutes usually were fined and released.

The ban garnered little popular support. One satirist suggested that if the ban were lifted the government would be more efficient because officials would stop wasting time going to Shanghai to patronize prostitutes and might instead stay in the capital and do their jobs.[47] Nevertheless, the ban remained in place until the mid-1930s. In 1934 the national government named prostitution one of the "three evils," along with gambling and opium, to be eliminated by the New Life Movement, which linked personal comportment to national welfare.[48] In spite of New Life propaganda, prostitution continued to be a major source of livelihood for poor women in the nation's capital.

Many other city governments tried to regulate prostitution during the Nanjing Decade. Light regulation, practiced in Hangzhou and many other places, entailed registering and taxing brothels and prostitutes, along with some efforts to protect public health and reform prostitutes. Coercive regulation, practiced in Kunming, confined prostitutes to des-

ignated areas and kept them under surveillance. This approach was relatively rare. Revenue-intensive regulation, practiced in Guangzhou and the surrounding province of Guangdong, entailed high licensing fees for prostitutes and taxation per encounter, including singing appearances at banquets. Prostitution was a crucial revenue source: in one Guangdong County, the prostitution tax provided more than half of government revenue in 1929, while in the city of Guangzhou, the prostitution industry generated 10 to 30 percent of municipal tax revenues. The funds financed road building, vocational education, and poverty relief.[49] By 1935, the city and the province shifted their approach, announcing that they would abolish prostitution by gradually withdrawing licenses. It appears that this step was never fully implemented. Meanwhile, many women turned to unregistered sex work.[50]

In Shanghai, prostitution was concentrated in the two foreign-controlled areas of the city.[51] In the International Settlement, prostitution was banned in 1920. But courtesans and courtesan houses were exempted from the ban, licensed, and taxed, providing a healthy revenue stream for the foreign-controlled Municipal Council.[52] Meanwhile, unlicensed prostitutes and brothels continued to operate. Nearby, the French Concession permitted licensed prostitution. In these two areas as well as the Chinese-controlled sections of the city, enforcement fell to the police, who arrested "pheasant" streetwalkers for unlicensed soliciting. Prostitutes routinely were detained overnight, fined a nominal sum, and released back onto the streets.[53]

Even while licensing prostitution, regulators attempted to control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. By 1933, Shanghai's French Concession required medical inspections of prostitutes.[54] In the Japanese Concession of Tianjin, prostitutes were examined by health officers in a local clinic every seven to ten days. More than one-third of them were found to be infected. They were forbidden to work while they were being treated, although an infected woman was most likely simply to leave the brothel.[55]

Guidebooks, scandal fiction, and newspaper advertisements aimed at urban readers warned that a sexual encounter, even with a beautiful high-class courtesan, could leave a customer syphilitic. Streetwalkers were portrayed as even more dangerous: their brothels were nicknamed "fruit stores" because one could acquire strawberry-shaped syphilitic lesions there. Prostitutes were understood not only as a disease vector, but as a dangerous weak point in China's defenses. Connecting to broader eugenics concerns, writers warned that sexually transmitted diseases, passed down to offspring, would weaken the Chinese "race" and make the Chinese nation more vulnerable.[56]

No matter what mix of policies a city adopted, prostitution continued to flourish and even expand. The reliance of local governments on licensing fees, taxes, and fines helped to perpetuate the profession. Regulation

was not successful at controlling sexually transmitted disease. Nor did it ensure the protection of prostitutes, many of whom worked for madams under exploitative contracts.[57] One study estimated that Shanghai residents spent more than sixty million yuan per year on licensed prostitutes alone.[58] Official regulators and nongovernmental reformers continued their efforts to limit prostitution, but it persisted as a major employer of urban women until the early 1950s.

**Regulating Customs**

Perhaps the most far-reaching Nationalist attempt to control daily life was the campaign to regulate customs and behaviors regarded as harmful to women. Such efforts preceded the Nanjing Decade. In the mid-1920s, reformers and social activists in South China had tried to emancipate women from what they regarded as harmful social customs. A series of campaigns sought to eliminate indentured servitude (*binü*), child daughters-in-law, concubines, and prostitutes. Activists also denounced breast binding—the wearing of tight undergarments to constrict the breasts—as unhealthy and unmodern. In 1927, the Nationalist government in Guangdong outlawed the practice.[59]

But what started out as an attempt to free women from family and bodily restraints took a conservative turn during the Nanjing Decade. By the early 1930s, Guangzhou authorities stopped trying to overturn what they saw as social customs and instead attempted to control women's behavior. The main threats to social morals, in their view, were women who came from the economically distressed countryside to the city. Unable to find factory employment, they entered sexualized service jobs that could shade over into clandestine prostitution. The Guangzhou press published reports, illustrations, and fiction about women teahouse singers (*nüling*) and waitresses (*nü zhaodai*), asking whether they were social victims or social threats who might become pickpockets, seductresses, and disguised prostitutes. The Guangzhou city government undertook to license teahouses and restrict the hours that women could work there.[60] In the mid-1930s, it also launched a campaign to criticize makeup, short sleeves and skirts, plunging necklines, bright nail polish, and other "strange costumes," which were finally banned outright in September 1935.[61] Similar initiatives, which generally were ineffective, took place in other cities as well.

The Nationalist state also promoted reform of wedding ceremonies. State authorities hoped to replace a marriage ritual celebrating the bride's absorption into the patriline with a ceremony centered on the conjugal couple and their role as modern citizens. When Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek married Wellesley-educated Song Meiling in late 1927, Chiang

told the newspaper *Shenbao* that he had divorced his previous wife from an arranged marriage, taking the opportunity to criticize the practice. He and Song, a Christian, married in two ceremonies: a small Methodist service and a public gathering at a Shanghai hotel. The couple wore Western-style wedding attire: a white gown for the bride, a dark morning coat for the groom. This new-style wedding, sometimes called the "civilized wedding," was linked to marriage reform, cosmopolitan consumption, and the idea that a modern ceremony was the sign of a modern nation.[62]

Chiang and Song were not creating a new trend with their wedding. They were providing a state endorsement of practices favored by young, educated urban dwellers. New-style weddings were publicized by urban popular magazines aimed at young women, such as *Linglong* (Linloon Magazine). They moved the rituals of marriage away from parental control and toward a union of conjugal equals witnessed and sanctioned by the state.

But the cost of such weddings, including portraits, clothing, rings, a cake, a venue, and a banquet, could be prohibitive. By the mid-1930s, the Nationalist Party was requiring officials to set a frugal example when they married. City governments began to promote less expensive group weddings, in which several dozen festively dressed couples married before a portrait of Sun Yat-sen. The ceremony typically featured orchestral music, the national anthem, marriage certificates, official speeches, and a group photograph. The promotion of group weddings was part of the New Life Movement's drive to instill frugal and responsible conduct at a time of national peril (see below). Even group weddings, however, required a financial outlay beyond the means of many urban residents.[63]

**Regulating Religion**

During the Nanjing Decade, intellectuals continued to criticize popular religious practices as superstitious and a fundamental cause of China's backwardness.[64] The Nationalist state named rural women as particularly vulnerable to superstition. One woman Nationalist organizer called for the reeducation of nuns, women diviners, and women spirit mediums, along with midwives, women healers, matchmakers, and other backward elements.

Many government officials sought to nationalize temples and temple lands, and convert them to schools, a recurring goal of campaigns since the late nineteenth century. Nationalist Party activists in the lower Yangzi region and Guangdong detained Buddhist priests, led groups to smash statues of deities, and seized land and monasteries controlled by Buddhist and Daoist temples. In central China, women's mosques and women clerics, which had been established features of local Muslim

religious life for centuries, were also targeted for reform.[65] Arguing that popular religion promoted harmful customs, authorities prohibited many local festivals and rituals, including customary celebrations associated with the Lunar New Year.

Anti-temple activity provoked a military uprising in 1929 by the Small Sword Society and the Red Spears, both secret societies with many rural adherents. They attacked Nationalist government offices in northern Jiangsu and at least one girls' school that was identified with the modernizing and antireligious stance of the state. They even detained a number of women teachers and students identified by their short hair.

And yet this was not a clear-cut case of modernizing officials versus feudal-minded believers. Both the government activities and temple resistance to them were deeply entangled with local political and economic interests, and women appeared on both sides of the conflict. In Gaoyou, a town in northern Jiangsu, Party activists smashed the temple of the city god in early 1931. Several hundred protesters led by women in their fifties and sixties known as "temple grannies" assaulted party officials at their headquarters and their homes. They installed paper images of the gods to replace the statues. Then they deployed their organizing skills to petition county authorities, leaflet the local population, and force local businesses to close, duplicating many political tactics used by student protesters. The grannies raised funds from thousands of people in the area to restore the temple. Their techniques for defending the temple were no less modern than the Nationalist move to destroy it.[66]

In response to this and many other protests, the Nationalist government curtailed antireligious activities, declaring that religion was permitted and only superstition was forbidden. The net effect was that the Nationalists required religious groups to register and pledge loyalty to the state. Secret societies, redemptive societies promising salvation, and popular religious practices that were less easily controlled remained off-limits. But they were never successfully eliminated.

## WOMAN AS SYMBOL: THE NEW WOMAN AND THE MODERN GIRL

The New Woman and the Modern Girl were globally circulating figures. Their careers, personal comportment, and consumption habits embodied urban modernity. In 1930s China, both took on particular localized features. The New Woman was a representation of what women should do and be, and the Modern Girl often embodied what women should not do and not be. Both should be understood as symbols—Woman with a capital W—that were constantly under discussion, engendering differences of

opinion and social tensions. These symbols did not merely hover in the discursive atmosphere; they became reference points, ideals, and warnings about where a woman might go wrong.[67]

**The New Woman**

The New Woman already had been a fixture on the Chinese urban cultural scene for several decades, but by the 1930s she had acquired some new features. The illustrated women's magazine *Linglong*, or Elegance, outlined her characteristics: eager to acquire knowledge and attain economic independence, trained in a profession, not subservient to men, frugal, modest in dress and self-presentation, politically informed, attuned to contemporary social problems.[68] The New Woman was supposed to do and have it all. After education in a new-style school, she would pursue a career in business, education, medicine, journalism, or the arts,[69] at least until she married a modern, forward-looking New Man. In the workplace, she would avoid any hint of scandal—no gossip about seduction or extramarital affairs. After marriage—an aspect of New Womanhood that became more prominent in Nanjing Decade writings—she would run a scientifically managed home, supervise the preparation of healthful meals, educate the children, and make sure the domestic space was tastefully decorated in a cosmopolitan mode. As a politically aware consumer, she would honor the frequent boycotts of Japan and buy products produced in China. In all of these respects, the New Woman was a worthy descendant of the virtuous woman of the late Qing. Both types of Woman were expected to work hard, sacrifice themselves, and show sexual restraint. Both were seen by the elites of their day as key to the well-being of the larger polity—the threatened empire during the Qing, the imperiled nation during the Republic.

Many of these prescriptive features of the New Woman were formulated by men.[70] They do not tell the whole story of this powerful symbol. The careers and self-conceptions of several self-identified New Women born in the first decade of the twentieth century show how new ideas about womanhood could be understood, altered, and enacted in many different ways.[71]

Some who understood themselves as New Women chose careers in physical education. Lu Lihua established her own teacher training institute to train women physical education teachers. She also founded China's first women's basketball team and led it to competitive play in Japan and Korea. Lu married twice—she divorced one husband and another died in 1932 during the brief Japanese assault on Shanghai—and had another long relationship with a man during the war.[72] Chen Yongsheng also taught physical education at a number of teacher-

training schools, graduated from Baylor College in Texas in 1927, and after her return to China continued to teach physical education to girls and young women. Repelled in childhood by the fact that her educated, politically progressive father and uncles took concubines, Chen Yongsheng chose not to marry.

For many women in Lu and Chen's generation, physical fitness was not merely a spare-time activity. It was a means to save the nation and thus the Chinese "race" through strengthening individual bodies, while at the same time creating a "healthy beauty" in women that could contribute to gender equality. Woman gymnasts, swimmers, track stars, and basketball and tennis players became minor celebrities in newspapers and magazines, especially when five women athletes joined China's delegation to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.[73] Women's teams had to contend with zealous spectator interest in the bodies of the players, as when the audience repeatedly shouted "Legs!" during a basketball tournament in 1931.[74]

Other women chose self-consciously feminist lines of work. Zhu Su'e, a lawyer, graduated from the Patriotic Girls' School in Shanghai and Shanghai Law College, with the express intention of advocating for women's rights. She joined the Nationalist Party, representing many women clients in domestic abuse and family property complaints. At age thirty Zhu married a physician she met through a friend, raised two children, organized the Chinese Women's National Defense Organization, edited a women's magazine, and practiced law until 1949. Wang Yiwei studied journalism and in 1932 founded *Women's Voice* (Nüsheng), a biweekly journal aimed at educated women readers. Along with *Women's Monthly* (Nüzi yuekan) and *Women's Life* (Funü shenghuo), the magazine published fictional and nonfictional portrayals of women's contemporary dilemmas.[75] Wang Yiwei published *Women's Voice* until financial and censorship difficulties forced it to close in 1935. She was dismayed by the increasing diversion of New Woman ideals into homemaking, believing that women should help make a social revolution.[76]

The New Woman figure was a common, if still controversial, feature of 1930s urban life, even though the number of white-collar career women remained small.[77] Occupying the role was difficult, however. Popular suspicions about the personal characters of career women continued to proliferate. Lu Lihua, for instance, became the subject of gossip that she had sexual relations with men in order to raise funds to support her teacher training school.[78] In the 1930s, even if a woman had a job she was not free from the effects of economic instability, gossip, or direct threats to her person and her virtue. For New Women, remaining single or leaving a difficult marriage offered alternative paths through adulthood, but both required extreme vigilance about one's reputation.

Melodramatic films enjoyed by a large audience often showed New Womanhood culminating in a damaged life or a tragic death. In 1935, film star Ruan Lingyu starred in *New Women* (*Xin nüxing*), a film based on the life of an actress who had committed suicide.[79] Ruan herself was a product of the new possibilities available to women. The only surviving child of a widowed mother, she attended a mission school for girls and in 1926 responded to a Shanghai newspaper advertisement placed by a film company. Eventually she ended up at the left-leaning Lianhua film studio, and by 1930 she was nationally famous.

The plot of *New Women* revolves around the travails of Wei Ming, a divorced woman writer who suffers the loss of her job, the illness and death of her young daughter, and the unwanted advances of several men. Wei composes "The Song of New Women" for a woman friend who is a factory worker and organizer. But then, driven to despair by her circumstances, Wei commits suicide. The film's final scene shows women workers marching together as they sing the triumphantly militant song she has composed. The song, actually composed by Communist musician Nie Er, suggests that collective solidarity among working-class women may render them stronger New Women, shielded from the forces that felled Wei Ming.[80]

The film *New Women* soon became caught in a tight circuit of life imitating art. After it was released, Shanghai tabloids pursued exposés on star Ruan Lingyu's personal life: her failed relationship with a gambler who sued her for support and her later relationship with a wealthy merchant. Media accounts denounced her behavior as scandalous and damaging to society. Under relentless pressure, and possibly responding to problems in her relationship with the merchant, she committed suicide at age twenty-four on International Woman's Day in 1935. That day she had planned to talk to middle-school girl students about what the holiday meant and how they themselves could become New Women.[81] She left behind a note (although the authorship is in doubt) that read, "Gossip is a fearful thing," inspiring the writer Lu Xun to publish an essay by that name denouncing tabloid coverage for contributing to her death. It was reported that more than one hundred thousand people lined the route of Ruan's funeral cortege.

During the Nanjing Decade, the New Woman struggling in the professional world was joined by a domesticated avatar, the modern scientific housewife. For Nationalist state authorities, as for their late Qing and early Republican predecessors, promoting women's domestic skills was a priority. The government mandated that girls' schools devote substantial classroom time to instruction in sewing, cooking, child care, and other household arts, all based on the latest in scientific knowledge.[82] Educated

in a new-style school, after marriage the New Woman was to apply her education to household management, considering outside employment only after the children were raised successfully.[83] Sometimes the domestic version of the New Woman was promoted at the expense of the career woman. One educator commented in 1934, "The reality is that except for a few genius women who devote themselves to their careers and apply what they have learned to their work, most women put what they have learned on the shelf once they marry and have children." The writer concluded that it was a waste of resources to educate girls in general subjects rather than domestic skills.[84]

Urban magazines and newspapers portrayed an idealized modern housewife who could create and preside over a domestic environment with all of the accoutrements of modern consumer culture, while also maintaining a family savings plan.[85] Some writers affixed the modifier "new" in front of the phrase "good wife and wise mother" to emphasize that they did not want a return to Confucian family arrangements.[86] The New Culture's family revolution—the transition to a companionate, freely chosen marriage—was presented as a finished process, already taken for granted. The new good wife and wise mother did not live in the extended kinship household of previous generations, but rather in the "small household" of a couple and their children.[87]

In the 1930s, business people joined the discussion about family reform, seeking to shape the family as a unit of consumption.[88] To keep the household clean and conflict-free, while providing her productively employed husband and children with well-prepared meals in a properly decorated domestic space, this new housewife required new products and the educated good judgment to distinguish among them. The business community was happy to provide guidance. The milk entrepreneur You Huaigao produced a free magazine, *Family Weekly*, which was distributed with his milk deliveries. It instructed women on everything from home decorating and family budgets to wholesome leisure-time activities and the duties of husbands and wives.[89] You Huaigao emphasized a housewife's role as helpmate to her hardworking husband:

> You must respect yourself and you must respect your husband's work. . . . Help him with his work as much as you can, giving him every kind of convenience. No matter what his success at work, you should be the first to praise him. When he fails, you will be the only one to comfort him. . . . So, if you make up your mind to be a virtuous and intelligent wife, you cannot let your husband have only hard work and no comfort.[90]

New clothing was central to a New Woman's self-presentation. The *qipao*, a one-piece garment with a high collar, modeled in part on the long gowns worn by late imperial male scholars, became popular in the mid-1920s. It

was worn by urban middle-class women in part because it suggested women's equality and perhaps a degree of androgyny. The Nationalist government formally endorsed the qipao in 1927 as appropriate dress for women. By the 1930s it had become shorter and more tight-fitting, with a high slit in the skirt, telegraphing the desirability of the woman wearing it. The New Women featured in print advertising often combined Chinese-style clothes with Western-style shoes, gloves, or purses.[91]

Also required were new protocols of personal hygiene and health products, some of foreign origin. Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People made appearances in many magazines.[92] Beginning in the mid-1920s, Kotex, Modess, and Tampax sanitary napkins were touted in articles and advertising for their scientific design, cleanliness, comfort, and lack of odor. Authors graphically contrasted them to older-style menstrual cloths denounced as "'filthy,' 'coarse' and 'prone to scraping women's private parts.'" Women were instructed to use these new products in a regimen that also included exercise, rest, and frequent ablutions.[93] By the 1930s, advertisements for soap featured film stars and models, promoting clean, glowing skin free of bacteria and odor. Women were advised to pour a few drops of the cleaning fluid Lysol in their bathwater to kill bacteria on the skin and deodorize the vagina.[94] Modern hygiene required a woman to become a discerning consumer.[95]

Anti-imperialist boycotts in the 1920s and 1930s affected the use of foreign products, particularly those from Japan. The domesticated New Woman was encouraged to buy "national products" in a movement sponsored by the Nationalist government with the support of urban manufacturers and bankers.[96] Like foreign imports, national products were marketed as components of a modern home environment in which members of the family exercised and showered regularly, now using Chinese-made soap and wearing a Chinese-made bathrobe.[97] The modern housewife directed the flow of goods that linked consumerism to patriotism. A housewife who consumed unwisely—for instance, seeking low prices or high quality even if the goods were not Chinese-made—was pilloried as a direct threat to the nation.

In 1934, organizers of Women's National Products Year decreed that national salvation hinged upon the choices of women consumers. "A woman who commands her family to use national products," ran one campaign slogan, "is the equivalent of someone commanding officers and soldiers on the battlefield to kill the enemy for the country." Some women objected to the incessant emphasis on national products as the most important focus of women's political activity, pointing out that many threats to China had nothing to do with women's consumption. Most frequently, however, women registered their discontent with the high-pressure tactics of Women's National Products Year by quietly buying what they pleased.[98]


**Photo 5.2. Woman in 1930s Victory Cigarettes ad**

Not all features of urban advertising were directed at virtuous wives and mothers upholding the nation. The domestic space had erotic potential as well. Commercial calendar posters rendered the faces and limbs of women in sumptuous detail, lingering on the revealing fabrics they wore and the array of fashionable jackets and shoes, furniture, and appliances in their surroundings.[99]

**The Modern Girl**

The Modern Girl can be understood as the mischievous, irresponsible, and vaguely dangerous younger sister of the New Woman. As the New Woman was increasingly domesticated in the form of the new good wife and wise mother, the social disquiet attached to her was redirected onto the Modern Girl.[100]

Unlike the New Woman, a term that dates from the early twentieth century, the Modern Girl first appeared in the 1930s, in the context of urban consumer culture. Her very name, "modeng nülang" or "modeng nüzi," with "modeng" appearing as the transliteration of "modern," referred to the circulation of "the modern girl around the world" at this time.[101] If improving society and saving the nation were the tasks of a New Woman, and responsible consumerism was the hallmark of a domesticated modern housewife, reckless behavior and wasteful consumption were the characteristics of the Modern Girl.[102]

The figure of the Modern Girl was prominent in Shanghai advertising and fiction in the 1930s. Every aspect of her bodily self-presentation was depicted: permed hair, high heels, fashionable (often imported) clothing—all requiring lavish outlays of money (see box 5.1). When the Modern Girl wore a qipao, it was apt to be sleeveless and made of a flimsy fabric that revealed every feature of her breasts and much of her legs. Unlike respectable urban women, she smoked cigarettes in public as a sign of rebellion and sexual availability.[103] Cautionary tales warned men to stay away, lest the Modern Girl cause their financial ruin. Unmarried Modern Girls appeared as deceitful, flirtatious, and greedy, and a man credulous enough to marry one would find her uninterested in housework and motherhood, leaving him to manage the home while she continued her free-spending, sexually promiscuous ways.[104] Her love of imports, especially cosmetics and perfume, was blamed for the minimal success of the national products movement and for China's trade deficit. Although some essays about her in women's magazines attempted to redeem her image, more commonly she was portrayed as a threat to personal morality, financial health, and national strength. Her fundamental error was that she misunderstood modernity, equating it with anything Western.[105] When a woman sported the Modern Girl look, a man could never be sure exactly who she was: college student, factory worker, secretary, recent rural migrant, or prostitute.[106]

One place where women dressed in the Modern Girl mode could be found was the cabarets of Shanghai. There male students, literary men, film actors and directors, journalists, officials, gangsters, and other urbanites went at night to listen to jazz and dance the Charleston and the Black Bottom. Customers would purchase a book of dance tickets and redeem

**BOX 5.1.**
**The Modern Girl's Outward Appearance and Essence, 1933**

Modern (*modeng*) means contemporary. It used to be that as long as one lived in present times, one could be considered modern. Ordinary people never used to say "this girl is modern" or "that girl is so un-modern." I believe that anyone with a little bit of knowledge cannot deny this statement. But, haven't people today misinterpreted modern? There are people who say that there is nothing good about modern girls. In fact this is too unjust.

Basically what ordinary people call modern is based solely on outward appearance. A girl wearing the latest fashion of 1933, her hair set in a "permanent wave," blood red lips, and leather shoes 6 or 10 cm high is seen as the modern girl. Indeed it is so. From her appearance she seems to represent the meaning of contemporary. But if this kind of person does not have brains, then isn't it a joke [to call her modern]? It is most unfortunate that today there are in fact so many of this kind of empty, superficial person. As a consequence, modern girls are subjected to strong attacks.

Therefore our explanation of modern must use, at the very least, two standards:

1. Her outward appearance, while it should be contemporary, should not be extravagant. Being constrained by old-fashioned things is not really a moral virtue.
2. Her spirit and brains are most important. How does she think? What is her outlook on life? What are her convictions? Of course, it is not that we expect all modern girls to be extraordinary characters, but at the very least they should measure up to the standard of a contemporary person.

Of these two conditions, without a doubt, the second condition is much more important; after all, isn't the modern girl's inner substance always more important than her external appearance?

*Source*: Shi Lili, "The Modern Girl's Outward Appearance and Essence," *Linglong* 3, no. 99 (1933): 882–83, English translation from https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/linglong/about_linglong/woman/modern.

them for dances with women partners, or "taxi dancers," employed by the dance halls. Taxi dancers incurred considerable expenses to look the part of a sophisticated ingénue, with appropriate clothing, shoes, accessories, hairstyles, and cosmetics. Exotic Western dances with attractive young hostesses began to replace courtesan performances at dinner banquets as the entertainment of choice for Shanghai's gilded youth. Courtesans even began to work as taxi dancers, and stories of cabaret hostesses filled the city's films, fiction, and gossip columns.[107] But in spite of their glittering

public image, many taxi dancers were hired from the countryside and made marginal incomes in the cabarets, especially as Shanghai fell into a deep recession after the Japanese bombed part of the city in 1932.

Some dance hostesses entered into long-term relationships with their patrons, and others supplemented their income by selling sexual services. Dancers were known in local slang as "locomotives," and their patrons were called "cabooses."[108] In the 1930s media, dance hostesses embodied the full range of images of the Modern Girl: beautiful, mysterious, alluring, victimized, dangerous, and duplicitous. Less often emphasized was their role as service workers in an urban economy shaped by the world depression, Japanese aggression, and the influx of impoverished women from the countryside.

## WOMEN WORKERS

The New Woman was remote from the daily existence of the estimated 160,000 women working in Shanghai's textile mills, silk filatures, and tobacco factories.[109] The Modern Girl as a style of presentation was less distant: many journalists commented on the fashionable dress of the better-paid young women in Shanghai's silk industry. Nevertheless, neither the New Woman nor the Modern Girl tells us much about the daily experience of urban women workers during the Nanjing Decade.

Their world was shaped by global depression, China's 1931 loss of Manchuria to Japan, and ongoing military conflict with the Communists. These events shrank the market for cotton textiles, silk, and other goods, leading to factory closings and lockouts.[110] Many labor disputes recorded during the 1930s were defensive in nature: workers demonstrated or occupied factories in order to keep their jobs. They were not in a position to agitate for improved pay or working conditions.

Worker militancy was also limited by the Nationalists, who installed corporate ("yellow") unions in the larger factories, run by officials connected to a far-reaching urban network with ties to the underworld known as the Green Gang.[111] Union membership encompassed both management and workers, and every effort was made to suppress union activity based on a notion of class struggle. Women workers were further constrained by the contract labor recruiting system in the cotton mills, which expanded during the 1930s. Young rural women were indentured for a period of several years to contractors who usually also were affiliated with the Green Gang. Women contract laborers had no direct access to the wages they earned, and outside of working hours were often confined to the housing controlled by the contractors.[112]

**Photo 5.3. Factory women on their way to work, Shanghai, 1933**

*Source*: Agnes Smedley, *Chinese Destinies; Sketches of Present-Day China* (New York: Vanguard, 1933), facing p. 266.

In spite of these limitations, women played an important role in labor activism during the Nanjing Decade.[113] One potential basis for solidarity was the practice of pledging sisterhood, in which a group of six or eight women who had sworn loyalty to each other looked out for each other in the mills, kept harassers at bay inside the factory and on the street, lent each other money when necessary, and socialized during their off hours.[114] Mill hands also learned techniques of political organizing in night schools for workers run by the Young Women's Christian Association, many of whose organizers, foreign and Chinese, were committed to strengthening the labor movement.[115]

In spring 1928, silk workers from many different filatures organized a strike in response to the dismissal of four workers and the fatal beating of a fifth. The workers demanded that the police and manager involved in the initial incident face trial, and reportedly 6,000 men and 111,600 women in ninety-three filatures joined this strike. When the manager and one police sergeant were acquitted, the workers struck again for a month in the summer, seeking economic gains for themselves and compensation for the family of the man who had died. An estimated fifty thousand women participated in this second action.[116]

Six years later, at the height of the world depression, workers at the ten Meiya silk weaving factories went on strike to protest a 15 percent wage cut, the second in two years. Meiya workers were skilled and relatively well educated, and they made good money, even though the women weavers earned less than male weavers who did the same job. Meiya workers were known to spend their spare income on Western clothing

and shoes, as well as urban amusement houses and dance halls. It is possible that the women among them resembled the Modern Girl figure more than other Shanghai workers did. But by 1934, Meiya's exports of woven silk to India and Southeast Asia were being squeezed out of the market by Japanese competition. Strike activity began among male skilled craftsmen and weavers, of whom some were members of the underground CCP, which had been operating clandestinely in Shanghai since the suppression of the Party in 1927.[117] Workers organized through a committee structure of their own making, rather than the "yellow" union.

Throughout the protest, women militants played key roles. The first fatality of the strike was a woman worker killed in a standoff at one of the factories by French Concession police armed with machine guns and tanks. Worker demands for compensation to the injured and the family of the dead woman fueled an extension of the strike. When plainclothesmen arrived at the factories to take ringleaders into custody, Elizabeth Perry writes, "An alert member of the strikers' security force managed to sink her teeth into the hand of the policeman before he could complete his assignment." The arrest of a woman weaver led to a vigil at the police station by workers at Meiya, other factories, and university students. At one point two hundred women engaged in a hunger strike. One of the strike demands was equal pay for men and women. The strike was suppressed after fifty-one days, many activists were arrested, and worker pay was cut by 30 percent.[118] Although not a memorable labor victory, the Meiya strike nonetheless illustrates the active participation of women workers in labor protest at a time of economic crisis.

## RURAL WOMEN AND THE WORLD ECONOMY

### Women's Agricultural Labor

For many New Culture and later leftist writers, the rural woman embodied everything that was most backward about China. She inhabited the corner of Chinese life that was most difficult to reform—the family—in an agricultural sector that urban intellectuals often portrayed as unchanging. The rural woman, in their view, was a sign of China's deep troubles. Her powerlessness and feudal attitudes were a drag on the modernity sought by urban Chinese intellectuals and activists.

Their portrait of rural women was not completely inaccurate, but it was certainly incomplete. Village women comprised roughly 40 percent of the total Chinese population during the Nanjing Decade, and it is important to ask an additional set of questions about their lives, even though the documentary record on rural women is much sparser than it is for urban

women. What sorts of labor did rural women perform in different regions? How were their lives affected by the integration of some of China's rural areas into the global economy and by the collapse of that economy during the worldwide Great Depression? Did expansive Nationalist state projects or nongovernmental reform efforts touch their lives? In short, what changed in the 1930s, and where, for China's village women?

Women across all of China's agricultural regions worked.[119] They went to the fields during the busy seasons, doing so year-round in households that were short of male labor. In areas well beyond the one described by Mao Zedong in 1930 (see box 5.2), they could be found weeding corn, harvesting barley, transplanting cabbage, picking peanuts, tending sweet potatoes, hoeing and picking cotton, planting and hulling and threshing rice and other grain, sharpening and wielding sickles, raking the fields, picking tea, pushing water carts and irrigating the fields one ladleful at a time, working the foot pedals of waterwheels, driving the oxen that powered some water pumps, and guarding the irrigation ditches.[120] Women poled boats downstream and hauled them upstream along towpaths. In more

**BOX 5.2.**
**Mao Zedong on Women's Work**

In 1930, Mao Zedong skipped an important conference in Shanghai to spend a month investigating life in a remote corner of Jiangxi Province, where he was beginning to develop a rural strategy for the CCP. One of the things he noted in Xunwu County was the relentless demand for women's daily labor:

> Strictly speaking, in terms of farming, women's duties are much heavier than those of men. Because certain tasks require physical strength, men are more likely to take charge of plowing and raking the fields and carrying the muck and grain. However, women assist men in carrying the muck and grain, transplanting rice seedlings, weeding fields, uprooting the weeds in the paths between the fields and on the edges of the fields, turning over the soil, and cutting the grain. But although men help out, women are chiefly responsible for hulling grain, polishing grain, watering gardens, transplanting vegetables, cutting wood, mowing grass, making tea, cooking meals, raising pigs and other domestic animals, washing and ironing clothes, mending clothes, making shoes, sweeping floors, and doing dishes. Besides these tasks, raising children is also a woman's duty; thus, the toil of women is harder than that of men. Women's tasks come one after another, and their work never ends. They are appendages of the male economy. . . . Although men are no longer serfs, a woman is still a man's serf or semi-serf, without political rights and personal freedom. No one suffers more than women.

*Source*: Mao Zedong, *Report from Xunwu*, translated by Roger R. Thompson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 212–13.

commercially developed regions such as Jiangnan, they produced textiles and handicraft goods for the market under the putting-out system.[121] In north China, they spun and wove for home consumption and sometimes for sale.[122] They also were responsible for domestic labor: cooking, washing, spinning and weaving and sewing the family's clothing, making cloth and felt shoes and shoe soles, and caring for children, who generally were not in school and were put to work as early as possible. Whether or not women had bound feet, whether they worked indoors—the preferred location for reasons of respectability—or in the fields, rural women's labor was crucial to household survival.

Rural women's production in economically more developed areas was increasingly shaped by international markets.[123] In silk-producing rural areas of Guangdong Province, women's labor was particularly valuable. With the support of their families, women delayed cohabitation with their husbands after marriage, or declined to marry altogether, contributing to the upkeep of their natal (and sometimes marital) families through their work in silk filatures.[124] In the Wuxi area, women raised silkworms at home. They remained respectably out of public sight, selling the cocoons to urban filatures in Shanghai and elsewhere that produced silk yarn for export to European and U.S. factories.

Raising silkworms was extremely demanding work. The voracious creatures had to be carefully arranged on bamboo trays in a warm moist environment and fed round the clock with a steady diet of mulberry leaves in order to spin their cocoons without damage during the brief spring season. Women were often blamed if the cocoon spinning went awry. It was widely believed that menstruation, pregnancy, or postpartum bleeding could pollute the environment and cause the silkworms to die. Raising cocoons was also a financially risky business, because prices were unstable, and a fall in price could ruin a farming household.

Women who raised silkworms formed a crucial node in China's capitalist production for an international market—and were vulnerable to market vicissitudes. When the global depression spread to China in the early 1930s, prices for agricultural goods dropped rapidly, and foreign markets for Chinese exports collapsed. This ruined the livelihoods of farmers who produced raw cotton, handwoven cloth, silk cocoons, and other products. Prices for silk cocoons in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces fell by more than two-thirds between 1930 and 1934. With the drop in their cash incomes, farmers in highly commercialized areas had trouble purchasing rice and other food supplies. Many were forced to take out high-interest loans to finance daily expenses, production supplies, and life-cycle events such as weddings and funerals.[125] Reports of dozens of rice riots filled the press, and mobs of farmers attacked and robbed wealthy households.[126]

During the same period, more than one hundred thousand women in Guangdong who had worked in silk production lost their employment and headed for the cities to look for work as servants.[127]

The stigma attached to women's going out to the fields remained strong, yet women routinely performed farm labor. In the northern Yangzi Delta, which produced raw cotton for mills in Shanghai and other Jiangnan cities, and cotton cloth for China's northeast, large commercial farms began to emerge by the 1920s. Men increasingly left their shrinking family farms to weave for the market or find other jobs. Women took their place, weeding and picking the cotton crop on the family farms, and hiring out as wage laborers for larger farms run as commercial enterprises. Some women, bought by wealthier families as child daughters-in-law and concubines and wives, doubled as unpaid farm laborers.[128] Women also hired out as farm laborers in parts of Zhejiang and in Guangzhou to the south.[129]

The partial feminization of agriculture was not limited to China's most commercialized regions. In Yunnan, some women spent more days in the fields than men; in coastal Fujian, women were deeply involved in agricultural production while the men fished.[130] As a child, Xie Bingying encountered many child daughters-in-law among Hunan tea pickers: "Every day each girl had to pick at least 140 or 150 pounds of tea leaves, yet her pay was only twenty or so copper coins. She had to give this money to her future mother-in-law."[131]

In inland rural Shaanxi, when able-bodied men left home in search of work or to avoid conscription, or became disabled, or died, women replaced them in the fields. Cao Zhuxiang, who married in the mid-1930s, did field labor from the minute she became a wife:

> That's why I was never really a daughter-in-law. For a daughter-in-law, there were many restrictions in better-off families. She was not allowed to go out of the door easily. But in my situation, I went to work in the field right away.

Later, as a young widow, she even learned to plow, normally a task reserved for men: "I was ashamed that the land that I plowed was not as good looking as other people's plowed land, so I plowed my land at night." Working alone made her vulnerable to criticism and even assault. But she felt that employing a hired hand would expose her to scandal:

> I didn't call in anyone, and didn't hire anyone. I was afraid that others would make idle talk. My neighbors said that my family had never before had such a capable person. In the fields I quietly threw myself into the work. I didn't gossip or waste time. So they had no basis for idle talk.[132]

Women's increased involvement in agricultural work clearly enabled them and their households to survive. But it did not necessarily raise their status or loosen the control of family authority.

**Rural Instability and State Regulation**

When Chiang Kai-shek unified the country in 1928, the warlord era nominally came to an end. But in Hebei, Sichuan, and many other areas, episodic conflict continued between his regime and military factions, or among sub-factions that sought to expand their own power.[133] Marauding bandits and remnant warlord troops were not always easy to distinguish. Newspapers in 1928 reported that farmers in areas twenty miles from Nanjing, where state control might have been expected to be strongest, were paying protection money to bandits and being kidnapped for ransom. One farmer in the area said,

> Those who are as poor as we have neither means to move to other places, nor work at home, but close the door at night and hurry away to hide with their children wet and cold, in the bushes and streams of the mountainsides, in spite of the mosquitoes and snakes.[134]

The Nanjing Decade was marked by natural disasters. During a 1928 drought in Shandong, children and women reportedly were being sold for a few dollars or traded for a sack of grain.[135] In summer 1931, floods on the Yangzi and Huai River systems affected one hundred million people in seventeen provinces. Several million people drowned or died from cholera and typhus, and massive numbers of refugees in Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi, and Jiangsu fled their homes for higher ground and treetops, or sought escape in small boats, rafts, washbasins, and hastily emptied coffins.[136] The 1935 Yellow River flood was estimated to affect four to five million people.[137]

Rising waters endangered all in their path, but the social aftermath was often gendered. During the 1935 Yellow River flood and resulting famine in Shandong, for instance, the sex ratio of children born to mothers in flood refugee shelters was 151 males to 100 females, suggesting that women were practicing female infanticide. This practice may have been even more common among refugees who were not in the shelters, where women were provided at least a minimal food allotment for each new child.[138]

In 1935, an article in the popular Chinese journal *Eastern Miscellany* (Dongfang zazhi) elaborated on the consequences of the rural crisis for women. As men left—for the cities, overseas, the army, or banditry—Chen Biyun wrote, "over 99 percent of them leave their wives and their children (if they have them) behind." Remittances were rare, and so

> the married woman who remains in the countryside faces a hopeless situation. If she has only herself, it is easier. If she has children, short of starving and waiting to die, or fleeing famine and wandering abroad, she has few options.

Women who left for the cities would find that many cotton mills and silk filatures had closed, and that the market for nursemaids, maids, and prostitutes was saturated. "As a result," Chen observed, "most of these women have no escape; they must resign themselves to hunger and cold." When food was short, rural women ate less. When debts were due, "moneylenders have been known to accept a wife or daughter as collateral on a loan as if she were a piece of livestock." Women suffered domestic violence from their hard-pressed and angry menfolk and, Chen said, were more likely to die in China's floods and droughts, both because bound feet made flight difficult and because they were responsible for children. She noted press reports of markets in many provinces where women and girls were sold for a pittance. One account described young women selling sexual services in drought-stricken areas, advertising their services with a placard that read, "Drought household, gentlemen welcome."[139]

Rural women in the 1930s received some attention from the state. The Nationalists banned footbinding and set a schedule of fines for households that violated the regulations. Enforcement was not consistent, and the ban probably had less effect on the decrease in footbinding than the spread of girls' schools and changing economic patterns.[140] Women sometimes were incorporated into ambitious state development plans for the countryside. One approach led to various experiments with rural cooperative industry in model counties, supported by the government, academic institutions, and sometimes by foreign funding.[141]

Just outside the new national capital of Nanjing, the government in 1933 established the model county of Jiangning where, it boasted, women were given literacy training and vocational classes while their children were cared for in county government facilities.[142] But this rosy picture was overdrawn. Nationalist party leaders did not agree about the best approach to the rural crisis, and so support was inconsistent.[143] Local officials spent far more on their own operations than on farmers. Intervention in land ownership or marriage practices, which might have addressed the rural crisis and its effects on women, was unthinkable.

## WOMEN WITHIN AND BEYOND THE NEW LIFE MOVEMENT

Throughout the Nanjing Decade, the Nationalist government struggled to reformulate the radical agenda that had characterized the official women's movement during the United Front years. Attacks on patriarchy, involvement in political activity, and support for social revolution were no longer official goals. During the Nanjing Decade, women were mainly exhorted to support the Nationalist regime in their role as wives and mothers.[144] Women active in the Nationalist Party, as well as non-Party reformers, had some success in sending more than a dozen nonvoting

women observers and representatives to the citizens' convention of 1931, at which a provisional constitution was formulated. Tang Qunying's vision of universal suffrage, however, remained unfulfilled.[145]

In early 1934, in the midst of a military campaign against the Communists and intensifying Japanese encroachment, Chiang Kai-shek inaugurated the New Life Movement. New Life, which drew on fascist practices in Germany and Italy, sought to involve every citizen in nation building, down to the level of bodily habits. Chinese citizens were exhorted not to spit, urinate in public, scratch, gamble, or smoke opium. They were enjoined to stand up straight, shower regularly, trim their nails, button their top buttons, shine their shoes, comb their hair, air out their bedding, and purchase domestically produced goods.[146]

Women had gender-specific roles to play in the New Life Movement. Chiang Kai-shek's wife, Song Meiling, presided over the New Life Women's Guidance Committee (WGC). Its monthly magazine, the *Women's New Life Monthly*, promoted model homemakers who were also deeply concerned about the nation, poor urban and rural women who contributed to the survival of their families, and women who had put aside idle pleasures to join the war effort—a portrayal that preceded the national outbreak of war in 1937.[147]

As students, girls and young women were to be offered an education that cultivated housework skills, industriousness, frugality, and mothering.[148] As housewives and mothers, they were expected to bring modern hygienic practices into the home and impart them to their children, reordering family life in the service of a mobilized nation. With the wives of high-ranking Nationalist officials directing the effort, the WGC sponsored public lectures and ran seminars on how to run a model household and how to be a model domestic servant, while also conducting disaster relief and running civics classes for women. But attendance at all of these early activities was spotty, and local police were enlisted to round up people and deliver them to the meetings.[149]

The New Life Movement discouraged personal adornment and consumption in a time of national crisis. Government regulations, which were widely disregarded, decreed that the qipao should fall four inches below the knees, with a side slit that extended no more than three inches above the knees. Revealing clothing and permed hair were prohibited, with police sometimes enforcing these regulations. The Modern Girl was repudiated. Model New Life women were to be athletic and healthy beauties like the champion woman swimmer Yang Xiuqiong, who was recruited to help publicize New Life in appearances across China.[150]

Not everyone found New Life initiatives adequate to meet the growing political crisis. A commentator in *Women's Voice* observed, "Thousands of square miles of Chinese territory have been occupied by the Japanese without any resistance, but if a woman offends public decency, she must

be expelled."[151] Women responding to the various restrictions on dress and behavior invoked the state's own ideal of "healthy beauty," which required physical activities such as swimming and a certain amount of exposed flesh, as intrinsic to nation building.[152] Like other Nationalist initiatives, the New Life Movement had limited effect on the daily lives of urban residents, reaching people mainly through their schools or workplaces, and no effect on those in rural areas. And its message about women's societal roles was not consistent: in addition to their crucial domestic duties, women were encouraged to work in teaching, public health, and handicraft production at home. Then, with the outbreak of full-scale war in 1937, the movement shifted to mobilization for the war effort.

It is tempting to conclude that the Nanjing Decade marked the end of a national politics entwined with feminism. Women's rights in marriage were expanded by state decree rather than by social activism. Refugees, poor women, prostitutes, women workers, and labor activists were regulated and contained, albeit with limited success. The ideal of domesticity was reconfigured on a scientific and hygienic basis, to be presided over by new good wives and wise mothers who would guide consumption, reduce the trade deficit, and raise a new generation of strong citizens. The rebellion of the Modern Girl centered on profligate consumption and sexual allure, not on political engagement. Rural women, beleaguered by an economic crisis whose origins lay far beyond their local communities, seemed to dwell in a universe untouched by the radical questions of the late Qing period and the New Culture debates. And the state's response to intensifying political threat from Japan and from the Communist movement entailed militarizing all social arrangements, with a largely unrealized vision of disciplined unity in which women were chiefly responsible for the home.

And yet, in the daily practices of new institutions, the range of activities considered normal for women continued to expand. Teacher training institutes proliferated, drawing women from inland cities and rural areas, and offering them a road into teaching and other professions: law, journalism, literature, and the arts. Radical educators urged women to become politically active, decrying educational goals that taught them to be consumers who were dependent upon men and isolated from broader social movements.[153] At secondary schools in the lower Yangzi region, both male and female students participated in extensive self-government activities: managing the school cafeteria, organizing cooperatives, coordinating work in the school garden, regulating student behavior, taking sick classmates to get medical attention, and organizing sports meets as well as extracurricular clubs for the arts and home economics.[154] Almost every week, girl students in lower middle schools attended civic rituals and ceremonies to honor Sun Yat-sen, raise and lower the flag, and mark various holidays, although celebrations of the May Fourth and May Thirtieth Movements, common during the United Front period,

were curtailed.[155] Government-sponsored Girl Scout troops, established in secondary schools during the 1930s, taught young women martial drills, outdoor skills, and first aid. A group of Girl Scouts who rescued a drowning young woman was widely publicized. The scouting program

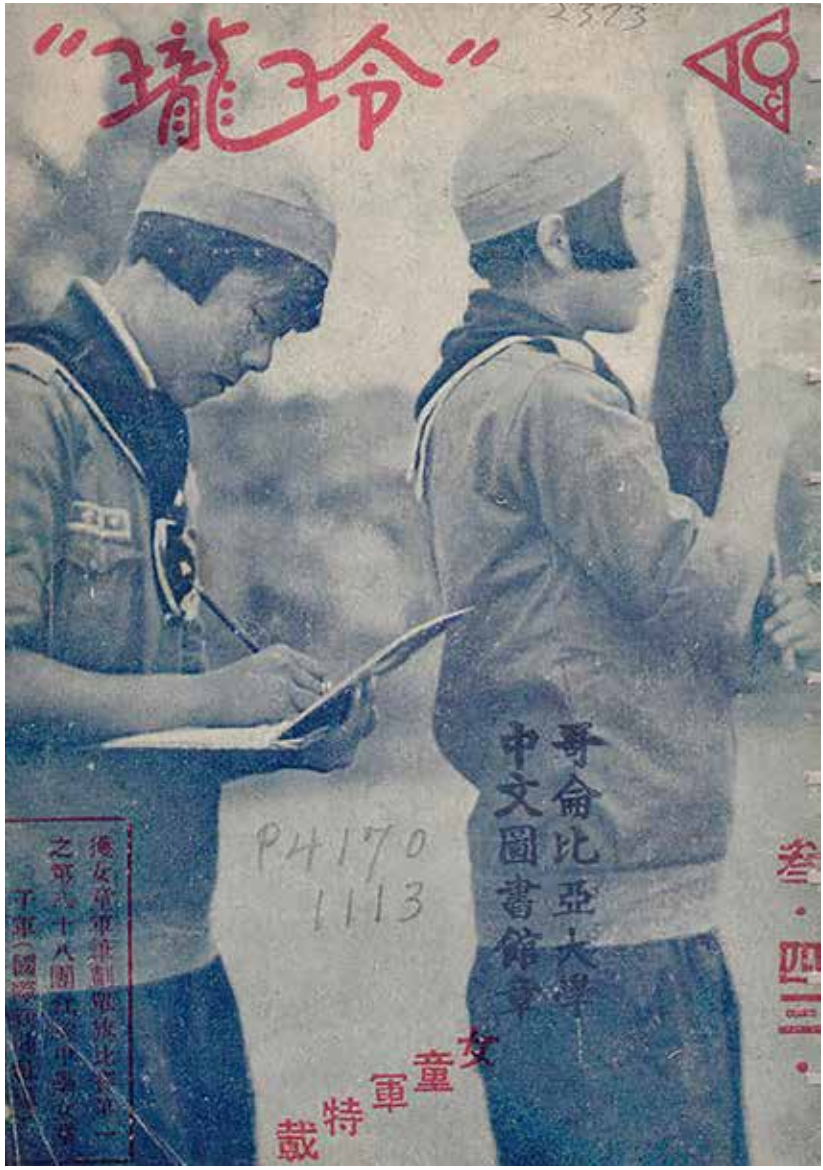


**Photo 5.4. High school Girl Scouts, 1933**

*Source*: *Linglong* magazine, 123 (December 6, 1933), cover. Courtesy of C. V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

closely paralleled the activities organized for young men, but when male students attended their mandatory military training class, young women were sent to learn nursing.[156] Thousands of young women wrote for school journals in secondary schools across China, far outnumbering the small number of literate women whose work had seen print under the Qing. In some of these writings, they expressed a commitment to discipline themselves, build up their physical strength, learn to work hard, and contribute equally with men to saving the nation.[157]

Such declarations could be understood as an obedient response to the state's New Life Movement. But as the decade wore on and a growing student movement advocated increased resistance to Japan, student activists found themselves at loggerheads with the Nationalist authorities. By late 1935, American reporter Agnes Smedley wrote,

> each week-end men and women students gathered by the hundreds in the Western Hills [outside Beijing] on what they called "picnics." . . . What they were really doing was practicing mountain-climbing and guerrilla warfare. Sticks were their weapons, and stones were their hand-grenades.[158]

The December Ninth Movement of 1935 began with a rally of two thousand students in Beijing to protest Japanese encroachment in North China. Among the marchers were students from a girls' middle school.[159] Hundreds of marchers were attacked by police and injured, and several dozen were arrested, setting off similar protests in other cities and garnering significant support from labor unions and prominent intellectuals. A week later, a young woman student from Qinghua University named Lu Cui briefly became the face of the protest movement. Arriving at a locked city gate with five thousand student demonstrators, she rolled under the gate to try to unlock it and was arrested. Her supporters won her release by conducting a sit-down strike. Foreign journalists dubbed her "China's Joan of Arc."[160] Enacting their citizenship, students asserted their critical judgment. In doing so, the women among them asserted their full rights and duty to act politically, just as their male classmates did.

In 1935, outraged by Chiang Kai-shek's continued policy of nonresistance to Japan, He Xiangning, former head of the Nationalist women's bureau (and future high-ranking official in the PRC), sent him a cutting poem, written on a woman's skirt. It read in part:

> You claim yourself a man
> But you willingly suffer the humiliation of the enemy.
> You present our mountains and rivers without fighting,
> Thus leaving shame for tens of thousands of generations.
> We, the women,
> Are willing to die on the battlefield.
> I give you my dress,
> To exchange for an army uniform.[161]


**Photo 5.5. Lu Cui, December Ninth student leader**
*Source*: *Dazhong shenghuo* 1.6 (December 1935), cover.

Less than two years later, with the beginning of a full-scale Japanese invasion, war drew all Chinese women into a world where possibilities, as well as dangers, had widened.