

REVIEW ESSAY

RECENT STUDIES OF WARTIME CHINA

Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945. By RANA MITTER. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. + 450 pp. \$30.00 (hardback), \$15.95 (paper).

China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945–1949. By DIANA LARY. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xii + 283 pp. \$29.99 (paper).

The Ecology of War in China: Henan Province, the Yellow River, and Beyond, 1938–1950. By MICAH S. MUSCOLINO. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xiii + 294 pp. \$85.00 (hardback).

Runaway Wives, Urban Crime, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949. By ZHAO MA. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. xiv + 366 pp. \$49.95 (hardback).

Life and Death in the Garden: Sex, Drugs, Cops, and Robbers in Wartime China. By KATHRYN MEYER. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. x + 272 pp. \$35.00 (hardback).

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The history of World War II has long been a favorite topic of military, diplomatic, and social historians (even more so for viewers of the History Channel), but the focus has typically been on the European theater.¹ With a more limited archival record, the conflict in Asia has received less attention. This is certainly not because Asia was less important. The war undermined the legitimacy of colonial regimes throughout Southeast Asia, led to the division of Korea into two hostile states, and contributed in fundamental ways to the collapse of the Nationalist regime in China and the triumph of the Communist revolution. The last few years have seen substantial new scholarship on the 1937–45 War of Resistance in China and what Japanese historians often call the Fifteen-Year War, starting with the occupation of Manchuria in 1931.² The number of titles falls far short of what has been written on Europe, but the war in China is now being approached in new and interesting ways.

For years, we have lived with a simple compelling narrative of China at war. No book was more influential in shaping that narrative than *Thunder Out of China*, written immediately after the war by the journalists Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby. For them, “The story of the China war is the story of the tragedy of Chiang K’ ai-shek . . .” and of “the Communists [who] had the people with them.”³ The military history of the war was framed by the official US Army history of the China-Burma-India Theater, three fat volumes by Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland: *Stilwell’s*

¹Max Hastings, “What’s New About the War,” *New York Review of Books* 63:4 (March 10, 2016), 28–30.

²I have never been able to understand how one gets fifteen years between the Mukden Incident of September 18, 1931 and the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, but somehow the “Fifteen-Year War” has become standard in Japanese historiography.

³Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby, *Thunder Out of China* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1946), xv–xvi.

Mission to China, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, and *Time Runs out in CBI*.⁴ Like White and Jacoby, Romanus and Sunderland were sympathetic to the US commander in China, General Joseph Stilwell, in his unending conflicts with Chiang Kai-shek. Stilwell's troubled relations with the Generalissimo were but one part of the larger US-China alliance, though the incompatible personalities of the acerbic Stilwell and prideful Chiang seriously complicated the relationship. The Stilwell-Chiang confrontation as a synecdoche for US policy in Asia became the dominant theme of Barbara Tuchman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–1945*.⁵ Tuchman was largely concerned with the high politics of the relationship; Graham Peck's *Two Kinds of Time* provided a ground-level account of the personal and human dimensions of the US role in China's war.⁶ After the collapse of the Nationalist regime and accusations that US policy had contributed to the "loss of China," US-China relations in the 1940s became an inescapable focus of attention, most notably in Herbert Feis's semi-official *The China Tangle: The American Effort in China from Pearl Harbor to the Marshall Mission*, and Tang Tsou's *America's Failure in China*.⁷

In all of this work, the master narrative was the progressive erosion of support for Chiang Kai-shek's regime during the war against Japan, and the Guomindang regime's precipitous collapse in the ensuing Civil War with the Communists. During the 1930s, Chiang did everything possible to delay war with Japan until he had built up his own military arsenal and eliminated his domestic rivals, especially the Communists' Red Army. In the end, two of Chiang's own generals kidnapped him in the December 1936 Xi'an incident and compelled a truce with the Communists, which developed into a tenuous United Front after full-scale war with Japan broke out in 1937. The country rallied behind Chiang in the first years of the war, but after the loss of country's economic center in Shanghai and its capital in Nanjing, Chiang hunkered down in the wartime capital of Chongqing and the war entered a prolonged stalemate. Especially after the United States entered the conflict following the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, Chiang's strategy became increasingly defensive. Isolated from the coastal cities, the economy atrophied, corruption spread, and inflation devastated the small professional classes. Political power was concentrated in Chiang's family and in-laws plus a few loyalists, and the conviction grew that Chiang's cautious military strategy was founded on a commitment to let the might of the American military defeat Japan in the Pacific, while he preserved his strength for a postwar confrontation with an ascendant Chinese Communist Party.⁸

In all scholarship on this period, politics was (at best) just below the surface. In the conventional narrative, especially as told by Americans, the US did everything it could to aid and reform the Nationalist regime and its armies, but Chiang's regime collapsed due to its own corrupt, conservative, and autocratic tendencies. The Chinese Communists, by contrast, won the hearts and minds of

⁴Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission to China*, United States Army in World War II: China-Burma-India Theater (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1953); Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, United States Army in World War II. China-Burma-India Theater (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1956); Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in CBI* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1959).

⁵Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

⁶Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008; original edition: 1950).

⁷Herbert Feis, *The China Tangle: The American Effort in China from Pearl Harbor to the Marshall Mission* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); Tang Tsou, *America's Failure in China, 1941–50* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁸A representative scholarly work reflecting this conventional wisdom is Lloyd E. Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

the Chinese people and thus prevailed in the Civil War despite their substantial deficiency in all types of modern weaponry—airplanes, tanks, artillery, and machine guns. White and Jacoby saw a tide of revolution sweeping over all of Asia and concluded that “a China ruled entirely by the Kuomintang dictatorship... would be a historical monstrosity.”⁹ This consensus prevailed through the 1980s; but after Chiang Kai-shek’s son, Chiang Ching-kuo, moved Taiwan toward democratic government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shot unarmed students around Tian’anmen Square in 1989, a different view of Chiang’s Nationalist regime gained strength. On Chiang himself, Jay Taylor provided a much more sympathetic portrait in his biography, *The Generalissimo*.¹⁰ But the most significant new contributions to our understanding of the war have come from Cambridge University’s Hans van de Ven. His *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945*, opens with a spirited attack on what he calls “the Stilwell-White paradigm,” and on the Americans’ “ideological commitment to the offensive” as opposed to Chiang’s preference for more cautious defensive actions. His book is the most compelling defense of Chiang Kai-shek’s strategic decisions, just as his co-edited volume, *The Battle for China*, is by far the best military history of the war.¹¹

This brings us, at last, to the books currently under review. They include both broad surveys of the War of Resistance and the Civil War, and more fine-grained local social and ecological histories. As such, they represent a significant maturing of the field, scholarship that is the fruit of recently opened archives and newly discovered sources. By and large, they move beyond the preoccupation with Sino-American relations, and present a more nuanced view of the revolution. Perhaps most exciting is a new attention to the occupied areas, a subject almost completely absent from Chinese scholarship on the war (with the exception of the Nanjing massacre) and only recently featured in the Anglophone literature.¹²

Rana Mitter’s *Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II, 1937–1945*, opens with a bold call for a “comprehensive and complete reinterpretation of China’s long war with Japan” (12). He provides the best available general history of the conflict, but in the end, this Oxford professor and student of van de Ven follows his mentor’s lead on most important points, especially his criticism of “Stilwell’s failed strategy” (260) and his appreciation of Chiang’s role in holding down more than 600,000 Japanese troops in China while receiving only 1.5 percent of all Lend-Lease aid in 1941–42, and 0.5 percent in 1943–44 (244–45). US criticism of Chiang’s regime is dismissed

⁹White and Jacoby, *Thunder Out of China*, 322.

¹⁰Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-Shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). Significantly, Taylor had earlier written a laudatory biography of Chiang Ching-kuo: *The Generalissimo’s Son: Chiang Ching-Kuo and the Revolutions in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹¹Hans J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China 1925–1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), quoted passages from pp. 7, 8; Mark R. Peattie, Edward J. Drea, and Hans J. Van de Ven, eds., *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). I have expressed my disagreements with van de Ven’s conclusions in Joseph W. Esherick and Matthew T. Combs, eds., *1943: China at the Crossroads* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Program, 2015) so I shall not repeat them here.

¹²After John Hunter Boyle’s early path-breaking *China and Japan at War, 1937–1945; the Politics of Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), new studies of occupied China began with Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), were followed by Wen-Hsin Yeh, ed., *Wartime Shanghai* (London: Routledge, 1998), and most fully developed in Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), and David P. Barrett and Lawrence N. Shyu, eds., *Chinese Collaboration with Japan, 1932–1945: The Limits of Accommodation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

as implying “that China should act as if it were a first-rank ally while being treated as a third-rank one” (313).

The narrative in *Forgotten Ally* is basically chronological, treating escalating Sino-Japanese conflicts during the Nanjing Decade (1927–37), the outbreak of war at Marco Polo Bridge, Chiang’s determined resistance in Shanghai that turned the conflict into a national war, the Nanjing massacre, the Nationalist blowing of the Yellow River dikes to slow the Japanese advance, the US entry into the war and the two Burma campaigns, famine in Henan, and finally the Ichigo Offensive and Stilwell crisis of 1944. The most original aspect of Mitter’s account comes from the extensive use of Zhou Fohai’s 周佛海 diary for insight into the thinking of Wang Jingwei’s 汪精衛 collaborationist regime. Wang Jingwei receives sympathetic treatment here as a great orator with “charismatic good looks” (38) who was excluded from Chiang familist power structure. In Mitter’s account, Wang and Zhou were not “pro-Japanese” but believers in a “pan-Asianist future” who “saw themselves as the truest patriots” (207). Their pan-Asianism ends up being a bit of a dead end (as was the collaboration itself), and the implications of Zhou’s late war dealing with the Nationalist spymaster Dai Li 戴笠 are never really followed up. But it is refreshing to see these Japanese collaborators given a significant role in a book on wartime China.

Balanced histories of the War of Resistance now recognize that most of the real fighting with Japan was done by the Nationalists and not the Communists’ Eighth Route and New Fourth armies. Nonetheless, the war did bring an enormous growth of Communist power, from a small force of perhaps 40,000 soldiers on the eve of the war to an army of roughly one million at its end. The reasons for this growth have been the subject of intense debate in the field, with scholars tracing the Communist appeal to peasant nationalism, class struggle, strategic use of the united front, tax and rent reduction, the empowerment of young males in village militia, and popular mobilization for guided village elections.¹³ We see all too little of this in Mitter’s account. Instead his treatment of the Communist movement is confined to a chapter entitled “States of Terror” in which he argues that “The essential element of [the] infrastructure in all three governments [Nationalist, Communist, and collaborationist]—intricately linked to their functioning, but rarely mentioned—was state terror” (281). After describing Dai Li’s secret police and the collaborationist operation at 76 Jessfield Road in Shanghai, Mitter recounts Kang Sheng’s 康生 excesses during the final stages of the Rectification Campaign in Yan’an. While there is nothing inaccurate in this account and coercion was certainly an underappreciated aspect of the new Communist regime, a single-minded focus on this one campaign far from the rapidly expanding front-line guerrilla bases seems an inadequate explanation of the roots of Communist power.

Finally, it must be noted that Mitter’s book is not without its share of factual lapses. In 1927, Zhou Enlai is seen slipping off to the hills with Mao (49–50), though in fact he remained in Shanghai until 1931; the Chongqing regime is described as isolated except for the “Hump” airlift after the loss of the coastal cities (183) though the Burma Road remained open until 1941; Zhu De is identified as “commander of the New Fourth Army” (225); and the Normandy landings (Overlord) are described as “about to start” when Stilwell was fired in the fall of 1944 (339), when in fact they had already occurred in June. These and other slips are minor flaws in an otherwise exemplary study,

¹³Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967); Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Tetsuya Kataoka, *Resistance and Revolution in China: The Communists and the Second United Front* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Yung-fa Chen, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Odoric Y.K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Kathleen Hartford and Steven M. Goldstein, eds., *Single Sparks: China’s Rural Revolutions* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1989).

though it is disappointing to see such errors in a book that is likely to become a standard reference on wartime China.

In *China's Civil War: A Social History, 1945–1949*, Diana Lary picks up the narrative where Mitter leaves off. We already have two excellent works on the titanic struggle between the massive armies of Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek that produced the unexpectedly rapid collapse of the Guomindang and the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party. Almost forty years ago, Suzanne Pepper wrote her seminal work on the political struggle, and more recently Odd Arne Westad added a fine study of the military conflict.¹⁴ Lary, while framing her work around the chronology of the military conflict, “focuses on the painful and divisive social impacts of the war” (12). The format follows one that she used with success in her textbook on republican China:¹⁵ an analytical narrative interspersed with vignettes on key personalities, and popular Chinese aphorisms and slogans of the time, presented with original characters, romanization and English translation. The vignettes provide the personal voices of a diverse group of individuals—the archaeologist K.C. Chang 張光直, film director Ang Lee 李安, translator Yang Xianyi 楊憲益 and his wife Gladys, the artist Zhang Daqian 張大千, author Lao She 老舍, and many more—notably including voices from both the mainland and Taiwan. Through their stories, Lary illustrates her tale of the “profoundly damaged societies” and “legacy of grief and injury” (4) that came from the Civil War.

Some of the themes are familiar: the Nationalists’ bungled treatment of “collaborators” as they resumed control in the Japanese occupied cities, the resentment of Guomindang carpetbaggers returning to claim the spoils of war, the devastating impact of inflation on the small middle class, the success of CCP propaganda among students and Nationalist soldiers. But Lary’s focus is not so much on the historical process of the war as its legacy. It is not surprising, then, that the final chapters and roughly one-fourth of the book treat the period *after* 1949. Her general assessment is both clear and grim: “social disintegration,” “a fragmented society full of confusion and uncertainty” (12), “the crumbling of the old family” (13), “diluted... power of the blood connection” (73), the rise of “young men used to violence” (29). In describing this social transformation, Lary includes sections on women and youth in most of her chapters, and here the picture is more complex. During the course of the long war against Japan and the Civil War, many women “acquired greater independence from their menfolk, whether they wanted it or not” (73). For younger women, this freedom could be exhilarating, but for the majority, “freedom was a chimera” (101), especially the wives of soldiers who died or disappeared in the war. A generation gap emerged as “love played a greater role in young women’s lives” (161). The abolition of polygamy meant that more poor men could get wives, but what was to become of the “surplus wives and concubines” (181), and what did it mean that polygamy was replaced by “serial monogamy” among the nation’s leaders? (228)

This social history of the war is replete with useful insights: the disappearance of the *changpao* 長袍 in men’s clothing, the popularity of bobbed hair among young women, reading William Hinton’s *Fanshen*¹⁶ with its “subtext... that killing was legitimate in the revolutionary process” (99). But the anecdotal source base leaves one wondering just how common these trends were among different classes or in different regions. In the end, I read this book as an extended reflection by a senior historian with long experience in the field (her first visit to the PRC predated the Cultural Revolution) on the social changes that have swept China and Taiwan since the 1940s. Her

¹⁴Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978; second edition: Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵Diana Lary, *China's Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁶William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966).

observations, I would submit, should be taken more as hypotheses to be tested by rigorous social history analysis than as established conclusions on social change in revolutionary China. The text is, to my eyes, relatively free from errors. John Melby is misquoted to put B-52s in wartime China instead of B-29s (89), 兵不血刃 is mis-romanized as *bing bu xuedao* (114), and 勢如破竹 becomes 事如破竹 (168). But these and a few other examples are minor and could easily be corrected in later printings. In all this is a thoughtful examination of the enduring legacies of war and revolution in the 1940s.

Micah Muscolino focuses on the same Yellow River flood that his Oxford colleague Rana Mitter discussed in his book, but this time from the perspective of environmental history. This is careful, detailed, archive-based local history. It begins with Chiang Kai-shek's 1938 decision to break the dikes in order to slow the Japanese advance on Wuhan, and then blame the flood on Japanese bombing. It was, says Muscolino, "perhaps the most environmentally damaging act of warfare in world history" (2), a rather substantial claim given the consequences of the Spanish conquest of the New World, or the US use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. He goes on to discuss the strategic use, by both Nationalist and Japanese armies, of Henan's flooded plains as a defensive barrier for the next six years of the war. Further suffering was inflicted on the peasants of Henan by the famine of 1942–43. There were half a million Nationalist soldiers stationed in Henan, more than in any other province. Feeding these soldiers required extraordinary exactions when the harvests failed in a prolonged drought. The result was disastrous: peasants starved or fled, children were sold, draft animals were slaughtered, and support for the Nationalist armies evaporated. But the drought ended in 1943, the displaced population slowly returned; then after the war, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) repaired the dikes (sending the Yellow River north into Communist controlled areas of Shandong), lent tractors to bring the land under cultivation again, and restored productivity to prewar levels. "Human-engineered environmental infrastructure remolded war-ravaged landscapes" to produce a "virtually seamless continuity" (230).

This is a work of painstaking local history, illustrated with numerous detailed maps of the shifting Yellow River flood, and gripping photographs from the time. Archival sources and local observers provide telling details and useful statistics. But it is the nature of such sources to include conflicting information based on different local perspectives, bias, or deliberate obfuscation. Muscolino is not as helpful as he might be in guiding the reader through such contradictions. Take the issue of how many people were affected by these environmental disasters—specifically how many were forced to migrate to escape flood or famine. First we are told that during the war, 14,533,200 people in Henan (43 percent of the population) "lived as refugees for at least a time" (4). A few pages later, we learn that "In Henan the Yellow River floods displaced more than 1,172,000" (31). Then we are told that "as many as 1.7 million refugees from Henan and other provinces affected by the Yellow River floods had migrated to Shaanxi" (79). Many of these began to return by mid-1943 (156–57); however, "80 percent stayed" in Shaanxi (174), though in Fugou county (the most devastated by the floods) "70 percent of the refugees had returned" (199). It is entirely possible that all of these figures are accurate, but their simple presentation without comment makes it very difficult for the reader to discern exactly how many people were affected by war, flood, and famine, and in what way.

Muscolino is an environmental historian, a path-breaker in this discipline in the China field.¹⁷ He forces old-fashioned historians like me to think in new ways, which is certainly both necessary and useful, but I am not always certain that I want to go where he is leading me. Much of the problem begins at the level of conceptual terminology. He describes his "analytical framework" as a

¹⁷See also Micah S. Muscolino, *Fishing Wars and Environmental Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

“conceptual focus on energy and energy flows” (236), and this language pervades the book. When the Nationalists breached the Yellow River dikes, the purpose was to “alter the energy needs of the enemy” (22). When the government promoted land reclamation in Shaanxi to support refugees, this represented “the wartime state’s need to generate energy surpluses to fuel China’s military resistance against Japan” (60). When the government extracted grain from the Henan peasantry, this is to “secure energy for the military” (95). Does it really help us understand the historical process when a famine brought on by excessive grain exactions is treated as an energy transfer?

Muscolino vigorously resists any effort to separate analytically the natural and human causes of the disaster. “From an environmental historian’s perspective, an interpretation of war’s role in the causation of famine premised on an artificial distinction between human actions (war) and acts of nature (poor harvests) affords little insight into these relationships” (88). (One wonders where this approach would lead us in an analysis of the Great Leap famine.) Then as he concludes a brief discussion of the factors contributing to the famine, we return to a familiar theme: “Famine resulted from a web of interconnections among war, water, climate, agriculture, and insects. What tied these elements together is energy” (90). Regrettably, exactly how energy tied these together remains a mystery to me. Even more, I regret the fact that despite a number of telling stories of individuals affected by the war, flood, and famine, Muscolino’s language of energy tends to remove humans from the picture—and in this sense, his book seems to lead in the opposite direction from Diana Lary’s determined attempt to humanize the history of China at war, and his conclusion of “seamless continuity” deflects our attention from the monumental social and political changes wrought by the war.

Zhao Ma’s *Runaway Wives, Urban Crime, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing* leads us back to social history. In European and American studies, the rise of social history was fueled by the widespread use of legal cases that survived in archives in great numbers. Zhao Ma brings this approach to wartime Beijing. Like other Chinese repositories, the Beijing Municipal Archives contain relatively plentiful holdings from the occupation period, and “runaway wives” was a sufficiently apolitical topic to allow the author access to their cases. By retracing the narrative thread and exploring the social context of a limited number of interesting cases, Ma provides valuable insights into the social history of occupied Beijing.

From the title of this work, we sense that the focus is going to be somewhat scattered, and in this respect the book does not disappoint. In his conclusion, Ma claims to have “plac[ed] runaway wives at the center of the inquiry” (318), but this is not really the case. In fact, his method is to begin each chapter with a particular runaway case, and then use that case to introduce his topic: working women, the politics of dependency, women in the tenements, serial marriages, mobility and survival tactics, and the police. This is similar to Matthew Sommer’s method of exploring gender relations among common people in the Qing, but Ma seems to have only a few dozen cases in Beijing, while Sommer uses some 1,200 cases from Qing archives and submits each account to rigorous scrutiny for its reliability and social import.¹⁸ Significantly, Ma’s list of chapter titles does not include urban crime, so anyone who picks up this book wishing to learn about murder or robbery in wartime Beijing is apt to be disappointed. “Urban Crime,” it seems, is in the title because it was illegal for a woman to abandon her husband for another man, and when the police located such women, they ended up in criminal courtrooms.

The real contribution of this book is its use of legal cases and social surveys to extend the history of gender relations beyond the realm of the elite. The women in this history are neither the highly educated elite women who have been the focus of most studies of women in late imperial China, nor

¹⁸Matthew Harvey Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); see also his *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

the republican-era liberal activists studied by Wang Zheng.¹⁹ While the analysis is not as systematic or coherent as I would prefer, we do get a general impression of the lives of poor women in Beijing. Ma notes that the former capital did not experience the sort of industrial development seen in Shanghai or Tianjin, so few women found employment in textile mills. If they worked outside the home at all, it was usually in domestic service, waitressing, or sex work. None of these was considered a proper profession (*zhiye* 職業), so the effect was to “differentiate productive labor and gainful employment from reproductive labor and housework” (85). Most poor women did only domestic work, washed and sewed clothes for others, or collected trash for recycling. Consequently they were unemployed (*wuye* 無業) in the eyes of the law. In addition, though dependent on their husband’s income for survival, they lived under a republican-era legal regime that promoted women’s independence and mutual support in marriage. As Ma rightly observes, “this official ideal did not reflect the reality among people of the lower classes” (89). One consequence of this situation was that in the female networks that knit together social life in Beijing’s tenements and lower-class *hutong* 胡同, friendly neighbors frequently advised impoverished wives that they should seek a new husband better able to support them. The numerous examples of this sort of practical advice are one of the most intriguing findings of Ma’s study.

The book is peppered with insights into gender relations among the Beijing poor. There is a rich chapter on “the tenement neighborhoods as a female’s world of sociability in a male-dominated system” (124). His chapter in serial marriages contrasts the popular view of marriage involving specific customary rituals and the republican law requiring official registration. He argues that “a greater level of tolerance to let women explore public spaces” undermined the traditional “spatial division between domestic and public spaces” (276). All of these are important findings, but the evidence is only anecdotal, and there is no attempt to specify when these changes occurred. Were they the product of the new republic? of Guomindang rule? or of wartime China? Beyond the archival record, the most frequently cited sources are Sydney Gamble’s prewar surveys of 1921 and 1933, and a path-breaking 1932 study of female prisoners by a Yanjing University sociology student.²⁰ For this reason, it is difficult to determine what aspects of these new gender relations and social patterns are specific to the wartime period. Other than inflation, grain shortages, and more rigorous policing, there is little discussion, much less sustained analysis, of exactly how the war affected life in Beijing. In the context of this review of scholarship on wartime China, this is a bit disappointing.

Of all the books presently under review, I learned most from Kathryn Meyer’s *Life and Death in the Garden: Sex, Drugs, Cops and Robbers in Wartime China*. Meyer is a Japanese historian who came across a rich 1941 report by three Japanese police officers describing a Harbin complex of flophouses, opium dens, fortune-tellers, and cheap inns called the Garden of Grand Vision (Daguanyuan 大觀園). The authors are filled with imperial prejudice against supposed Chinese character flaws that led to idleness, drugs, gambling, and poor hygiene; but they are also meticulously careful recorders of every shop, resident, and petty crime in this collection point for the

¹⁹Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On late imperial China, see Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

²⁰Sidney D. Gamble and John Stewart Burgess, *Peking: A Social Survey Conducted under the Auspices of the Princeton University Center in China and the Peking Young Men’s Christian Association* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921); Sidney D. Gamble, Ho-chên Wang, and Jên-ho Liang, *How Chinese Families Live in Peiping: A Study of the Income and Expenditure of 283 Chinese Families Receiving from \$8 to \$550 Silver per Month* (New York, London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1933); Zhou Shuzhao 周叔昭, “Beiping yibaiming nüfan de yanjiu” 北平一百名女犯的研究, *Shehui xuejie* 社會學界 6 (1932).

destitute of northern Manchuria. They are educated men, and one goes on to a postwar professorship in Japan. Meyer uses their report carefully, and supplements it with such alternative perspectives as a colorful American consul's contemporary reports. She succeeds admirably in telling "a story about living and dying on the lowest margins of society during the Second World War" (3).

The early chapters move smoothly back and forth from close description of the "floating population" (25) of the Garden of Grand Vision to the larger history of Manchuria. On the latter, she notes that "everyone in Manchuria came from someplace else" (75), and in Harbin—a city that first appeared on maps only in 1900—we meet Russian traders and refugees from the revolution, Korean opium dealers, Japanese settlers, and a Chinese population that largely hailed from Shandong. Through this narrative, Meyer offers a useful history of the understudied puppet state of Manchukuo. She describes the Japanese intrigues that led to the founding of Manchukuo, highlighting the remarkable career of Amakasu Masahiko 甘粕正彦, a Japanese officer convicted of murdering a labor activist following the Kanto earthquake, conspirator in the Mukden incident, police chief in Harbin, and later head of the Manchukuo Film Studio. We see the Harbin police from the inside with their combination of ruthless efficiency and technical prowess: police academies, electronic listening devices, waterboarding, and a practice of turning over political prisoners to Unit 731 for biological warfare experiments.

The heart of the book is a close description of the Garden of Grand Vision. It is not a pretty picture, but it is compelling. Meyer leads us through Harbin, describing the different neighborhoods, the architecture, the streets, and the residents. A chapter on "Dirty Work" details various forms of scavenging and recycling that extend to a practice of stealing and selling the clothes of the dead and even the dying. We see the strict self-regulation of beggar communities and the various forms of performance that their members used to induce charity. Another chapter deals with drugs, both opium and heroin, and Meyer determines (perhaps too generously) that despite the role of Japanese traffickers and their Korean surrogates, "Japanese authorities in Manchukuo... sincerely wanted to control the problem" (147). Flophouses were a major feature of the Garden of Grand Vision, and the police investigators were ahead of their time in describing the prostitutes as "sex workers" (142). An important aspect of this occupation in Harbin (as elsewhere in China) was the extent to which the women "worked within their immediate family units" (136) and "sold their bodies to support husbands, lovers, and children" (133).

There is no question that this is a look at the under-belly of Chinese society, in a cold northern city, in the midst of a long and cruel war. There is no reason to believe that this was representative of China as a whole—but Meyer and her police informants make no such claim. As we ponder the grand strategic decisions that determined the fate of millions, the broad social changes that transformed mid-century China, or the "seamless continuity" of the agrarian environment, this picture of Harbin in 1940, where hawkers sold whiskey by the swig, brings our attention down to a point where we can see what it meant to be poor in a time of war.