Zhao Ma


Zhao Ma’s study is an important contribution to a body of scholarship that explores the everyday lives of lower class residents of Beijing and the ways in which they both coped with severe economic deprivation and interacted with an increasingly intrusive state. It also has the added advantage of focusing on wartime China (covering both the Japanese occupation period of 1938–1945 and the civil war years of 1946–1949), a period that has tended to be overshadowed by studies paying more attention to the Nationalist/Guomindang decade of 1927–1937 or post-1949 Maoist China. Making extensive use of the criminal case files of the Beijing District Court covering the years 1939–1949 (housed in the Beijing Municipal Archives) and involving cases of bigamy (chonghun 重婚), adultery (tongjian 通姦) and abduction (youguai 诱拐), Ma analyses the ways in which poor lower-class women (in particular, married women) survived poverty, spousal abuse or neglect, unemployment, the shortage of food, and political turmoil by utilising neighbourhood connections and modern forms of transport to exploit opportunities in the informal, or ‘black’, economy (handicraft production, petty trade, smuggling, human trafficking, prostitution). For many of these women such survival tactics (to meet both economic and emotional needs) equally involved breaking away from marital relationships to find new husbands whom they believed might give them a more secure livelihood—the court cases explored in Ma’s book often occur as a result of outraged husbands bringing charges of adultery or bigamy against wives, or of abduction against mothers, mothers-in-law and other men. As Ma points out (pp. 4–5), this morally ambiguous ‘underworld’ inhabited by lower-class women and characterised by an informal economy, customary practices, neighbourhood networks, criminal undertakings and illegitimate relationships stood in marked contrast with the official, male-centred world of formal administration, security measures, legal codes and reformist rhetoric concerning, for example, how women should or should not behave and how they should be appropriately employed. Again, as Ma observes (p. 11), such a focus on the

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1 See for example: David Strand, Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); M.Yue Dong, Republican Beijing: The City and its Histories (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Weikun Cheng, City of Working Women: Life, Space and Social Control in Early Twentieth Century Beijing (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2011).
agency of lower-class women and their ‘everyday tactics’ of simple survival complements recent gender studies of wartime China that usually highlight how the war radicalised women, either in Guomindang-controlled China (female suffragists or factory workers in Chongqing), or CCP rural base areas (female activists in the rural revolution).

Chapter One focuses on the limited employment opportunities for married women as they struggled to cope with their husbands’ inability to provide for the family at a time of growing food shortages. Many of the women appearing in the court cases were designated as ‘unemployed’ (wuye 無業) and in terms of the formal economy, this may have been true. Unlike other cities such as Shanghai or Tianjin, Beijing (primarily a government and cultural centre) did not experience significant industrial development during the first half of the twentieth century, and there were few ‘modern’ factories; the numbers of women employed in the industrial sector were few. Official statistics in 1943 indicated that only seventeen of the 266 factories in Beijing employed women, while in 1944 the total number of women in manufacturing jobs was given as 11,025, comprising 10.8 per cent of the entire labour force in this sector (pp. 53–54). Yet many women did work – either working at home under a putting-out system producing embroidery items such as curtains, tablecloths and cushions or outside the home as domestic servants and cooks, street peddlers, menders and washers of clothes, and recyclers of waste. All these occupations, however, were in a sense ‘invisible’ to the official and bureaucratic gaze. On this point, Ma usefully notes (pp. 44–50) that the Chinese term for ‘occupation’ (zhiye 職業), which originally referred to official duties in early China, had become by the early decades of the twentieth century associated with ‘productive and disciplined’ labour that contributed to industrialisation and national well-being.

As food rationing became more stringent and the price of basic food items rose after 1938, married women sought other ways to escape their increasingly precarious situations. Chapter Two discusses their flight from the marital relationship, either in tandem with men they had encountered within their neighbourhoods or while at work, or, with the assistance of older female neighbours and relatives, including mothers and mothers-in-law, to enter into a new marriage elsewhere with a potentially more solvent husband. In many of the court cases such women justified their actions by indicting their husbands’ failure to provide support (buyang 不養). Ma argues that in so doing these women did not aim to challenge patriarchal norms, which posited men as the household head and principal bread-winner (often the target of social reformers), but rather to protest at their non-fulfillment. Wifely desertion in itself, considered a crime under Qing dynasty law, was ‘de-criminalised’ in the 1930s, and only if a woman consummated a new marriage before dissolving the previous one