

*Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949*. By ZHAO MA. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. xiv, 366 pp. ISBN: 9780674088382 (cloth). doi:10.1017/S0021911818002711

By focusing on stories of lower-class women charged under “Offenses against the Institutions of Marriage and the Family” (*fanghai hunyin jiating zui*) in Beijing from 1937 to 1949, Zhao Ma details everyday lives under the turbulent economy and modern state-building efforts of successive wartime regimes (Guomindang, Japanese Occupation forces, and Communist), and examines key themes animating recent urban, labor, and women’s history studies of prewar and wartime China.<sup>1</sup> While the case files of women charged with crimes of bigamy (*chonghun*), adultery (*tongjian*), and abduction (*youguai*) may provide only partial stories of extraordinary circumstances, and only of married women, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing* gives more than “a good enough story” (p. 31). The book moves between the daily “survival tactics” of lower-class women and larger spheres of social reformist, elite feminist, legal, and modern disciplinary state campaigns. Beijing’s lower-class women emerge as central to a world of changing practices of marriage, sexuality, work, travel, and forms of women’s public presence.

Chapter 1 discusses the developing official and social reformist discourse of *zhiye* (occupation) as an ideal of a modern industrial workforce engaged in regular and skilled productive and moral labor. *Zhiye* discourse envisioned such labor as central to women’s liberation (p. 39). Beijing’s minuscule formal industrial sector, however, meant that lower-class women were usually precariously employed in an informal economy of low-paid serial labor. Ma reveals not only the difficulties married lower-class women in finding stable gainful employment to decrease their dependency on men, but also the lack of official and social reformist recognition for the labor they did perform. Running away from a marriage and entering a new one thus becomes a key survival tactic of lower-class women that the book examines.

Chapter 2 focuses on women claiming a “lack of the source of livelihood” (*wuyou shenghuo*) from husbands when charged with adultery or bigamy (p. 87). Lower-class women, their families, and court judges all tended to accept that men were providers and women dependents, despite new laws fostering more financially equal gender dynamics in marriage. Ma argues that unlike more elite women, lower-class women did not abandon marriages to oppose male authority. Instead, male authority was challenged indirectly as men became “victims” of their expected role as breadwinners in a time of wartime

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., 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 Press, 2011); Janet Y. Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900–1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012); Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Di Wang, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870–1930* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Danke Li, *Echoes of Chongqing: Women in Wartime China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986); Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

poverty (p. 89). One may, however, consider women's use of the still-accepted language of their dependency and moral purity to justify actions with other reasons. Male authority may also not have been seriously shaken, as runaway wives were still tracked down by husbands, brought to court, and put under intense scrutiny about their motivations and actions.

While lower-class women may have been dependent on men, they were not without a community to turn to in times of need. Tenement communities in wartime Beijing helped women escape from untenable familial situations and find new jobs and partners (chapter 3), and provided crucial community recognition for marital arrangements that may not have otherwise complied with new official regulations for marriages (chapter 4). Officials and social reformers viewed the transience and crowding of the tenements as fostering immorality, criminality, and “backward” practices, leading to state surveillance efforts aimed at them—from revamping the imperial-period *baojia* to new household registration (*hukou*) and identity card (*juhuzheng*) schemes. Lower-class women, however, deployed flexible neighborhood networks to evade and manipulate this surveillance. Despite such local communal tactics, Ma argues that tenement networks were often self-serving, and not a basis for sustained solidarity or formal resistance to institutional and political agendas.

The final chapters focus on a wider spectrum of mobile lives and state attempts to manage them. Chapter 5 surveys increasingly reliable transportation that allowed women access to regional markets. Chapter 6 discusses women's use of cheap hotels and wayside inns for refuge, illicit trade, and sexual encounters. Ma reveals Beijing's lower-class women as a “driving force” for “a new relationship between womanhood and urban public space” (p. 286) that also elicited official alarm about improper female behavior in public. A female police force patrolling Beijing's tenements, train stations, and city gates (p. 293) is also mentioned, but warrants more study. Overall, these chapters expose successive wartime regimes' views of lower-class women's activities and mobility as potential threats to social and domestic order, while women themselves creatively negotiated new security measures in their struggles for survival.

The continuity of the state apparatus and vision of women's domestic and public lives of the Guomindang, Japanese, and Communists is a main insight of this book. The conclusion, however, discusses the Communists' successful recruitment of lower-class women's labor and collective political consciousness, which may mitigate the book's general assertion that lower-class women lacked such consciousness. Ultimately, though, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing* richly shows how grand narratives of “awakening and progress” (p. 11) may not account for the everyday tactics of survival and resistance of populations such as lower-class women in wartime Beijing.

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*The Buddha Party: How the People's Republic of China Works to Define and Control Tibetan Buddhism.* By JOHN POWERS. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiv, 370 pp. ISBN: 9780199358151 (cloth, also available as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911818002723

*The Buddha Party* is a comprehensive study of the efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to redefine Tibetan Buddhism to make it compatible with official