Creating Loyalty and Building Families in Wartime China

Professor Louise Edwards, Scientia Professor, School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Australia, examines wartime propagandists’ efforts to reorient group identity and encourage participation in the war effort through an analysis of posters, woodblock prints and ink-drawings produced in China during the War of Resistance against Japan.

Professor Edwards argues that reformulation of group identity was a major concern for propagandists as they encouraged people to shift from prioritising family bonds to identifying with larger units such as the region, nation or Army. Chinese wartime propaganda, in this aspect, is similar to its western counterparts.

Professor Edwards also highlighted that the European and Chinese characterisation of men who enlisted in the army differs. In Europe, World War II propaganda posters portrayed enlisted men in the army and navy as masculine and as a big man capable of making a difference in the war. This was the case of propaganda posters in the United States, France, Soviet Union, Germany and Britain. In China, there was however a different interpretation to the enlistee’s role. The men in the Guomindang army were portrayed as ordinary soldiers who had developed strong camaraderie and team spirit in detachments and platoons in the combat against the Japanese.

In the case of the women, the interpretation and characterisation were also different. Women in wartime Europe and the United States took on roles on the home front, providing support to the men fighting on the front lines in continental Europe. Women in the cities were portrayed as defenceless from the aerial bombings of enemy planes, and men were needed in the armed forces to protect them. In China, as the war was fought in China where women were exposed to the danger of invading Japanese armies, women were portrayed as combatants in the war. Propaganda posters portrayed women as joining the Guomindang army and playing a crucial role in the nation’s war effort. Some posters also depicted women in villages taking up arms alongside the old and young when Japanese troops approached. Thus, the characterisation of women’s role during the war in Europe was very different from that in China.

Lastly, Professor Edwards highlighted that in the Chinese case, especially due to the dwindling numbers of recruits needed to sustain the war effort, propagandists appealed to the powerful desire of men to form families in their bid to attract men to enlist. Specifically, in the case of Chinese propaganda during the War of Resistance, the ‘promise of a wife’ was explicitly presented as a lure to encourage men to enlist. In this respect the state became the ‘super patriarch’—replacing the role of parents and elders in facilitating marriage. This was absent from European and US propaganda, suggesting that men in these locations did not feel as powerless in the marriage market as Chinese men and neither did they regard wives as some form of ‘reward’ for military service.

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