

**Document 11.3: Excerpts from a memoir by Li Xiuwen (1890–1992), describing life under Japanese invasion and occupation**

*Born in a Guangxi Province village to a poor peasant family, Li Xiuwen's life spanned a tumultuous century in China's history. She was the wife of one of China's most famous twentieth century generals, Li Zongren. Li Zongren was also elected vice president of China in 1947 and became the country's acting president from 1948–1949. After the Communists took power, Li Xiuwen lived in Hong Kong, then Cuba and the United States. In 1973, she returned to Guilin in China. She dictated her memoirs to the wife of her nephew, and they were serialized in Chinese newspapers. Her son translated the text into English.*

In 1937, the whole nation was mobilized to fight against Japan. The fighting was still very far from Guangxi [Province]. Life in Guilin was still peaceful. The provincial seat of the government was moved from Nanning to Guilin. Government personnel, workers and their families arrived gradually, and there were many organizations which followed. The work of education and military matters increased and expanded and there were many new high schools to satisfy the demands of the new populace. All sorts of commerce, business, entertainments and restaurants appeared everywhere in the city. Each day, the small, quiet mountainous town changed more and more into a big city with all kinds of commerce and business....

City life was happy. Things in the city changed for the better. Guilin had all the things that the big city would offer. Also, the war was happening in many areas of China. The fighting was still far away from Guilin. People enjoyed life as though there was no war in the country.

Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou were lost in succession to the Japanese invader. Wuhan was in danger and the city of Changsha was almost completely destroyed by fire. People from everywhere rushed to Guilin. Soon the city became a refugee center of poets, playwrights, artists, educators and writers. And the city suddenly became the center of Chinese culture. Many wartime patriotic stories, plays and propaganda appeared. The city was mobilized and the people were encouraged to work for the survival of the country.

Men, women and children joined the patriotic activities and movements. Donation tables were placed in every street to collect money for the war effort....

In mid-May 1939, Li Zongren [*now a general in the Nationalist army*] won the biggest, most important victory in the war. It was the first victory against foreign troops in the Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese imperial troops suffered their first defeat at Chinese hands with more than 20,000 killed or wounded. The victory assured the Chinese government and people that Japan could be defeated and final victory would belong to China.

Every city and town in China celebrated this big victory. In Guilin, the whole city was joyful. People set off firecrackers. Parades were held day and night. The celebration went on for three days. All my friends came to congratulate me on my husband's big victory. They praised my husband as a very good strategist and a good commander-in-chief. They said, "With a few more victories like that, we will drive the Japanese invaders out of China." I was very happy on this occasion. For the next six months, people in Guilin were quite optimistic in their outlook on the war.

But there was no good news from the battlefield. Enemy troops advanced and occupied more and more Chinese territory. People who had husbands, fathers, sons and relatives in the battle zones worried about their safety....

At the beginning of the war, people left their homes in the war zones and came to Guilin for their safety. Those who were wealthy immediately bought houses and properties in the city for them to live in. Some could only afford to rent a house or a few little rooms and some just built the simplest living space with wooden boards and bamboo outside the city....

The city population increased from under 100,000 to 300,000. Government and business offices and civilian organizations moved in and spread all over the city. More new business offices, stores, hotels, restaurants and teahouses were opened. There was a teahouse every block, a restaurant on every other block. Some restaurants were famous for northern food, some specialized in southern food. There were Cantonese, Sichuanese, and Hunanese restaurants. All of them were very crowded and did good business because the Chinese like good food and secondly, they would rather sit in restaurants talking with friends than sit in the few small crowded rooms with members of their family. Of course, one had to have money to eat out in the restaurants; however, there were many economical places also.

All over the city there were stalls and stands in the streets selling rice noodles, rice with meat and vegetables on top, fried pancakes, sweet cakes, water chestnut cakes, peanuts, cooked chestnuts and drinks. Their prices were much cheaper than those in the restaurants. At night, the streets were very bright with lights and store neon signs and were very crowded with people walking. The city was very lively and noisy. Some of the people came out to take a walk in order to escape the tedious, monotonous atmosphere at home. Some went to the restaurants to have dinner with friends or associates. Some entertained for business; some went to theaters to see plays, movies or opera. This busy, lively and prosperous atmosphere had not been seen or felt ever before.

Inside the stadium there was an interesting open market where people bought and sold second-hand clothes, personal belongings, furniture and everything that one could think of. The majority of the customers were refugees from other parts of the country. When they arrived in Guilin, they couldn't find work right away. When their savings were exhausted, they had to sell their clothes and belongings for food. Some sold the things that they had no use for anymore, and some reduced their belongings for convenience in traveling. However, when they needed something cheap, they went there to buy. This marketplace was very busy and crowded. When the enemy came close to Guilin, the people sold their belongings and turned them into money to escape from the city. In such confusing times, many expensive things were sold for one tenth of their value. In the last three years of the Sino-Japanese War, refugees from nearby towns and cities rushed to Guilin for safety. Hundreds of them came without any money and couldn't find work.

They became beggars living in the street. Men, women and children begged for money and for food. They followed the people in the street, begging for a few pennies, or went from house to house to ask for leftovers. It was terribly sad. These were the tragedies of the war. I always gave them a few pennies and gave them leftovers, but it wouldn't solve the problem. I was so disturbed I seldom went out of the house.

In 1942, a woman came to Guilin with her daughter of seventeen. She heard that my brother was planning to take a second wife because his first wife could not bear him a son. She asked someone to bring her daughter to see me and inform me that she wanted to give her daughter to my younger brother as a second wife for some money. Then she could continue on her journey to Guizhou to live with her relatives.

I was sorry to see such a young girl marry my younger brother who was over thirty years old, but if I had refused her, they wouldn't have had the money to continue the journey. I let my brother meet the girl, and he agreed to take her in as a second wife. The mother thanked me so much for saving both their lives, and continued her journey to Guizhou alone....

One night, a famous opera was performed in the theater and my friend and I went to see it. We were settled in our reserved compartments. In the midst of the performance, we saw a disturbance in the orchestra section. There was fighting, quarreling, yelling, and crying everywhere. The condition was very confused. My friend and I hurriedly walked out of the theater.

We saw a group of ten policemen who arrived to keep order. We found out later that the disabled and wounded veterans refused to pay admission. The orderlies tried to order them out and quarrels started. The veterans said that they lost their arms, legs and even their lives to defend their country against the Japanese in the battlefields. The people who did not do the fighting nor served the country stayed behind to get rich in investments and speculations. They enjoyed their lives. It was time that the disabled and wounded veterans should have a good time, too. They complained that they were poorly paid and could not afford to pay admission, but the people away from the battlefields owed their lives and properties to them, so they had the right to see the opera performances....

Not long after the start of the Sino-Japanese War, inflation had spread all over China. In Guilin, the prices of things increased very rapidly. People hoarded food provisions, clothing, materials, etc. in order to protect the value of their savings. Some speculated in silver and gold and some went into teahouse, restaurant, hotel and wholesale businesses. Those who had friends, relatives or connections in the banks borrowed money with special low interest rates to do all kinds of speculations. They had a few turnovers of speculation in a few months or a year and tripled their capital. Of course, they had to share their profits with the people who lent them the money or did favors for them. In a short time, they became very rich.

I didn't know about doing business much less speculations and had no interest in them. My friend, Mrs. Wong, advised me repeatedly that I should do something to prevent the depreciation of my savings. I told her that my husband warned me not to speculate and hoard, which would confuse the financial market. All speculation and hoarding were bad for the war effort and the nation. It also violated the law. We patriots should not do things to hurt the nation.

Later, the depreciation of Chinese money was getting worse, so I and some of my village friends opened a silk retail store Li & Li Silk Material Company in Guilin. My older brother was the manager of this company. Not only did we not make any profit, but we lost everything. In the attack and occupation of Guilin by the enemy, our store and its inventory were all destroyed by fire. That was my first lesson in doing business....

The war was in its sixth year. There were many refugees old and young in the streets. They were poor and hungry; moreover the wounded and disabled veterans wandered the streets everywhere. That tragic condition appeared in the entire city. I was very worried about my husband's safety and my son's well-being in the United States<sup>1</sup>. I began to go to the temple to pray for their safety and well-being. I became a superstitious person....

At the beginning of the war, there had been no air defense against enemy air raids. In Guilin, air raid safety had been badly neglected. When the sirens sounded, the enemy planes had already appeared above in the sky and people had no time to run to the caves in and around the city or the air raid shelters nearby.

After severe damage of property and great loss of human life, the city government had urgently built a city air raid safety and defense system. Inside and around Guilin, there were many mountains with big caves—natural air raid shelters. There were also air raid shelters built under government buildings. I usually ran into the underground shelter of the government bank next door. Soon the city civil service air raid defense was formed to work for better air raid defense and safety.

Air raid warning lamps were put at the top of the mountains in and around the city. My house was only two blocks away from a small mountain with two big caves in the middle of the city. When the first air raid warning sounded, I could easily walk to the shelter. However, enemy planes came often to bomb the city, sometimes at night, and sometimes twice a day. Many areas were destroyed; thousands of people were killed or wounded. Every family stored dried food for emergencies. Many city people took refuge in the country in the daytime and returned home at night to sleep. Sometimes the enemy knew people took refuge under the trees in the countryside

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<sup>1</sup> Youlin had left China to study in the United States just before war broke out.

and opened fire from the air at the treetops. Many people were killed and wounded in this way. Life in the city was enormously disturbed and unsafe, so some of the city people went to live in the country with their relatives. I accepted my servant's advice and took refuge in Longtoucun and lived with my mother-in-law and relatives....

In July 1944, Changsha in Hunan, about 300 miles away, was lost to the Japanese. They slowly marched to Guilin. The city was very disturbed and confused, and people began to evacuate the city for distant mountainous areas. In August, people were worried and my relatives and friends asked me whether the city would be lost and where would I go. Guilin was under war conditions. Its lively and prosperous conditions suddenly disappeared.

The order to evacuate was issued by the authorities. The conditions of the city were disorder and confusion. It seemed that calamity was closing in, but there were people who still hoped that the Chinese army could perform miracles, win a victory and repulse the enemy. However, the provincial government planned to move to Bose, 200 miles away.

Governor Wong of Guangxi was ill and planned to go into the hospital in Chongqing<sup>2</sup>. His wife and family also went with him. Some of the provincial high officials' families also planned to take refuge in Chongqing. I didn't know where to go. My husband was on the battlefield and had no time to look after me. My only son was very far away in America. So I couldn't make the decision.

My husband's two brothers decided to take refuge in the village first, and if the enemy advanced close to Guilin, they would go into the mountains. I planned to wait for a while, hoping to hear from Delin. Two days before Governor Wong's departure for Chongqing, his wife came over and asked me whether I had decided to go to Chongqing with them. I knew that this group was with their families while I was by myself. So I decided not to join them. I told her that I would go back to the village home with my brothers-in-law to wait and see.

Madame Wong warned and advised me that I was a person in an important position [*as the wife of General Li*] and I shouldn't go back to the village for refuge. She told me that according to the government's opinion if I didn't want to go to the national capital of Chongqing, I should go

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<sup>2</sup> Chiang Kai-shek had moved the government to Chongqing in 1937.

with the provincial government to Bose. The day of the governor's departure, his wife came to see me again. She said they were leaving in the afternoon and if I wanted to, I still could go with them. She told me to be sure to leave the city. She said if I didn't, if anything bad happened to me, the governor would not be able to face my husband.

But my husband had already sent someone to bring a message to me to go to Bose with the provincial government. So I hurried to pack my belongings to start the unknown journey. I told my older brother and my servant, Tienshao, to remain living in the house until the enemy came close to the city. Then they could leave and go into the mountains. They brought a young girl servant of seventeen years old and a male cook to go to Bose with me.

We left Guilin in a car. Following about five busloads of government officials along the way, there were hundreds of young and old refugees. Some walked; some rode on a wooden cart pulled by people or animals. They looked frightened and confused, carrying their belongings and pulling their children. Some stopped on the road, tired of walking. Children and old people were crying because they were hungry and hurt. It was sad and terrifying to see such suffering.

When we rode along the railroad tracks, we saw people tightly packed inside and on the roofs of the trains. People also tied themselves underneath the trains. Hundreds were killed from falling off the roofs and those tied underneath suffered broken ribs. The people took such terrible risks to escape from the enemy. Refugees who were unable to get inside the trains were crowded inside and outside the station, their belongings piled up like a hill. They were targets for the enemy planes to bomb and machine gun. Hundreds died this way. All I saw and heard along this journey was very tragic, sad and frightening. It could have happened to me. In my mind, I thought if I die, I would prefer to die at home, so I regretted leaving Guilin....

Everyone was patiently waiting for the final victory and the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. When the news came, the people were wild with joy. People ran from house to house to report the good news. Noise from firecrackers filled the town [*where she had sought refuge*]... We, the refugees, were exhilarated by the good news and congratulated one another. Everyone was busy packing their belongings... We wished that we were born with wings so we could fly back [*to Guilin*] immediately. Some of us who had relatives who had taken refuge in other places would write or telegram them about their return. The post and telegraph offices were packed with

people. At this moment, I didn't know where my husband was, and my son was too far away in America.... A few days later, we started our journey....

We heard that Guilin had a cholera epidemic. On the way to Guilin, we found that a great portion of the streets and some bridges had been damaged by the bombing and had not been repaired. Some of the bridges shook when the cars traveled on them. Once, we drove close to a wooden bridge and saw some of the wooden pieces were broken. My driver told us to come out of the car and walk across the bridge. While he was driving the car across it, more pieces of the bridge broke. When the car came near the other side, the wood beneath the car cracked. The car tilted to one side. Luckily the car reached safety. But one of the big suitcases on the car roof fell into the river. My driver said that he had gone through the enemy bombings during the war without a scratch, but he almost lost his life falling off the damaged bridge in peacetime.

We arrived in Guilin in the evening and we were glad to be home again. As we drove through the city, we saw that great parts of the city had been destroyed by bombs and fire. There were very few people in the street. The city was dead. I found my new home in Guihua Street had been destroyed by fire. The house and the last section behind the silk store were leveled along with other buildings on my property.

Luckily, my sister's son had come back to Guilin a month earlier. He hired a builder to build a temporary small house for me to live in on the land of my other old Chinese house, which was also destroyed by fire. My sister's son told me that all my close relatives were safe and well. But my belongings, left in my older brother's house, were all confiscated by the Japanese soldiers. But I was happy that everyone was safe, and I didn't mind about the loss of my belongings.

The city's utilities were damaged in the fighting so we had no running water or electricity. Life was inconvenient and uncomfortable. Homeless people and refugees sat on the sidewalks of the streets. Some of them had lost a hand or arm, some a leg, some their sight. There hung a sheaf of paper explaining their tragedies and begging for help. It was just too sad and frightening. Such a hopeless atmosphere had resulted from the war.

But after eight years of war, the final victory indeed brought joy and happiness to every Chinese. Sweeping the Japanese army out of China, no more suffering from fighting, and sovereignty over our own territory were much more important than family and individual losses. As long as we



were an independent and free nation, our determination could build us into a strong and rich country. As an individual, I would try to rebuild what I had lost....

After the war, my fellow business associates suggested opening a hotel, so my storefront and three little sections of the house were rented out to be the hotel and my nephew (my sister's son) was the manager. During the war, even after the war, one had to participate in business. Paper money depreciated so fast, all employees of government, business and workers refused to accept pay in paper money. They were paid either in silver coin or rice or other stuffs of equivalent value. So people had to exchange or barter their goods for themselves and their families to live. Those who depended on their salaries to live on and those who had fixed income were the ones who suffered very much. So there was corruption, red tape in the government, business and everywhere.

People thought that these conditions existed only in wartime, but after the war, the depreciation of Chinese paper currency was much worse. As my friend told me, Chinese paper currency was not even worth using as wallpaper....

Source: Li Xiuwen, unpublished memoir.