

Document 8.7: Excerpts from a memoir by Li Xiuwen (1890–1992), describing the political turmoil of the 1920s

Born in rural Guangxi Province 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.

Although there was no fighting around the area of Guilin, we often heard threatening rumors. Once people spread the news that fighting was not far away. The army headquarters commandeered all the boats big and small. An order was given to the army personnel's families to leave the city by boat. People didn't even have time to pack their belongings. They just ran down to the pier. Then they learned that it was only a rumor so they walked home.

My husband was out of Guilin at this time. Dejie¹ and I had decided not to follow the evacuation order, so we had stayed in the city. But we were frightened by the rumor. I could never get used to this unsteady, abnormal and horrifying life. I often thought of the quiet and peace of the village. I daydreamed of the blue mountains and water, green trees and rice fields, the fragrant smell of flowers, and the singing of the birds... the smoke coming out from all the chimneys indicated dinner cooking in every family... the whole family together to enjoy dinner.... How happy family life had been! No wonder my husband had told me that I would never become accustomed to the life of the wife of an officer.

¹ Li Xiuwen's husband's second wife

In the war years,² we moved often from city to city. We couldn't eat and sleep peacefully. Suddenly an order would be given by army headquarters to move. The families would hurry to pack and follow the army by boat or by sedan chair. Sometime we heard the noise of cannons. Sometimes the enemy advanced behind us. It was hard for a woman to take these adverse conditions.

Whenever we arrived in a new city, we rented a place to live, or we stayed in the barracks. There wasn't much discipline in the army. The people were terrorized by the soldiers. When the army came into a city, people locked their doors. The shops stopped doing business. Some stores had their doors half open. If the merchants got paid for their merchandise, they would open their doors wide and continue to do business.

Whenever the army arrived at a place, the soldiers went out to "borrow" things from the people, sometimes for their superior officers. The borrowed things would never be returned. There was a Chinese saying: "Whenever an army passes by, the chickens and dogs are greatly disturbed." That described the horrible conditions. I was really sick living this kind of life in Guilin. Always I wanted to go back to the village. I went through so many years of fighting and couldn't imagine when peace would come. It would have been better for me to live a normal and safe life.

Fortunately, the war finally ended in Guangxi [Province]. In the autumn of 1925, Guangxi was unified by a government. To celebrate the unification, people lit firecrackers, beat drums and gongs. There were parades for many days and nights. All the streets were crowded with people. Joy and jubilation showed on everybody's face. The people in the army were especially happy, for they didn't have to go to war again. Their families and wives were ecstatic, for they thought their future would be normal and peaceful. They wouldn't have to worry about becoming widows.

Lives and businesses started to become prosperous. In Guilin, there were a few new restaurants on riverboats. They built new theaters, and people crowded into the

² Between 1912 and 1927

restaurants and theaters. One could hear the noise and singing of the people. The whole city was filled with happiness and joy.

During more than ten years of fighting, people went through all the hardships of war. Now that there was peace; farming and business flourished in the whole province. Living conditions improved. People were living in a happy environment. But Delin³ was busier than ever. Now he was one of the leaders of Guangxi Province. He went away often and tried to make a plan to build up the province....

Source: Li Xiuwen, unpublished memoir.

³ Her husband