

EPISTOLARY GUIDEBOOKS FOR WOMEN IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY CHINA AND THE SHAPING OF MODERN CHINESE WOMEN'S NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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The historical scene behind epistolary guidebooks for women in China

The practice of writing letters has a long history in China. Before the invention of paper, people in ancient period wrote letters by inscribing text on string-bound bundles of bamboo and wooden slips, roughly a foot in length. Therefore, in accordance with the characteristics of the writing material, *chidu* 尺牘 became the earliest term for letter.² *Chi* refers to the length of the wooden slips while *du* means a piece of board. With the flourishing of letter writing since the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589), epistolary guidebooks, which contain a big variety of sample letters and vocabulary, appeared and functioned as references for readers to write different letters. In the Song-Ming (960-1644) period which was one of the golden ages of book printing, the role of *chidu* has altered significantly. People not only regarded letters as the main reliable means of correspondence, but also as a kind of literary creation and appreciation. The flood of letter collections resulted, also called *chidu*, and were published as forms of anthologies (*zongji* 總集) and collected works (*bieji* 別集). More importantly, these collections also functioned as letter-writing guides, which aimed “to help less well-educated readers write the sort of letters they needed to maintain social relations in literate society.”³

In the early Qing period, these commercial letter collections were still widely popular. Significantly, with the tendency towards a rising rate of female literacy in the Ming-Qing (1368-1912) era, women's letters began to attract male scholars' attention. A number of letter collections included some fragments of letters written by women, despite

- 1 This paper is developed from my M. Phil. thesis, “Model Missives: Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China” (Hong Kong Baptist University, 2012)
- 2 It is important to note that *chidu* is not the only term for letter. As a result of the rapid changes that occurred in printing materials and writing formats of letters, a considerable presence of other terms for letters prevailed, for instance, *chihan* 尺翰, *chisu* 尺素, *shu* 書, *shuzha* 書札, and many others. For more details, see Xie Jinmei 謝金美, *Gujin shuxin yanjiu* 古今書信研究 (A study on epistolary writing from ancient to modern times; Gaoxiang: Gaoxiang shifan xueyuan guowen yanjiusuo, 1978), pp. 16-46; Zhao Shugong 趙樹功, *Zhongguo chidu wenxueshi* 中國尺牘文學史 (A history of Chinese epistolary literature; Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1999), pp. 5-12.
- 3 David Pattinson, “The Market for Letter Collections in Seventeenth-Century China,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, vol. 28 (Dec. 2006), p. 133.

the fact that these collections were still largely made up of writings by male writers.⁴ Collections of women's letters eventually appeared in the late Qing period, of which *Shuangguixuan chidu* 雙桂軒尺牘 (*Shuangguixuan* letter collection) is the earliest one we can locate.⁵ Entering the twentieth century, publishing experienced another golden age of letter collections. Publications for different usages, including commercial as well as social, and different targets such as women and children, were produced in large numbers, enjoying considerable commercial success.⁶ A growing interest in women's education was noticeable, and thus epistolary guidebooks exclusively for women, commonly in the name of *nüzi chidu* 女子尺牘, first emerged, aiming at guiding their female readers to write letters, and these quickly boomed in popularity.⁷

While being published in early twentieth century China, which was described as “a period of crisis—— a crisis of nation, of race, and national and racial identity,”⁸ these letter-writing manuals did more than simply demonstrating the technical skills of letter writing to women. They also educated women on how to take up their roles as new society members in a new era. As Luo Suwen 羅蘇文 states in her book, these publications were associated with societal development during late Qing and early Republican China. She further elaborates that the manuals not only provided a useful guide for helping women develop their code of behavior and manners, but also encouraged them to evolve as a member of “*nüjie* 女界” (the realm of women).⁹ In other words, rather than regarding these guidebooks merely as epistolary manuals, it could be reasonable to argue that they also functioned as a tool to promote ideas related to female citizenship.

- 4 See Ellen Widmer, “The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China,” *Late Imperial China*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Dec. 1989), pp. 1-43.
- 5 Ding Shanyi 丁善儀 (1821-1850), *Shuangguixuan chidu* (Qing edition; housed in the Toyo Bunko Library).
- 6 See Zhao Shugong, *Zhongguo chidu wenxueshi*, p. 78.
- 7 By searching the electronic version of “WanQing qikan quanwen shujuku 晚清期刊全文數據庫,” one can discover that apart from printing epistolary guidebooks for women as individual publications, magazines also contained a number of sample letters for their female audiences. For example, *Tongxue bao* 通學報 published several sample letters in its issues. See “Chidu: Nūhai xiang nūyou jie qinpu (ZhongYingwen duizhao) 尺牘: 女孩向女友借琴譜(中英文對照)” (Epistolary guidebook: A girl writes to borrow a piano piece [Chinese-English]), in *Tongxuebao*, vol. 57 (1907), p. 85; “Chidu: Nūhai huanshu yu nūyou (ZhongYingwen duizhao) 尺牘: 女孩還書于女友(中英文對照)” (Epistolary guidebook: A girl returns a book to her friend [Chinese-English]), *ibid*, p. 86; “Chidu: Nūhai yinbing cixie luxing (ZhongYingwen duizhao) 尺牘: 女孩因病辭謝旅行(中英文對照)” (Epistolary guidebook: A girl mentions in a letter that she cannot go on a picnic because of illness [Chinese-English]), *ibid*, vol. 60 (1907), p. 181; “Chidu: Nūxuesheng jiabing (ZhongYingwen duizhao) 尺牘: 女學生家稟(中英文對照)” (Epistolary guidebook: A girl student writes to her parents [Chinese-English]), *ibid*, vol. 64 (1907), p. 307. Unfortunately, since model letters in magazines are limited, currently they are not sufficient to put up a discussion.
- 8 Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.4.

Furthermore, although information concerning most of the editors of epistolary guidebooks either cannot be found or showed insufficient biographical accounts, the limited sources about Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973),¹⁰ Xu Wanlan 徐畹蘭 (1862-1912),¹¹ and Yu Jiadian 俞佳鈿,¹² can still shed light on their backgrounds, allowing us to look into their objectives of publishing epistolary guidebooks. Linking the feminist ideas that Bao advocated during his term as editor of *Women's Eastern Times*, together with Xu, and Yu's participation in the activities of supporting nation products, it is easy for us to infer that during the process of compiling *chidu*, the editors aimed at more than the transmission of writing-skills to women; they were actually utilizing sample letters as tools to disseminate new nationalist and gender ideas. Prefaces in epistolary guidebooks for women also demonstrated the editors' objectives, showing that their purpose was more than merely illustrating the technical skills of letter-writing to women. They also paid attention to help women maintain high moral standards. For instance, the preface in *Zuixin nüzi chidu fanben* 最新女子尺牘範本 (The newest epistolary guidebook for women) claimed this guidebook's main objective as to impart ethical education so that it could be used by civilized women (*wenmin nüshi* 文明女士) as both a letter-writing manual and a textbook on morality.¹³ Similarly, an editor of *Nüzi pingquan chidu* 女子平權尺牘 (Letter-writing manual for equal female rights) clearly stated in the preface that the purpose of the letter-writing guidebook was to highlight morality and knowledge as necessary in preparing women to strive for gender equality and women's suffrage.¹⁴

Despite their behind-the-scenes objectives, studies on epistolary guidebooks written for women at the turn of the twentieth century are relatively few in number. While recent works have fruitfully emphasized the historical significance of letters, letter-writing manuals for women are frequently pushed out of the spotlight. For instance, scholars like Hu Chuanhai 胡傳海, Zheng Yimei 鄭逸梅, Zhao Shugong, and

9 See her *Nüxing yu jindai Zhongguo* 女性與近代中國 (Women and modern China; Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1996), p. 448.

10 Mei Jialing 梅家玲, "Bao Tianxiao yu Qingmo Minchu de jiaoyu xiaoshuo 包天笑與清末民初的教育小說" (Bao Tianxiao and late Qing and early Republican educational fiction), in *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學, vol. 35, no. 1 (Jun. 2006), pp. 156-183; Mao Ce 毛策, "Bao Tianxiao wenxue huodong ceying 包天笑文學活動側影" (A silhouette of Bao Tianxiao's literary activities), in *Qingmo xiaoshuo* 清末小說, 1995 no. 15 (Dec. 1995), pp. 70-84.

11 See the electronic version of *Zhejiang defang zhi* 浙江地方志, <http://zjtz.zjol.com.cn/05zjtz/system/2005/12/09/006396550.shtml> (accessed Jan. 2010)

12 Huang Fei 黃飛, "Yuanwei guohou liaoyin shichan: Ji Minchu aiguo nülianjia Yu Jiadian 願維國貨聊隱市塵: 記民初愛國女聯家俞佳鈿" (Yu Jiadian: A patriot for protecting national products in early Republican China), in *Duilian: Minjian duilian gushi* 對聯: 民間對聯故事, vol. 26 (2002), p. 21.

13 Biaomeng bianyisuo 彪蒙編譯所 (ed.), *Zuixin nüzi chidu fanben* (Shanghai: Biaomeng shushi, 1907; hereafter *ZNCF*), "xuyan 序言," 1ab.

14 Zhang Xingji 張荇吉 (ed.), *Nüzi pingquan chidu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guangyi shuju, 1920; hereafter *NZPQCD*), "bianji dayi 編輯大要," unpagged.

Zhu Weiqing 朱维青 conducted general studies on the history of letter-writing in an attempt to draw academia's attention.¹⁵ Following the rediscovery of precious *shuyi* of the Tang Dynasty (618-906) and the Five Dynasties (907-979) from Dunhuang, a number of scholars like Zhao Heping 趙和平 and Zhou Yiliang 周一良, have highlighted the significance of epistolary guidebooks and suggested the possibility of studying social norms through the letter format.¹⁶ Doubtlessly, previous studies have opened up wide horizons for us, but there is still room for us to further expound the great value of Chinese letter writing, especially those epistolary manuals for women which contain a wealth of information about the transformation of gender roles.

With an emphasis on the rediscovery of lost or neglected sources relating to gender issues,¹⁷ letters by and about women have captured scholarly attention in recent decades. Significantly, however, epistolary guidebooks for women published during the early twentieth century were totally ignored, whereas letters written by women and model letters from epistolary guidebooks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often enter and stay in the minds of scholars as a medium for exploring the intersection between letter-writing and gender roles. For instance, Dorothy Ko, Kathryn Lowry, and Yu-yin Cheng have translated several letters written by women and model letters for women in the Ming-Qing period so as to emphasize the richness of China's documentary record on gender relations.¹⁸ Moreover, Ellen Widmer has made use of letters written by Ming-Qing women to explore how female talents built their connections through their epistolary networks.¹⁹ Utilizing women's letters, case studies on specific women have emerged too.²⁰ In addition, Kathryn Lowry worked on love letters in late Ming letter-

15 Hu Chuanhai, *Chidu shijiang* 尺牘10講 (Ten short talks on letter-writing; Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2003); Zheng Yimei, *Chidu conghua* 尺牘叢話 (A story of letter-writing; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004); Zhao Shugong, *Zhongguo chidu wenxueshi*; Zhu Weiqing, *Zhongguo tongxin xiaoshi* 中國通信小史 (A brief history of Chinese correspondence; Taipei: Xuexi chubanshe, 2011).

16 See Zhao Heping, *Dunhuang xieben shuyi yanjiu* 敦煌寫本書儀研究 (Research on epistolary guidebooks from Dunhuang; Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1993); *Dunhuang biao Zhuang jianqi shuyi jijiao* 敦煌表狀箋啓書儀輯校 (Collections and collations of model letters and various official reports from Dunhuang; Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 2000); *Zhao Heping Dunhuang shuyi yanjiu* 趙和平敦煌書儀研究 (Zhao Heping's research on Dunhuang epistolary guidebook; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011); also, see his collaborative work with Zhou Yiliang, *Tang Wudai shuyi yanjiu* 唐五代書儀研究 (Epistolary guidebooks during the Tang and Five Dynasties; Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995).

17 Susan Mann, "What Can Feminist Theory Do for the Study of Chinese History? A Brief Review of Scholarship in the U. S.," *Research on Women in Modern Chinese History*, vol. 1 (Jun. 1993), pp. 241-260.

18 See Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng (eds.), *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 149-153, 155-167, 169.

19 Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," pp. 1-43.

writing manuals to examine how the editing, writing and reading of love letters tied private spaces to changing social roles in the early-seventeenth century.²¹

Conversely, only Luo Suwen observes the sudden occurrence of the letter-writing guidebooks for women during the early twentieth century, pointing out that not only could this be used as a letter-writing guidebook, but also as an ethical textbook, which inculcated into its readers both letter-writing skills and a code of conduct. She also noted that these model letters served as a mirror that reflected how the editors re-appropriated the role of women. Yet, she merely focused on one letter-writing guide for women and only devoted a brief section in her book to this.²²

Although most of the sample letters I studied may not be authentic letters and were short,²³ there is great value in the study of their texts, as they provide strong evidence of the emerging “New woman”.²⁴ This paper thus aims to fill a gap in existing

- 20 Ann Waltner, “Life and Letters: Reflections on Tanyangzi,” in Joan Judge and Hu Ying (eds.), *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Global, Area, and International Archive, 2011), pp. 212-229; Liu Yonggang 劉勇剛, “Yanguo liuchao, qingshen BanCai—— *Liu Rushi chidu* 豔過六朝, 情深班蔡——《柳如是尺牘》” (More gorgeous than the Six Dynasties, more passionate than Ban Zhao and Cai Wenji: Liu Rushi’s letters), in *Shaanxi guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao* 陝西廣播電視大學學報, vol. 4, no. 4 (Dec. 2002), pp. 52-53.
- 21 Kathryn Lowry, “Three Ways to Read a Love Letter in Late Ming,” in *Ming Studies*, vol. 44 (Fall 2000), pp. 48-77; “Duplicating the Strength of Feeling: The Circulation of *Qingshu* in the Late Ming,” in Judith T. Zeitlin & Lydia H. Liu (eds.), with Ellen Widmer, *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 239-272; “The Space of Reading: Describing Melancholy and the Innermost Thoughts in 17th-Century *Qingshu*,” in Ping-chen Hsiung, Ailing Wang, Siaozen Hu, (eds.), “Concealing to reveal”—— *An International Scholarly Conference on the “the Private” and “Sentiment” in Chinese History and Culture* (Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 2003), pp. 33-80.
- 22 Luo Suwen, *Nüxing yu jindai Zhongguo shehui*, pp. 448-455.
- 23 Although some guidebooks contained names of the writers and recipients, the editors did not mention that these letters really came from the said person. Also, most epistolary guidebooks for women simply used “mou 某” (anonymous), to name them. Hence, merely exploring the letters, it is difficult to examine which of the sample letters were really written by women and which were made up by the editors based on how they imagined the modern woman to be.
- 24 In recent years, there have been a number of ground-breaking studies which examined the images of “New Women” at the turn of the twentieth century. Their scholarly works have opened an insightful path for challenging the idea of viewing the emerging new women as a “Western import” and “the polar opposite of the traditional woman. For details, see Barbara Mittler, “Defy(N)ing Modernity: Women in Shanghai’s Early News-Media (1872-1915),” *Research on Women in Modern Chinese History*, vol. 11 (Dec. 2001), pp. 215-259; *Newspaper for China? : Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China 1889-1918*; “Naming the First New Woman: The Case of Kang Aide,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2001), pp. 196-231; Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

studies, by exploring a considerable number of letter-writing manuals for women in early twentieth century China to attempt to re-discover and re-assess the historical significance of these precious sources. I will also analyze these female-oriented manuals as material and cultural objects, and not merely as discursive texts, to explore how the editors had intentionally used these sample letters to introduce their female readers to the new Chinese society and to encourage new modes of female social and political engagement by focusing on female national images reflected in the model letters. As Hu Ying suggested, the figuration of women at the turn of the twentieth century was closely bound up with the anxiety among the intellectuals about constructing a viable cultural, racial, and national identity: the anxiety of modernity.²⁵ Both the emergence of new style epistolary guidebooks and the prominence of women and gender issues on the pages of model letters were products of social forces. Therefore, through an investigation into the sample missives which contributed to the reconstruction of a new womanhood, this paper will paint a broad picture to interpret the inextricable connection between model letters, gender, and national issues in early twentieth century China.

“New women” with a strong sense of national mission

It is stated in the *Yijing* 易經 (The book of change), “Jiaren, nǚ zhengwei hunei, nan zhengwei huwai 家人，女正位乎內，男正位乎外” (In a family, the woman’s place is in the home, while a man’s place is outside the home).²⁶ In theory, men and women followed different paths in their lives in traditional China. As an example, while men were encouraged to make their contribution to the nation, women were strongly cautioned not to participate in politics.²⁷ However, when it came to early twentieth century China, these social norms for women challenged by contemporary intellectuals and reformers. Women were no longer excluded from politics but were urged to shoulder their national obligations. As Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), a prominent political reformer of the late Qing Dynasty, emphasized, both men and women were an integral part of the *guomin* 國民 (nationals), giving way to the idea that nationals faced no boundaries, particularly in gender, thus marking women with the same responsibility

25 Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China 1889-1918*, p. 4.

26 Wang Bi 王弼 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-684; annos.), *Yijing zhengyi* (contained in Ruan Yuan 阮元 [1764-1849; comp.], *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Notes and commentaries on the thirteen classics]; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), *juan* 10, “tuanxia 彖下,” “jianren 家人,” p. 158.

27 Contemporary scholar Liu Yongcong 劉詠聰 conducted a comprehensive exploration into the concept of the *femme fatale*. She mentioned that such an idea began in the Pre-Qin period and reached intellectual cognizance in the Han dynasty. See her *Nüxing yu lishi: Zhongguo chuantong guannian xintan* 女性與歷史：中國傳統觀念新探 (Women and history: A reappraisal of traditional Chinese views; Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1995), pp. 3-5; *Decai sequan—Lun Zhongguo gudai nüxing* 德·才·色·權——論中國古代女性 (Virtue, talent, beauty, and power: Women in ancient China; Taipei: Maitian chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 1998), pp. 15-164.

for the fate of the nation as men.²⁸ Hence, with the national crises, patriotic intellectuals, both men and women, widely discussed women's national responsibility.²⁹ They made use of publications to express their views and to highlight women's close relationship to the nation. New style epistolary guidebooks for women served as a tool to feature a new feminine national identity through model missives, in order to regulate how their female readers understood themselves as people of the nation. The editors of the guidebooks intended to guide them to follow the examples of the characters constructed in the model letters, and expected them to learn from the vivid images of modern women, who placed their own nation as their primary concern. These values were reflected in the guidebooks.

For instance, in a letter of reply to her father who instructed her to learn from the Woman of Qi Shi, Lu 魯漆室女,³⁰ and to serve the nation by devoting herself to education upon graduation, a female writer promised to be determined to live up to her father's expectations. Pointing out that both men and women should be socially and nationally responsible, she stated, "if I gave up, I could not be a real national citizen."³¹ Another example can also be seen in a model letter written by a patriotic young woman who emphasized the Chinese women's national role to her cousin studying in Japan. Comparing the patriotism of Chinese and Japanese women, she lamented that Japanese women were willing to sell their accessories to support the military expenses for the Russo-Japanese War, yet throughout the history of China there were few Chinese women who had acted like the Woman of Qi Shi, Lu. The girl urged her cousin not to forget her loyalty to the nation, even though she was studying in Japan.³² Also, a young woman in a letter written to her classmate stressed the importance of female education,

28 Kang Youwei, "Qu xingjie bao duli 去形界保獨立" (Eliminating barriers to the preservation of independence), in his *Datongshu* 大同書 (*Book of great harmony*; Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956), pp. 126-167.

29 Zheng Yongfu 鄭永福, Lü Meiyi 呂美頤, "Guanyu jindai Zhongguo "nügomin" guannian de lishi kaocha 關於近代中國"女國民"觀念的歷史考察" (Historical research on the idea of "female citizens" in modern China), in *Shanxi shida xuebao* 山西師大學報, 2005 no. 4 (July 2005), pp. 58-63.

30 The Woman of Qi Shi, Lu, was a girl who showed greatly her concern about the current state of the country. Often leaning against a door-post sighing, she was misunderstood by her neighbor who thought that she was sad because of having passed the time of marrying and still not being wed. In fact, she was worried about her country, in which the ruler had gotten older and the heir was too immature to govern the country. Thus, in traditional Chinese history, the Woman of Qi Shi, Lu, has always been portrayed as a female patriot. See Liu Xiang 劉向 (79 BCE-6 BCE), *Gu lienü zhuan* 古列女傳 (The biographies of Chinese women; collected in *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 [Photo facsimile reprint of the completed collections of the four treasures] ; Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1984), *juan* 3, "renzhi zhuan," 14-15a.

31 "Fufu 復父" (Reply to my father), in *ZNCF*, "bingfu lei 稟復類," 9b-10a.

32 "Zhi biaomei quan aiguo 致表妹勸愛國" (Writing to my younger cousin, I urge her to be patriotic), in *ibid.*, "quanshan lei 勸善類," 18ab.

noting that it was a way to prepare women to be *wanquan zhi guomin* 完全之國民 (perfect citizens). She pointed out that women, as nationals, should bear responsibility to the nation and improve their political knowledge as well as their practical skills before participating in politics and the military.³³

In addition, several model letters discussed national affairs and national crisis. A good example was about a young lady who wrote to her friend studying in Japan about the contemporary execution of Xu Xilin 徐錫麟 (1873 -1907) and Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907). The writer believed that many women were overwhelmed by sorrow and anger because of the unjust judgment but unfortunately they did not dare to speak up for fear of repercussions from being involved in the case. Since Chinese students in Japan were always zealous regarding national affairs, she asked if her friend had heard of this news and what she thought about it.³⁴ In a letter written about the Twenty-One Demands of 1915, a girl showed her fury that China had received the ultimatum from Japan on May ninth. She condemned the ignorance of the Chinese government, which thought that it was the winner in this negotiation because Japan had made a concession and China's sovereignty had not been violated. Feeling disappointed with the government, she stressed that four hundred million Chinese people must never forget the humiliation of May ninth, and must struggle wholeheartedly to enrich the strength of the nation.³⁵ Another intrepid girl commented angrily on the Japanese invasion in China, "Although I am just an ordinary girl (*nüliu* 女流), I shall stand up against the Japanese intrusion to defend my nation." She thus wrote to request her paternal uncle to withdraw all of her savings from a Japanese bank and transfer them to a Chinese bank.³⁶

In order to strengthen the power of China, some nationally-minded women in the model letters chose to take practical action through playing the role of fundraiser and donor to support their nation financially. For example, one girl worked very hard at raising money, and received the good sum of 203.48 *yuan* after her friend asked her to raise money for the nation.³⁷ Moved by her friend Peiyu 佩瑜, who actively organized fund-raising activities to support the state, Manxian 曼仙 was determined to donate

33 "Quan qinxue 勸勤學" (A letter to encourage diligence), *ibid*, "quanmin," 27b-28a.

34 "Zhi tongzuezi lun Qiu Jin shi 致同學姊論秋瑾事" (Writing to my classmate, I discuss Qiu Jin's matter with her), in *Zuixin nüzi chidu jiaoben* 最新女子尺牘教本 (The newest letter-writing textbook for women; Shanghai, Zhangfu ji shuzhuang, 1908; hereafter *ZXNZCDJB*), "xuejie 學界," 35b-36a.

35 "Yuyou lun chengren Riben zuihou zhi tongdie 與友論承認日本最後之通牒" (Discussing an ultimatum announced by Japan with my friend), in He Qunshang 賀羣上 (ed.), *Fenlei jujie nüjie xinchiu zhinan* 分類句解女界新尺牘指南 (Epistolary guidebook for women with classification and explanation of each sentence; Shanghai: Jinzhang tushuju, 1915; hereafter *FLJNJXCDZN*), *juan* 4, "lunshi lei 論事類," 14b-15a.

36 "Bing bofu qingdai ti zhengjiyinhang cunkuan 稟伯父請代提正金銀行存款" (Sending to my uncle, I request him to withdraw my savings from a bank), in *ibid*, 3b-4b.

37 "Weiyou daiji guomin juankuan 爲友代集國民捐款" (Helping my friend to raise money for the nation), in *ZXYNZCDJKS*, *xiabian*, 12b-13a.

some money as so to make her contribution too.³⁸ She wrote a letter to her parents, telling them that since many girls in her school had donated money to the nation, she had decided to donate 10 *yuan* from her daily expenses.³⁹

Early twentieth century women and their fight against imperialist power

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Western powers made use of their superior military strength to force China to open itself to the world. China had to resort to signing unequal treaties with the foreign ‘visitors’. The comparatively more advanced styles of Western management and product quality allowed foreign imports to flood the Chinese consumer market, further serving as a death blow to domestic manufacturers and economy.⁴⁰ Hence, there was a popular voice supporting domestic manufacturers, which aroused an urge to protect the interests of local producers as well as to resist the entrance of imports. Noticeably, “women were critical to the National Products Movement not only as participants but also as representations of an ideal nationalistic consumer.” People believed that “if women could learn to consume nationalistically, China would not only survive the incursions of imperialism but also grow rich and powerful.”⁴¹ In consequence, supporting the use of native products became a “real” theme in the letters contained in epistolary guidebooks for women. A number of letters carried the term “Aiguobu 愛國布” (patriotic cloth) to explicitly show the support for national products. In a letter written to her mother, a daughter expressed her desire to have cotton clothes because spring was approaching. She then mentioned that every male and female student nowadays only wore made-in-China textile products, and went on to tell her mother to tailor garments by using ‘patriotic cloth’ as a token to resist

38 “Yu Peiyu zi shu 與佩瑜姊書” (Writing a letter to my sister, Peiyu), in Xu Wanlan (comp.), *Fünü chidu* (Book title labeled as *Fünü shuzha* 婦女書札 on the cover; Shanghai: Zhonghua tushuhuan, 1915; hereafter *FNCD*), *juan* 5, p. 21.

39 “Bing fumu baogao pingan bingyan juansong jiuguo chujin 稟父母報告平安並言捐送救國儲金” (Writing to my parents, I told them I am alright and talked about my contribution to the national salvation fund), in *FLJNJXCDZN*, *juan* 1, “jiating lei 家庭類,” 1b-2b.

40 According to Hsiao Liang-Lin’s import and export statistical research of Chinese foreign trade during 1864-1948, except for the years 1864, 1872-76, 1941 and 1948, China suffered a severe trade imbalance for the rest of the time. See his *China’s Foreign Trade Statistics, 1864-1949* (Cambridge, Mass.: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University; distributed by Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 22-24. Quoting Hsiao’s statistics, Karl Gerth further mentioned that “these numbers represented the two problems confronting China. First, the deficit represented the absence or weakness of Chinese control over China represented by the nation’s inability to stop imports. And, second, it proved that China was a nation of consumers with a weak sense of patriotism.” See his *China Made: Consumer Culture and The Creation of The Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 45.

41 Focusing on the relationship between consumption and nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century in China, Karl Gerth recognized the important of women’s participation in the National Products Movement. See his *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation*, pp. 285-358.

imperialist powers.⁴² Moreover, in two other model letters, two female students who were appointed by the school to source appropriate material for their autumn uniform insisted on using ‘patriotic cloth’ too.⁴³

In addition to saving the nation by consciously consuming China-made goods, female patriotic consumers were eager to encourage others to do the same. Two like-minded female writers in different letters both urged others not to buy foreign silk to make clothes. They emphasized that women, as patriotic nationals, should not give any chance for the foreigners to earn money in China.⁴⁴ With a similar intention, another writer urged her friend to use Chinese products by stressing the economic deprivation that had occurred since a large number of Japanese products had poured into China.⁴⁵

Apart from urging others to boycott foreign products, some nationally-minded women were actively proposing concrete methods to promote national products. One of these examples was Bai Suying 白素英, who wrote a long letter to her younger cousin making suggestions to promote domestic products. She admitted that the quality and variety of foreign goods were obviously superior to Chinese goods, thus claiming that if domestic manufacturers wanted to succeed in the market, the Chinese government would have to establish industrial schools and training centers for industrial innovation and management education. However, considering the fact that cultivating good managers and workers needed a lot of time, she supplemented her argument by offering a short-term solution which was to adopt the Japanese approach of making identical products based on the imported goods to accumulate capital for financing the country’s industrial development. She believed that when the domestic products succeeded in holding a stable market share, consumers would subsequently prefer domestic products to foreign

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- 42 “Bing fumu qing aiguo bu yifu 稟父母請愛國布衣服” (Writing a letter to my parents, I ask them to buy me a garment made of patriotic cloth), in *FLJNJCZDN*, *juan* 1, “jiating lei,” 3ab.
- 43 “Yueyou cangan gongchang 約友參觀工廠” (Making an appointment with my friend to visit a factory), in Yang Qingru 楊清如 (ed.), *Xiangzhu tongyong funü chidu* 詳註通用婦女尺牘 (*General epistolary guidebook for women with detail annotations*; Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1921; hereafter *XZTYFNCD*), *juan* 3, 22ab; “Tuoyou guo aiguo bu 託友購愛國布” (Asking my friend to buy patriotic cloth), in *ibid*, 23ab.
- 44 “Yu biaomei (quanyong guohuo) 與表妹(勸用國貨)” (Writing to my younger cousin, I urge her to use national products), in Wu Gongxiong 吳公雄 (ed.), *Xinti nüzi baihua chidu* 新體女子白話尺牘 (*New style of epistolary guidebook for women in vernacular Chinese*; Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1921; hereafter *XTNZBHCD*), “qinqi lei 親戚類,” 15ab; “Quan tongxue guohuo han 勸同學國貨函” (A letter to persuade my classmate to buy national products), in Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 (ed.), *Zhonghua nüzi chidu* 中華女子尺牘 (*Letter-writing manual for Chinese women*; Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1914), “xuejie tonghan lei 學界通函類,” 38b-39a.
- 45 “Quanyong guohuo 勸用國貨” (Persuasion to support national products), in Liu Tieleng 劉鐵冷 (ed.), *Xiangzhu shiyong fenlei nüzi gaodeng chidu* 詳註實用分類女子高等尺牘 (*An advanced epistolary guidebook for women with classification and detailed footnotes*; Shanghai: Zhongguo tushuguan gongsi, 1918; hereafter *XZSYFLNZGDCD*), “guiquan lei 規勸類,” pp. 126-127.

ones.⁴⁶ In addition to these arguments, in a letter sent to her elder sister, Wu Keren 吳可人 argued that the reason why Chinese products were not as popular as the foreign imports was the lack of publicity. She indicated that numbers of advertisements for foreign products had been overwhelming in every avenue, while the Chinese ones were just in the alleys, not to mention their incredibly small and mediocre logos. She believed that publicity was the remedy to raise the profile of Chinese products so that their sales would rise.⁴⁷

Furthermore, advocating national products served as a pressing force for women to operate companies.⁴⁸ One nationalistic girl told her sister in a letter that the Chinese economy was being seriously affected by the influx of foreign products. In order to help China restore economic sovereignty, she said that women should also bear their national responsibility as the men in promoting Chinese products. She was determined to put her words into action and planned to open a store selling only Chinese products, a venture which she invited her friend to join.⁴⁹ Another obvious example can be showed in a letter written by a strong-minded girl, who said in an angry tone that western goods flooded into the Chinese market whilst Chinese ones lost their share and became unwanted stock. The situation was frustrating and therefore supporting Chinese products became crucial and a national obligation for Chinese women. In order to save China's economy and awaken Chinese women to their duty, she invited her younger sister to establish a Nüzi guohuo she 女子國貨社 (Women's National Products Association) with her.⁵⁰ Ji Wan's 嵇曉 sister was another patriotic young woman who was determined to set up a women's industrial company in order to help Chinese domestic products compete with western ones, despite the fact that quite a number of corporations run by women had eventually closed down.⁵¹

46 “Yu biao mei lun tuixiao guohuo cong fangzhi yanghuo rushou 與表妹論推銷國貨從仿製洋貨入手” (I discuss with my younger cousin the promotion of Chinese product should begin from imitating Western products), in *FNCD*, *juan 4*, p. 15.

47 “Mou guanggao wei guohuo zhi guanxi 某廣告為國貨之關係” (The relationship between advertising and national products), in *ibid*.

48 These phenomena not only occurred in the model letters, but also in actual fact. According to Pan Junxiang 潘君祥, the businesses established in the national product movement involved the considerable participation of women. See his *Jindai Zhongguo guohuo yundong yanjiu* 近代中國國貨運動研究 (Research on the national products movement in modern China; Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1998), p.8.

49 “Zhi youren (yuekai nüzi guohuo dian) 致友人(約開女子國貨店)” (Sending to my friend, I invite her to establish a women's national products' shop), in Guangyi shuju 廣益書局 (ed.), *Chuxue shiyong nüzi chidu zhinan* 初學適用女界尺牘指南 (Elementary epistolary guidebook for the women circle; Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1914), *juan 4*, “shiyou lei 師友類,” 21b-22a.

50 “Zhiyou moushe nüzi shangdian 致友謀設女子商店” (Writing to my friend, I decide to set up a store for ladies), in Yan weiyu 嚴渭漁 and Li Gonger 李公耳 (eds.), *Yanwen duizhao nüzi xinchidu* 言文對照女子新尺牘 (New epistolary guidebook for women in classical Chinese printed side by side with the vernacular version; Shanghai: Shanghai huiwentong, 1921), *juanxia*, 12b-13a.

51 “He mouzi xingban shiye gongsi shu 賀某姊興辦實業公司書” (A congratulating letter to my sister for establishing an industrial company), in *FNCD*, *juan 4*, p. 17.

Apart from portraying female patriots who called for boycott of foreign products, the epistolary guidebooks for women constructed a nationalist discourse which envisioned women as active participants in the railway recovery movement at its peak in late Qing. One of the obvious examples was a young woman who invested 3000 yuan in shares of the Jiangzhe railroad by selling her land. Accentuating her national identity in the letter sent to her brother, she stated in an affirmative tone that her participation in raising funds to help China purchase the railways back was obligatory, since many people had already done the same for the sake of the nation.⁵² Besides purchasing forty shares of the Su-Hang-Yong 蘇杭甬 (Suzhou-Hangzhao-Ningbo) railroad, a more enthusiastic girl in another model letter even organized *Nǚzi guomin jukuanhui* 女子國民拒款會 (Female Citizens' Association for Resisting Foreign Loans) to raise funds for the railway, and encouraged her paternal uncle and aunt to purchase shares.⁵³

On the other hand, some model letters highlighted women's potential contribution to China's military. Using nationalist rhetoric, in a letter to her friend, a girl chided that modern women could not be compared with Xun Guan 荀灌 (303-?), who was brave enough to fight against the enemy, and Hua Mulan 花木蘭, who took her father's place in the military. She thus decided to organize a martial arts group with other patriotic sisters in order to provide support in case of a national emergency. Since her friend had a deep knowledge of the military knowledge, the writer invited her to be a regimental commander. In reply, her friend showed her support for organizing the female martial arts group by stressing that "taking up the responsibility for the country is a mission, which we do not dare to give up." Addressing the nationalist concern that a strong army could make the nation strong, she hoped that a woman's army would defend the nation under the *wusi guoqi* 五色國旗 (The flag of the Republic of China).⁵⁴ A female student in another letter resorted to the idea of raising money to help the nation strengthen its military power. Writing to her classmates, she asked for funds in support of a government plan to re-establish the navy, further showing an in-depth understanding of the government's difficulties. These included the problem of where to find donations, to the risks of threats from the Western nations upon asking them for loans, and to the reluctance of wealthy governors and businessmen to play a part. Stressing that women should shoulder their responsibility to the nation, she encouraged her classmates to make donations.⁵⁵

52 Zhi di tuoguo Jiangzhe lugu 致弟託購江浙路股” (I request my brother to help me buy shares of the Jiangzhe railroad), in *Zhonghuo tushuguan gongsi heji* 中國圖書館公司和記 (ed.), *Putong nǚzi zuixin chidu* 普通女子最新尺牘 (The newest epistolary guidebook for general women; Shanghai: Zhongguo tushuguan, 1915), *juanxia*, 16ab.

53 “Bing bofumu chou Su-Hang-Yong lukuan gufen 稟伯父母籌蘇杭甬路款股份” (Writing to my uncle and aunt, I wish them to buy shares of Suzhou-Hangzhao-Ningbo railroad), in *ZXNZCDJB*, “zudang 族黨,” 17ab.

54 “Zuzhi jingwu lianxi tuan 組織經武練習團” (Organizing a martial arts group), in *NZPQCD*, “lianmeng lei 聯盟類,” 30a-31b.

55 “Zhi gexiao tongxue zhu junxiang 致各校同學助軍餉” (Writing to students from every school, I ask for their donation to support soldiers), in *ZNCF*, “xuzhu lei 恤助類,” 25ab.

Social responsibility of modern women

Apart from China's national welfare, women at the turn of the twentieth century were urged to take up their social responsibility and actively participate in charitable work⁵⁶ As female-oriented publications, epistolary guidebooks included an abundance of model letters, recording passionate female donors engaged in various fund-raising activities, so as to encourage their readers to be involved in fund-raising activities. Hence, it is not difficult to find images of young women who donated their own personal savings to help the needy. For instance, one such woman made a donation of 10 *yuan* which she had saved from food and daily expenses to help people in need. She told her maternal uncle and aunt that although her donation was trivial compared with many elders who had contributed amounts of as much as 100 *yuan*, it was still a token of her sincerity and concern about the catastrophe of a recent famine.⁵⁷ A similar example could be found in another letter. Speaking of the critical situation after a hydrological flood in northern China, the writer felt sorry for the thousands of victims who were suffering post-disaster crises, notably starvation. The writer went on to describe the distressing experiences of the victims, lamenting that they had to consume inedible plants to get rid of hunger, and that children were even being sold and killed to make meat buns. Along with her classmates, she had therefore saved up their breakfast money because she wanted to help these miserable people in their misery.⁵⁸

Besides those mentioned above, many of the 'New Women' depicted in the model letters promote the idea of being fund-raisers to their friends and communities. In one case, a sympathetic woman asked her elder sister to take pity on the miserable flood-

- 56 There is a long history of Chinese women actively participating in charitable activities. In recent years, much scholarly attention has been paid to Song women, exploring how they stepped out of their inner chambers and became enthusiastically involved in public work. See Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 265–71 ; Liu Jingzhen 劉靜貞, "Nüwu waishi?— Muzhiming zhong suojian zhi BeiSong shidaifu shehui zhixu linian 女無外事?— 墓誌銘中所見之北宋士大夫社會秩序理念" (Within the home?— The depiction of 'Model women' in the epitaphs of the Northern Song), in *Funi yu liangxing xuekan 婦女與兩性學刊*, vol. 4, (Mar. 1993), pp. 21-46; "Zhengwei yunei?— Songdai nüxing shenghuo kongjian 正位於內?— 宋代女性生活空間" (Within the home?— The living space of women in the Song Dynasty), in *Qian Mu xiansheng jinianguan guankan 錢穆先生紀念館館刊*, vol. 6 (Dec. 1998), pp. 57-71; Bao Jialin and Lü Huici 呂慧慈, "Furen zhiren yu waishi— Songdai funü he shehui gonggong shiye 婦人之仁與外事— 宋代婦女和社會公共事業" (Women's kindness and their social activities: Women and public works in Song Dynasty), in Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南 (ed.), *TangSong nüxing yu shehui 唐宋女性與社會* (TangSong women and society; Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2003), pp. 263-274.
- 57 "Zan yifumu zhen'e 贊姨父母賑餓" (Praising my uncle and aunt's donation to the famine), in Shangwuyin shuguan bianyisuo 商務印書館編譯所 (ed.), *Xinzhuan nüzi chidu 新撰女子尺牘* (Newly composed letter-manual for women; Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1907), xiace, 3a-4b.
- 58 "Yu bofu (shu zhenzai) 與伯父(述賑災)" (Narrating aid to the stricken area to my uncle), in *XTNZBHCD*, "jiating lei," 7b-8a.

sufferers. She said with apparent grief that although some people might have been lucky enough to survive the flood, their lives were seriously threatened because of the lack of food and access to drinkable water. By expressing that their loud cry could even shake the sky, the girl hoped her sister would assist and lead others to donate their money to sufferers.⁵⁹ In other correspondence writing about terrifying damage caused by flooding, a niece urged her paternal aunt to help the sufferers. Mentioning that all the farmland in that area was submerged and that most of the people and livestock had died, she stressed that there were no reasons not to offer help to the needy, especially when many people in Shanghai, including prostitutes who had performed in a drama to raise funds, were showing their concern for the sufferers. She thus wished her paternal aunt would assist too.⁶⁰

Apart from the images of sympathetic women who showed special concern for disaster victims, some letters depicted women as supporters of charitable organizations, who aimed at improving social welfare. Some took part in running charities whilst others were eager to provide practical and financial support. The lucid example can be found in the correspondence of a lady who devoted herself to running a children's shelter, and her friend, who assisted her. In a letter written to her friend, the lady argued that simply giving money to the poor people would not ultimately be a solution to help to get rid of poverty. She knew that the best way was to promote universal education, so that more people could acquire knowledge and practical skills to earn a living in the future. Since a woman in her clan was willing to take the money initially put aside for establishing a factory, and reallocate it to building a children's shelter, the lady had decided to serve as a managerial staff member of this institution. Nonetheless, it was difficult to manage the whole project alone, and she thus wished her friend could come and join her.⁶¹ After receiving this letter, her friend was impressed with what the writer had been doing and praised her as a *nüzhong haojie* 女中豪傑 (a hero among women) and a *nüjie weiren* 女界偉人 (giant in the realm of women). Emphasizing that she would fulfill her obligation of helping people in need, she not only promised to help run the children's shelter, but also that she and her mother would donate 10 *yuan* and 50 *yuan* respectively every month for the operation and maintenance of the children's shelter.⁶² Another example of women's charitable works was a letter, which illustrated how public-spirited women stood out through assisting charities by playing the role of fundraisers. Grumbling that women in the old days were not aware of the importance

59 "Quan juanzhen 勸捐賑" (Persuading to donate money), in *XZSYFLNZGDCD*, "guiquan lei," p. 120.

60 "Qing zhenji shuizai 請賑濟水災" (Asking for donations for the flood disaster), in Liu Zaisu 劉再蘇 (ed.), *Fenglei wanghuan nüzi mofan chidu* 分類往還女子模範尺牘 (Model correspondence letters for women with classification; Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1926), *zhengji xiace*, "cishan 慈善," 30a.

61 Zheng Ziliang 鄭子良 (ed.), *Zuixin nüzi chidu jiaokeshu* 最新女子尺牘教科書 (The newest letter-writing textbook for women; Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1907), *juan* 3, 20ab.

62 *Ibid.*, 21a-22b.

of helping each other because of their reliance on men, the writer argued that modern women should show their concern to the needy. She then mentioned that there was a kind woman, who had decided to establish an *Aiqun xueshe* 愛群學社 (Institute of Community Care) to unite women to take part in more charitable activities, and so she wrote to her elder cousin to ask her to donate some money for the establishment.⁶³

Conclusion

As a product of the twentieth-century Chinese society, epistolary guidebooks for women are an important resource for the study of the re-appropriation and reconfiguration of the place and roles of Chinese women in a new era. Nevertheless, they have only recently been brought to light. By investigating model letters for women, especially those which featured discussions on how women were encouraged to devote themselves to serve the nation, it is not difficult to deduce that the objectives hinted at behind these model letters were not simply to teach their readers how to write letters, but was to guide them to find their most suitable roles in the project of nation building. Modern women in model letters were depicted as patriotic citizens who placed their own nation as their primary concern. Having the national consciousness that women should have the same responsibilities to the nation that men did, they devoted themselves to fight against imperialist powers by playing the roles of donors and fund-raisers to support the nation financially, boycotting foreign goods, participating in the railway recovery movement and strengthening national defense. Their concerns included social welfare as well. No matter what their roles were, either as fund-raisers or donors, they were eager to be involved in charitable work. Obviously, even though these letters really provided useful guides for women when writing letters, this by no means prevents us from arguing that these epistolary guidebooks constructed a feminist and nationalist discourse to help shape a new womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century.

Moreover, this article demonstrates how these epistolary guidebooks for women opened up a literary, political and national space, in which Chinese intellectuals encouraged women's contribution to the nation, and reconstructed a new womanhood. When female readers read these letters, it would have seemed that they were participating in the discussion, and ideas on gender order would have been indirectly instilled into them. Hence, through an exploration of the epistolary guidebooks for women, we not only can shed light on the historical value of these rich sources, but also obtain a better understanding of the transitional role of women at the turn of twentieth century.

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63 “Zhi tangzi quan hequn 致堂姊勸合群” (Writing to my elder cousin, I plead with her to work with others in helping the weak), in *ZNCF*, “quanshan lei 勸善類,” 18b-19a.

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