

MASTER'S THESIS

Model missives: epistolary guidebooks for women in early twentieth century China

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**Model Missives:
Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China**

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for the degree of

Master of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Prof. Clara Wing-chung HO

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Abstract

This dissertation studies epistolary guidebooks for women, commonly in the name of *nüzi chidu* 女子尺牘, published in early twentieth-century China. With an emphasis on rediscovering the neglected historical sources by and about women, this study not only re-examines the historical significance of epistolary guidebooks for women, but also examines how the editors contributed to the redefinition of womanhood. Through a thorough exploration of the sample letters which reveals common expectations of modern women, this research aims at further demonstrating how intellectuals 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, thus broadening our understanding of the panoramic picture of the transformation of gender roles during late Qing and early Republican China.

Using gender as a category of historical analysis, this research approaches epistolary guidebooks for women as material and cultural objects, and not merely as discursive texts. Hence, apart from placing these epistolary guidebooks for women in the broader context of the history of letter-writing to trace the origins of epistolary guides exclusively for women, I categorize the sources into three main themes: personal ambitions, national consciousness, and family obligations. Featuring the images of women in the sample letters, my study clearly shows that these sample letters served not just as references to transmit letter-writing skills. Instead, they educated women as to how to take up their roles as new society members in a new era. Significantly, the coexistence of traditional and modern women's images reflected in the guidebooks sheds light on the complexity of the new womanhood so as to challenge any simplistic divide between tradition and modernity. More questions are also answered: How new exactly were the “new” labels or “the newest” tags shown in epistolary guidebooks? What cultural and political significance did the images of women imply?

Examining the epistolary guidebooks for women, my study contributes to providing a window to look into the changing nature of epistolary guidebooks, and the construction of new womanhood in early-twentieth-century China. In other words, the exploration of these precious historical materials brings new insight into the history of letter-writing and considers the broad picture in order to interpret the inextricable connections between publications, gender and social order in early twentieth century China.

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