# Childhood Studies in Modern China: A Half Century's Development

GAO Zhenyu 高振宇

In China, the formal study of childhood first emerged in the early 20th century. This foundational effort set the stage for evolving societal perspectives on childhood and brought significant improvements in the welfare of China's child population. Western ideas and concepts related to the field of childhood studies, introduced through European and American missionaries and Japanese scholars, gradually took root in Chinese academic circles. Despite challenges from political turmoil, communication barriers, and limited access to resources, Chinese scholars produced both comprehensive and specialized studies on children and childhood. Childhood research groups and institutions dedicated to childhood studies were established, while academic journals published a substantial amount of research papers. The development of modern Chinese childhood research peaked in the 1920s and 1930s, even as interests in childhood studies waned in Europe and America. Thus, modern Chinese childhood research significantly contributed to the global child-study movement, and its continuing advancements have played a vital role in the sustainable development of the field internationally.

Historical sources suggest that the development of childhood research in modern China can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage, which I call the "Sprouting and Preparation" phase, developed out of the efforts of European and American missionaries and Chinese missionaries influenced by them. Although not all efforts focused specifically on children or childhood research, they contributed to the dissemination of foundational concepts and published some of the first works on related research subjects in China. These efforts spurred interest among China's emerging intellectual class, bringing attention to modern academic disciplines. The primary methods of dissemination included: (1) establishing new educational institutions to provide specialized courses or creating new medical facilities to conduct practical training, (2) publishing textbooks and other learning materials to support the education of children, and (3) systematically promoting the concept of childhood research by establishing journals and magazines. For example, Western missionaries and their religious schools were the first to introduce child psychology to China as a subfield of psychology. A notable example is the establishment of St. John's College in Shanghai in September 1879, where Yan Yongjing (颜永京,1838-1898), a Chinese pastor and president of the Anglican Church, taught psychology using his own translation of the American book *Mental Philosophy* (*Xinlingxue* 心靈學).[1] This is arguably the first textbook on modern psychology published in China. While it did not specifically address the idea of childhood studies, its content laid the groundwork for subsequent studies in child psychology.

Research on children in China was also notably influenced by Japan. Japanese scholarship on children had provided Chinese scholars with extensive knowledge of the history and the development of childhood studies, particularly in Europe and America, shaping early impressions of the field and laying the groundwork for its further development. For example, in the field of child education, the earliest theoretical works were translated from Japanese by Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877-1927) and others. Examples included *Education* (*Jiaoyuxue* 教育學) by Tachibana Sensaburo (立花铣三郎, 1867-1901) and *Textbook of Education* (*Jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* 教育學教科書) by Makise Goichiro (牧漱五一郎, 1866-1920), both of which were translated by Wang.[2] In the field of child psychology, Japanese academics also played a key role. For instance, *Lectures on Psychology* (*Xinlixue jiangyi* 心理學講義), written by Hattori Unokichi (服部宇之吉, 1867-1939), a psychology instructor at Beijing University's Normal School, presented the latest advancements in Western psychology and may be the first Japanese psychology publication in early 20th-century China.[3]

The study of children first attracted the attention of the Chinese academic community between 1904 and 1906. In 1904, *Educational Vocabulary* (*Jiaoyu cihui* 教育辭彙), compiled by the Japanese Academy of Education and translated by Xu Yongxi (徐用錫, year of birth and death unknown), introduced representative figures in child psychology to China for the first time.[4] In 1906, Miao Wengong (繆文功 1871-1944) emphasized the need for educators to study child psychology in his book *The Latest Textbook of Education* (*Zuixin jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* 最新教育學教科書), arguing that education must be grounded in human nature.[5] According to Miao, to educate without understanding human nature was like a quack doctor treating a disease he did not understand or a blind person riding a steamboat or a car without seeing its mechanism. Miao stressed that, since education was rooted in psychology, teachers should have a solid grasp of child psychology and that viewing children's minds solely from an adult's perspective would only lead to partial understanding and, ultimately, to inadequate education. In this first stage, while Chinese academics started to work on building native childhood research systems, they were still in the stage of imitating foreign scholars or introducing Western research findings. Nor did they have much real-world experience, and they had not yet forged strong relationships with child service initiatives in China.

# Writing Letters for Soldiers: Literate Girls' Epistolary Service in Wartime China

CAI Danni 蔡丹妮

Writing letters for seniors was a common theme in epistolary primers for young students in the first half of 20th-century China. These popular instructional models capture the immediate experience of many literate boys and girls of the day, who contributed to their families and communities through their voluntary epistolary service. Indeed, the existing real-life stories of these warm-hearted young authors demonstrate the agency of youth, challenging mainstream narratives that depict children as immature or incapable.[1] The extensive biographical literature and records I have collected for my ongoing project about letter-writing children in modern China suggests that many young students, especially girls, assumed the task of writing letters for wounded soldiers during China's War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949). Although some letter-writing stories have been rediscovered by scholars to highlight Chinese women's wartime contribution,[2] most participants' accounts of their epistolary service remain largely unknown to the public. By uncovering some of these long-hidden stories, this article highlights the letter-writing girls in wartime China to further illustrate how epistolary literacy elevated Chinese girls' roles in broader sociopolitical communities and enabled them to become powerful subjects.

Liu Taozhen 劉桃貞 (1919–?) was one of these letter-writing girls, as recorded in her later essay.[3] She was a progressive member of the Communist Party-led "Chinese Liberation Pioneers Squad" (*Zhonghua minzu jiefang xianfeng dui* 中華民族解放先鋒隊) from Sanyuan 三原 Female Middle School (Shaanxi Province). In 1938, during the early stage of the War of Resistance against Japan, Liu worked together with her teachers and other students to raise money and sew quilts and clothing for wounded soldiers. The group also assisted wounded soldiers with writing letters home to their families.

One 19-year-old soldier was injured so badly that none of the students initially volunteered to write a letter to his family. However, Liu Taozhen stepped forward to apologize for not attending to his needs earlier, and she eventually helped him write two letters: one to his parents and another to his new bride. The latter was especially tragic: the soldier urged Liu to help him convince his wife to find another healthy husband because of his grave injuries during the war. Liu was initially concerned about her ability to complete such a challenging letter, but since she could not bear the disappointed look of a helpless soldier who had lost his arms and legs, she nevertheless agreed. She listened to him with respect and patience, as a professional scribe would do to his customer in the marketplace. To avoid breaking his bride's heart, they decided to hide the brutal fact of his disability by fabricating a story that he had joined the "Death Squad," which positioned him in extreme danger at all times. Liu read her draft aloud to confirm that her letter conveyed his "genuine feeling" (*zhenqing* 真情) and communicated his request for their breakup in the gentlest language. She perceived this letter as more of a literary creation because of its sophisticated rhetoric of affection and devotion. She might have also achieved a sense of pride from the compliments she received from the soldier, which she vividly recalled many years later: "You are among the school children (*xuesheng wa* 學生娃) but act like a fortune-telling master (*suangua xiansheng* 算卦先生), holding the power to fully draw out what is really in a person's heart. Your teachers are really good at educating students." By comparing Liu to a fortune teller, a category of professional scribes from which Liu drew inspiration, the soldier acknowledged her knack for written communication and her professional ethics.


Fig. 1 (right): Bilingual descriptions of Chinese girl guides' epistolary service for wounded soldiers in a hospital of Shanghai from *The War Pictorial* 戰事畫刊 (dated 1937). These letter-writing girls were deemed admirable by the general public for their courageous service and portrayed as exemplars of civilians. Photographs of such care were not unusual in wartime magazines to demonstrate the spirit of the whole country passionately united against Japan. (Image courtesy of Shanghai Library)

The second story of comforting injured soldiers took place in Nanchang (Jiangxi Province) during the Chinese Civil War (ca. 1948). Lin Mianqian 林緬芊 published an article about her letter-writing experience in hospitals in the *Modern Children Magazine* 新兒童.[4] She was among 30 female students from three local girls' schools whose primary objective upon arriving was to help the soldiers write letters home to their families.

Lin started her journey with excitement, but she was soon saddened by the inhospitable conditions these soldiers suffered. Three of the ten wounded soldiers whom Lin helped left a strong impression on her. The first

In the second stage, a significant body of childhood studies literature emerged, including original works by Chinese researchers as well as translated works from Europe, America, and Japan. Zhu Yuanshan's (朱元善, 1856-1934) *Childhood Studies* (*Ertong yanjiu* 兒童研究) (1915), for instance, could be considered the first Chinese work on childhood studies.[6] Although it did not address foundational theories or frameworks, Zhu's work explored three key topics: children's personality and developmental characteristics, fatigue theory, and imitation theory. Translations of works on childhood studies from Europe, America, and Japan also introduced Chinese readers to the history and theories of childhood. Between the 1920s and the 1930s, for instance, the works of Seki Hiroyuki (關寬之, years of birth and death unknown) have been widely translated into Chinese.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese scholars such as Ling Bing (凌冰, 1894-1993), Zeng Zuozhong (曾作忠, 1895-1977), Yao Zhibi (姚枝碧, year of birth and death unknown), and Feng Pinlan (馮品蘭, 1894-1984), also began producing original works that reflected Chinese perspectives on childhood studies. Ling Bing, in particular, developed his own concepts on childhood studies during a series of lectures at Nanjing Normal University's summer school. These lectures were then compiled into a book in 1921, and subsequently revised and republished in 1932 and 1934. This work, ultimately published in four editions, was the most influential work on childhood studies in Republican China. It predated the formal release of many Japanese works and other translated texts on childhood studies, and no comparable Chinese text existed at the time Ling's book was published. Ling's work thus marked an original contribution to the field and the beginning of Chinese childhood studies. Subsequent scholars frequently referenced Ling Bing's writings in their works on childhood studies. Zeng Zuozhong's *Childhood Studies* (*Ertongxue* 兒童學) (1926), for instance, further expanded and enhanced the framework of Ling, covering topics such as historical perspectives on children, scientific approaches for studying children, children and genetics, children's instincts, the intellectual and moral development of children, crime, play, language acquisition, and the application of children's knowledge.[7] These additions significantly enriched the research about child psychology.

The final stage, which I will call the "Advancing amidst Twists and Turns" phase, witnessed a downturn in childhood studies, with a marked decline in research output. However, this did not signal a complete halt in the field. It was evident from a few published works that academics were still actively building and developing childhood studies. Dong Renjian's (董任堅, years of birth and death unknown) *Outline of Childhood Studies* (*Ertongyanjiu gangyao* 兒童研究綱要) stands out as a key contribution.[8] In the preface of his book, Dong stated that it was intended for parents, education students, and child teachers. The book consisted of four chapters – "Organic Foundation," "Children's Impulses and Activities," "Social Environment," and "Discipline for Children" – divided into thirty-eight sections, each with an outline, a research plan, and a list of references. Focused on a comprehensive, realistic view of the full child, Dong's work aimed to encourage adults to value child education and avoid outdated perspectives, using scientific knowledge to foster empathy and manage situations with children. Supported by research materials from the American Childhood Studies Association, it further expanded the existing research framework by addressing childhood studies from psychological, educational, and societal perspectives. Although it did not offer a systematic disciplinary framework, it contributed to refining the content structure established in earlier stages. A limited number of scholarly journals also published articles on childhood studies, exploring the field's history, methodologies, current state of development, and emerging themes in greater depth.

In conclusion, the development of childhood studies in Republican China underwent a complex, multi-phase evolution that reflected broader societal changes in the ways children were perceived, valued, and supported. This progression underscored an increasing recognition of the importance of childhood to the larger social and economic fabric of China, highlighting a growing sense of urgency around the need to provide children with necessary resources and support. Each stage of research on children in China was marked by representative scholars, publications, research groups, and journals and newspapers that collectively advanced the field. Despite its relatively late start and the disruption of the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, research on children and childhood persisted and made remarkable global contributions during the interwar period and the post-war era. Childhood studies remains a promising field in contemporary China. As such, it offers a rich foundation for further research with important implications for the future of Chinese children and the society in which they are growing up.

**Gao Zhenyu** is a professor of education at Hangzhou Normal University (China). His research interests are intellectual history, history of childhood and children, and philosophy for/with children.
Email: lincolngao@hznu.edu.cn

**Notes**

1 Yan Yongjing, *Xinlingxue* (Shanghai: Yishishuhui, 1889).
2 Tachibana Sensaburo's *Jiaoyuxue* was published in the journal *Jiaoyu shijie* (教育世界) in 1901 and Makise Goichiro's *Jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* was published in the same journal in 1902.
3 Unokichi Hattori, *Xinlixue jiangyi* (Tokyo: East Asia Company, 1905).
4 Xu Yongxi, *Jiaoyu cihui* (Beijing: Jingshi daxuetang yixueguan, 1904).
5 Miao Wengong, *Zuixin jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* (Shanghai: Wenming shuju, 1906).
6 Zhu Yuanshan, *Ertong yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1916).
7 Zeng Zuozhong, *Ertongxue* (Beijing: Beijing minguo daxue tushuguan, 1926).
8 Dong Renjian, *Ertong yanjiu gangyao* (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1948).

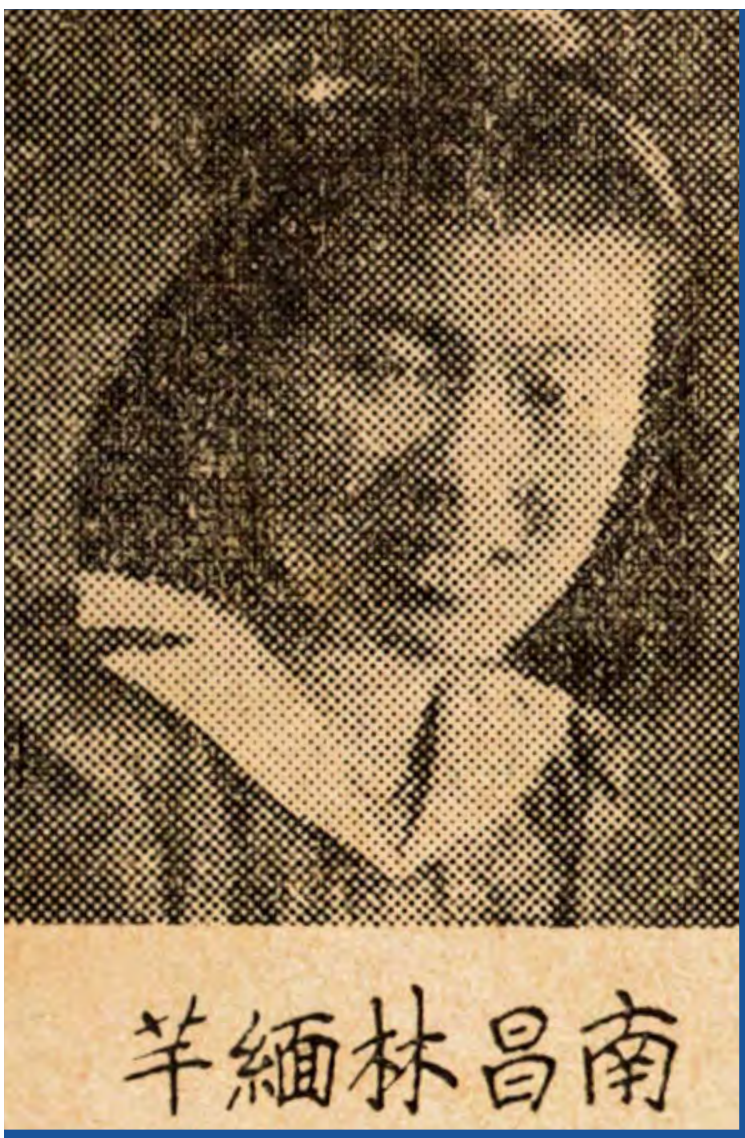


Fig. 2 (left): As an earnest reader of the *Modern Children Magazine*, Lin Mianqian sent her photograph (dated 1949) to the magazine for publication. (Image courtesy of Shanghai Library)

young soldier from Henan sought to write a letter home to his mother, who was desperate for his pay and provisions to make ends meet. However, he was so upset that Lin could not understand his accent that he lost his temper. Instead of feeling annoyed or flustered, Lin showed sympathy for his physical pain and emotional distress, apologizing to him and asking a translator for help to finish the letter. Another soldier from Guangdong proclaimed that he was also in need of help; nevertheless, he complained that he was not able to communicate with the visiting students since he did not understand the Mandarin they spoke. Luckily, Lin understood Cantonese and willingly took over the task of helping this soldier, who had not returned home in three years, compose a letter to his uncle requesting medicine. Both soldiers seemed satisfied with Lin's efforts of turning their vernacular language into written words, as they expressed their gratitude to her in the end.

The third soldier, whom Lin deemed "eccentric," wanted Lin to ask his father to pick him up from the troops because he was uncomfortable with what he described as the troop's "dark side." Despite this request, Lin heeded her teacher's request that negative comments about the war or battlefield conditions should be avoided in letters. She thus took the liberty of excluding the soldier's disturbing description once she confirmed that he was illiterate. Lin felt an enormous sense of unease for censoring this part of the letter, especially because he seemed to place great trust and expectations on her. Considering Nanchang, where Lin resided, was under the administration of the Nationalist government when she volunteered her services as a letter writer, it is likely that the soldiers Lin helped were enrolled in the Nationalist Forces, and she was politically sensitive about the low morale of the troops fighting for the Kuomingtang. She concluded her journey by observing that Chinese soldiers endured the most hardship of any people in the world and hoped that the Nationalist government would increase their remuneration.

Stories of girls writing letters for wounded soldiers across the country abound in contemporaries' memoirs, essays, diaries, photos, and other forms of documentation. These stories, either narrated by girls themselves or recorded by other witnesses, demonstrate the important political and emotional role of young female letter writers in wartime China, which has often been critically overlooked. As Nicole Barnes suggests, educated young women's wartime "emotional labor," such as writing letters for soldiers, created an intimate connection between two populations who would otherwise have had few opportunities to meet and share personal details: female students of the urban middle class and male soldiers from poor villages.[5] Although few sources suggest that these schoolgirls and wounded soldiers continued their conversations after they parted, the heartbreaking scenes during their epistolary service must have been indelibly imprinted on the minds of most girls. The task of fostering communication between soldiers in the field and their families from afar presumably reshaped the sociopolitical consciousness of literate girls, especially those from affluent families. More notably, the two letter-writing girls in the aforementioned stories, Liu Taozhen and Lin Mianqian, showed their determination to gain recognition for these underprivileged soldiers. This determination prompted them to overcome various difficulties, such as dialect barriers, fears of soldiers' bloody bodies, and soldiers' quick tempers. The acquisition of epistolary literacy actively empowered these school girls and gave them confidence and courage in their ongoing endeavour to serve their country.

**Cai Danni** is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the History Department of Hangzhou Normal University, Zhejiang, China. This research is sponsored by the Program of Philosophy and Social Science Fund of Zhejiang Province (No. 24NDQN006YB).
Email: danni.cai@hznu.edu.cn

**Notes**

1 Danni Cai, "Power, Politeness, and Print: Children's Letter Writing in Republican China," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13.1 (2020), 38–62.
2 For example, Nicole E. Barnes, *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 81–84.
3 Liu Taozhen, "Wo zai kangri hongliu zhong chengzhang" 我在抗日洪流中成長 [I grew up in the wave of resistance against Japan], in *Qinli kangzhan: Beijing jiaoyujie laotongzhi kangzhan huiyilu* 親歷抗戰：北京教育界老同志抗戰回憶錄 [Personal experiences in the Anti-Japanese War: The memoirs of veteran comrades involved in education in Beijing], ed. Zhonggong Beijing shiwei jiaoyu gongzuo weiyuanhui (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2005), 331–334.
4 Lin Mianqian, "Weilao shangbing ji" 慰勞傷兵記 [A record of comforting wounded soldiers], *Modern Children Magazine* 22.3 (1949): 36–37.
5 Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, 81–84.