

Model Letters Declining Arranged Marriages: Changing Formulas for Family Correspondence in Modern China

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Abstract: This paper examines model letters declining arranged marriages exchanged between young people and their elders in Republican China. These new models deserve special attention for creating a subtle tension in the family hierarchy during the early twentieth century. Notwithstanding their common purpose, model letters declining arranged marriages produced by different publishers differ in format and tone. While certain model letters reinforced Confucian patriarchy and positioned the elders superior to the young, other model letters provided the standard lines of appeal that sought to ease tensions between the younger and older generations as the young consciously appropriated the emergent discourse to legitimize their dissent. The marital negotiation thus allows us to glean insights into the changing dynamics of family letters under the influence of new ideals about family and marriage in modern China.

In Qian Zhongshu's 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) satiric novel *Fortress Besieged* (*Weicheng* 圍城, 1947), the college student Fang Hongjian 方鴻漸, who has been engaged under a family arrangement since high school, grows green eyed after seeing couples in love on campus and feels aversion to his fiancée Miss Zhou, who has quit after one year of high school to learn housekeeping at home in order to serve her future in-laws and husband. Fang begins thinking of how to ask his father to release him from this arranged marriage without infuriating him. In his first family letter regarding this issue, he fabricates his physical discomfort as an excuse, which requires him to sever this marital contract since his poor health may cause a lifetime of regret for Miss Zhou. Although Fang's letter is "couched in an elegant style without incorrectly using any of the various particles of literary Chinese," his father still reads his thoughts and gives him a severe scolding in reply, criticizing Fang for neglecting his filial duties and threatening to cut off his funds.¹ As a result, Fang has to send a second letter immediately begging for his father's forgiveness and reluctantly accepts this marriage but asks "that it be postponed until after his graduation. For one thing, it would interfere with his schooling; for another he was still unable to support a family and would not feel right about adding to his father's responsibilities."² His father, nevertheless, is satisfied to prove his authority over his distant son in college and grants Fang's request for the postponement.

Sarcastic as it may sound, this scenario, which is set roughly in the late 1920s or early 1930s, was not entirely groundless in reality, since letters seeking to cancel or postpone marriages arranged by parents or grandparents were common family correspondence from young people in modern China, as evident in extant letter-writing manuals published primarily for teaching purposes.³ Epistolary knowledge has long been inculcated into a general audience to meet their communicative needs across various cultures.⁴ In China, the history of model-letter collections dates back to at least early medieval times; these were prone to situate epistolary etiquette within broader social norms and were developed in a great many ways through the ages.⁵ The late Imperial and

Republican periods, in particular, witnessed an explosive growth of guides to letter writing that remain understudied.⁶ Available fictive model letters from the early Republican period (1912–1949) invite comparisons with Qian’s novel and help present-day readers better understand why Fang’s first letter does not achieve his purpose while his second letter does, thereby capturing changing formulas for family correspondence during the crucial era of transition in modern China.

One noticeable change is that public affairs, rarely documented in letter manuals of the Imperial period, entered the private sphere of personal letters between individual kin and acquaintances, which continually renewed the epistolary rhetoric and complicated the art of epistolary communication. Formal epistolary expressions in Imperial China were largely conditioned by Confucian ideas of ritual propriety and social hierarchy, which were instrumental in constructing and maintaining a harmonious community based on kinship and family.⁷ A notable example of the Confucian influence was the rise of *shuyi* 書儀 in medieval China, manuals that lay down etiquette for letter writing and other occasions, and instruct the performance of rites through decorous words.⁸ The changing epistolary etiquette was shaped by political climates, as manifested in the epistolary textbooks consolidating the concept of Republican citizen.⁹

The writing of family letters was also expected to follow the new fashion, so the authority of the older generation in some exemplars was subtly undermined as the Confucian vision of family was under severe attack since the late nineteenth century, especially during the New Culture Movement (1915–1919). According to the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), one of the Confucian classics, “the ceremony of marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two (families of different) surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the services in the ancestral temple, and in its prospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line.”¹⁰ Traditionally, family elders had the legal authority to make a decision regarding the marriage of young people.¹¹ This long-standing tradition was challenged amid the iconoclastic cultural upheaval and serious national crisis in modern China. Denouncing the Confucian extended family as oppressive and callous, the New Culture intellectuals elevated the modern notion of “free love” to a central position and appropriated the ideal of “conjugal family” (*xiao jiating* 小家庭) for their personal and political ends.¹² In their minds, marriage was more than simply a personal or family issue but a matter of national importance, though recent revisionist scholarship has called into question the radical intellectuals’ fervent denouncement of Confucianism and ahistorical assumptions about arranged marriage.¹³ In seeking to escape the strictures of the patriarchy, the young equipped themselves with new ideas, which they invoked in polite dissent against their elders’ wishes. Model letters that focused on declining arranged marriages, which has received little attention in the study of Chinese family history or epistolary culture, thus provide us with a window into the changing rhetoric of family letters and changing thinking on marriage.

Notwithstanding their common purpose, model letters declining arranged marriages produced by different publishers differ in format and tone. These differences point to two major types of narrative based on the youths’ positions in their negotiations with their elders. Model letters depict the young in both disadvantaged and advantaged positions, like Fang’s two letters to his father in *Fortress Besieged*, and indicate divergent views of contemporary publishers on the family hierarchy. To appreciate the nuanced dynamics, this paper will situate examples of both positions within more general epistolary traditions by incorporating model letters of relevant topics.

The Young as Inheritors of Confucian Ethics

Examples of family letters appeared early and frequently in household encyclopedias for daily use. In *Comprehensive Collection for Use at Home of Indispensable Matters* (*Jujia biyong shilei quanji* 居家必用事類全集), an encyclopedia that dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) but was widely circulated in the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1912), there is a separate section on family letter templates (*jiashu tongshi* 家書通式) under the category of “Letters” (*shujian* 書簡).¹⁴ The genre of family letter later developed into a fundamental category in letter-writing manuals. It is conventionally viewed as a gateway to master epistolary skills, and constitutes a site of social practice that prepared individuals for their future.¹⁵ Confucian ideas played a sustained role in the maintenance of the patriarchal hierarchy in family letters of Imperial China.

The expansion of moral content in letters of the late Qing and Republican eras bears some similarities with changes in American letter writing over a similar period. For example, authors of the American manuals of “familiar letters” endorsed letter writing as a new way to “inculcate the younger generation in the values, skills, and habits that would determine both personal character and social status upon adulthood.”¹⁶ Similarly, letter manuals in nineteenth-century American schools presented the dominant culture’s behavior codes for daily living, such as personal discipline, self-sacrifice, duty, and obedience; thus “learning to write a good letter was learning to become, by 19th century codes, a well-mannered person.”¹⁷

In the very different context of nineteenth-century China, the epistolary content of family letters was expanded to suit the new cultural milieu and incorporate pertinent Confucian moral lessons. *An Indispensable Reader for Letter Writing* (*Xiexin bidu* 寫信必讀, the earliest available edition dated 1887), which was popular throughout the first half of the twentieth century, offers a model letter from a sojourning father to his son at home. It reads:

My son, as you know, it has been three months since I left home. Because it is hard to access the postal service, [I] have not been able to send a letter home, which has been lingering in my mind.¹⁸ Your father [i.e., the writer] is forced to travel far away from home. You should be filial to your grandmother and mother. In all matters, you should first accept things as they are at the beginning; your daily expenditure should be frugal. You should pay respect to your seniors and neighbors and must keep away from licentious acquaintances and gambling friends. Go to bed early and get up early. It is most important to keep the household safe, do not become slack, and be especially vigilant towards fire risks. For other matters such as food and drink and the usual pleasantries, you should remain attentive. You must remember my words, and do not disobey my instructions.

某兒知悉，余自離家，迄今三月，以郵便難逢，無從一致家書，念念。汝父遠違鄉井，亦非得已，爾當孝養祖母，侍奉母親。凡事必先忍耐，日用尤宜從儉。親長鄰居，務須尊重，淫朋賭友，切勿相交。早眠早起，門戶最要小心，勿怠勿惰，火燭更當謹慎。餘如飲食寒暄，自宜留意。切記余言，勿違是囑。¹⁹

The content of the above model letter possesses a didactic tone and engages in moral cultivation. This father’s exhortation, as the “letters of familial admonition” examined by Antje Richter, reads in a similar fashion to family instructions (*jiajie* 家誡 or *jiaxun* 家訓) and testaments (*yiling/yan* 遺令/言) in terms of their content by showing “Confucian in character,” in particular “the focus on self-cultivation and humility as well as the choice of worthy friends,” thereby contributing to the honor of one’s family.²⁰

Model letters to family members upheld the Confucian hierarchy even after the founding of the Republican regime. For example, the *New Letters for Republican China* (*Gonghe xin chidu* 共和新尺牘, dated 1913) suggests a proper letter should avoid pretentious language and make sure all words come from the heart; nevertheless, the diction of family letters should be adjusted accordingly: writing to elders should be reverent, which is called *feng* 奉; writing to brothers should be sincere, which is called *yu* 與; writing to juniors should be dignified, which is called *ci* 賜.²¹

While moral instruction was often imparted by the elderly to younger family members, a reverse situation was possible in model letters written by a junior to a senior, aiming to uphold the Confucian family hierarchy. A sample letter to one's eldest brother (first edition dated circa 1921), for example, endorses the concept of filial piety by criticizing the recipient for often disobeying the instructions of his "kind mother" (*cimu* 慈母). Two reasons are offered to support the writer's criticism: for one thing, based on "the propriety of a son" (*renzizhili* 人子之禮), one should accord with his or her parents' orders in everything rather than improperly taking the liberty to act independently and hurting the parents' feelings; for another, the young should not obstinately defy their parents' opinions since the young are considered naïve and inexperienced while their parents are more circumspect and farsighted. In the case that the parents' opinions are off the mark, the author insists, young people should seize the chance to explain themselves tactfully instead of infuriating their parents and hurting their parents' feelings.²²

While the above letter does not specify the disobedient behavior of the recipient, I have identified one noticeable example of disobedience—declining arranged marriage—by combing through letter-writing manuals published in Republican China. *Grand Treasury of Classified Patriotic Letters* (*Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao* 分類愛國尺牘鴻寶, dated 1916) offers a set of fictive letters between a nephew named Dunxiao 敦孝 (literally, sincere and filial) and his uncle (*gufu* 姑父), the husband of his paternal aunt; it touches upon the issue of declining arranged marriages and implicates the power relationship based on seniority. On a recent trip to Shanghai by sea, Dunxiao experiences a severe windstorm and his ship sinks at midnight. He survives but makes use of this adventure to turn down the marriage arrangement made for him by his paternal aunt, citing how the potential bride must have brought him bad luck. Moreover, he claims he is too young to get married and should wait for another two years. He writes to his uncle to convey this message in the hope of obtaining his aunt's understanding.

This letter contains four basic components of a formal letter: 1) the opening (*qishou* 起首), 2) the compliments (*gongwei* 恭維), 3) the narration (*xushi* 敘事), 4) the closing (*jiewei* 結尾).²³ These are numbered in the following translation:

1) My Venerable Uncle the Great Person in front: It has been three years since I [literally, your nephew] bade you farewell and returned to the South from Tianjin and was unable to receive your kind instructions.

姑父大人尊前：竊姪自津沽拜別回南，不奉慈訓，於今三載。

2) From afar I hope your journey is safe, your good fortune is increasing, and your wellbeing is steadily advancing—this is what I am more than happy to pray for.

遙憶旅祉安祥，升祺迪吉，曷勝忻頌。

3) Here I state: I recently traveled to Shanghai for a job appointment. My ship encountered a severe windstorm and sank at midnight, which almost took my life. Fortunately, now I got away in a whole skin. I am writing to let you know and alleviate your concern. As for

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my aunt's marital proposal, let us forget about it. [I suspect] the potential bride's fortune must be bad; otherwise, how could this mishap befall me while the marriage was under discussion? I am still young, so it is not too late [for me] to consider about marriage after one or two years. Please convey my decision to my aunt, ask her forgiveness and not to blame my straightforwardness. This [I consider] fortunate.

茲稟者：姪日前赴滬就業，適值大風為災，半夜輪沉，幾喪性命。今幸安然無恙，馳書特報，藉抒遠注。惟承姑母作伐之事，可作罷論。緣該女命必不佳，不然姪何以甫經議及，便出門不利也？侄年尚幼，即再過一、二年議婚，亦不為遲。務祈轉達姑母。請其恕侄伉直，勿加嗔怪。是幸。

4) I respectfully send [my letter] and greetings for the autumn [to you]. Your untaught nephew, Liu Dunxiao, sincerely sends [this letter].²⁴
肅此佈上，並請秋安。愚表姪劉敦孝謹上。²⁵

While following the layout of an elegant, literary letter and correctly applying epistolary commonplaces, like Fang's first letter, Dunxiao's letter fails to justify his refusal of the elders' arrangement of his marriage.²⁶ The "narration" part of his uncle's reply, which declines Dunxiao's request, is translated as follows:

Your aunt is especially fond of you and would like to conclude a marital arrangement for you in response to your parents' request. However, you do not understand her careful thoughts and remain unsatisfied with her arrangement. Now science is booming, eclipsing the theories of geomancy and fate, but you adhere to superstitious ideas and ignore your aunt's kind consideration. Isn't this a double mistake? I have no intention to intervene in your aunt's arrangement. She is living with other relatives and has not returned. She said she would send another letter when she is back.

汝姑母對汝感情尤厚，欲為汝締婚，以盡兄嫂之託。特何汝不解事，依然為前憤憤。況今日科學發旺，從無關風水命運之說，而汝猶拘執迷信，不諒親情，豈非誤而又誤。汝姑母事我本不管，現已往親戚家不回。言旋時當另函報。²⁷

As the reply reveals, his uncle speaks not only for Dunxiao's aunt but also for his parents, who had asked his aunt for help. Therefore, by declining this arrangement, Dunxiao is also perceived as going against his parents' will, thereby breaching his filial duty. Resorting to Confucian patriarchal tenets to justify the elders' authority, Dunxiao's uncle criticizes his nephew, recalling the aforementioned younger brother who admonished his eldest brother against hurting their mother's feelings, which would constitute a breach of familiar ritual propriety. The criticism from a younger brother also resonates with how Dunxiao's uncle, who appears more rational, dismisses Dunxiao's superstitious excuse as naïve by citing the emergent discourse of science. Like Fang's first letter requesting to cancel the arranged marriage, Dunxiao's letter lacks the acceptable justifications to legitimize his resistance to his family obligations, and his first letter was considered a challenge to his elders' authority, which was undermined but still paramount in the deep-rooted Confucian family hierarchy of the day.

The Young as Advocates of Civil Codes

As a means of disseminating new theories, epistolary manuals were probably no less effective than other print media in terms of spreading practical applications of their instructions to people, such as those communicative strategies used by young readers to release them from arranged marriages. The contemporary rhetoric of resisting the intervention of senior family members in young people's decisions about marriage was developed in tandem with the prevailing discourse of banning "early marriage" (*zaohun* 早婚). The official regulations of the marital age existed throughout Chinese history, but it was not until the twentieth century that issues of early marriage caused considerable controversy.²⁸ In his far-reaching essay *Debates on Banning Early Marriage* (*Jin zaohun yi* 禁早婚議, 1902), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) categorized the detriments of early marriage according to five components of individual and public well-being: 1) physical health, 2) reproduction, 3) national education, 4) personal academic pursuit, and 5) national and household economy.²⁹ Liang deemed early marriage to be an institution that would cause excessive sensual pleasure and therefore responsible for the Chinese's lack of vitality, bravery, and fortitude.³⁰ Liang's criticism of early marriage reflects the liberal nationalist orientation that imagined, planned, and designed the "advanced" and "modern" nation-state in early twentieth-century China.³¹ While the view that Liang "started" the discourse against early marriage, as some conclude, is not accurate, Liang's essay was likely the most influential.³² In many articles published during the first decades of the twentieth century, subsequent writers frequently revisited these themes, either by reinforcing or questioning them.³³

A review of various reasons for declining or postponing marriage in model letters suggests their correlation with Liang Qichao's criticism of early marriage.³⁴ The earliest extant example (dated 1907) of a text invoking the harm of early marriage was published by the Commercial Press (Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館).³⁵ The most comprehensive example in my collection was published by the Chinese Press (Zhonghua shuju 中華書局), *New Letters in Vernacular Chinese* (*Yuti xin chidu* 語體新尺牘, dated 1935), which covers four detriments discussed by Liang, but omits the one concerning the poor early education provided by ignorant young parents.³⁶ An older brother, Maoru 茂如, cautions his younger brother, Zhuoru 卓如 (who is mocked as "not old but so eager to have a grandson"), against the harm of arranging a marriage for his only son Lan 蘭 too early. In arranging a marriage in accordance with the Confucian idea that "men are born with the wish to have a family," there are four issues to consider.³⁷ First, young men and women should reach marriageable age; otherwise, the timing will not be right, and they will not have adequate knowledge of love and sex, which would be harmful to both men and women since they would not be able to control their sexual desire. Second, the bodies of the young should be completely mature; otherwise, they will not have sufficient stamina to engage in the sudden experience of sexual activities following their marriage, which would affect their lifespan and the strength of their children. Third, the young should be academically accomplished; otherwise, they may indulge too much in the "land of warmth and tenderness" (*wenrou xiang* 溫柔鄉)—a seductive realm—after they marry, and it would therefore be very difficult for them to make any academic progress. Fourth, the young should be economically independent; otherwise, it will be difficult for them to make ends meet after marriage. Even if their father and brothers are of means, the young cannot rely on them forever. Maoru gently criticizes Zhuoru for being too eager and persuades him to delay the marriage of Lan, who is only eighteen years old and has not yet graduated from high

school. Although Maoru is sympathetic with Zhuoru about having a grandson to carry on the family line, which compelled Zhuoru to arrange a marriage for Lan, Maoru warns that an early marriage would hurt Lan eventually and suggests that he defer it for two years.

Apart from the emergent intellectual orientation, the profound changes in the lives of the young in early twentieth-century China also provide contexts to understand the reasons against arranged marriages. In his book tracing the life of Chinese students (mostly males) from 1890 to 1920, Jon Saari demonstrates that young students faced the dilemma of negotiating between their independent individual consciousness and their traditional family obligations.³⁸ Since students were away from home for further schooling, they were released into a peer group in a nontraditional urban setting. Some upper-class students sought to escape their family's control, and they were considered to be "patrician rebels" armed with new ideas emphasizing the individual and the nation as the most significant matrix of social life. They challenged the old family system with a revolutionary consciousness motivated by progressive books and peer contacts outside the family. Young students who were able to receive civic education and citizenship training came to observe a new "civic ritual": a "symbolic collective performance that organizes social and political relationships, produces cultural patterns, and serves as a context for negotiating social power."³⁹ The idea of declining early marriage, an outcome of civic education, can be regarded as a type of civic ritual. The new civic ritual, different from Confucian rituals, reshaped the minds and behaviors of young students. Both marriage and career choices were regarded not merely as personal issues but also as matters of national import. Some students, inculcated with the new ideas of civic education and citizenship, determined to prioritize their academic studies and careers over marriage arranged by their family. Many model letters utilize the reforming discourse and civil codes to bolster the young in their negotiations with elders in their family.

Model letters for both men and women apply similar reasons for declining a marriage, such as not having completed one's academic studies and established one's own career, to teach the young how to decline marital engagements. The repetitive occurrences of such reasoning indicate their importance as rhetoric in letter writing, whether the young agree to the engagement or not. Two models from popular letter manuals, first edition dated 1920 and 1921, are translated as below:

My Father the Great Person for your kind reading 父親大人慈鑒：

I have received and read your serious instructions. I know with respect that you, [Father] the Great Person, love me [literally, this boy] very much and would like me to get engaged to the lady from a certain family. Our family backgrounds are certainly similar, and this lady's virtue and learning are said to be well known. I have never disregarded this engagement as a fortunate opportunity.

接讀嚴諭，敬悉大人愛男心切，欲為男定婚於某家，彼此家世，固屬相當。某氏女德性學問，聞亦可觀，男固未嘗不引為幸事。

However, for a matter like marriage, one should not undertake it until he becomes independent from his family. Otherwise, if he still relies on others, how is he able to take good care of his wife and children? I am not twenty years old and haven't finished my studies yet. At this moment, my most urgent task is to seize the time for learning and to foster my morality. This is not yet the time to get married.

但家室之事，須俟自立有餘然後行之。否則自身尚須依賴他人，有何能力顧其妻子耶？男年未及冠，學亦未成，以目前論，正宜及時力學，增進德性，卜婚之事，尚非其時。

Moreover, the lady from a certain family is already grown up. If we were to be engaged, it would hardly be possible for her to wait for a long time [to consummate the marriage]. I hope you, [Father] the Great Person, can go to decline this marriage. After I accomplish my academic goals and grow mature enough to establish myself, it is still not too late to think about it.

況某氏女，年已長大，定婚之後，萬難久待。望大人即往婉言卻之，俟男學業成就，年齡長大，足以自立，再言婚事，未為晚也。

I reply in a respectful manner and wish you good health. This boy So-and-so sincerely reports.

肅覆，敬請鈞安。男某某謹稟。⁴⁰

My Uncle the Great Person for your valuable reading 伯父大人鈞鑒：

I have just read your handwritten instructions and felt honored by your consideration regarding the fact that I [literally, your niece] am fifteen years old and thus should be betrothed immediately according to conventions. You love me more than words can express, for which I am very grateful. As for Mr. Chen, who is now available, you mention that the property of his family reaches more than one hundred thousand. If I married into his family, there would be no need to worry about clothing and food for the rest of my life.

刻誦手諭，敬悉大人以姪女年屆及笄，按女大當嫁之旨，急應擇配。愛我之忱，溢於言表，感何能已。但大人所謂現已物色得陳家公子，家產有十餘萬之鉅云云。姪女得歸陳家，固屬一生不愁衣食。

However, my lifetime pursuit is not gold; moreover, I am a student and have not yet graduated. Now it is not yet the time for marriage.

然姪女生平立志，不在黃金，況在校讀書，又未畢業。締婚聯姻，尚非其時。

If we were to be engaged, the formal wedding ceremony ought to be postponed until I am twenty years old. Early marriage is harmful to both men and women, which I am acutely aware of.

即慾舉行，非至二十歲以外不可。男女早婚，有害無利，姪女固知之有素也。

I am taking the liberty of writing to you in the hope of obtaining your forgiveness, which [I consider] fortunate. I reply in a humble manner and wish you good health. Your niece Peihua sincerely sends [this letter], February 4th.

冒昧上陳，諸乞鑒諒為幸。尚此奉復，敬請鈞安。姪女佩華謹上，二月四日。⁴¹

These two letters follow the same protocol: first, while the assumed letter writers firmly decline an early marriage arranged by their seniors, they unanimously express their reverence or gratitude at the beginning of the letters, as a way to confirm the elders' authority and to better achieve their purposes; second, they depict students who are worried about being distracted from their pursuit of academic progress and their preference to prioritize their success in studies before graduating from school; third, they further touch upon marital expectations—models for men tend to cancel the arrangement while models for women tend to postpone the arrangement. They are both from letter manuals published by the World Press (Shijie shuju 世界書局), a Republican center of letter manuals that reprinted certain titles more than two hundred times.⁴²

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The latter example from the fictional correspondent Peihua was constantly adapted by other publishers with minor differences and accompanied by additional instructional content. One example is followed by a notice, reminding the reader that disagreement with the proposals of their seniors should be expressed in a respectful and polite manner.⁴³ Another example from the late Republican period is followed by a reply from the uncle, the core of which is translated as below:

As for the marriage, you have your own plan and others should not intervene. I [literally, the untaught] will help you achieve your aim. You can make your own decision [on your marriage] in the future. I hope you work hard at school, and do not let your parents down. This is my instruction.

關於婚姻事，汝既有志，不能相強，愚當成就汝之志願，他日由汝自決可也。望汝在校勤奮攻讀，毋負汝父母之期望為囑。⁴⁴

Unlike the aforementioned uncle of Dunxiao, who scolds his nephew for his superstitious excuses, Peihua's uncle replies with understanding and encouragement, which suggests model letters for family correspondence underwent significant changes in accordance with the new ethos. Model letters not only provided legitimate reasons for young people who wanted to pursue their academic studies but also offered an excuse for those who intended to escape from their elders' intervention in their decisions about marriage while still maintaining proper relations.

Conclusion

Family correspondence was an important and common element of letter-writing manuals, and they communicated Confucian ritual practice and ethical norms throughout Chinese history. Modern China witnessed a gradual transformation in epistolary models from reflecting norms and values of Confucian patriarchy to the ideal of the free love and conjugal marriage, as seen in model letters by young writers to family members that sought to postpone or cancel arranged marriages.

As seen in Fang's letters in *Fortress Besieged*, both personal excuses and public-spirited justifications existed in contemporary model letters, which bespeak nuanced dynamics between the older and younger generations. If young correspondents were in disadvantaged positions, they were supposed to assent to their elders' authority in knowledge and experience, and the elders were considered superior to the young. If young correspondents were in an advantaged position, they were taught to tactfully decline elders' marital arrangements by providing tenable reasons regarding the harm of early marriage. The most popular models notably provided the standard lines of appeal that sought to ease tensions between the younger and older generations as the young consciously appropriated the emergent discourse to legitimize their dissent. This forceful yet subtle dissent in the 1920s reflects different threads of ongoing social reforms. Specifically, it uncovers the highly fluid nature of epistolary knowledge in accommodating new ideas with the traditional Confucian tenet that instructs the young to comply with their elders' wishes. These model letters offered reform-minded young students a decorous communicative strategy to release them from arranged marriages and provide us a window into the changing formulas of family correspondence in modern China.

NOTES

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¹ Ch'ien Chung-shu [Qian Zhongshu], *Fortress Besieged*, trans. Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 9.

² Ch'ien [Qian], *Fortress Besieged*, 10.

³ Fang Hongjian has spent four years in college in Peking and four years in Europe before returning to Shanghai in 1937.

⁴ Letter-writing manuals have attracted scholarly attention since the 1930s. For letter manuals beyond China, see, for example, Katherine Gee Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter-Writer in English, 1568–1880," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (1934): 1–150; Janet G. Altman, "Teaching the 'People' to Write: The Formation of a Popular Civic Identity in the French Letter Manual," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 22 (1993): 147–80; *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Chartier; trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Lina Bernstein, "The First Published Russian Letter-Writing Manual: Priklady, Kako Pishutsia Komplementy Raznye..." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 46.1 (2002): 98–123; Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Markus Rüttermann, "So That We Can Study Letter-Writing: The Concept of Epistolary Etiquette in Premodern Japan?" *Japan Review: Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies* 18 (2006): 57–128; *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present: Historical and Bibliographic Studies*, ed. Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

⁵ On the only extant epistolary guide from early medieval China, see Antje Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 139–45.

⁶ For recent studies of these epistolary guides, see, for example, David Pattinson, "The Market for Letter Collections in Seventeenth-Century China," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 28.1 (2006): 125–57; Dániel Z. Kádár, *Model Letters in Late Imperial China: 60 Selected Epistles from 'Letters from Snow Swan Retreat'* (Munich: Lincom Europa, 2009); Oi Man Cheng, *Model Missives: Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China* (MA thesis, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2013); Danni Cai, "Power, Politeness, and Print: Children's Letter Writing in Republican China," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13.1 (2020): 38–62; Christina Kilby, "Printing Tibetan Epistolaria: A Bibliographical Analysis of Epistolary Transformations from Manuscript to Xylograph," *Journal of Epistolary Studies* 2.1 (2020): 19–33.

⁷ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14–44.

⁸ Patricia Ebrey, "T'ang Guides to Verbal Etiquette," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45.2 (1985): 583–84.

⁹ For an example, see Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51; on sample letters encouraging new modes of female social and political engagement, see Oi Man Cheng, "Epistolary Guidebooks for Women in Early Twentieth Century China and the Shaping of Modern Chinese Women's National Consciousness," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 14.2 (2012): 105–20.

¹⁰ *The Book of Rites* in Chinese Notes, trans. James Legge, <http://chinesenotes.com/liji/liji044.html>, accessed June 5, 2022.

¹¹ Chen Guyuan 陳顧遠, *Zhongguo hunyin shi* 中國婚姻史 [A history of Chinese marriage] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 113–15.

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¹² Free love served as “the key trope of universal subjectivity” through which a new national community could be imagined due to “the relationship between the modern subject and the modern political community.” See Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 7, 18. For an in-depth study of “*xiao jiating*,” see Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a recent study of family reform during this period, see Zhao Yanjie 趙妍傑, *Jiating geming: Qingmo Minchu dushuren de chongjing* 家庭革命：清末民初讀書人的憧憬 [The quest for family revolution in late Qing and early Republican China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2020).

¹³ Weijing Lu, *Arranged Companions: Marriage and Intimacy in Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 3–22.

¹⁴ Anonymous, *Jujia biyong shilei quanji*, in *Mingdai tongsu riyong leishu jikan* 明代通俗日用類書集刊 [A collection of encyclopedias for daily use in the Ming dynasty], vol. 4, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo wenhuashi 中國社會科學院歷史研究所文化室 (Chongqing: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2011), 4–5.

¹⁵ As a gateway to master epistolary skills, see Anonymous, *Gonghe xin chidu* 共和新尺牘 [New letters for Republican China], vol. 2 (Shanghai huiwentang, 1913), 1; as preparation of individuals for their future, see *Zhonghua putong xuesheng chidu* 中華普通學生尺牘 [Chinese letters for general students], 14th ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1926), 19–20.

¹⁶ The category of “familiar letters” encompassed “letters of business and letters of news, as well as letters of friendship, family, amusement and courtship.” For more explanation, see Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, 42–53. In this article, I focus on letters between family members. See also Konstantin Dierks, “The Familiar Letter and Social Refinement in America, 1750–1800,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1999), 33–34.

¹⁷ Lucille M. Schultz, “Letter-Writing Instruction in 19th Century Schools in the United States,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. Barton and Hall, 118–19.

¹⁸ The original Chinese text omits the subject “I,” a common practice in classical Chinese letters and in the following examples. For an explanation, see “Notes on the Grammatical Characteristics of the Traditional Correspondence,” in “Lexicon of Chinese Correspondence of Literary Style with English Translation and Notes” at <https://www.brandeis.edu/grall/chinese/a-lexicon-of-chinese-correspondence-of-literary-style-with-english-translation-and-notes-1.pdf>, accessed June 5, 2022.

¹⁹ “Guijie” 規誡 [Exhortation], in *Tangzhu xiexin bidu quanbi* 唐著寫信必讀全璧 [Complete collection of an indispensable reader for letter writing compiled by Mr. Tang] (1912), reprinted in *Chūgoku gogaku shiryō sōkan: Sekidoku hen* 中國語學資料叢刊：尺牘篇 [A collection of Chinese language sources: The section of letters], vol. 2, ed. Tarō Hatano 波多野太郎 (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan, 1986), 501.

²⁰ Antje Richter, “Between Letter and Testament: Letters of Familial Admonition in Han and Six Dynasties China,” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 269–70.

²¹ Anonymous, *Gonghe xin chidu*, vol. 2, 1.

²² “Guishou muxun” 規受母訓 [Exhorting the older brother to accept mother’s instruction] in *Chudeng xin chidu* 初等新尺牘 [New letters for elementary education], new 14th ed., vol. 2, ed. Huang Kezong 黃克宗 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1948), 36.

²³ On the four basic components, see “Xiexin yaojue 寫信要訣” [Essential skills for letter writing], in *Zuixin zengguang zhujie zihui chidu quanbi* 最新增廣註解字彙尺牘全璧 [Newest expanded complete work of annotated letters with a vocabulary list] (1902), ed. Tang Zaifeng 唐再豐, reprinted in *Chūgoku gogaku shiryō sōkan: Sekidoku hen*, vol. 2, ed. Tarō Hatano, 402.

²⁴ The writers of classical Chinese letters apply self-deprecatory terms like “untaught” (*yu* 愚) to show their deference to the recipients.

²⁵ *Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao*, vol. 3, ed. Jiqing shi 霽青氏 (Shanghai: Jiangdong shuju, 1916), 16a–16b.

²⁶ On the conventionality of epistolary topoi, see Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 117–38.

²⁷ *Fenlei Aiguo chidu hongbao*, vol. 3, ed. Jiqing shi, 17a.

²⁸ See, for example, Zhang Guogang 張國剛 and Jiang Aihua 蔣愛花, “Tangdai nannü hunjia nianling kaolüe” 唐代男女婚嫁年齡考略 [A survey of marital age in the Tang dynasty], *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 2 (2004): 65–75.

²⁹ Liang Qichao, “Jin zaohun yi,” in *Yinbing shi wenji dianjiao* 飲冰室文集點校 [Writings from the Studio of Ice Drinking with annotation] (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 652–57.

³⁰ Liang, “Jin zaohun yi,” 653.

³¹ Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Hill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 30–60; On Liang’s transformation from a Confucian intellectual to a liberal nationalist, see Joseph Richmond Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

³² On the view that Liang “started” the discourse against early marriage, see, for an example, Yubin Shen, “Too Young to Date! The Origins of *Zaolian* (Early Love) as a Social Problem in 20th-Century China,” *History of Science* 53.1 (2015): 93. Early marriage was in fact banned by local officials long before the publication of Liang Qichao’s essay. See, for example, Huang Bao 黃葆, “Jie zaohun bei” 戒早婚碑 [Stele exhorting early marriage] (1892), in *Shenxian wenshi ziliao: Shenxian beiwen daguan* 莘縣文史資料：莘縣碑文大觀 [Records of literature and history of Shen County: Stone inscriptions of Shen County], vol. 19, ed. Shenxian zhengxie xuexi xuanchuan wenshi weiyuanhui 莘縣政協學習宣傳文史委員會 (Shandong sheng xinwen chubanju, 2004), 74–75.

³³ Lü Wenhao 呂文浩, “Zhongguo jindai hunling huayu de fenxi: Cong Qingmo zhi 1930 niandai” 中國近代婚齡話語的分析：從清末至 1930 年代 [An analysis of discourse of the marital age in modern China: From the late Qing to the 1930s] (2005), in *Shehui shenghuo tansuo* 社會生活探索 [Exploration of social life], ed. Liang Jinghe 梁景和 (Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2010), 3–16.

³⁴ Model letters against early marriages in my collection include “Quehun” 卻婚 [Declining marriage], in *Dingzheng xinzhuan xuesheng chidu* 訂正新撰學生尺牘 [Revised new letters for students], new 7th ed. (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1938, first edition dated 1907), 51; “Yan biaomei buyi zaopin” 言表妹不宜早聘 [Younger female cousin should not be engaged early], in *Dingzheng xinzhuan nüzi chidu* 訂正新撰女子尺牘 [Revised new letters for women] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, date unknown, first edition dated 1907), 37b–38b; “Yan zi buyi zaohun” 言子不宜早婚 [Son should not be married early], in *Xinzhuan nüjie chidu zhinan* 新撰女界尺牘指南 [New epistolary guide for women], 11th ed. (Shanghai: Jinzhang tushuju, 1922, preface dated 1915), 9b–10a; “Quan you buyi yuzi zaohun” 勸友不宜與子早婚 [Dissuading one’s friend from arranging the early marriage for one’s son], in *Shiyong xin chidu* 實用新尺牘 [Practical new letters], vol. 2, ed. Sun Xusheng 孫虛生 (Andong: Chengwenxin shuju, 1915), 364–66; “Quan wu zao hun” 勸勿早婚 [Dissuading one from early marriage], in *Xinzhuan gaodeng xuesheng chidu* 新撰高等學生尺牘 [New letters for advanced-level students], 9th ed., vol. 2, ed. Wang Quansun 王荃孫 (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1919), 2b–3b; “Lun zaohun zhi hai” 論早婚之害 [On the detriment of early marriage], in *Xin shidai xuesheng chidu daquan* 新時代學生尺牘大全 [Complete collection of letters for students in a new age], 26th ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1933), 77–78; “Lun zaohun zhi hai” 論早婚之害 [On the detriment of early marriage], in *Nüzi xin chidu* 女子新尺牘 [New letters for women], 23rd ed., vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1928), 22–24; “Quan wu wei zhi zaohun” 勸勿為姪早婚 [Dissuading one’s brother from arranging the early marriage for one’s nephew], in *Yuti xin chidu* 語體新尺牘 [New letters in vernacular Chinese], ed. Jin Zhanlu 金湛廬 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935), 37–38.

³⁵ “Quehun,” in *Dingzheng xinzhuan xuesheng chidu*, 51.

³⁶ “Quan wu wei zhi zaohun,” in *Yuti xin chidu*, ed. Jin, 37–38.

³⁷ This quote was attributed to Mencius (Mengzi 孟子), a famous Confucian philosopher. See *Mencius* in Chinese Notes, <http://chinesenotes.com/mengzi/mengzi006.html>, accessed June 6, 2022.

³⁸ Jon L. Saari, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890–1920* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990).

³⁹ Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 209–10.

⁴⁰ “Su juhun zhi you” 訴拒婚之由 [Explaining the reasons for declining marriage], in *Xin shidai xuesheng chidu daquan*, vol. 3, 23.

⁴¹ “Wan ci zuofa” 婉辭作伐, in *Nüzi xin chidu*, vol. 1, 10.

⁴² For more statistics, see “Fulu: Yi” 附錄：一 [Appendix: I], in Cai Danni 蔡丹妮, *Minguo xuesheng de shuxin jiaoyu yanjiu* 民國學生的書信教育研究 [A study of epistolary instructions for students in Republican China] (MA thesis, Xiamen University, 2014).

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⁴³ “Fandui dinghun” 反對訂婚 [Rejection to engage], in *Xiandai nüzi shuxin* 現代女子書信 [Letters of modern women], new 2nd ed., ed. Tao Qiuying 陶秋英 (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1941, first edition dated 1930), 11.

⁴⁴ “Dang chengjiu ru zhi zhiyuan” 當成就汝之志願 [I will help you achieve your aim], in *Nüzi qianjin shuxin* 女子淺近書信 [Plain and simple letters for women], 2nd ed., ed. Shi Lang 施琅 (Shanghai: Guoguang shudian, 1948), 44.