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## Transforming childbirth practices

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# **Transforming childbirth practices**

New style midwifery in China, 1912 – 1949

**Minghui Li**

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university of  
 groningen

# Transforming childbirth practices

New style midwifery in China, 1912 – 1949

## PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
 University of Groningen  
 on the authority of the  
 Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga  
 and in accordance with  
 the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Tuesday 30 June 2020 at 9.00 hours

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## Preface

When I was finalizing my dissertation at the end of January, 2020, the city of Wuhan in China was locked down due to the outbreak of coronavirus, and strict measures of hygiene and social distancing were enforced in major territories of the country overnight. While trying to continue focusing on my writing, I added new tasks to my daily agenda: following related news and updated rules, and checking with my family to ensure that they stayed at home as much as they could. We yet never expected that the “local” incident developed into a global pandemic within only a few weeks, and from the early March my family in turn sent me messages endlessly asking me not to go out. As I am writing at the moment in late April, there have already been “lockdowns” and diverse medical and health measures across the world to fight against the pandemic. Though some regions have seen signs of improvement, we are still uncertain whether effective vaccine could be produced, when the pandemic will end, and how the global landscape of economy and the life of humanity will be affected. Even after a few years’ reading and analyzing historical sources of health and medicine, I find myself at a loss when overwhelmed by information about the virus, real or fake, positive or negative, coming from everywhere. But I am aware that my understanding of health and mortality in the past is and will continue to be shaped by my experience of critical events like this.

The worldwide concern for fighting against the pandemic reminds me of the outbreak of Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014. Back then I was still a master student, wandering around recommended books and articles from different courses, and trying to figure out a theme for my thesis. Even being far away from Africa, I was surrounded by a variety of news and reports about the mechanism of Ebola as well as how medical personnel and health organizations engaged in resolving the crisis. Partly because of the news, I developed a curiosity for historical diseases and healthcare, and chose to write my history thesis from a medical perspective.

While delving into the local archives I was attracted by a small volume of sources regarding the infant and maternal healthcare in Shaanxi, China during the 1930s-1940s, which later constitutes a chapter of my master thesis. When I came into contact with Professor Maarten Duijvendak, now my promoter at the University of Groningen (RUG), he advised me to further explore the theme of infant and maternal healthcare and to extend the scale and scope of this research. The dissertation presented here today is way different from the plan we designed four years ago, and I am grateful for his professional guidance and constant encouragements throughout the journey, which help the dissertation take its present shape. I have also received valuable comments, guidance and support from my supervisors Dr Richard Paping and Dr Vincent Tassenaar. Numerous discussions with them, and their incisive remarks, help sharpen the arguments of this dissertation. More importantly, my promoter and supervisors offered me freedom and chances to learn, to try and to become an independent researcher. My gratitude to them goes beyond words.

This dissertation will not be possible without the assistance of many archivists and researchers, as well as the financial support. During my trips to Chinese archives, I received help from local archivists who provided invaluable advice in searching for relevant data. I

am particularly thankful to Professor Li Chuanbin and Mr Huang Shanqi, both of whom have a wealth of knowledge of missionary hospitals of modern China, and have generously offered me sources and suggestions on collecting hospital records. The Rockefeller Archive Center has kindly sent me digital copies of some sources as I was unable to visit the archives in person, and I appreciate their help greatly. I would also like to thank to Ms Chung Shu-chi and Huamulan publishing company for allowing me to use the data of Ms Chung's book in my dissertation. I also wish to thank my supervisor of my master's program Professor Zhang Ping for providing me with much support during my research in China and with help ever since I started the postgraduate study, and Dr Xu Xueqiang for instructing me to work on the maps. In the Netherlands, Dr Minie Baron and Ms Loes Schultz have kindly referred me to literature that enriched my knowledge of the history of Dutch and European midwifery. Discussions with them inspired me to look at midwifery at a broader geographical scale and to relate the history to debates of reproductive health, abortion and family planning today. The scholarship provided by the China Scholarship Council for this study, and the travel grants provided by the Graduate School for the Humanities of RUG for academic activities and fieldwork are much appreciated.

The chair group of Economic and Social History and colleagues at the history department of RUG made my PhD life meaningful in many ways. Erwin Karel was a devoted historian and supportive teacher who was enthusiastic about research and open to sharing ideas. Sadly he passed away in April, 2019. I appreciate his concern for my work and will miss him. Geurt Collenteur has a keen eye on arguments and numbers, and always encourages me to ask questions, to compare different regions, and to rethink. I benefited greatly from his challenging remarks in our coffee conversations and I appreciate his support along the way. Anjana Singh and Marja van Tilburg are caring, attentive and friendly, helping me to get accustomed to work and life in Groningen. Their enthusiasm about research and teaching and their disciplined way to work set a good example of a female scholar for me. I also wish to thank Willem Jongman for carefully reading parts of this dissertation, Ya-pei Kuo for her warm concern for this research, and Hanneke de Vries for heartily introducing me various cultural attractions around the city. My thanks also go to Martin Uebele, Daniël Broersma, Hilde Bras and Daniel Franken for their concern and encouragements.

I wish to thank researchers, PhD fellows and other participants who have provided essential comments and suggestions for my research in various seminars, conferences and masterclasses I attended in the past years. I am also grateful for joining the PhD training program of the N.W. Posthumus Institute, from which I learned to write and present my research in English. The language of this dissertation benefited much from Kees Kuiken, who is proficient in Dutch, English and Chinese. I am thankful to his thoughtful correction of words and careful edition that improves the readability of the text.

I am grateful for having good accompany of friends in Groningen. Floor Groefsema has been helping me to dissolve my "cultural shock" over these years and always offers a listening ear. It is my pleasure to have her accompany, and her courage to explore and discover new fields has inspired me along the way. Merit Hondelink and I are in the same cohort in the Posthumus Institute and her accompany made our travels to and participation

in Posthumus seminars and conferences more enjoyable. It is also a great delight to learn from her different foods in the past and today. Neha Basnet remains a good friend since we shared a student house in our first year, and I am glad that we keep sharing our joy and complaints in good and bad times. Yara Marusyk and I share the office at Rode Weeshuisstraat in my final year. It is wonderful to create a “tropical and colorful” environment with her by filling the office with posters, paintings and plants, and I admire her capability to manage teaching, research, and motherhood.

My Chinese friends in the Netherlands and at home give me a cultural and spiritual harbor that I could resort to. I would like to thank Ke Huimin, Zhou Ying, Peng Hongying, Wang Yingjie and Wang Miao for enlightening my life in cheerful ways. These ladies are strong and confident women from whom I often get inspirations. I also wish to thank Ma Ye, Hong Yiyi, Xu Qi, Sun Yu and Zeng Yingying, who have offered their genuine opinions about life and professions during different stages of my PhD. Wang Hao, Wang Xing, Zeng Xiaoxia and Gong Peng are always ready to give a hand, and I owe thanks to them. Particularly I want to thank Huang Ting. We started our PhD at the Faculty of Arts together in 2016, and in the past years we have been sharing our laughter, tears and anxiety over everything rushing through our life. I am glad to see that both of us have grown stronger in this journey.

Last, I wish to express my gratitude to my family. My parents have given me their unconditional love and support that filled me with the courage to face difficulties. Especially my mother has been answering my different questions by telling the birthing stories of her own, her mother, and other female relatives, some of which I did not know before. These stories reveal the childbearing of my female family members under different economic, political and cultural contexts in the past decades, and help me understand stories I came across in the sources. My twin brother, surprisingly, keeps asking me throughout the past years: “How is your research going?” His encouragements with passion and his consoling words with reason have, since teenage, stimulated me to move forward. This dissertation is devoted to them.

感谢爸爸妈妈，哥哥，还有所有家人一路以来的关爱，包容和支持。我毕业啦！

Minghui Li (李明慧)  
April, 2020 at Groningen