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# Chinese literature and “New Methods of Midwifery” during the 1950s

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**Abstract:** The literary description of the movement, “New Methods of Midwifery,” during the 1950s is not only a historical record of the innovation of delivery techniques, but also a demonstration of the realization of bio-governance at the grassroots level, and of the reformation of traditional gender concepts. These works directly criticized outdated delivery methods and the traditional concept of life that traditional midwives observed and also documented the development of bio-politics in New China. The writers portrayed a series of images of traditional midwives and socialist midwives which left a traceable legacy of visions of Chinese professional women. This article aims to investigate the images of this special professional group and their cultural significance to the reformation of Chinese fertility culture, daily life and the development of bio-politics during the 1950s.

**Keywords:** bio-governance; national discourse; “New Methods of Midwifery”; traditional midwives/socialist midwives.

In the 1950s, Chinese literary works usually focused on recording grand historical events and social movements, such as the Second Sino-Japanese War, Liberation, the Land Reform Movement, etc. A lot of research on literary works centered on these grand historical events. By contrast, the movement, “New Methods of Midwifery,” was a small medical campaign which mainly required midwives to adopt modernized, updated methods to deliver babies.<sup>1</sup> In spite of its narrow scope, many literary works were printed on this topic in the 1950s, even though

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<sup>1</sup> “New Methods of Midwifery” can be viewed as modern obstetrics and gynecology, it requires the midwives to know the process of natural childbirth well, maintain strict sanitization and disinfection during the delivery process, and prenatal examination and postpartum care. This medical movement aimed to protect newborns from tetanus and prevent against puerperal infection.

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researchers have paid less attention to them.<sup>2</sup> These texts, less known to readers but full of historical and cultural significance, presented not only a series of images of professional women named “*jieshengpo*” (接生婆, traditional midwives) and “*jieshengyuan*” (接生员, socialist midwives), but also the development of bio-politics in New China, or the regulation of individual life by the state. This article aims at investigating the images of midwives and their significance to culture and daily life. Through the investigation of these literary images from the perspectives of the modernization of hygiene, the development of the modern nation-state and socialist feminism, we will get an understanding of the development of bio-power in New China and its effects on the traditional concepts of life, culture, customs, daily life, and women’s liberation.

## 1 The negative stereotype of traditional midwives in the pre-modern era and its causes

Traditional midwives played an important role in the daily lives of Chinese women. This profession originated from “*yi*” (医, doctor) during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), where there is mention of officially assigned medical assistance by an *yi* for women when giving birth. These *yi* referred to the earliest delivery assistants and their genders had no special limits. In the Han Dynasty, the Royal Court appointed some women called “*nu yi*” (乳医, milk doctors) or *nü yi* (女医, female doctors) from the common people to offer private medical services to the royal ladies, with delivery one of their tasks. With the specialization of gynecology in the Song Dynasty, Chinese traditional doctors named these women who help mothers to deliver babies as “*chan shi kan sheng ren*” or “*kan sheng zhi ren*” (产时看生人 or 看生之人, keepers of birthing) or “*shou sheng zhi ren*” (收生之人, attendants of childbirth). Most of these attendants were old women who had their own experience in childbearing and then were able to help deliver babies. Because of the strict boundaries of gender in the inner

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2 Some Chinese researchers only investigated the political connotations of *Quiet Maternity Hospital*, such as Hou Jinjing’s *Creativity and Characters of Ru Zhijuan’s Novel*, Mao Dun’s *Comments on the Novels of 1960s*, Bing Xin’s *Keeping Forward, Comments on Ru Zhijuan’s Novel*, Ma Bing’s *From Hospital to Maternity Hospital*, and so on. They did not pay attention to images of socialist midwives during that period. And some historians like Tina Philips Johnson and Yi-Li Wu have done a lot of research on the development of traditional midwives. Joshua Goldstein’s *Scissors, Surveys, And Psycho-Prophylactics: Prenatal Health Care Campaigns and State Building in China, 1949–1954* provided a detailed presentation of New Methods of Midwifery in the early 1950s and pointed out the relationship between women’s delivery process and New China. Gail Hershatter adopted oral history techniques to keep recordings of women’s reproductive habits in the 1950s, which also provided a new perspective to investigate the development of bio-politics in New China.

quarters, male doctors were not permitted to participate in childbirth directly and could only provide medical suggestions to the female participants. Consequently, these traditional midwives played an essential role in human reproduction.

Some doctors observed midwives' function in the delivery process and emphasized that pregnant women should choose righteous, experienced, and responsible midwives to deliver babies.<sup>3</sup> In some early “*chuanqi*” (传奇, tales of the miraculous), midwives who could help successfully deliver babies were depicted as healers with mysterious powers. In *Youtai Xianguan Biji* (右台仙馆笔记, Notes of Youtai Xianguan), a midwife gained a dead hand and honored it, and then she became an expert who could solve pregnancy complications like dystocia.<sup>4</sup> However, midwives were more often portrayed negatively by male intellectuals, and there existed a huge difference between the images of midwives in ancient literary works and their representation in the historical record.

In the Yuan Dynasty text, *Chuo Geng Lu* (辍耕录, A Dropout's Notes), Tao Zongyi classified women who injected themselves into public activities into nine categories according to their different functions, including midwives, and grouped them with a derogatory term, “*san gu liu po*” (三姑六婆, three types of nuns and six sorts of hags).<sup>5</sup> This stigma influenced the public perception of midwives. In “*shiqing xiaoshuo*” (世情小说, worldly novels), they were portrayed as greedy and relentless. Cai Laoniang in *Jin Ping Mei* (金瓶梅, The Plum in the Golden Vase) was a typical example of this type. In the novel, she was described as a well-dressed and bejeweled old woman who paid more attention to the rewards from her clients than the safety of mothers and newborns.<sup>6</sup> This was echoed in the views of male

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<sup>3</sup> Zhang Jingyue 1984 [Ming dynasty]: 207. “所以凡用稳婆, 必须择老成忠厚者, 预先嘱之, 及至临盆, 务令从容镇静, 不得用法摧逼。” (The midwives employed should be experienced and thoughtful. Under male doctors' direction, they could deliver babies calmly without brute force).

<sup>4</sup> Yu Yue 2004: 115.

<sup>5</sup> The group of three nuns includes *dao gu* (道姑, Taoist nuns), *ni gu* (尼姑, Buddhist nuns), and *gua gu* (卦姑, divination nuns), and the group of six hags, which could be understood as six kinds of professional women in ancient China, includes *ya po* (牙婆, broker), *mei po* (媒婆, matchmaker), *shi po* (师婆, witch), *qian po* (虔婆, procuress), *yao po* (药婆, female pharmacist), and *wen po* (稳婆, midwife). All of these are looked down on in society. If the family has a relationship with these women, it will fall into trouble. The best way is to stay away from them and chase them out of the family. Tao Zongyi 1998 [Yuan dynasty]: 143.

<sup>6</sup> Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng 1982 [Ming dynasty]: 783. “蔡老娘道:我做老娘姓蔡, 两只脚儿能快。身穿怪绿乔红, 各样发髻歪戴。 嵌丝环子鲜明, 闪黄手帕符箋。 入门利红市花红, 坐下就要管待。 不拘贵宅娇娘, 那管皇亲国太。 教他任意端详, 被他腿衣百划。” (Cai Laoniang said, “I am a midwife called Cai Laoniang and very busy with delivering babies. I like wearing red and green and there are a lot of hair clasps on my hair bun. The jewels I have worn are glinting. When someone invites me to deliver babies, warm hospitality and good reward should be prepared for me”).

intellectuals, where midwives preferred to chase money and fame, threatening the lives of mothers and newborns.

In Chinese traditional families, newborns, especially baby boys, were not only about the development of the clan, but about the distribution of family legacy. Sons became a major factor in the family battle of power and legacy. In novels during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a lot of plots were about killing weak mothers and babies, to which midwives became accomplices.<sup>7</sup> Even in historical practice however, some families asked midwives to kill surplus births, mainly baby girls, which also made the midwives out to be ruthless killers.<sup>8</sup>

From the perspective of Chinese traditional medicine, the operations of midwives could be belittled as a collection of techniques from practical experience rather than a complete, systematic medical theory. Traditional Chinese doctors, especially male doctors, rejected these women because they betrayed the principle of respecting natural processes by deliberately intervening into natural childbirth with brute force.<sup>9</sup> Although these criticisms pointed out the drawbacks of the practices of midwives, they also were grounded in gender-based prejudice.

In these ancient literary works and medical classics, gender-based prejudice played a major role in forming this stereotype. On one hand, the strict gender segregation system confined all the women into the inner chambers in order to maintain chastity. As professional women, traditional midwives broke these restrictions on women by moving freely in society, which made them completely different from the image of ideal women. And as gender segregation also confined the movement of men in the inner chambers, they could not participate in the delivery process directly, even though the birthing of new life was vital to the survival of the family's bloodline and the inheritance of property. On the other hand, the traditional concept of the female body as polluted tainted the midwives and their profession. The delivery process was depicted as an inauspicious, dirty

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7 Yuan Mei 1986: 380. “正妻妒而狡, 知太守爱妾, 不敢加害, 值妾产子时, 贿收生婆, 于落胎后, 将生桐油涂我产宫, 溃烂而亡。” (The wife was a jealous and devious woman. She bought off the midwife to hurt the county guard's favorite concubine after her childbirth. The midwife spread the wood oil over the mother's womb, which led to her death).

8 Chen Shouqi 1968: 1130. “凡胞胎初下, (接生婆)率举以两手审视女也, 则以一手覆而置于盆, 问存否, 曰不存, 即坐索水曳儿首倒入之, 儿有健而跃且啼者, 即力捺其首, 儿辗转其间, 甚苦。母氏或汪然泪下, 有倾, 儿无声, 擦之不动, 始置起整衣, 索酒食财货, 扬扬而去。” (When the baby was delivered, the midwife identified its sex right now. She asked the parents' disposition of the girl baby. If they did not want it, the midwife would drown the baby in the basin and the baby struggled and writhed till die. Then the midwife demanded material rewards and left).

9 Chen Ziming 1992: 462. “坐婆疏率, 不候时至, 便令试水。试水频并, 胞浆先破, 风飒产门, 产道干涩。及其儿转, 便令坐草; 坐草太早, 儿转亦难, 致令难产。” (The negligent midwife asked the mother to deliver the baby prematurely without careful examination. The water broke and the birth canal became dry. The fetus didn't turn around in the womb, which led to dystocia).

and dangerous practice, and the blood and bodily fluids from the childbirth were also viewed as dangerous and vicious forces which would defile the gods and bring disaster. The midwives who had been stained with reproductive blood were also contaminated by this dangerous force.

In the pre-modern era, the negative stereotype of midwives had been constructed and solidified by male intellectuals. Although the public perception of this group of professional women was full of gender-based prejudice and social discrimination, some doctors still recognized their practical function in human reproduction. With the emergence of the nation-state and the development of hygienic modernity, their medical function gained more attention, and people developed a new understanding about this professional group.

## 2 “The reformed traditional midwife” as medical worker in the modern nation-state

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, when western missionaries began to open modern hospitals, cultivate obstetricians, and translate the relevant medical books, advanced knowledge of maternal and child health spread in China along with reformed midwifery methods. Although these actions had strictly political and religious intentions, they objectively promoted the development of Chinese maternal and child health for the long-term. Some enlightened officials in the Qing Dynasty also classified the negative effects created by outdated methods in midwifery in terms of their impact on the nation.<sup>10</sup>

In their views, these midwives were ignorant and uncultured women, who brought infinite harm to pregnant women and newborns. To cultivate healthy citizens, the nation should take measures to reform traditional midwifery with more scientific methods. Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Jin Tianhe, and other social intellectuals emphasized the importance of maternal health to national development and ethnic prosperity. The issue of fertility was not only a physiologic activity but also an important part of the construction of the modern nation-state. This natural process became medicalized and nationalized.

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<sup>10</sup> Tianjing Archives, J0130-00093, 广仁堂卷宗, 《光绪三十二年二月督宪袁札兴办女医学堂卷》, “且未谙腠理, 挲用刀割, 伤生不辨缓急, 动辄虚言恫吓, 大则戕人之命, 小则诈人之财, 其罪何胜擢发。即幸而两获安全, 而小儿堕地之初, 关系甚重, 往往接生不得其法, 致令发育迟钝, 酿成疾病根源。” (The midwife knew very little about the medical knowledge and took operation recklessly, which hurt the mother physically. The consequence of this practice ranged from money waste to lives lost. Even the delivery process was completed successfully, the wrong midwifery could devitalize the mother and the baby. The baby was developmentally behind).

Under the joint pursuits of elevating national discourse and modern medical development, midwives could not shoulder the responsibilities of “*qiang zhong*” (强种, eugenics)<sup>11</sup> and became instead objects to be reformed. In 1913, the Metropolitan Police of Beiping issued an order called “*Jingshi Jingchating Zanxing Qudi Chanco Guize*” (京师警察厅暂行取缔产婆规则, The Temporary Regulation of the Ban of Traditional Midwives), in which the government took measures to regulate and reform midwifery practices.<sup>12</sup> The Beiyang Government gave midwives a new type of administrative task, in which they were asked to register with the police the basic information of newborns including the address, name, sex, birthday, and physical condition. On August 3rd 1928, the Interior Ministry launched “*Guanli Jieshengpo Guize*” (管理接生婆规则, The Regulation of Midwives) and required that every midwife register and get certified, by which they became medical workers controlled by the government. In this way, these reformed midwives not only mastered the new methods of midwifery, but also became the basic agents of national bio-politics, which would “take individual births and deaths into the scientific network to account for them, and make them become an object which may be archived in the modern administrative system.”<sup>13</sup> The literary works during this period reconstructed images of these professional women.

In a little-known scientific novel, *Gaizao Chanco* (改造产婆, The Reformation of A Midwife), Lao Zhupo experienced a complete transformation from a seasoned and reputable traditional midwife to a medical worker cultivated by the modern hospital and administered by the police.<sup>14</sup> The writer recorded the initial development of childbirth medicalization and health administration through the description of Lao Zhupo’s transformation. In the novel, Lao Zhupo was portrayed as a figure attracting both support and disgust with a potent mix of popular rhetoric. Although she had some drawbacks like other traditional midwives, her

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**11** In the late 1900s, this term spread in China with the introduction of Darwin’s theory of evolution. It means that China should take measures to improve the quality of the population and realize ethnic prosperity. Both the Reformers and the Revolutionists emphasized the promotion of Qiang Zhong. Newborns were very important to this movement.

**12** “The Regulation of Traditional Midwives”, 1999: 69–70. “不得不应招请; 不得索要重资; 不得打胎; 不得危害产妇及生儿; 不得掉换、买卖男女婴孩; 有难产时须令本家请求医生, 不得以非法下胎; 不得妄用神方及其他俗方与产妇及生儿服食; 不得于产妇及生儿妄施针灸; 产畸形怪状时须呈报官厅, 不得妄为处置; 不得宣布产妇秘密阴私及挟持需索。” (There were ten kinds of actions midwives were forbidden to do, including ignoring a call, overcharging fees, conducting abortions, injuring the mothers and their babies, trading newborns, illegal abortion caused by dystocia, using folk prescriptions, offering acupuncture, disposing of fetuses with birth defects at will, and threatening to expose clients’ secrets).

**13** Yang Nianqun 2013: 208.

**14** Ma Li 1948: No. 2: 21; No. 8: 24.

practical function in the delivery process could not be neglected, which made her play an important role in the county. Tang Xiansheng, a doctor in the hospital, made use of her social status to promote the methods of modern midwifery. In this way, Lao Zhupo gained new midwifery skills and became a member of the modern health administration system. Unlike the negative stereotype in the pre-modern period, this novel presented an objective and colorful image of a midwife.

However, the national government was too weak to promote reproduction reformation from the top down during the Republican Period, so the innovation of midwifery continued in the second half of the twentieth century. With the founding of New China, the nation-state promoted New Methods of Midwifery together with the reform of old-style midwives and the cultivation of new-style midwives. On August 20, 1950, the Ministry of Health issued policies to promote new delivery methods over outdated methods. They promoted the reform of traditional midwives and the cultivation of socialist midwives across the country in the First Chinese National Symposium of Maternal and Child Health.<sup>15</sup> However, not all midwives were eligible for training.

In the 1950s, writers created the image of the midwife as part of the modern medical establishment, and presented their transformation in the context of the development of modern reproductive hygiene. The images of midwives could be classified into two types. The first is kind and helpful workwomen who shouldered the responsibility of delivering babies among the grassroots. These women had high status in the existing social network and gained lots of respect from the public (especially rural women). Different from the classical image of greedy traditional midwives, their motivations for attending the delivery process were not for material rewards. In *Liangge Shoushengpo* (两个收生婆, Two Traditional Midwives), Gao Daniang and Liu Dashen suffered a lot of pain in their own childbirths and decided to help other mothers as a consequence. These were model workwomen who participated actively in public affairs and gained much respect and support from the public. Mashan Dama in *Shengming Yaolan* (生命摇篮, The Cradle of Lives) was a typical representative. Compared to other selfish and indifferent old women in the county, she submitted food to the government actively and expressed full support for the enlistment of her son-in-law, which made her admired in society.<sup>16</sup> The medical function and social status of these midwives

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15 Xinhua News Agency 1950: 250.

16 Liu Rentao 1956: 92. “缴纳公粮, 我全是一干二净饱满的好谷子; 女婿参军, 我也没扯过后腿; 献军鞋, 人家一双, 我也没少一只。” (“All the grains I submitted to the people’s commune are of high quality. I supported the enrollment of my son-in-law, and I also completed the task of making military shoes on time”).

entitled them to become objects transformed by new midwifery and consequently these reformed traditional midwives got a new name, socialist midwives.

The other type of midwife was a negative stereotype in the manner of the pre-modern literary works. They chose this profession only for money, and the material rewards completely obscured the work ethic of medical workers. It was very difficult to reform these traditional midwives and they were not allowed to become practitioners of New China's bio-politics. Hu Yaoshen in *Shancun Jieshengyuan* (山村接生员, The Rural Modern Midwife) was one of these greedy traditional midwives. She adopted an iron hook to pull the newborn from the womb without reproductive examination, which caused both the mother and her baby to die. Moreover, she also showed an indifferent attitude toward life. When Hou Ying was giving birth, she proclaimed that "someone is destined to die, there is nothing we can do about it," which gave the whole family a horrible feeling that the mother and baby would die.<sup>17</sup> Her outdated methods and irresponsible attitude led to her exclusion from the movement of New Methods of Midwifery. But it did not mean that these traditional midwives were abandoned by New China; with the guidance of the new government, they could earn their living through other types of manual labor. Pan Nainai in *Jingjingde Chanyuanli* (静静的产院里, Quiet Maternity Hospital) who once hindered the spread of New Methods of Midwifery on behalf of traditional midwives took on a new profession as a chicken-breeder and made a great contribution to the communal farm.<sup>18</sup> These traditional midwives were transformed to common workwomen who made their own efforts for the prosperity of New China.

Writers criticized the outdated methods adopted by midwives and their negative attitudes towards life by acknowledging their social status and personal qualities rather than by portraying them as negative stereotypes. As mentioned in the last section, the traditional midwives developed their techniques from their own childbirth experiences, including "chui, da, za, dun, yong biandan ya duzi, yong chenggouzi gouchu tai'er" (捶、打、砸、蹲, 用扁担压肚子、用秤钩子钩出胎儿, hitting the waist, belly massaging, pressing the belly with a shoulder pole, pulling dead babies by steelyard hook), which risked physical harm to pregnant women and babies.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Hua Shi 1954: 27 “哼, 该死的接不来!” (“The fetus that was destined to die could not be born”).

18 Ru Zhijuan 1960: 17.

19 When dealing with the women's dystocia, most of the traditional midwives would take an extreme measure to protect the life of the mother by pulling the newborns with steelyard hooks. In the literary works of the 1950s, like *Two Traditional Midwives*, *Delivery Story*, and *The Rural Midwife*, the writers presented this plot, in which the traditional midwives had no capacity to deal with the dystocia and their practical operations in the delivery process would pose a great threat to mothers and their babies. Fortunately, their unenlightened actions had been stopped by the modern midwives with the New Methods of Midwifery.

Bai Dasao in *Jiesheng* (接生, Delivery Story),<sup>20</sup> Xiang Lian in *Shengming Yaolan*,<sup>21</sup> and Hai Niang in *Liangge Shoushengpo*<sup>22</sup> were tortured brutally by their midwives and almost lost their lives. Traditional midwives emphasized that it was meant to be torturous and miserable for women to deliver babies, and this passive conception caused the neglect of mothers' physical and emotional suffering during the delivery process. During the 1950s, the writers tried to change this negative attitude towards life by emphasizing modern medical interventions into the delivery process. An emphasis on honor and respect for life modernized the philosophical approach midwives could take. In these works, the reformed midwives would pay more attention to the physical situations of pregnant women than before, and women's delivery conditions were improved. The medical function of these reformed midwives was highlighted, by which they became healers safeguarding lives rather than executioners.

Their social status had also been transformed from a presider of life rituals to a medical worker under the charge of the national health administration. In the past, traditional midwives hosted traditional rites, such as “*xi san*” (洗三, Custom of giving bath to a baby on its third day), “*tian pen*” (添盆, Throw gifts into the basin), and “*bai baisui*” (掰百岁, Break off the steamed bun), which were important moments of initiation into the family for newborns in China, yielding much significance to the cultural function of traditional midwives.<sup>23</sup> In the 1950s, the reformed midwives not only helped women to deliver babies, but also supervised the birth of individual life as regulated and managed by the hygiene department. In this way, the new state began to intertwine the development of individual life with modern medical technologies. *New Methods of Midwifery* was “one of the first issues through which rural Chinese women encountered their new government.”<sup>24</sup>

The transformation of the social identity of midwives not only displayed the modernization of Chinese traditional culture, but also presented the development of bio-politics in New China. In the national discourse, the stigma of midwifery was removed and the public recognition of this professional group was reconstructed.

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20 Bai Yao et al. 1951: 8–10.

21 Liu Rentao 1956: 104.

22 Ma Feng 1949: 45–46.

23 Yang Nianqun 2001: 136. “稳婆在社区中的作用主要不在接生, 而是凭借其娴熟的辞令和仪态, 成为新生儿步入家庭场所的仪式督导者。” (“The function of midwives in the community is not only delivering babies but also supervising the custom of newborn's birth with her skilled rhetoric and manner”).

24 Hershatter 2011: 156.

### 3 The images of cultivated socialist midwives and their cultural connotations

New China promoted New Methods of Midwifery through the reformation of old midwives into socialist midwives. The literary works during the 1950s not only recorded this modern transformation, but also presented the cultivation of new-style midwives. This kind of socialist midwife realized her own liberation and achieved personal fulfillment by virtue of this profession.

The National Medicine and Health Administration cultivated lots of new-style midwives who had no delivery experience. These training objects could be classified into two kinds: the middle-aged female cadres who were warmhearted and well-known among the grassroots, and the young unmarried women who were taught to read and write at school. Although they were part of the socialist midwives in New China, their images were very different from those of the reformed traditional midwives. These new cultivated midwives were more intellectually liberated and positive and were regarded as the backbone of New Methods of Midwifery. As the intermediary between the nation-state and grass-roots women, on one hand, these midwives promoted the policies of New China, reconstructed family relations and social networks, and reformed traditional customs and cultural beliefs. On the other hand, they also paid much attention to women's liberation and development, and guided society to get rid of the barriers instituted by clan power, patriarchal rules, and religious authority. Meanwhile, they also made achievements of their own in this process. These two kinds of new midwives had different social identifications, marital statuses, and life experience and their images presented different cultural meanings.

The female cadres who had childbirth experience and strong public support were regarded as the major driving force behind the spread of New Methods of Midwifery. Although they did not work previously as midwives, their own personal experience of birthing made them aware of the damage to mothers and babies caused by outdated delivery methods, which prompted them to actively attend the training of socialist midwives. New Methods of Midwifery was not only a political assignment in the national discourse, but also an important medical event in personal discourse for these women.

The new-style midwives cultivated from female cadres undertook doubled responsibilities for medical development and political construction. They not only solved women's medical issues but also became the representatives of new power. In stories of the time, Ma Xiulan, Luo Manmei, and Wei Zhaoming<sup>25</sup> were

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<sup>25</sup> Qie Ning 1953; Jiang Jide 1959; A Journalist from *Guangming Daily* 1955.

representative of this kind of midwife. They provided timely rescues when the mothers and newborns were hanging on by a thread. And during this process, they also propagandized national policies and consolidated the implementation of new power in grassroots society. With the help of the nation, they guided women to overcome traditional barriers preventing them from participating actively in public affairs. They tackled the problems that rural women faced in daily life, including fertility problems and the need for jobs for women. They helped them to realize their economic independence which was essential to the construction of female subjectivity in New China. On some level, the political and social significance of these midwives was more important than their medical function.

In order to sustain the development of national bio-politics, New China also emphasized the cultivation of young midwives who were usually unmarried and non-pregnant. Compared to the other type of new midwives, their medical and intellectual functions were highlighted. They not only assisted women in child-births, but also identified the myths around childbirth in order to spread medical and health knowledge. In a sense, this kind of socialist midwife was a public educator. Bai Tongzhi, a new midwife in *Jiesheng*, broke down the superstitions of “*li zhuangke*” (立撞客, Conjuring) and “*shao zhiquan*” (烧纸钱, Burning ghost money), and promoted scientific knowledge in its place.<sup>26</sup> However, these unmarried socialist midwives faced more questions and challenges from the public than other midwives. Their unmarried status and lack of childbirth experience made the public wary and critical of them. In literary works, writers presented their defense of this profession.

There were two reasons why these young women became midwives: national messaging and personal career planning. On one hand, their recognition of this profession was affected by the national discourse surrounding midwives. Qiu Kexiu in *Shancun Jieshengyuan*, Wang Xiuming in *Mofan Jieshengyuan* (模范接生员, A Model Midwife), and Zhuzhu in *Liangdairen* (两代人, Two Generations of Professional Women) stressed that national pursuits should be given top priority; the main purpose of socialist midwives was to deliver new lives for New China. With national support, these unmarried women had the courage to be engaged in a line of work once exclusive to married women. On the other hand, these young women hoped to become skilled professional women and gain public respect and support. As socialist midwives, they could realize their professional goals and obtain social status in society. In *Jiesheng*, Er Xiu was recognized by the public for her professional skills.<sup>27</sup> Like other narratives of female liberation in 1950s, the description of young midwives displayed the construction of a new female subjectivity in modern society.

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26 Bai Yao 1951: 19–20.

27 Gu Yu 1953: 80.

Compared with other midwives, it was easier for young women to accept new ideas and technologies, and they were the most open-minded, professional, and innovative among the ranks of socialist midwives. As specialized midwives they made it easier to remove women's childbirths from the local traditional network and reconstruct them as part of the bio-political system of New China.<sup>28</sup>

The literary images of new-style midwives presented the ideal blueprint of professional women envisioned by New China. On one hand, they were medical workers who improved the conditions of childbirth as well as maternal and neonate health among the grassroots. On the other hand, they had their own careers and realized their own liberation and development, which actually promoted the construction of a new female subjectivity in New China. However, the cultivation of new-style midwives also seemed to comply with traditional concepts of gender segregation which asked women to be the primary delivery attendants and excluded men from this activity.<sup>29</sup> During the 1950s, there were still fewer male midwives than female ones.

## 4 Epilogue: recording the Chinese social history of lives in the 1950s

The literary texts based on the movement of New Methods of Midwifery not only presented the development of New China's bio-politics through the intervention of national bio-power into individual life, but also provided a series of archetypes of midwives which left a special mark on the history of professional women's images, and on the construction of the modern subjectivity of women in grassroots society. These traditional midwives who were once seen as greedy and relentless would become the laborious and kind-hearted medical workers in pursuit of Chinese bio-governance, so that people paid more attention to their medical and political functions than their cultural roles. The transformation of these female images was not only the description of the liberation and development of women, but also the promotion of the modernization of Chinese society. The literary narratives of New Methods of Midwifery offered a solemn and vibrant depiction of the social history of life.

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<sup>28</sup> Goldstein 1998: 154.

<sup>29</sup> During the 1950s, there were only two works about male midwives, Wang Yu's *Jie Shengyuan* and Shi Kaiwen's *Chao Ying*. And they were not expert midwives but just delivered babies by accident. Women were the main participants of the delivery process by sex preference, and men were still excluded.

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