The early postwar Japanese governments were indifferent to the existence of the Japanese orphans left behind in China, considering them to be naturalized Chinese. The Kishi cabinet ultimately designated them as “wartime dead,” burying their existence in the vault of history. Consequently, the succeeding cabinets ignored their existence altogether. Meanwhile, the orphans had endured discrimination and persecution in China, and longed to return to Japan, where they thought they would be free and safe. The more they suffered, the stronger their longing became. As soon as Sino-Japanese relations normalized in 1972, the orphans began writing to the newly opened Japanese embassy in Beijing, asking for information on their identities and birthparents.

Nevertheless, the Japanese government was still reluctant to begin a search for the orphans, as Sino-Japanese relations were intertwined with the U.S.-China-Soviet strategic triangle. The process for concluding a Sino-Japanese peace treaty stumbled over the “hegemonic clause” issue, while Sino-U.S. rapprochement followed a less smooth path, as it was involved with the Vietnam War and its aftermath. It took six years for China and Japan to sign a peace treaty in August 1978, after they had normalized their diplomatic relations. It took seven years for China and the United States to establish their diplomatic relations in January 1979, after President Nixon’s visit to Beijing. Consequently, the orphan issue was sidelined during this period, and the Japanese government did not take any initiative to solve it.

It was three years after the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty, and only after incessant pressures from the volunteer
organizations created to help the orphans in the absence of government initiatives, that the Japanese Ministry of Health organized official missions to search for the orphans’ kin in Japan in 1981 (see table 6.1 in appendix). Meanwhile, some Japanese challenged the taboo about the orphans and began their own searches for the orphans. A Buddhist priest, Yamamoto Jishō in Nagano prefecture, became the pioneer of such endeavors.

**Volunteer Searches for Orphans: Yamamoto Jishō**

Yamamoto Jishō joined the Manchuria-Mongolia Settlement Mission in May 1945, which turned out to be the last mission from his region. The group of 250 settlers was charged to develop a new village in Baoqing prefecture in Dongan province, at the eastern border by the Ussuri River. Yamamoto was to teach fifty-one children at the new public school in the village. However, just when they began to settle, the Soviet Army attacked the settlement. Yamamoto took all of his fifty-one pupils and wandered around the wilderness until the Soviet Army captured them. Yamamoto was sent to Siberia, released, and repatriated in 1948. Out of 250 settlers who left their hometown with Yamamoto, only thirteen came home. Out of his fifty-one pupils, only six returned. His wife and two daughters went missing. The repatriates did not want to talk about their missing family members in Manchuria. They said that all of them had died. Yamamoto chanted the sutra every day at the graves of the missing settlers and his pupils, who were designated as “wartime dead.”

Nearly a quarter century later, in 1969, Yamamoto was called to the deathbed of one of the repatriates. The person confessed to Yamamoto that she had left her children with the local Chinese. Yamamoto went to Tokyo and requested that the Ministry of Health search for the children left behind in China. The Ministry rejected his request. It had already finished repatriation of war veterans and considered the government task of repatriating Japanese completed. In fact, the Repatriation Assistance Bureau no longer existed. It was given the ambiguous name of “Assistance Bureau” in 1959. The Ministry officials said, “The parents left their children in China of their own will. Why should the government search for the orphans?” Yamamoto persisted and visited the Ministry repeatedly.

It was not until September 1972 when Prime Minister Tanaka visited Beijing that the Ministry’s attitude begin to change. Yamamoto also received a letter from China. It was a “letter from the dead” because