

Doing History of Childhood in China

While the history of childhood is attracting more scholarly attention in the Anglophone academia in the past few decades, it is still in its infancy in China. This does not mean that scholars in China are “lagging” behind the trend in the Anglophone world. Instead, it reveals different academic traditions and approaches to the question of childhood in history. Although few scholars in China label themselves as historians of childhood, substantial research has been conducted on children and childhood under the rubrics of literature, education, the history of family, and women’s and gender history.

About a decade ago, Ping-chen Hsiung, a pioneering scholar of childhood in Chinese history, reflected that Chinese Childhood Studies were particularly well-equipped to challenge the notion of a “universal childhood” as part of the ideal of “general humanity,”¹ for much of the European-American theorisation of childhood and children cannot be unproblematically transplanted and applied to the Chinese context. Building on Hsiung’s observation, this edition of China Connections aims to explore both “Chinese childhood” and the ways in which Chinese scholars approach the issue of childhood in other socio-cultural contexts.

What is the current state of the field of childhood history in China? What are the key concerns of the Chinese practitioners in this area? These questions guide the contributions to this collection. Xin Xu provides a brief overview of the study of children in ancient China, with a particular focus on the uses of material culture to reconstruct the historical reality of children in the past. Similarly, Gao Zhenyu outlines the development of childhood studies as a distinct discipline in

early 20th-century China. Cai Danni, on the other hand, focuses on a more specific case: literate girls’ epistolary service in wartime China, which offers the reader an instructive window into the inner world of children during the late 1930s and the 1940s. Finally, Li Shushu explores the representation of children in contemporary Chinese and Anglophone literature to reflect on the notion of childhood innocence. Collectively, these contributions demonstrate the diversity of approaches to the study of children and childhood in China.

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Notes

- 1 Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 185.

Children in Ancient China: An Overview of Historical Realities and the Historiographical Research

XIN Xu 辛旭

Comparing childhood in world history, Peter Stearns has argued that China was a patriarchal society during the “classical civilization” period. The Chinese parenting style, which was based on maternal devotion and filial piety, fostered adult attachment to children, with a depth surpassing that of Greco-Roman civilization.¹ In terms of personal development, in contrast to India, which is also part of the “Eastern civilization,” China encourages children to follow the crowd, while India focuses on nurturing the imagination of its youth.² As the ‘schoolchild’ increasingly becomes the epitome of modern childhood, this concept of childhood has also been embraced in modern China. Through both formal and informal education, China is establishing a new concept of children as citizens of the nation-state. While Stearns’ description captures certain historical realities of Chinese children, it lacks a comprehensive understanding of the rich and varied historical images of children in ancient China. This also points to the inadequacy of current research on the history of Chinese children.

The image and real-life experiences of children in ancient China have been widely documented in various prescriptive medical texts, educational texts, biographies, literature, and family records. Visual media such as paintings, sculptures, and tomb landscapes have also testified to the public visibility of children. For example, children’s games since the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties have been conceptualized under the term “children’s play” (erxi 儿戏) in various contemporary texts. Toys such as bamboo horses (zhuma 竹马, see Fig. 1) and bird carriages (jiuche 鸡车) featured extensively in pictorial representations, archaeological artifacts, and other material objects. The bustling scenes of children peddling toys along the streets are vividly depicted in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) painting “Peddler of Toys.” During the Song and Ming (1368–1644) Dynasties, “Children at Play” paintings (yingxi tu 婴戏图), which depicted the pure and joyful nature of children at play, became widely popular and were a preferred choice for congratulatory gifts. In the field

of medicine, from the Han and Jin (265/266–420) Dynasties into the Song Dynasty, youke (幼科 pediatrics) gradually evolved into a specialized field distinct from adult medicine.

Despite the growing presence of children in visual arts and the medical field, a continuous “belittlement” of children in daily life has persisted, including the colloquialization of “pediatrics” to xiao’er ke (小儿科 literal meaning: kid’s play) and the evolution of the term erxi into a colloquial phrase suggesting trivial things not to be taken seriously. The coexistence of these phenomena indicates the complexity of the ancient Chinese conception of children. This complexity also inspired ancient Chinese philosophers to explore the philosophical meanings of the concept of children at an early stage. Both Laozi’s concept of “returning to infancy” (fugui yu ying’er 复归于婴儿) and Li Zhi’s (李贽, 1527–1602) “Tongxin shuo” (theory of the child-like innocence 童心说) emphasize the innate goodness and innocence of children. Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) similarly encouraged children to engage in

“useless activities” (wuyi zhishi 无益之事), emphasizing the difference between the simple and innocent nature of children and the adult world’s focus on “benefits” (liyi 利益) and “utility” (gongyong 功用). On the other hand, Xunzi (荀子, 300–230 BCE) included children in his theory of inherent evilness (xing’er lun 性恶论). He believed that the only way to eliminate the possibility of people acting recklessly was to teach them proper rules and rectify their manners from birth. Although both Xunzi and Mencius emphasized guidance and education, Mencius believed that the motive for learning stemmed from the innate goodness of human nature, whereas Xunzi’s emphasis was on “discipline.” These diverse understandings of human nature shaped the various parenting methods in ancient China. For example, the upbringing of the Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao 程颢, 1032–1085; Cheng Yi 程颐, 1033–1107), prominent Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty, became a paradigmatic narrative of Confucian child-rearing. However, they themselves believed that “children are like



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Fig. 1 (right): Mirror featuring bamboo horses, China. Bronze, diameter 13.8cm, Tang Dynasty (618–907). On loan to the Tsinghua University Art Museum. Photo taken by XIN Xu during the exhibition *All Things in Full Reflection: The Culture and Art of Ancient Chinese Bronze Mirrors* (2021).