

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

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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



Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

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Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.



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).



Fig. 2 (left): *Children at Play*, Anonymous artist, Song Dynasty. Cited from *Song hua quanji*, Vol. 6 No. 1, Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2008, p. 186

puppies,” implying that naturally unruly children needed to be disciplined to cultivate their proper morality.

As Stearns has pointed out, childhood life is intimately connected to the realm of education. In ancient China, children began their education either through home schooling or by attending private schools, government-sponsored primary schools, and other educational institutions. Before the Tang Dynasty (618-907), there were no specific learning materials prepared for children. Both children and adults used the same educational materials, including *zishu* (character books 字书) for literacy instruction, *mengshu* (enlightenment books 蒙书) for intellectual and moral education, and *jingshu* (classical texts 经书) as textbooks on Confucianism. According to various documents unearthed in Dunhuang, a distinction was made between adults’ and children’s learning materials as early as the Tang Dynasty. Three main categories of children’s textbooks were developed: literacy, education, and practical application. Under each main category, there were various subcategories. For instance, under the literacy category, there were textbooks such as *A Thousand and Three Hundred Words Essential for Daily Use* (*Xinji shiyong gaozi yiqiansanbai yan* 新集时要用字壹仟叁佰言), which solely focused on literacy; *Essential Instruction for Opening the Mind* (*Kaimeng gaoxun* 开蒙要训), which contained rhymes and coherent sentences for literacy instruction; and *Surname Recognition* (*Xingwang shu* 姓望书) that used surnames for learning to read. With the invention of the printing press and the establishment of modern public school education systems, not only did the

quantity of children’s textbooks increase, but the knowledge categories also expanded, gradually evolving into modern educational materials for systematic learning. Because of the richness of primary sources, children’s education has received significant scholarly attention and emerged as one of the most important areas of research in the history of Chinese children.

There is no doubt that the global circulation of modern perspectives on children contributes to the effort to separate children from the adult world as a group with distinct characteristics. During the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), missionaries who established charitable institutions such as orphanages observed the widespread phenomenon of infant abandonment and infanticide. During the May Fourth era, John Dewey visited China, and his advocacy of child-centered learning was widely embraced across various sectors of Chinese society. In the Republican era (1912-1949), the elite began to promote child-centered initiatives through literature, scientific education, scientific childcare, healthcare, grassroots charity for children, and school education, thus integrating children’s welfare into the process of building a modern nation-state.

The late Qing and Republican eras not only left a wealth of historical documents directly related to children, but also witnessed the birth of the earliest child-centered academic research in China. Notable scholars in psychology research included Ling Bing (凌冰, 1894-1993), Huang Yi (黄翼, 1903-1944), Guo Renyuan (郭任远), Xiao Xiaorong (萧孝嵘, 1898-1970), Zhu Zhixian (朱智贤, 1908-1991), and Liao Shicheng (廖世承, 1892-1970). In the medical

field, exemplary figures were Fan Quan (范权, 1907-1989), Zhu Futang (诸福棠, 1899-1994), Deng Jinkan (邓金鑒, 1908-1973), and Wu Ruiping (吴瑞萍, 1907-1998). Chen Hegin (陈鹤琴, 1892-1982) and Tao Xingzhi (陶行知, 1891-1946) were leading figures in the field of education, while Zhou Zuoren (周作人, 1885-1967) dedicated himself to children’s literature. All of them had studied overseas. Their research not only established the modern professional system of child studies in China across four domains – child psychology, child education, children’s literature, and pediatrics – but also contributed to the global theories of childhood. Zhu Futang’s discovery of the role of placental extract in preventing measles, for instance, benefited children worldwide.

Since Philippe Ariès brought children into the field of history,³ the history of Chinese children has also attracted historians’ attention globally. In the 1980s, Western Sinologists, such as Anne Behnke Kinney, began to trace the real-life experiences of children in ancient China.⁴ Chinese historians followed suit, not only introducing Western theories of children’s history into their research but also incorporating archaeological discoveries and historical documents to reconstruct the material environment, social life, and representation of children in ancient China.

Overall, the history of children and childhood remains a relatively new research field within Chinese academia. While there have been some studies, they mostly involve adding children into existing historical narratives. The existing Chinese scholarship has not treated children as proactive agents in their own right, nor has it explored the concept of childhood from the perspectives

of class, gender, and race. This has resulted in a lack of thorough understanding of children and childhood in ancient China. However, as John Dardess has pointed out, “as a topic for scholarly inquiry, the history of childhood in China has a shallow past, but surely a promising future.”⁵ To turn this promising future into reality, it is crucial to first have a comprehensive understanding of the origins, development, and current status of this field. Additionally, it is important to establish a theoretical framework that can inspire different research questions and provide alternative interpretations.

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- 1 Peter Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.
- 2 Ibid., 30.
- 3 Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. R. Baldick (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1962).
- 4 Anne Behnke Kinney (ed.), *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 5 John W Dardess, “Childhood in Premodern China,” in Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (eds.), *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 91.