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.

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).

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* 鸠车) 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

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 yaozi yiqiansanbai yan* 新集时用要字壹仟叁佰言), which solely focused on literacy; *Essential Instruction for Opening the Mind* (*Kaimeng yaoxun* 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 (萧孝嶸, 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 (邓金鉴, 1908-1973), and Wu Ruiping (吴瑞萍, 1907-1998). Chen Heqin (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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Notes

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.

Childhood Studies in Modern China: A Half Century's Development

GAO Zhenyu 高振宇

In China, the formal study of childhood first emerged in the early 20th century. This foundational effort set the stage for evolving societal perspectives on childhood and brought significant improvements in the welfare of China's child population. Western ideas and concepts related to the field of childhood studies, introduced through European and American missionaries and Japanese scholars, gradually took root in Chinese academic circles. Despite challenges from political turmoil, communication barriers, and limited access to resources, Chinese scholars produced both comprehensive and specialized studies on children and childhood. Childhood research groups and institutions dedicated to childhood studies were established, while academic journals published a substantial amount of research papers. The development of modern Chinese childhood research peaked in the 1920s and 1930s, even as interests in childhood studies waned in Europe and America. Thus, modern Chinese childhood research significantly contributed to the global child-study movement, and its continuing advancements have played a vital role in the sustainable development of the field internationally.

Historical sources suggest that the development of childhood research in modern China can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage, which I call the "Sprouting and Preparation" phase, developed out of the efforts of European and American missionaries and Chinese missionaries influenced by them. Although not all efforts focused specifically on children or childhood research, they contributed to the dissemination of foundational concepts and published some of the first works on related research subjects in China. These efforts spurred interest among China's emerging intellectual class, bringing attention to modern academic disciplines. The primary methods of dissemination included: (1) establishing new educational institutions to provide specialized courses or creating new medical facilities to conduct practical training, (2) publishing textbooks and other learning materials to support the education of children, and (3) systematically promoting the concept of childhood research by establishing journals and magazines. For example, Western missionaries and their religious schools were the first to introduce child psychology to China as a subfield of psychology. A notable example is the establishment of St. John's College in Shanghai in September 1879, where Yan Yongjing (颜永京,1838-1898), a Chinese pastor and president of the Anglican Church, taught psychology using his own translation of the American book *Mental Philosophy* (*Xinlingxue* 心靈學).[1] This is arguably the first textbook on modern psychology published in China. While it did not specifically address the idea of childhood studies, its content laid the groundwork for subsequent studies in child psychology.

Research on children in China was also notably influenced by Japan. Japanese scholarship on children had provided Chinese scholars with extensive knowledge of the history and the development of childhood studies, particularly in Europe and America, shaping early impressions of the field and laying the groundwork for its further development. For example, in the field of child education, the earliest theoretical works were translated from Japanese by Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877-1927) and others. Examples included *Education* (*Jiaoyuxue* 教育學) by Tachibana Sensaburo (立花铣三郎, 1867-1901) and *Textbook of Education* (*Jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* 教育學教科書) by Makise Goichiro (牧漱五一郎, 1866-1920), both of which were translated by Wang.[2] In the field of child psychology, Japanese academics also played a key role. For instance, *Lectures on Psychology* (*Xinlixue jiangyi* 心理學講義), written by Hattori Unokichi (服部宇之吉, 1867-1939), a psychology instructor at Beijing University's Normal School, presented the latest advancements in Western psychology and may be the first Japanese psychology publication in early 20th-century China.[3]

The study of children first attracted the attention of the Chinese academic community between 1904 and 1906. In 1904, *Educational Vocabulary* (*Jiaoyu cihui* 教育辭彙), compiled by the Japanese Academy of Education and translated by Xu Yongxi (徐用錫, year of birth and death unknown), introduced representative figures in child psychology to China for the first time.[4] In 1906, Miao Wengong (繆文功 1871-1944) emphasized the need for educators to study child psychology in his book *The Latest Textbook of Education* (*Zuixin jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* 最新教育學教科書), arguing that education must be grounded in human nature.[5] According to Miao, to educate without understanding human nature was like a quack doctor treating a disease he did not understand or a blind person riding a steamboat or a car without seeing its mechanism. Miao stressed that, since education was rooted in psychology, teachers should have a solid grasp of child psychology and that viewing children's minds solely from an adult's perspective would only lead to partial understanding and, ultimately, to inadequate education. In this first stage, while Chinese academics started to work on building native childhood research systems, they were still in the stage of imitating foreign scholars or introducing Western research findings. Nor did they have much real-world experience, and they had not yet forged strong relationships with child service initiatives in China.

Writing Letters for Soldiers: Literate Girls' Epistolary Service in Wartime China

CAI Danni 蔡丹妮

Writing letters for seniors was a common theme in epistolary primers for young students in the first half of 20th-century China. These popular instructional models capture the immediate experience of many literate boys and girls of the day, who contributed to their families and communities through their voluntary epistolary service. Indeed, the existing real-life stories of these warm-hearted young authors demonstrate the agency of youth, challenging mainstream narratives that depict children as immature or incapable.[1] The extensive biographical literature and records I have collected for my ongoing project about letter-writing children in modern China suggests that many young students, especially girls, assumed the task of writing letters for wounded soldiers during China's War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949). Although some letter-writing stories have been rediscovered by scholars to highlight Chinese women's wartime contribution,[2] most participants' accounts of their epistolary service remain largely unknown to the public. By uncovering some of these long-hidden stories, this article highlights the letter-writing girls in wartime China to further illustrate how epistolary literacy elevated Chinese girls' roles in broader sociopolitical communities and enabled them to become powerful subjects.

Liu Taozhen 劉桃貞 (1919–?) was one of these letter-writing girls, as recorded in her later essay.[3] She was a progressive member of the Communist Party-led "Chinese Liberation Pioneers Squad" (*Zhonghua minzu jiefang xianfeng dui* 中華民族解放先鋒隊) from Sanyuan 三原 Female Middle School (Shaanxi Province). In 1938, during the early stage of the War of Resistance against Japan, Liu worked together with her teachers and other students to raise money and sew quilts and clothing for wounded soldiers. The group also assisted wounded soldiers with writing letters home to their families.

One 19-year-old soldier was injured so badly that none of the students initially volunteered to write a letter to his family. However, Liu Taozhen stepped forward to apologize for not attending to his needs earlier, and she eventually helped him write two letters: one to his parents and another to his new bride. The latter was especially tragic: the soldier urged Liu to help him convince his wife to find another healthy husband because of his grave injuries during the war. Liu was initially concerned about her ability to complete such a challenging letter, but since she could not bear the disappointed look of a helpless soldier who had lost his arms and legs, she nevertheless agreed. She listened to him with respect and patience, as a professional scribe would do to his customer in the marketplace. To avoid breaking his bride's heart, they decided to hide the brutal fact of his disability by fabricating a story that he had joined the "Death Squad," which positioned him in extreme danger at all times. Liu read her draft aloud to confirm that her letter conveyed his "genuine feeling" (*zhenqing* 真情) and communicated his request for their breakup in the gentlest language. She perceived this letter as more of a literary creation because of its sophisticated rhetoric of affection and devotion. She might have also achieved a sense of pride from the compliments she received from the soldier, which she vividly recalled many years later: "You are among the school children (*xuesheng wa* 學生娃) but act like a fortune-telling master (*suangua xiansheng* 算卦先生), holding the power to fully draw out what is really in a person's heart. Your teachers are really good at educating students." By comparing Liu to a fortune teller, a category of professional scribes from which Liu drew inspiration, the soldier acknowledged her knack for written communication and her professional ethics.

Fig. 1 (right): Bilingual descriptions of Chinese girl guides' epistolary service for wounded soldiers in a hospital of Shanghai from *The War Pictorial* 戰事畫刊 (dated 1937). These letter-writing girls were deemed admirable by the general public for their courageous service and portrayed as exemplars of civilians. Photographs of such care were not unusual in wartime magazines to demonstrate the spirit of the whole country passionately united against Japan. (Image courtesy of Shanghai Library)

The second story of comforting injured soldiers took place in Nanchang (Jiangxi Province) during the Chinese Civil War (ca. 1948). Lin Mianqian 林緬芊 published an article about her letter-writing experience in hospitals in the *Modern Children Magazine* 新兒童.[4] She was among 30 female students from three local girls' schools whose primary objective upon arriving was to help the soldiers write letters home to their families.

Lin started her journey with excitement, but she was soon saddened by the inhospitable conditions these soldiers suffered. Three of the ten wounded soldiers whom Lin helped left a strong impression on her. The first

In the second stage, a significant body of childhood studies literature emerged, including original works by Chinese researchers as well as translated works from Europe, America, and Japan. Zhu Yuanshan's (朱元善, 1856-1934) *Childhood Studies* (*Ertong yanjiu* 兒童研究) (1915), for instance, could be considered the first Chinese work on childhood studies.[6] Although it did not address foundational theories or frameworks, Zhu's work explored three key topics: children's personality and developmental characteristics, fatigue theory, and imitation theory. Translations of works on childhood studies from Europe, America, and Japan also introduced Chinese readers to the history and theories of childhood. Between the 1920s and the 1930s, for instance, the works of Seki Hiroyuki (關寬之, years of birth and death unknown) have been widely translated into Chinese.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese scholars such as Ling Bing (凌冰, 1894-1993), Zeng Zuozhong (曾作忠, 1895-1977), Yao Zhibi (姚枝碧, year of birth and death unknown), and Feng Pinlan (馮品蘭, 1894-1984), also began producing original works that reflected Chinese perspectives on childhood studies. Ling Bing, in particular, developed his own concepts on childhood studies during a series of lectures at Nanjing Normal University's summer school. These lectures were then compiled into a book in 1921, and subsequently revised and republished in 1932 and 1934. This work, ultimately published in four editions, was the most influential work on childhood studies in Republican China. It predated the formal release of many Japanese works and other translated texts on childhood studies, and no comparable Chinese text existed at the time Ling's book was published. Ling's work thus marked an original contribution to the field and the beginning of Chinese childhood studies. Subsequent scholars frequently referenced Ling Bing's writings in their works on childhood studies. Zeng Zuozhong's *Childhood Studies* (*Ertongxue* 兒童學) (1926), for instance, further expanded and enhanced the framework of Ling, covering topics such as historical perspectives on children, scientific approaches for studying children, children and genetics, children's instincts, the intellectual and moral development of children, crime, play, language acquisition, and the application of children's knowledge.[7] These additions significantly enriched the research about child psychology.

The final stage, which I will call the "Advancing amidst Twists and Turns" phase, witnessed a downturn in childhood studies, with a marked decline in research output. However, this did not signal a complete halt in the field. It was evident from a few published works that academics were still actively building and developing childhood studies. Dong Renjian's (董任堅, years of birth and death unknown) *Outline of Childhood Studies* (*Ertongyanjiu gangyao* 兒童研究綱要) stands out as a key contribution.[8] In the preface of his book, Dong stated that it was intended for parents, education students, and child teachers. The book consisted of four chapters – "Organic Foundation," "Children's Impulses and Activities," "Social Environment," and "Discipline for Children" – divided into thirty-eight sections, each with an outline, a research plan, and a list of references. Focused on a comprehensive, realistic view of the full child, Dong's work aimed to encourage adults to value child education and avoid outdated perspectives, using scientific knowledge to foster empathy and manage situations with children. Supported by research materials from the American Childhood Studies Association, it further expanded the existing research framework by addressing childhood studies from psychological, educational, and societal perspectives. Although it did not offer a systematic disciplinary framework, it contributed to refining the content structure established in earlier stages. A limited number of scholarly journals also published articles on childhood studies, exploring the field's history, methodologies, current state of development, and emerging themes in greater depth.

In conclusion, the development of childhood studies in Republican China underwent a complex, multi-phase evolution that reflected broader societal changes in the ways children were perceived, valued, and supported. This progression underscored an increasing recognition of the importance of childhood to the larger social and economic fabric of China, highlighting a growing sense of urgency around the need to provide children with necessary resources and support. Each stage of research on children in China was marked by representative scholars, publications, research groups, and journals and newspapers that collectively advanced the field. Despite its relatively late start and the disruption of the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, research on children and childhood persisted and made remarkable global contributions during the interwar period and the post-war era. Childhood studies remains a promising field in contemporary China. As such, it offers a rich foundation for further research with important implications for the future of Chinese children and the society in which they are growing up.

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Notes

1 Yan Yongjing, *Xinlingxue* (Shanghai: Yishishuhui, 1889).
2 Tachibana Sensaburo's *Jiaoyuxue* was published in the journal *Jiaoyu shijie* (教育世界) in 1901 and Makise Goichiro's *Jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* was published in the same journal in 1902.
3 Unokichi Hattori, *Xinlixue jiangyi* (Tokyo: East Asia Company, 1905).
4 Xu Yongxi, *Jiaoyu cihui* (Beijing: Jingshi daxuetang yixueguan, 1904).
5 Miao Wengong, *Zuixin jiaoyuxue jiaokeshu* (Shanghai: Wenming shuju, 1906).
6 Zhu Yuanshan, *Ertong yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1916).
7 Zeng Zuozhong, *Ertongxue* (Beijing: Beijing minguo daxue tushuguan, 1926).
8 Dong Renjian, *Ertong yanjiu gangyao* (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1948).

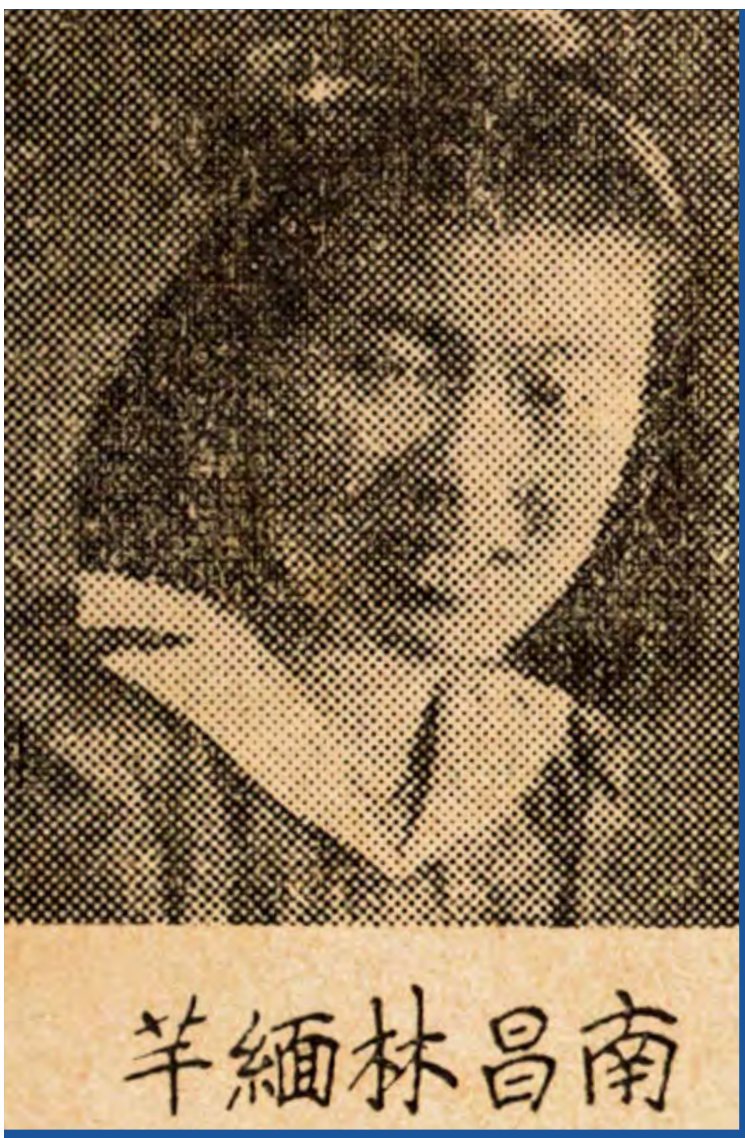

Fig. 2 (left): As an earnest reader of the *Modern Children Magazine*, Lin Mianqian sent her photograph (dated 1949) to the magazine for publication. (Image courtesy of Shanghai Library)

young soldier from Henan sought to write a letter home to his mother, who was desperate for his pay and provisions to make ends meet. However, he was so upset that Lin could not understand his accent that he lost his temper. Instead of feeling annoyed or flustered, Lin showed sympathy for his physical pain and emotional distress, apologizing to him and asking a translator for help to finish the letter. Another soldier from Guangdong proclaimed that he was also in need of help; nevertheless, he complained that he was not able to communicate with the visiting students since he did not understand the Mandarin they spoke. Luckily, Lin understood Cantonese and willingly took over the task of helping this soldier, who had not returned home in three years, compose a letter to his uncle requesting medicine. Both soldiers seemed satisfied with Lin's efforts of turning their vernacular language into written words, as they expressed their gratitude to her in the end.

The third soldier, whom Lin deemed "eccentric," wanted Lin to ask his father to pick him up from the troops because he was uncomfortable with what he described as the troop's "dark side." Despite this request, Lin heeded her teacher's request that negative comments about the war or battlefield conditions should be avoided in letters. She thus took the liberty of excluding the soldier's disturbing description once she confirmed that he was illiterate. Lin felt an enormous sense of unease for censoring this part of the letter, especially because he seemed to place great trust and expectations on her. Considering Nanchang, where Lin resided, was under the administration of the Nationalist government when she volunteered her services as a letter writer, it is likely that the soldiers Lin helped were enrolled in the Nationalist Forces, and she was politically sensitive about the low morale of the troops fighting for the Kuomingtang. She concluded her journey by observing that Chinese soldiers endured the most hardship of any people in the world and hoped that the Nationalist government would increase their remuneration.

Stories of girls writing letters for wounded soldiers across the country abound in contemporaries' memoirs, essays, diaries, photos, and other forms of documentation. These stories, either narrated by girls themselves or recorded by other witnesses, demonstrate the important political and emotional role of young female letter writers in wartime China, which has often been critically overlooked. As Nicole Barnes suggests, educated young women's wartime "emotional labor," such as writing letters for soldiers, created an intimate connection between two populations who would otherwise have had few opportunities to meet and share personal details: female students of the urban middle class and male soldiers from poor villages.[5] Although few sources suggest that these schoolgirls and wounded soldiers continued their conversations after they parted, the heartbreaking scenes during their epistolary service must have been indelibly imprinted on the minds of most girls. The task of fostering communication between soldiers in the field and their families from afar presumably reshaped the sociopolitical consciousness of literate girls, especially those from affluent families. More notably, the two letter-writing girls in the aforementioned stories, Liu Taozhen and Lin Mianqian, showed their determination to gain recognition for these underprivileged soldiers. This determination prompted them to overcome various difficulties, such as dialect barriers, fears of soldiers' bloody bodies, and soldiers' quick tempers. The acquisition of epistolary literacy actively empowered these school girls and gave them confidence and courage in their ongoing endeavour to serve their country.

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1 Danni Cai, "Power, Politeness, and Print: Children's Letter Writing in Republican China," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13.1 (2020), 38–62.
2 For example, Nicole E. Barnes, *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 81–84.
3 Liu Taozhen, "Wo zai kangri hongliu zhong chengzhang" 我在抗日洪流中成長 [I grew up in the wave of resistance against Japan], in *Qinli kangzhan: Beijing jiaoyujie laotongzhi kangzhan huiyilu* 親歷抗戰：北京教育界老同志抗戰回憶錄 [Personal experiences in the Anti-Japanese War: The memoirs of veteran comrades involved in education in Beijing], ed. Zhonggong Beijing shiwei jiaoyu gongzuo weiyuanhui (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2005), 331–334.
4 Lin Mianqian, "Weilao shangbing ji" 慰勞傷兵記 [A record of comforting wounded soldiers], *Modern Children Magazine* 22.3 (1949): 36–37.
5 Barnes, *Intimate Communities*, 81–84.

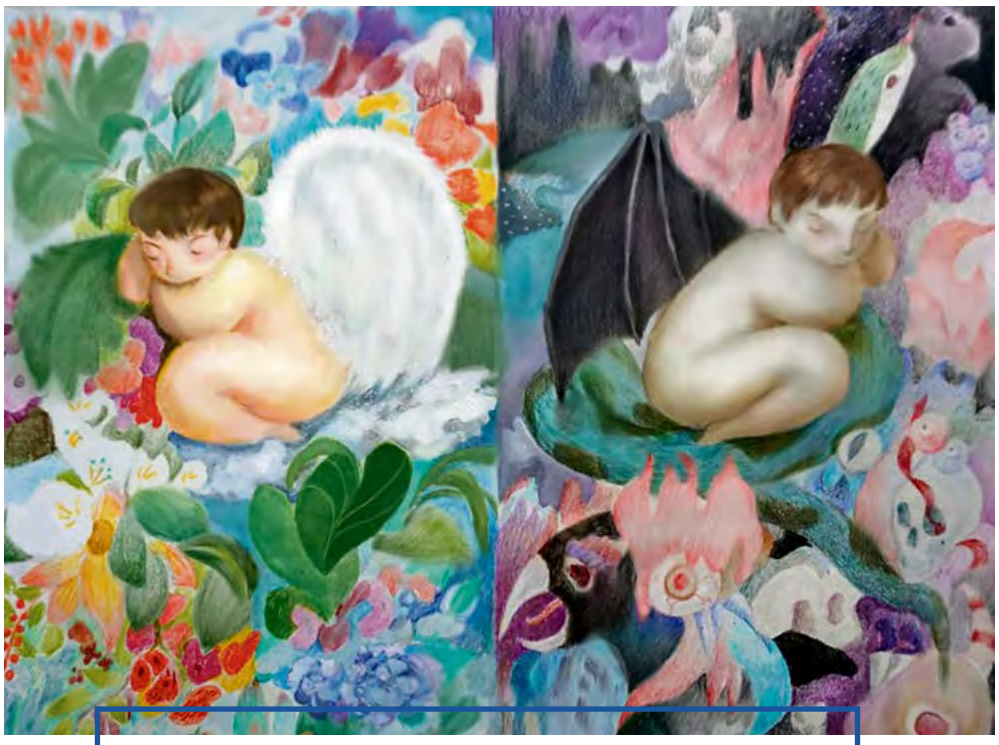

Fig. 1 (left): The discussion of human nature ultimately concerns new born babies. *Untitled*, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 7.95×6.35cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

Revisiting Childhood Innocence

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Although the theory of childhood innocence predates the Romantic Movement (1780-1830) in Europe and spans across multiple cultures,[1] there is no doubt that key tropes in Romantic philosophy, literature, and art at the cusp of the modern industrial age played a significant role in its renewal and global dissemination through Western imperialism. In China, even before the thinker Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602) formulated the notion of "childlike innocence" in his essay "The Theory of the Childlike Innocence" (Tongxin shuo 童心说, 1590), Taoist belief had revered childhood innocence in texts such as the Tao Te Ching 道德经 (571-471 BCE). Hence, the idea that children were inherently "innocent" in their characters and perceptions became part of the broad understanding, construction, and defence of the child and the stages of childhood development in both Eastern and Western cultures.

Scholars have, of course, criticised and rejected the idea of childhood innocence as it evolved and spread across different cultures. Strains in the perception of children's innocence become particularly acute when linked to other "Romantic" characteristics and to certain ancient Chinese folklores recording oddities and interactions with spirits. While in some texts and accounts of childhood, these spirits are seen as metaphors for the visionary-imaginative capacities of childhood that inevitably fade away as children mature, these representations can also slip into much darker portrayals strongly associated with the Gothic themes of children interacting with evil or occult forces.[2] Even if we interpret this solely in psychoanalytic terms, as has been attempted at critical junctures, the proximity between radical innocence and radical wickedness becomes unsettling, casting further doubt on the durability and authenticity of the "innocent child." These anxieties, of course, do not account for the thankfully rare yet shocking instances of children associated with sometimes monstrous transgression and crime.[3] The loss of innocence sometimes underscores children's vulnerability and the understanding that their purity cannot be guarded forever.

Questions of childhood innocence also shape the representations of children in literature. In the 20th century, the trend of presenting children as "darkened," evil, corrupted, and monstrous has become increasingly salient in different cultures through literature, video games, films, TV programmes, and digital media.[4] It is also interesting, in this context, to observe the trend of transporting "darkened" children from the lines of fantasy novels to screens. Adapting literary works for other platforms also returns to existing and older literary traditions. In the Chinese context, after *The Journey of Flower* (*Huaqiangu* 花千骨) was adapted into a TV series in 2015, the genre of "Immortal Arts Literature" boomed in China's film and television industries. *The Journey of Flower* recounts the story of Hua Qiangu, a young girl with extraordinary powers who, despite her love for her master Bai Zihua, a powerful immortal, is fated to become a demon god, forcing them into a tragic struggle between love, sacrifice, and the struggle between personal passion and duty. These works often follow a similar structure, in which the central characters are born with natural talents, evil powers, or even mental disabilities, lacking perceptions from the six senses. While growing up, these characters come into contact with an Immortal Sect and begin cultivating the Immortal Arts. At the same time, they are tasked with killing demons and monsters and maintaining the world's peace. However, due to their extraordinary and abnormal origins, they eventually become entangled in the liminal spaces between good and evil. Although they all become infected or possessed by evil influences in this borderland location, they are ultimately freed either through death or by purging the evil influences and returning to their previous state as Immortals or ordinary people.

The literary genre of Immortal Arts was influenced by earlier Martial Art Literature, Chinese legend, myth, and religion. However, the first modern appearances of the concept came from literary works, film, TV, as well as video games at the end of the 20th century.[5] For example, the video game Legend of Sword and Fairy (*Xianjian qixia zhuan* 仙剑奇侠传) was first released in 1995 and was later adapted into a TV series in 2005. As the game continued to be updated, sequels to its first TV series were subsequently produced in 2009 and 2016.

In the 21st-century Anglophone world, there has been a trend of revisiting or repurposing "darkened" children from earlier or existing fantasy works in TV series and films. These "darkened" children include not only the monstrous or demonised children seen in Chinese Immortal Art literature, but also children who are experienced beyond their years. Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (hereafter HDM) (1995-2000), for instance, was adapted into a TV series in 2019 and 2020, following a critically disparaged 2007 Hollywood adaptation of its first volume. In public commentaries, Pullman has clarified that HDM was conceived as a literary and imaginative intervention, deliberately engaging with the complex lineages and legacies of "Romantic Innocence." Influenced by William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Pullman portrays his central protagonist, Lyra Bellaqua, as valuing both the stage and condition of childhood innocence and the gifts it undeniably bestows upon children, while also affirming and embracing the inevitable end of innocence, as the world of adult opportunity, responsibility, and desire beckons young people at adolescence.

A similar theme appears in the recent fantasy film *Come Away* (2020). Although not directly adapted from a specific literary work, the film is inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, with Alice and Peter Pan as central characters. Before the accidental death of their brother David, neither Alice nor Peter Pan wanted to grow up. The family is devastated by grief after David's death: their mother drinks heavily, and their father accumulates severe gambling debts. To save their family, Alice and Peter set out on an adventure to London. In the face of these harsh truths, both Peter and Alice realise that it is time to grow up. Eventually, they succeed, but Peter chooses to remain a child in Neverland, offering to visit the family from time to time. Much like Immortal Arts Literature in China, children take on responsibilities at a young age and face the dangers of the adult world. In their adventures to protect the world or their family, these children inevitably lose their innocence, becoming wiser but fundamentally changed. These responsibilities, imposed by adults, pull them out of an Arcadian childhood, pressing them to grow up quickly.

The concept of "darkened" or evil children carries symbolic meanings in both literature and real-life contexts. Karen J. Renner examines portrayals of evil children in literary works, films, and TV series, categorising them into six groups: "Monstrous Births," "Gifted Children," "Ghost Children," "Possessed Children," "Ferals," and "Changelings."[6] James Garbarino studies how children lose their innocence and accumulate experiences in real life, including those affected by trauma, political violence, displacement, abandonment, extreme poverty, war, and child abuse.[7] Further research is needed to explore the various meanings of childhood innocence in these turbulent and often menacing settings.

Of course, the evil or "darkened" children discussed here and in other literary works cannot fully represent all childhood experiences, and it is important to avoid overly pessimistic or fatalistic accounts of adult-child interactions and relationships. While children may have been routinely ignored in history, in modern times they are supposedly valued and protected as part of the advancement of international human rights. However, it is crucial to remember that not all children receive the warmth and care of parents, teachers, siblings, or peers, nor the peace that such initiatives assume and promote.

Fig. 2 (right): The protective wall of childhood will eventually be broken by the outside. *Untitled*, watercolour, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 25.84×20.81cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

Fig. 3 (right): As the Victorian philosophers and writers described, the protective wall of childhood will eventually be eroded by the cruel adult world, and children have to face this dark world early. *Untitled*, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 25.2×20.32cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

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Notes

1 Robert Davis, "Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol 45, No. 2 (2011), 383-386; David Kennedy, *The Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 27-40.

2 Renee Simmons Raney, *Hairy, Scary, but Mostly Merry Fairies!: Curing Nature Deficiency through Folklore, Imagination, and Creative Activities* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2017), 18; Karen J. Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

3 Eric Ziolkowaski, *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 5-6; David Oswell, *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143.

4 Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, 1.

5 Zhange Ni, "Xiuzhen (Immortality Cultivation) Fantasy: Science, Religion, and the Novels of Magic/Superstition in Contemporary China," *Religions* 11.25 (2020), 12.

6 Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*.

7 James Garbarino, *Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development* (New York: Springer, 2008).