From Bourgeois Fantasy to Maoist Propagandism: The Representations of Children's Happiness and Nation-Building in Modern China

by

Leting Zheng

A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in East Asian Languages and Literatures

Dissertation Committee:

Roy Chan, Advisor

Maram Epstein, Core Member

Glynne Walley, Core Member

Bryna Goodman, Core Member

Ina Asim, Institutional Representative

University of Oregon

Spring 2026

© 2026 Leting Zheng

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Leting Zheng

Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Languages and Literatures

Title: From Bourgeois Fantasy to Maoist Propagandism: The Representations of Children's Happiness and Nation-Building in Modern China

This dissertation reimagines childhood not as a passive stage of human development or a mere social construct, but as an intangible contested space—a dynamic battlefield where adult anxieties, ideologies, and fantasies converge and clash. As the research demonstrates, children function as empty signifiers, endlessly appropriated as metaphors for societal aspirations and fears, allowing diverse forces—from state apparatuses and educators to families—to project visions of the future onto them. Happiness, in particular, emerges as a fluid and manipulable affective resource, circulated like currency in broader economies of emotion that serve political, cultural, and economic ends. The representations of children's happiness reveal intricate layers of conflict, overlap, and reinvention, where premodern legacies intertwine with Euro-American and Japanese influences to challenge simplistic narratives of rupture or progress. The dissertation begins by examining the "pictorial turn" in Chapter II, arguing that the May Fourth visual construction of the "happy," "cute," and "natural" child was fundamentally tied to a nationalistic agenda. Transitioning to the Great Leap Forward, Chapter III reveals a discursive shift in children's films, where the earlier focus on natural play was replaced by a rigid ideology of "happiness" found solely in collective labor. Finally, Chapter IV explores the escalation of this logic during the Cultural Revolution, analyzing how the state mobilized children through a mechanism of "cruelty," transfiguring violence into a form of political joy.

This dissertation includes previously published material.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Leting Zheng 郑乐婷

Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
Letingz@uoregon.edu; Letingzheng@gmail.com

EDUCATION

2020-2026	Ph.D.	East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Oregon, USA Dissertation Title: "Futuring the Nation: Happiness, Affective Economies, and Contested Childhoods in Modern China" Committee Members: Prof. Roy Chan (advisor), Prof. Maram Epstein, Prof. Glynne Walley, Prof. Bryna Goodman, Prof. Ina Asim
2017-2020	M.A.	Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Colorado Boulder, USA
2013-2017	B.A.	Chinese Language and Literature, Sun Yat-sen University, China

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Modern Chinese Culture, Literature, Film, and History; Transnational Children's Studies; Media and Visuality; Gender Studies; Affect Theory.

PUBLICATIONS

(2025) "'Documenting' Happiness of Labor for The Great Leap Forward: Children's Film and the Making of Modern Socialist Childhood," ***Journal of Chinese Cinemas***, https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2025.2524291.

(2025) "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines," ***Children's Literature Association Quarterly 50.1***, https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2025.a978114.

TEACHING INTERESTS

Chinese Language (All Levels); Chinese History, Literature, and Culture (Premodern to Modern); Film & Media Studies; Gender and Sexuality, Family & Childhood Studies; Socialism.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Oregon

2020-present	Graduate Employee, Dept. of East Asian Languages and Literatures Language Courses (Chinese language at all levels): First Year Chinese (Fall 2021) Second Year Chinese (Fall 2020, Winter 2021, Spring 2021, Fall 2022)

Third Year Chinese (Winter 2024)

Literature, Film, and Culture Courses (from lower-division to upper-division):

Introduction to Chinese Narrative (Spring 2024, Fall 2025)
Introduction to Chinese Film (Winter 2023)
Introduction to Pop Culture (Winter 2022, Spring 2023, Winter 2025)
History of Chinese Literature I (Beginnings to 3rd Century CE) (Fall 2023)
History of Chinese Literature II (3rd to 18th Centuries) (Winter 2024)
History of Chinese Literature III (Late Qing to 20th Century) (Spring 2022)
What is Asia? (Spring 2025)
Language of Food in East Asia (2026 Spring)

2022 The National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar

2020-2021 Department of Defense Chinese Flagship Program Tutorial

University of Colorado Boulder

2017-2020 Teaching Assistant, Dept. of Asian Languages and Civilizations

Language Courses (Chinese language at all levels):

First Year Chinese (Fall 2019, Winter 2020)
Second Year Chinese (Fall 2018, Winter 2019)
Third Year Chinese (Fall 2017, Winter 2018)

TEACHING CERTIFICATE

2020 Certificate in College Teaching issued by Graduate Teacher Program, University of Colorado Boulder

FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS, AND HONORS

2024 The Top Prize of Asian Studies Research Event and Asian Studies Awards for Graduate Students, University of Oregon

2024 College of Arts and Science Diversity Grant, "Harmony in Diversity: Exploring the Shared Heritage of Asia," Co-PI, University of Oregon

2024 National Humanities Center Graduate Student Summer Residency Program Sponsorship, University of Oregon (postpone)

2024 Oregon Humanities Center Dissertation Fellowship for 2024-25, University of Oregon

2023 East Asia Library Travel Grant, Stanford University

2023 Oregon Humanities Center Graduate Research Support Fellowship, University of Oregon

2021 Professional Development Grant, University of Oregon

2020-2025 Teaching Assistantship and Fellowship, Dept. of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Oregon

2019 Tuition Grant, School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University
2017-2020 Teaching Assistantship and Fellowship, Dept. of Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Colorado Boulder
2016 The Second Prize Scholarship, Sun Yat-sen University

SELECTED CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

Conferences Organized

2023 East Asian Languages and Literatures Graduate Student Symposium, University of Oregon, Eugene, April 22

Panels Organized

2023 Association for Asian Studies, "De/Romanticizing Childhood: Children and Nation-Building in Modern China and Japan," virtual, February 17

Papers Presented

2026 ETH Zürich University, "Players, Saviors, and Laborers: The Instrumental Plasticity of Childhood in the Chinese "Playground," Switzerland, August 26-28, 2026

2025 Oxford Center for the History of Childhood Colloquium: Becoming Human? Childhood, Development, and the Human Sciences, "Competing (R)Evolutionary Narratives: Children, Labor, and Happiness During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962)," University of Oxford / virtual, June 23, 2025

2025 Children's Literature Association Annual Conference, "Girls Front and Center: Honor Culture and Socialist Girlhood in 1950s Children's Films," in roundtable, "Tokens of Girlhood: Telling the Time through Material Memories," virtual, June 9-14, 2025

2025 American Comparative Literature Association, "Little Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976): Violence, Happiness, and Hatred in Propagandistic Children's Periodicals," virtual, May 29-June 1

2024 Northwest China Forum, "Hatred, Pleasure, and (In)visible Violence: The Innocent Weapons in Little Red Guards," Vancouver, Canada, October 18-20

2024 Children's Literature Association, "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China (1890s-1920s): The Depictions of Cuteness, Play, and Outer Spatiality in Children's Magazines," Madison, WI, May 30 - June 1

2024 7th Asian Studies Research Event at University of Oregon, "From Bourgeois Fantasy to Maoist Propagandism: Children, Happiness, and Nation-Building in Modern China," Eugene, OR, May 23

2023 Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, "What is Happiness?: Children, Labor, and Leisure in *The Story of Red Scarves*," Denver, CO, October 11-14

2023 Association for Asian Studies, "Entering the National Spatiality: The Affect of Cuteness in *Children's World*," virtual, February 17

2022 American Comparative Literature Association, "The Play of Langxian: Education as Subversion In 'Pan Wenzi Joins His Male Lover in A Grave of Mandarin Ducks,'" virtual, June 15-18

2022 25th Annual Harvard East Asia Society Conference, "The Affect of Cuteness: Cutifying Chinese Youth as the New Normal in the 1920s," virtual, February 19-20

2022 The Texas Asia Conference, "The Affect of Cuteness: Cutifying Chinese Youth as the New Normal in the 1920s," Austin, TX & virtual, February 25-26

2020 29th Annual Columbia Graduate Student Conference, New York, "Chen Zibao and His Primers: An Examination of Cantonese Identity in Late Qing China," February 21-20

2019 68th Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs Annual Meeting, "The Images of Carpenter and Artisan in Premodern Chinese Literary Thoughts," Lansing, MI, October 4-6

2019 Asian Studies Graduate Student Conference, "The Rhetoric of Liao Endao's Cantonese Verses: Playfulness and Sarcasm," Boulder, CO, February 15-16

SERVICE

2025 Member of College of Arts and Sciences Scholarship Committee, University of Oregon

2020-2021; 2023-2024 Member of Diversity Committee, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Oregon

NON-DEGREE ACADEMIC TRAINING

2022 The National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, University of Oregon,
"The Early Modern Vernacular Novel in China and Japan" by Prof. Maram Epstein and Prof. Glynne Walley

2019 The 42nd School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University
"Rethinking Trauma Theory" by Prof. Cathy Caruth

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

2024 Crafting Classroom Engagement: A Workshop for Teaching Tips, University of Oregon, Oregon

2024 Turning a Dissertation into a Book Workshop, University of Oregon, Oregon

2023 Teaching U.S. Undergraduates Workshop, University of Oregon, Oregon

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Cantonese	Native
Mandarin	Native
Classical Chinese	Professional Working Proficiency

English	Professional Working Proficiency
Japanese	Professional Working Proficiency (Japanese Language Proficiency Test N2 level certified)
Korean	Limited Working Proficiency

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Roy Chan, whose mentorship has been fundamental to my growth as a scholar. He introduced me to the field of critical theory—a terrain I was previously unfamiliar with—and rigorously sharpened my critical thinking skills. I am also particularly grateful for his generosity in offering independent studies when department course offerings were limited, ensuring that my research momentum never faltered.

Dr. Chan has also been a significant pillar of support during challenging times, always offering words of encouragement when I faced setbacks. Furthermore, he championed my professional development by using his research funds to facilitate my conference travel. I also had the privilege of serving as his teaching assistant on multiple occasions. These experiences were transformative; sitting in on his undergraduate classes and observing his pedagogy provided me with a model of excellence that continues to guide my own development as an educator.

I am equally grateful to my dissertation committee members, Dr. Glynne Walley and Dr. Bryna Goodman, for their intellectual generosity and rigorous engagement with my work. My understanding of Japanese studies and historiography was profoundly deepened through their seminars at the University of Oregon. Yet, our intellectual exchange extended well beyond the classroom. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Walley for graciously conducting an independent study at my request, where we closely read Japanese primary and secondary sources to refine my language proficiency and textual analysis.

Similarly, Dr. Goodman's seminars provided me with my first rigorous training in historiography. Although I am not a historian by trade, the scholarly methodologies I

acquired from her—enriched by our conversations both in and out of class—have significantly expanded the horizons of my literary and cultural research. Their patience and insightful suggestions have been invaluable to the completion of this project.

Words cannot fully express my gratitude to Dr. Maram Epstein. Our special bond (*yuanfen*) took root at my wedding to Leon in Eugene in 2020. It was the beginning of the pandemic, and we invited no one but Dr. Epstein and Justine to be our witnesses. I cherish the memory of that small, intimate ceremony. During these six years of graduate studies, Dr. Epstein was not only a professor who provided countless invaluable suggestions for my research, but also an empathetic life coach who always offered unwavering emotional support. I remember moments when we laughed out loud, and others where I cried in front of her without reservation. Dr. Epstein is a role model for me not only in academia but also as someone with a "golden heart" whom I truly admire. I hope to emulate her spirit, always ready to selflessly offer a hand to those in need.

Financial support for this research was generously provided by the Oregon Humanities Center at the University of Oregon through the 2023 Graduate Research Support Fellowship and the 2024–25 Dissertation Fellowship. I also extend my gratitude to the East Asia Library at Stanford University for the 2023 Travel Grant, which facilitated crucial access to archival materials essential to this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Ina Asim for serving as the institutional representative on my dissertation committee. I am likewise grateful to Xiaotong Wang, Chinese Studies Specialist at UO, for her generous assistance in locating research materials and facilitating access to resources across libraries. I also thank *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* for granting permission to include previously published material in this dissertation.

I owe a debt of gratitude beyond words to my husband, Leon, who has been my first and most steadfast supporter throughout this whole journey. We started a long-distance relationship shortly after our relationship began; it was tough when one of us was in Colorado and the other in Hong Kong. Two years later, Leon moved to the United States for his graduate studies, even though this had never been his plan. In the following years, he went where I went; he moved where I moved. He is always the one who celebrates with the loudest cheers for every small achievement I make, and encourages me every time I doubt my potential. Without Leon, I would not have achieved what I have today. The end of this Ph.D. journey is the beginning of our new chapter: we are deeply grateful to be welcoming our baby.

Finally, I want to take a moment to acknowledge my own growth and feel proud of myself. As a first-generation female scholar born and raised in a conservative village in China, pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States was unthinkable to me. I thank this six-year journey for all the moments of happiness, success, acknowledgment, frustration, and emotional rollercoasters. I learned, I laughed out loud, I cried hard, I fell painfully, I lingered in self-pity, I stood up again and again, and eventually, I survived. Throughout this process, I have been very harsh on myself and always strived for perfection. It was a difficult journey, and yes, I did it well.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Leon

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION 16–45

A. Concepts and Methodology: What is "Children?" What is "Happiness?" 18–25

B. The Evolution of Childhood Notions: From Premodern to Modern Era, from Republic of China to People's Republic of China 25–35

C. Literature Review and Contributions 35–39

D. Summary of Chapters.....39–42

II. CHAPTER II: THE VISIBILITY AND VISUALITY OF CHILDREN IN MODERN CHINA: CUTENESS, PLAY, AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES 46–82

A. Depicting Children from Song to Late Qing: The Waning of Play and Underemphasized Childlike Traits 48–56

B. Cuteness as Emergent Aesthetics in the 1920s on the Covers of *Children's World*.....56–67

C. From Natural Instincts to National Citizens: Empowered Outdoor Play in Early Republican China.....67–76

D. Conclusion 76–77

III. CHAPTER III: "DOCUMENTING" THE HAPPINESS OF LABOR DURING THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD: CHILDREN'S FILM AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SOCIALIST CHILDHOOD 83–127

A. From Orphans to Happy Children: Cinematic Constructions of "Modern Socialist Childhood".....86–93

B. Debating Satire and Criticism: From Child-centered Approach to Politically Driven Narratives.....93–100

C. From Documentary to Documentary Art Film: A New Form of Children's Film During the Great Leap Forward.....100–109

D. After *The Story of Red Scarves*: Louder Slogans, Less Creative Freedom.....109–116

E. Conclusion 116–117

IV. CHAPTER IV: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER CHILDREN LEAVE HOME?: HAPPY CHILDREN AS "INNOCENT WEAPONS" AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE NARRATIVES IN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION 128–172

A. Cultural Revolution, Little Red Guards, and Violence 131–135

B. Joyful Cruelty: Violence in the Guise of Happiness 135–142

C. From Uncontrolled Violence to Righteous Violence in Children's Illustrated Narratives 142–146

D. Outward Violence in Little Red Guards: Gamification, Sanitization, and the Overriding of Gender Norms 146–154

D. Inward Violence: Children's Heroic Self-sacrifice for Others 154–161

E. From Page to Life: How Violent Propaganda Shaped Children's Experiences 161–166

F. Conclusion 166–167

V. CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION 173–185

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page
1. *Song People Catching Jujubes*, Song dynasty (960–1279) 50
2. *Women and Children by a Lotus Pond*, Southern Song dynasty, (circa 1200–1250) 50
3. "Title page and opening illustration of "Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back," *The Child's Paper*, 1875, p. 1 54
4. Illustration of the sons' capture and the opening text of "Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back," *The Child's Paper*, 1875, p. 2..... 54
5. "Chinese Moral Education: Lesson 18 Reading Lesson on Filial Conduct." *The Children's Educator*, 1898, p. 16..... 55
6. Cover, "Protection," *Children's World*, vol. 17, no. 24, 1926..... 62
7. Cover, "Our Project," *Children's World*, vol. 17, no.8, 1926 62
8. Cover, "The Gift is on Its Way," *Children's World*, vol. 20, no. 25, 1927. 62
9. Cover, *Little Friend*, no. 219, 1926. 70
10. Cover, *Little Friend*, no. 105, 1924. 70
11. An illustration of children practicing *guoshu* (national martial arts) for physical fitness. "How to Strengthen the Body." *Children's World*, 1934, p.40..... 77
12. Illustrations of children playing soccer and swimming, promoted as healthy outdoor activities. "How to Strengthen the Body." *Children's World*, 1934, p.41. 77
13. A notorious manipulated photograph depicting children purportedly standing on an unnaturally dense rice crop, capable of bearing their weight 92
14. Students' leisure activities in *Play*..... 105
15. Students' leisure activities in *Play*..... 105
16. Children are depicted as joyfully engaging in labor in *The Story of Red Scarves*. 106
17. Children are depicted as joyfully engaging in labor in *The Story of Red Scarves*. 106
18. Wang Chunfa in the bucket..... 110
19. Children gaze at the camera and happily say goodbye to the audience..... 110
20. Shen Yingjiang takes the oath to join the Young Pioneers..... 114
21.Children applaud in celebration..... 114
22."Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon" 145
23."Bravely Slaying Enemies,"column of the 1972 volume 8 of Guangdong *LRG*.... 147
24."A Liang," in 1972 Volume 8 of Shandong's *LRG*..... 151
25. "Little Red Guards Capture a Villain" 1970 Volume 3 of Guangdong's *LRG* 153–154
26.Illustration of "A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai" 156

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, I was assigned Andrew Jones' book, *Developmental Fairy Tales*: *Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*, for a graduate seminar on modern Chinese literature. The book did not just inspire me intellectually; it struck me with an astonishing revelation, almost like a bolt of lightning. Born and raised in a business family in Guangdong, China, I grew up in an environment shaped by the commercial spirit of the Reform and Opening-Up policy, where business took precedence over politics. Far from Beijing, political matters felt distant and insignificant in my life. For example, despite the strict enforcement of the One-Child Policy, many families in Guangdong, including mine, had more than one child. Discussions about politics were virtually non-existent within my family and social circles—it was a taboo subject, seemingly irrelevant to my daily existence. As a daughter deeply attached to her family, I understood my identity in simple terms: a child of my parents, a sibling to my brothers. However, *Developmental Fairy Tales* shattered this perception by revealing that, after the May Fourth Movement, children became integral to politics and nation-building. This revelation was both shocking and enlightening. It made me realize that, despite my previous ignorance, I had always been part of the nation-building process, inseparable from the political context of my upbringing.

This newfound understanding ignited a lasting curiosity about childhood, children, and their roles in society. I wanted to move from being a passive recipient of this knowledge to someone who actively explores and shares insights about children, modernity, and the nation-state. After all, we all have childhoods, yet our experiences are

uniquely different, shaping us into the diverse individuals we are today. My interest in children is, in essence, an interest in myself and those of my generation—an attempt to understand what has made us who we are today: individuals born and raised in socialist China. During my research, I unexpectedly stumbled upon the rich cultural and political layers embedded in familiar aspects of my upbringing—layers I had never recognized before. Delving into the history of the Young Pioneers in the 1950s, I rethought the deep meaning of being a "red scarf" and the leadership role I once undertook in the squad. Revisiting childhood songs such as "Let Us Row the Oars," I discovered the cultural background behind these ubiquitous melodies. As I researched the propagandistic children's films of 1958, which valorized the significance of labor to children, I reflected on my own childhood experiences and realized that little had changed for those born and raised in the 1990s and even the 2000s. Memories of labor classes in primary school and responsibilities as a duty student (*zhiri sheng* 值日生)—everyone had tasks like cleaning the blackboard, taking out the trash, and sweeping the classroom floor—resurfaced. These reflections revealed not only the enduring influence of these practices on our daily lives but also the lingering impact of these ideologies on our identities. When I examined materials from children's magazines during the Cultural Revolution—a political campaign my parents never talked about—a question emerged: what distinguishes the children who read these over-empowering materials from those who never experienced the campaign? How do we identify ourselves differently within the nation? However, this dissertation is not just a journey of self-discovery; it also serves as an exploration for those who are not born and raised in China but are interested in the transformation of China and the identity of its people. It offers a glimpse into China's evolving

modernization project and provides a basis for contrasting Chinese childhood experiences with those of other cultures.

Concepts and Methodology: What is "Children?" What is Happiness?

For scholars of children's studies, defining "children" or "childhood" is a foundational, essential, and complex task. The pioneering scholarship on premodern China illuminates the path of this inquiry, revealing a scholarly progression from broad categorizations to more subtle and precise definitions. Anne Kinney's monograph, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (2004), for instance, highlights the complexity of this task. As one of the first English-language works to specifically examine childhood in early imperial China, it made a significant contribution, particularly given the scarcity of materials. However, the book struggles with a clear and strict definition of children and youth. Kinney conceptualizes children in the broadest sense, encompassing stages of human development from the embryo to late adolescence, and sets nineteen as the upper limit for "youth" in her discussion of aristocratic childhood, she traces the life of Liu Chang from his ascension to the throne at age two or three up to his eighteenth year. Rather than strictly segregating these categories, Kinney treats them as a developmental continuum, allowing her to examine how early childhood experiences shape the formation of youth identity.[1] She also extends her discussion to include unmarried, highly educated, and unestablished youths aged twenty to twenty-nine or older. By extending the category of "youth" to include unmarried individuals as old as twenty-nine, Kinney prioritizes social status (marriage and establishment) over biological or developmental age. This expansive scope collapses the distinct lived experiences of a

[1] Anne Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 63-64.

toddler and a fully grown adult into a single analytical continuum, thereby obscuring the specific vulnerability and malleability that define early childhood. Furthermore, the application of modern categories such as "adolescence" to the premodern context is historically anachronistic.

The conceptual tensions highlighted by Kinney's work are further explored and refined in the scholarship of Ping-chen Hsiung. Hsiung's framework, for instance, in *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (2005) continues this definitional inquiry, defining children in three related meanings. The first being the "social child" focusing on the "junior" position it has vis-à-vis the senior. This notion of "child," a *zi* 子, is understood mostly as a social status relative to his or her elders. It denotes the subordinate, humble, and inferior status of a child in a subservient role to that of his or her elders, ancestors, and others in a hierarchically superior position.[2] This definition of the "social child" helps explain the very phenomenon Kinney's work illustrates: a figure like the eighteen-year-old Liu Chang could be simultaneously a "youth" in biological terms and a "child" (*zi*) in terms of social and familial hierarchy. A second layer of meaning is one closer to the common modern understanding: it is perceived as a phase in a person's lifespan, the early period of human existence before adulthood. This narrower, more mechanical and biophysically defined notion of *zi* is seen in technical literature such as traditional Chinese pediatric texts and early education (*mengxue* 蒙學).[3] A third and more abstract meaning is when *tong* 童 and *zi* are used philosophically and aesthetically to highlight specific traits or qualities as a state in

[2] Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 21.
[3] Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 22

human nature, to refer to qualities as existentially "childlike" characteristics. Especially in discussing art and literature, but also in other cultural settings, people can speak of some inclination, artistic styles, or ethical values as representing or appearing close to "the spirit of a child."[4] However, Hsiung's framework, with its focus on pre-modern, Confucian-centric ideas, is less applicable to analyzing a modern China rocked by Euro-American ideological influx, profound political turmoil, and the urgent project of nation-building, forces that radically reconfigured the very notion of the child. A post-structuralist approach, such as that proposed by Sabine Frühstück for modern Japan, offers a valuable complement:

> "Childhood" as a construct could be seen to encompass only a few years or it could be extensive—depending on different conceptions of maturity, expectations of independence, and legal measures and practices related to education, welfare, labor, and criminality. But more important than the exact age group involved was a vision of the child being, not just a part of the nation, but also a prototype of the people—people who, like the child, should be educated, conquered, seduced, and, if need be, cheated in order to bring them from a place of weakness to one of strength, all for nation and empire.[5]

Rather than defining childhood with a specific age group, Frühstück understands childhood as a construct, with its definition varying according to different socio-political expectations. Frühstück views childhood as a largely fluid category shaped by the

[4] Ibid.
[5] Sabine Frühstück, *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 4.

interplay of various powers—such as law, education, and discourses of maturity and independence.

Scholars of children studies have long established that the "child" is never a natural given, but a historical and social formation. As the works of Frühstück and Hsiung have demonstrated, the definition of childhood is always contingent upon specific cultural contexts and state projects—whether as a "prototype" for the modern nation or as a subject of Confucian lineage. Similarly, this dissertation eschews a universal or essentialist definition. Instead, it defines the "child" strictly within the operational and theoretical scope of early 20th-century Chinese visual culture. In this specific context, the inquiry shifts from asking "what is a child" in the abstract, to asking "what political, social, and cultural work does the figure of the child perform?" It reveals how adult anxieties, state ideologies, and power structures are projected onto and enacted through the figure of the child. Operationally, this dissertation defines "children" as those aged from zero to fourteen. This range is determined by the core primary source materials analyzed in the body chapters, which document children from infancy to the upper age limit of state-run youth organizations like the Young Pioneers of China and Little Red Guards. Theoretically, this dissertation reframes the inquiry through the lens of political economy and defines "the child" by its socio-political function: as the primary site of social reproduction. In this framework, "the child" is not merely a biological entity but the raw material from which the state actively manufactures its future labor force and political subjects. The state invests in this "production" through specific technologies—in my case study, the technology of visual media. Consequently, "childhood" serves as a diagnostic tool: because the child is the focal point where the state's rigorous demands

for future stability meet the malleability of human life, analyzing the figure of the child reveals the state's most pressing anxieties and power structures. This process of social reproduction, however, is not seamless or abstract: It manifests on two interconnected levels, turning childhood into both a contested space and a site of practice. First, it reimagines childhood not as a passive developmental stage or a mere social construct, but as an intangible and contested space—a dynamic battlefield where adult anxieties, ideologies, and fantasies converge and clash. In this framework, children often function as "empty signifiers," appropriated as metaphors for societal aspirations and fears, allowing diverse forces—from state apparatuses to families—to project their visions of the future onto them. Second, and most critically, this ideological contestation is inextricably bound to the material world as a site of practice. I examine how the abstract ideological category of the "socialist subject" or "future citizen" is operationalized through concrete, sensory routines. Nowhere is this process more concentrated than in childhood—a prolonged, intensive apprenticeship in socio-political being. It is here that the boundary between the conceptual and the corporeal dissolves, as the very acts of learning how to feel, how to perform, and what to desire are inscribed upon the body through repeated, often unwilled, routines. To study childhood, then, is to study the primary site where societies forge their futures by actively cultivating the practices of their youngest members.

Happiness, the main affect examined in this dissertation, emerges as a fluid and manipulable affective resource, circulated in broader economies of emotion that serve political, cultural, and economic ends. The representations of children's happiness reveal intricate layers of conflict and reinvention, where premodern legacies intertwine with

Euro-American and Japanese influences to challenge simplistic narratives of rupture or progress. In this context, while "emotion" refers to a private, psychological, and often individually legible feeling (like a "smiling face"), "affect" denotes a political, social, and fluid energy or force. Affect is what happens when an emotion is embedded within a political system (such as state propaganda), generating an effect and contagious power that extends beyond individual experience. It transforms from "children feel happy" to "children's happiness is at work." Therefore, this dissertation defines "happiness" as a mediated and highly contagious political-affective capital. This capital is carefully mobilized and managed as an "affective resource" by the state and its cultural apparatuses.

Meanwhile, happiness acts as a powerful translator, making abstract political ideologies accessible and palpable. For instance, the political goal of the Great Leap Forward campaign, such as steelmaking for the nation, becomes concretely understood and emotionally appealing when translated into cinematic images of children singing, laughing, and laboring together. This mediates abstract "political correctness" into perceivable "emotional pleasure." Beyond this translational function, these cinematic portrayals also serve as potent affective pedagogical tools, teaching the populace, especially children, how they "should" feel and behave. The joyful expressions and songs provide a nationwide model for "correct emotions" and desired conduct, guiding children to "happily" engage in state-sanctioned activities. Furthermore, these representations function as proof of legitimacy and a source of political reassurance. Images of happy children offer compelling visual evidence that legitimizes state policies and movements, like the Great Leap Forward. They function as a potent "political tranquilizer" for

parents, assuaging concerns about their children's well-being or potential suffering. By showcasing children's visible happiness and "healthy growth," these representations dismantle parental resistance and elicit their support and acquiescence for children's participation in national campaigns.

Regarding the primary materials for this research, my focus lies not on children's literature, but predominantly on visual media, including premodern paintings, magazine illustrations, films, and photographs. While the 1920s witnessed the emergence of modern Chinese children's literature—with established writers such as Mao Dun contributing to the genre—my research deliberately privileges visual media, ranging from magazine illustrations to films. I contend that these visual archives offer a more visceral entry point for understanding the shifting notions of the child, affect, and modernity.

To articulate the unique power of these visual forms, I draw on the concept of "vernacular modernism," as theorized by Miriam Bratu Hansen and Zhen Zhang. Hansen expands the definition beyond print to encompass visual and sonic media, highlighting their "sensory immediacy and affect."[6] She argues that cinema, for instance, provided "mass audiences both at home and abroad, a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity."[7] Complementing this, Zhen Zhang posits that early film culture (1896-1937) did more than entertain; it catalyzed a profound transformation in everyday life. As she notes, this visual culture fundamentally changed "the way the world was perceived and experienced, knowledge production and dissemination, and the

[6] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 10.
[7] Ibid.

formation of modern subjectivities."[8] Furthermore, she emphasizes that the creation of this modern imagery was "informed by a host of old and new technologies and related cultural practices," [9] suggesting a complex interplay between tradition and the modern visual experience.

This theoretical framework illuminates why visual media is indispensable to my analysis. If, as Zhang argues, visual culture was the primary site where modern subjectivities were formed, then the visual representation of the "child" was not merely a reflection of reality, but an active technology of identity construction. Crucially, the "vernacular" nature of these images allowed them to bypass the literacy barrier inherent in literature, engaging the viewer through direct sensory impact. As explored in Chapter 1, commercial children's magazines relied heavily on illustrations to circulate the affect of "cuteness," a quality that demands visual immediacy rather than textual description. This mass accessibility and capacity for sensory engagement made visual media a potent vehicle for disseminating new concepts of child autonomy and liveliness. These same mechanisms, as I demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3, were later effectively mobilized in children's films and comics to serve the ideological demands of CCP propaganda.

The Evolution of Childhood Notions: From Premodern to Modern Era, from Republic of China to People's Republic of China

Premodern China was a lengthy period spanning over 2000 years, from the pre-Qin era to the late Ming-Qing dynasty. The notions of children in premodern China were markedly different from those in modern China. However, these notions were neither

[8] Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.
[9] Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 2.

monolithic nor static throughout this extensive period. Understandings of children varied significantly across different groups, shaped by social status, wealth, gender, and individual personality. I will primarily explore the evolving social understanding of children, while also including exceptional examples of individuals who held divergent beliefs about children, providing a more nuanced and holistic picture. I regard the Song dynasty as a pivotal dividing line within premodern China for the changing notions of children.

The Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) established foundational concepts of childhood that influenced premodern China profoundly. Chinese thinkers of the Han dynasty were pioneers in extensively discussing childhood within philosophical, historical, and educational contexts. Unlike previous eras, the Han interest encompassed all children, not just the aristocracy. During Jingdi's 漢景帝 reign (157–141 B.C.), Ruist (Confucian) tutors were highly influential.[10] However, Dowager Dou's 竇太后 devotion to Huang-Lao writings limited Confucian influence on imperial policy during Emperor Wu's 漢武帝 rule (141 to 87 B.C.). It was not until Emperor Yuandi's 漢元帝 reign (49–33 B.C.) that Confucianism was elevated above other schools in court policy.[11] The Han dynasty also marked the first time the central government established educational institutions for male children and youths throughout China.[12] Various theories of human nature competed with one another during the Han dynasty. Nevertheless, most Han thinkers concluded that, whether inherently good or bad, a child's original nature was

[10] Anne Behnke Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 13.
[11] Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 14.
[12] Ibid.

largely malleable and, to some extent, undeveloped or incomplete at birth. Therefore, they believed in the necessity of the transforming (*hua*) power of instruction to shape and cultivate a child's character.[13]

Education during the Han dynasty saw significant developments and a broadening of focus, encompassing both practical skills and moral instruction. In A.D. 3, during the reign of Emperor Ping 漢平帝 (1 B.C.–A.D. 6), the regent Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BC-23 AD) proposed establishing schools in all villages, although the extent to which this plan was realized remains unclear.[14] During the Han dynasty, education for male children began at around eight *sui*, when they were considered ready to acquire basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Aristocratic boys, typically between the ages of thirteen and twenty, studied the "six arts" (*liuyi* 六藝): ritual, archery, charioteering, music, writing, and mathematics.[15]

The Han period also marked the emergence of theories on the moral instruction of children, including prenatal education. Jia Yi 賈誼 (200 BC-169 BC) and Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 BC-6 BC) specifically addressed fetal instruction in their writings.[16] Liu Xiang, a seminal figure in Ruist thought during the Former Han period, made unique contributions to Confucian education by emphasizing the role of mothers in children's growth. In his work *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳), Liu Xiang expanded on Xunzi's 荀子 theories, asserting that early childhood marks the beginning of education

[13] Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 17.
[14] Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 15
[15] Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 10.
[16] Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*, 11.

and highlighting the significant role women play in the moral development of their children.

Moreover, the Han dynasty produced substantial evidence of children's achievements. Bureaucratic institutions actively sought talented youths, frequently recommending boys aged eleven to fourteen for government service. A prodigy in the Han dynasty was not only a child erudite in writing or classics but also one "talented" in filial piety or morality. *The History of the Later Han* is the first work to clearly note the early emergence of such moral qualities in contemporary figures.

The Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) periods witnessed a sudden appearance of sophisticated images of children in paintings and poetry during which children only occasionally and randomly appeared in the arts,[17] which demonstrated the increasing visibility and even the improving visuality of children at the time. Specifically, this period witnessed the emergence and popularity of "paintings of children at play" (*yingxi tu* 嬰戲圖), a genre depicting children playing in a garden continued to develop stylistically before diminishing in popularity during the late Qing era. Coinciding with the ascendancy of middle-income taxpayers and the development of an urban market economy, the rise of *yingxi tu* reflects the increasing prominence and aesthetic preferences of burgeoning social classes like wealthy farmers and merchants.[18][19]. The "Pictures of a Hundred Boys" (*Baizi tu* 百子圖) theme, also depicting children playing in

[17] Richard Barnhart and Catherine Barnhart, "Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry," in *Children in Chinese Art*, ed. Ann Barrow (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 31.
[18] Gerui Wang, "Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China," *Journal of Chinese History* (2023): 3-4.
[19] Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11

a garden, has been an established motif since the Song dynasty and remained popular among artists and craftsmen during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, with its iconography evolving over time and across different mediums.[20] Notably, while "paintings of children at play" include both boys and girls,[21] the hundred-boys motif exclusively features boys, rooted in the desire for male progeny. Throughout various periods, this motif expressed different wishes. Initially, it represented the basic wish for male progeny and appeared in many decorative arts, especially textiles such as bed curtains and women's robes. During the Ming dynasty, the theme evolved to emphasize education and high rank; by the end of the Ming period, images of boys engaging in scholarly pursuits—studying, playing chess, and performing on the qin—became widespread. Boys were also depicted as immortals or interacting with attributes of popular deities, like Liu Hai's toad or the box and lotus flower carried by the Twin Genii of Harmony and Mirth. The motif of a *qilin* 麒麟 carrying a "noble son" also became standard, and a recurring theme was boys passing the civil service examination with high honors, often shown holding branches of osmanthus and competing for a helmet. By the eighteenth century, boys' activities had transformed into pictorial puns or rebuses for specific four-character auspicious sayings, extending beyond passing exams

[20] Terese Tse Bartholomew, "One Hundred Children: From Boys at Play to Icons of Good Fortune," in *Children in Chinese Art*, ed. Ann Barrow (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 57. Please also note that Hsuing Ping-chen has a different observation about when the depictions of children at play waned. See Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11: "The depictions of "children at play" in Song paintings marked the last public appearance of the physically more carefree and indulgent order mode of childhood before it was "taken over" and "obliterated" from the social history scene in premodern China; the children's themes in Ming paintings became rare compared to those from the Song and Yuan (1279-1368). Bartholomew's investigation indicates that the theme of "pictures of a hundred boys" remained popular among artists and craftsmen even during the Ming-Qing dynasties, thereby refining Hsiung's observation. However, the popularity of these images does not necessarily prove the high status of children at the time, as they often symbolized various desires, such as the wish for more male progeny.

[21] Gerui Wang, "Picturing Parental Love," 6.

and maintaining family rank to encompass universal wishes for a bumper harvest, peace, prosperity, and happy occasions. From the naturalistic and sympathetic depictions of children at play during the Song period, by the Qing period, images of children had evolved into stylized icons of good fortune.[22] After the Qing dynasty, children receded again into relative anonymity until the modern era, continuing to appear frequently in the auspicious imagery of family, clan, and society, but only as stock players in institutionalized pageants and celebrations.[23]

Despite the growing popularity of depictions of children at play in the Song dynasty, the overall landscape of children's lives was more complicated. In urban life aesthetics, children are often depicted as lively and playful. However, since the Song dynasty, "Neo-Confucian perspective formed a new baseline for mainstream concepts in human conduct, and, thus, also for the childhood environment during the second millennium of imperial China": "Under the influence of Neo-Confucian philosophy…Infants were more carefully bundled up and at times overly protected. Pets, outdoor boisterousness, and physical games became forbidden. Tacit, timid, inactive, shy, and 'girl-like' boys were openly praised and widely adored…"[24] Confucianism also posits that the ideal child should be introverted and reticent, with outdoor physical activities having little significance in their daily life, emphasizing instead a successful academic life.[25] This discrepancy reminds us that even within a single period, the understanding of children was not monolithic; it varied based on different people,

[22] Terese Tse Bartholomew, "One Hundred Children," 83.
[23] Richard Barnhart and Catherine Barnhart, "Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry," 31.
[24] Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 9.
[25] Ibid.

contexts, and genres or media. On one hand, urban life celebrated the vibrancy and energy of children, possibly to symbolize prosperity and the continuity of family lines. On the other hand, Neo-Confucian ideals prioritized intellectual development and self-discipline, viewing these traits as essential for future success and moral integrity.

The notion of childhood and the visual representation of children experienced a profound transformation from the late Qing period to Republican China, heavily influenced by Euro-American and Japanese thought. China's "century of humiliation" commenced with the First Opium War (1839-1842) against the British Empire. The defeat of the Qing dynasty in this war resulted in a series of unequal treaties being imposed upon China. This pattern of defeat continued with the Second Opium War (1856-1860). The cumulative effects of these losses and the subsequent national humiliation spurred the Qing court to initiate the Self-Strengthening Movement (*Yangwu yundong* 洋務運動) (c. 1861–1895). As the first nationwide movement to industrialize China using Western methods, the Self-Strengthening Movement led to the significant introduction of Western technology, scholarly works, and literature. It also enabled a generation of Chinese students to study abroad, greatly expanding China's exposure to Western education. This period of openness and reform saw the Qing dynasty becoming more receptive to Western learning, creating a conducive environment for initiatives such as children's periodicals. Concurrently, China was integrating and disseminating Western concepts such as eugenics, hygiene, democracy, feminism, and evolutionary theory. These influences reshaped societal perceptions of children, leading to a gradual recognition of children as independent individuals, rather than merely extensions of the family unit.

In the late nineteenth century, the establishment of children's periodicals such as *Child's Paper* (*Xiaohai yuebao* 小孩月報) (1875) and *The Children's Educator* (*Mengxue bao* 蒙學報) (1897) marked a significant development. This phenomenon highlights the increasing visibility of children and the recognition of the need for dedicated content tailored to young readers. By 1922, *Children's World* (*Ertong Shijie* 兒童世界) and *Little Friend* (*Xiao pengyou* 小朋友), the first commercialized modern children's magazines, were launched, significantly influenced by the May Fourth Movement. Illustrations within these publications depicted "cutified" children engaging in carefree play with their peers outdoors, notably absent of maternal supervision. The 1920s also saw the emergence of "children's films" aimed at both adults and children. These films often depicted the miserable lives of homeless, wandering children and achieved significant commercial success.

The founding of the People's Republic of China marked a pivotal transformation in the perception and shaping of children. While the PRC inherited the view from Republican China that children were the future and saviors of the nation, it also introduced significant changes. The new socialist state continued to produce children's literature and films, but these productions were now entirely sponsored, controlled, monitored, and censored by the government. As a result, the content and themes of these genres became homogenized, losing their previous role in critiquing the country or government. Under the PRC, children were transformed into important tools of propaganda. Depictions of happy children were used to promote the promising future of socialism and the nation. In Republican China, children were already empowered as independent individuals and envisioned as saviors of the nation. This empowerment was

further intensified in the PRC. Under the PRC, children were depicted as belonging to the party-state rather than their families, emphasizing their significant role as contributors to socialism. They were portrayed as even more powerful than adults: in films, children were shown laboring to construct mini steel mills, and in *lianhuanhua*, they captured anti-revolutionary adults. This marked the complete dissolution of the traditional Confucian hierarchy, where adults and elders held authority over children and the younger generation.

This historical trajectory, however, is not without scholarly debate, particularly regarding the boundary between "premodern" continuity and "modern" rupture. Revisionist scholars have compellingly challenged the conventional May Fourth narrative of a total break with the past. In his seminal monograph, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, David Der-wei Wang, for instance, disrupts this narrative by arguing that Chinese literary modernity began to evolve "organically from within Chinese traditions" during the late Qing, well before the May Fourth era. Similarly, Hsiung Ping-chen adopts a revisionist stance regarding childhood. She rejects the simplistic binary that paints the premodern era as a "decrepit, rigid, feudal, and corrupt old cultural system" and modernity as an "irreversible linear progression... modeled on European and American civilizations."[26] Hsiung contends that the modern evolution of childhood culture cannot be entirely attributed to Western impact, pointing to the influence of indigenous philosophies like the Yangming School in fostering more "open and flexible" approaches to education well before the twentieth century. This continuity is indeed visible. For instance, based on my

[26] Hsiung Ping-chen, *Youyi yu Youmeng: Jindai Zhongguo Shehui de Mianyan zhi Dao* 幼醫與幼蒙: 近代中國社會的緜延之道 [Pediatrics and Early Education: A History of Reproductive Strategies of Chinese Society] (Xinbei: Lianjing Chuban Gongsi, 2018), 307-309.

research, when Liang Qichao 梁啟超 advocated for "Education with Enjoyment" (*Quwei jiaoyu* 趣味教育) in 1922, he justified it by citing modern Euro-American educational practices. However, as his work reveals, his arguments against rote memorization and for inspiring internal motivation strongly echo the pedagogy of the Ming scholar Wang Yangming 王陽明.[27] This example illustrates how May Fourth reformers, in their turn toward Western authority, may have obscured or overlooked potent indigenous intellectual sources.

While fully acknowledging the valuable correctives that this revisionist scholarship provides against oversimplified May Fourth narratives, this dissertation seeks to recalibrate the focus. Rather than primarily emphasizing indigenous continuity, I argue that modern concepts of childhood represent a fundamental rupture from the past. This rupture is defined not only by the integration of Western ideas through translation and retranslation, but by a new constellation of forces entirely distinct from the premodern era: the shift in political formations, the urgent demands of the nation-building project,

[27] In this article, Liang justifies the concept of quwei jiaoyu by referring to Euroamerican countries, stating that "it has already been common in the education realm of modern Euroamerican countries" 近代歐美教育界早已通行了. However, by comparing this work with Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) "The Main Ideas for Educating Children: Fundamental Principles for Liu Bosong and Others" (*Xunmeng dayi shi jiaodu Liu Bosong deng* 訓蒙大意示教讀刘伯頌等), notable similarities in theme and rhetoric emerge. Wang's essay criticizes previous pedagogies that focused on drilling children in recitation and lessons, demanding strict discipline without guiding them with proper manners. He advocates for a new teaching method that inspires and motivates children so that they feel joyful and enthusiastic from within, leading to continuous progress on their own. In the main texts of both essays, the writers use the rhetoric of withering trees, with phrases like *shengyi xiaosuo* 生意蕭索 and *shengyi jin yi* 生意盡矣 being indistinguishable. They both criticize the harm of forcing students to memorize textbooks and conclude that students will skip class to seek fun if the teaching is not interesting. The similarities between the two articles on the same topic seem more than coincidental—it is very possible that Liang Qichao have read Wang Yangming's essay. However, what is more significant is how Liang justified quwei jiaoyu, condemning rote memorization and uninteresting education—he turns to Western education for authority to prove its reasonableness, yet does not mention Wang Yangming or other related pedagogies from the Ming-Qing period at all. According to Hsiung, such educational philosophies were already known during the Ming-Qing era.

the rise of mass media, the burgeoning influence of commercial culture, and the very scholarly debates that circulated these new ideas. This is not to deny the persistence of premodern ideas, but to posit that the modern transformation was less an organic continuation of indigenous concepts, which, while present in elite discourse, were not widely disseminated, and more a complex amalgamation decisively shaped by these new modern forces. Chapter One of this dissertation, for instance, will address this complexity. While auspicious depictions of children were common in premodern art, it will demonstrate how the modern aesthetic of "cuteness" is a fundamentally different construct, emerging precisely from this new constellation of transnational, political, and media influences.

Literature Review and Contributions

Existing scholarship on modern Chinese children's studies, particularly in English, has primarily followed two main currents. The first explores how "the child" was incorporated into the political and cultural imagination of modern China, becoming a savior for the nation or a "future citizen." Scholarship here is largely concentrated on the Republican period. For example, Andrew Jones's *Developmental Fairy Tales* (2011) argues that the reception of evolutionary theory created a new "developmental" narrative, linking the linear growth of the child to the progressive "evolution" of the nation-state. Xu Lanjun's *Children and War: Education, Nation and Popular Culture* (2015) (in Chinese) analyzes how the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) repositioned children as public, political actors, mobilizing them as symbols of national suffering and active participants in resistance. Margaret Tillman's *Raising China's Revolutionaries: Modernizing Childhood for Cosmopolitan Nationalists and Liberated Comrades, 1920s-*

1950s (2018) investigates how child welfare and scientific child-rearing became a central political project, adopted by both cosmopolitan Nationalists and revolutionary Communists to "modernize" the nation's future citizens. This framework of linking children to nation-building is not unique to China, but rather a central theme in modern East Asian children's studies. Influential works like Sabine Frühstück's *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan* (2017) demonstrates that children and concepts of childhood have been historically appropriated for national and political projects. She demonstrates how children serve as powerful symbolic and rhetorical tools to validate, moralize, and naturalize war, particularly during Japan's nation- and empire-building phases. By examining the intersection of childhood and the military, Frühstück reveals how essentialist notions of the child are used to advance decidedly unchildlike political and militaristic goals. Dafna Zur's *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea* (2017) compellingly demonstrates this dynamic. Analyzing modern Korean children's periodicals against their political and cultural context, Zur demonstrates that the figure of the child was seen as uniquely favorable to the project of modernity and nation-building. Conceptualized through the child-heart, the idea of the child as transparent and pure, this figure became a powerful antidote to the colonial present and an uplifting metaphor for Korea's future.

A second branch of inquiry focuses on the representation of children in literature, art, and film. Research on premodern China, such as Ann Elizabeth Barrott Wicks's *Children in Chinese Arts* (2002), has traced the long evolution of children's images in visual arts. This dissertation, however, focuses on the modern period, where the rise of mass media fundamentally reshaped these representations. Foundational studies in this

area include Mary Ann Farquhar's *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong* (1998), which provide foundational histories of the genre, mapping its ideological development from the May Fourth emphasis on individual liberation to the socialist-realist mode of the Mao era. In modern visual culture, Zhang Mei's *Late Qing and May Fourth Periods: Visual Narratives in Children's Reading Materials* () (2016) specifically analyzes graphic narratives in early children's periodicals. In film history, Zhang Zhilu's (2005) and Lin A'mian's (2011) chronological works provide an essential index for the genre. Daisy Du (2019) explores Chinese animation, a subgenre of children's films, with a focus on its engagement with international forces from the 1940s to the 1970s. Meanwhile, Stephanie Donald (2005) specializes in children's media, with her research including Cultural Revolution posters and contemporary children's films, though not those from the Maoist era.

While this body of work is significant, it collectively points to several critical gaps that this dissertation addresses. First, a significant temporal gap exists: the vast majority of English-language research is heavily concentrated on the pre-1949 Republican era. There is a lack of coherent, longue durée analysis of the evolutions and ruptures across the critical transition from the Republican era to the socialist PRC, particularly during periods like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, existing studies often focus on a single medium, typically textual materials, such as children's literature, textbooks, or traditional art history categories. The key mass visual media at the center of this dissertation, including illustrated magazines, propaganda films, and revolutionary comics (*lianhuanhua* 連環畫), have not yet been systematically studied in conjunction, especially with newly available materials. Finally,

these issues are compounded by methodological gaps, as research is often siloed within single disciplines, lacking an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates textual analysis, visual analysis, and historical contextualization.

This dissertation directly responds to these gaps. Its core contributions are threefold. The primary contribution of this dissertation is to is to provide a long-term examination, spanning from the Republican era into the early decades of the People's Republic of China, of children's representations by focusing on the three aforementioned neglected visual media. It clearly delineates the transitions and transformations from the Republican era to the socialist period. The second contribution is its interdisciplinary approach, which synthesizes media studies and historical research within a transnational framework. It moves beyond separating the two main research themes, "The Child in Media and Culture" and "The Child and Nation-Building." Instead, it demonstrates that they are inextricably linked: media is a core site where nation-building is practiced and contested. To achieve this, the project combines literary analysis, visual analysis, and film studies, supported by in-depth archival research at the Stanford University East Asia Library, Beijing Normal University Library, and the National Library of China. Furthermore, this analysis is situated within a transnational framework, examining the influence of Euro-American thinkers and referencing developments in Japan to reveal the complex global currents that shaped modern Chinese conceptions of childhood.

Finally, the dissertation's core theoretical contribution is its analytical framework. It conceptualizes "childhood" as an "intangible contested space"—a dynamic battlefield where adult anxieties, ideologies, and fantasies of the future converge and conflict. To analyze this space, the dissertation introduces the framework of "economies of affect."

This framework views the state and its cultural apparatus (media, education) as an "affective central bank" that defines, produces, and circulates "valuable" emotions, especially happiness, as a manageable resource for specific political and cultural agendas. This framework allows the dissertation to engage deeply with the local Chinese context. Also, the dissertation also moves beyond the uncritical adoption of theoretical frameworks from Anglophone studies. For instance, many Western theories presuppose a binary division between "entertainment" and "propaganda." This dissertation challenges such binaries. In Chapter Two on left-wing children's films, for example, it argues that "propaganda" and "entertainment" are skillfully fused into a form of "joyful labor" in the Chinese context, a model that Western binaries do not adequately explain. This critique of the limits of Western theory echoes scholars like Wendy Larson, who cautions against the "theoretical subsidiarity" of Chinese studies and urges scholars to root their research in the "fundamental ontological or epistemological meanings" of Chinese culture. By articulating the distinctiveness of Chinese children and childhood, this dissertation seeks to highlight the diversity within socialist frameworks, provide comparative perspectives between capitalism and socialism, and ultimately enrich the theoretical discourse of global children's studies.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One, "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines" illuminates the "pictorial turn" in representations of children from premodern to modern China. In premodern China, children were often depicted as miniature adults, with no clear signs of infantilization, or as symbols of the desire for abundant offspring and familial prosperity.

Play was rarely depicted, but when it appeared, it was usually confined to garden settings under the watchful eyes of maternal figures, reinforcing ideals of domesticity and protection. However, during the May Fourth era, visual depictions of children underwent a radical transformation: they began to appear as cute, autonomous individuals engaged in outdoor play with their peers. This shift was not merely an aesthetic evolution but a reconfiguration of childhood itself. The new imagery reflected emerging conceptions of children as independent and naturally inclined toward exploration—ideas that, while now commonplace, marked a profound departure from earlier traditions. This chapter argues that this transformation extended beyond artistic style to signal a deeper ideological shift in how childhood was understood. Modern notions of childhood in China were shaped by transnational Euro-American theories, particularly the educational philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, which emphasized children's innate instincts and individuality. The cutification of children in visual representations—framing childhood as a time of natural freedom—was, paradoxically, tied to a nationalistic agenda. Beneath the celebration of children's "natural" instincts lay the expectation that they would grow into strong national citizens, ultimately serving and saving the country. This contrast between the natural and the national reveals the underlying tensions in modern China's reimagining of childhood—a rhetoric of liberation that, in practice, aligned with the demands of the state.

Children's films have long been an underexplored topic in Chinese cinema studies. Chapter Two, "Documenting" the happiness of labor during the Great Leap Forward: Children's film and the making of modern socialist childhood" explores how Great Leap Forward children's films in the form of artistic documentaries/documentary

art films served both as a vehicle for state propaganda and, more importantly, as a dynamic space for constructing a 'modern socialist childhood'. I demonstrate that children's cultural productions, including literature and film, in the early PRC period did not begin as a rigid political mouthpiece. Instead, it passed through a phase of debates and artistic experiments from the early PRC to the Great Leap Forward before devolving into repetitive, low-quality vehicles of political messaging under intensifying ideological pressures. Meanwhile, by focusing on happiness as a central affect in these children's films, this chapter reveals that the redefinition of childhood happiness marked a departure from the May Fourth–era evolutionary thinking and child-centered approach, giving rise to a revolutionary discourse rooted in collective labor essential for socialist construction.

Chapter Three, "What Happens After Children Leave Home?: Happy Children as 'Innocent Weapons' and Revolutionary Violence Narratives in the Cultural Revolution," explores how children were represented and how their "happiness" was imagined during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). I argue that the state did not merely impose indoctrination upon a "blank slate" of childhood; rather, it engaged in a process of ideological harnessing, exploiting the innate "wildness" of childhood as raw material for political mobilization. Through an analysis of visual and textual narratives, I contend that this mobilization operated through a mechanism of "joyful cruelty," where violence was transfigured into political happiness. This mechanism functioned along two distinct axes of violence: an outward aggression directed at war invaders and class enemies, and an inward violence inflicted upon the self through physical self-sacrifice. By making the reality of these violences opaque and altering their moral color, the state collapsed the distinction between pain and pleasure. For the child who "leaves home" in this era, the

destination is neither independence nor depravity, but a total integration into the Party-State, where the surrender of the self—whether manifested as a weapon against the "enemy" or as the destruction of one's own body for the cause—is celebrated as the supreme form of political joy.

Portions of this dissertation have been previously published. Chapter II appeared as "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines" in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025). Chapter III appeared as "'Documenting' the Happiness of Labor during the Great Leap Forward: Children's Film and the Making of Modern Socialist Childhood" in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2025). I am the sole author of both articles.

Works Cited

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage Books, 1962.

Barnhart, Richard, and Catherine Barnhart. "Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry." In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 31–56. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

Bartholomew, Terese Tse. "One Hundred Children: From Boys at Play to Icons of Good Fortune." In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 57–83. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk. *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Du, Daisy Yan. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019.

Farquhar, Mary Ann. *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

Frühstück, Sabine. *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism." *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 10–22.

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

———. *Youyi yu youmeng: Jinshi Zhongguo shehui de mianyan zhi dao* 幼醫與幼蒙: 近世中國社會的緜延之道 [Pediatrics and early education: A history of reproductive strategies of Chinese society]. Xinbei: Lianjing Chuban Gongsi, 2018.

Jones, Andrew F. *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Kinney, Anne Behnke. *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Liang, Qichao 梁啟超. "Cong quwei chufa" 從趣味出發 [Starting from interest]. In *Liang Qichao lun jiao yu* 梁啟超論教育 [Liang Qichao on education], edited by Dong Fangkui 董方奎 and Chen Fuyi 陳夫義, 275–77. Haikou: Sanhuan chubanshe, 2007. Originally delivered as a speech titled "Quwei jiaoyu yu jiaoyu quwei" 趣味教育與教育趣味 [Education of interest and educational interest] on April 10, 1922.

Lin, A'mian 林阿棉. *Zhongguo ertong dianying biannian jishi 1922–2011* 中國兒童電影編年史 *1922–2011* [Chronicle of Chinese children's films 1922–2011]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Tillman, Margaret. *Raising China's Revolutionaries: Modernizing Childhood for Cosmopolitan Nationalists and Liberated Comrades, 1920s–1950s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Wang, Gerui. "Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China." *Journal of Chinese History* 7, no. 1 (2023): 1–33.

Wang, Shouren 王守仁. “Xunmeng dayi shi jiaodu Liu Bosong deng” 訓蒙大意示教讀劉伯颂等 [The General Aims of Elementary Education: Shown to Teacher Liu Bosong and Others]. In vol. 1 of *Wang Wencheng gong quanshu* 王文成公全書 [Complete works of Wang Wencheng], annotated by Wang Xiaoxin 王曉昕 and Zhao Pinglüe 趙平略, 108–10. Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2015.

Xu, Lanjun 徐蘭君. *Ertong yu zhanzheng: Guozu, jiaoyu, yu dazhong wenhua* 兒童與戰爭：國族，教育，與大眾文化 [Children and war: Nation, education, and popular culture]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015.

Zhang, Mei 張梅. *Wanqing wusi shiqi: Ertong duwu shang de tuxiang xushi* 晚清五四時期：兒童讀物上的圖像敘事 [Late Qing and May Fourth periods: Visual narratives in children’s reading materials]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016.

Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Zhang, Zhilu 張之路. *Zhongguo shaonian ertong dianying shi* 中國少年兒童電影史 [History of Chinese children and youth films]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Zur, Dafna. *Figuring Korean Futures: Children’s Literature in Modern Korea*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

CHAPTER II

THE VISIBILITY AND VISUALITY OF CHILDREN IN MODERN CHINA: CUTENESS, PLAY, AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES

This chapter was previously published in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025). I am the sole author.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many East Asian countries underwent profound transformations in how they conceptualized and represented children. Dafna Zur, in her study of modern Korean children's literature, proposes two interconnected "V"'s to comprehend the growing prominence of children at this juncture: the visibility of children—"children's literature is born when the child moves out of society's periphery to the center of social networks"[28]—and the visuality of children's magazines, referring to "texts and images created to cater to the kind of intellectual and affective qualities perceived as age-, gender-, and class-appropriate."[29] Zur's dual "V" alignment underscores a mutual relationship: investment in visual representations in children's reading materials arises from the growing visibility of children, while the heightened significance attributed to illustrations further enhances their visibility. Although Zur's research focuses on Korea, her framework also provides a compelling lens for examining China's shifting representations of children, which mirrored Korea's broader intellectual and cultural changes in the early modern era.

Drawing on Zur's theory, we can also observe a profound transformation in the visibility and visuality of children within the Chinese context. Over time, children

[28] Dafna Zur, *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 4.
[29] Zur, *Figuring Korean Futures*, 13.

became increasingly visible not only in cultural representations but also in political discourse, while the stylistic conventions used to depict them underwent significant shifts. In premodern China, children received relatively little attention in literature and art. Among the visual depictions that did exist, several distinct patterns emerge. First, children were frequently portrayed as miniature adults, with few distinctly infantile features. Even in *yingxi tu* 嬰戲圖 ("paintings of children at play") —a genre that emerged during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and offered rare portrayals of youthful frolic and parental affection—children's infantile characteristics remained muted. These images typically depicted play within domestic garden settings, closely monitored by maternal figures, reinforcing ideals of protection and family order. Second, children were often used as symbols of auspicious wishes, reflecting an emphasis on Confucian familial ideals such as fertility, prosperity, and the continuation of the family lineage. This symbolic function is evident in works such as *baizi tu* 百子圖 ("paintings of one hundred children") and *nianhua* 年畫 (New Year prints), where depictions of children served to visualize familial aspirations rather than to represent childhood itself.

By the early twentieth century, however, both the visibility and visuality of children underwent a dramatic shift. Producing age-appropriate reading materials for children emerged as a distinctly modern practice, marking a shift from premodern China, where the designs of texts like the *Sanzi jing* 三字經 (*Three Character Classic*) were based on literacy levels rather than developmental suitability. At the same time, visual representations of children introduced new aesthetic norms, fostering an increasing prevalence of "cutified" child figures. This transformation was driven by several intellectual currents: evolutionary theory, Rousseau's advocacy for childhood as a

distinct phase deserving play and self-discovery, and John Dewey's emphasis on children's instincts and physical development. As these ideas gained traction, a new visual paradigm took hold—one characterized by lively outdoor scenes of cheerful children engaging in play, a hallmark of the May Fourth period. Notably, the depiction of cute children was not an entirely modern innovation. Even in imperial China, some of the New Year prints featured plump, wide-eyed infants embodying prosperity and good fortune. However, such representations were relatively rare and primarily static, with children depicted almost exclusively as infants rather than as active participants in their environment. In contrast, the cuteness that emerged in early twentieth-century China was fundamentally different in both form and function. It not only became pervasive across various media but also shifted focus toward older children, emphasizing their engagement with nature, physical vitality, and personal autonomy.

This reconceptualization of childhood coincided with a broader reimagining of the ideal child. No longer defined by early maturity, scholarly diligence, and obedience, the new model prioritized energy, strength, and even a degree of rebelliousness, aligning with the nationalist vision of children as future defenders of the nation. As periodicals, illustrations, and children's literature proliferated, children attained unprecedented visibility in the public sphere, reflecting a growing societal investment in their well-being. Recognizing this visual and conceptual evolution reveals how modern Chinese society came to "see" and value its youngest citizens, situating China's transformation within a broader global discourse on the redefinition of childhood.

Depicting Children from Song to Late Qing: The Waning of Play and Underemphasized Childlike Traits

In early imperial China, children were often viewed dismissively as unformed people, to be carefully cloistered and molded into vessels for the beliefs and aspirations of the family. Children's relative social unimportance was reflected in their sparse and random appearance in early Chinese art forms.[30] This artistic norm began to change during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, when sophisticated depictions of children in paintings and poetry became increasingly common. Specifically, the Song dynasty this period witnessed the emergence and popularity of "paintings of children at play," a genre that continued to develop stylistically before diminishing in popularity during the late Qing era. Coinciding with the ascendancy of "middle-income taxpayers" and the development of an urban market economy, the rise of *yingxi tu* reflects the increasing prominence and aesthetic preferences of burgeoning social classes like wealthy farmers and merchants.[31] Two outstanding examples of *yingxi tu* include *Songren puzao tu* 宋人撲棗圖 (*Song People Catching Jujubes*) by an anonymous painter (see Fig. 1), and *Heting yingxi tu* 荷亭嬰戲圖 (*Women and Infants by a Lotus Pond*) Wang Qihan 王齊翰 (see Fig. 2). In *Song People Catching Jujubes*, a prominent theme expressed is the Confucian desire for (more male) offspring. Common symbols associated with this wish—such as the jujube, pomegranate, lotus leaf, lotus seed pod, and goat—frequently appear in *yingxi tu*. The jujube, for instance, phonetically resembles the Chinese word *zao* 早 (early), reinforcing the wish for early or

[30] Richard Barnhart and Catherine Barnhart, "Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry," in *Children in Chinese Art*, ed. Ann Barrott Wicks (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 31.
[31] Gerui Wang, "Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China," *Journal of Chinese History* 9, no. 1 (2023): 3–4.



Figure 1. (Left) *Song People Catching Jujubes*, Song dynasty (960–1279).

Figure 2. (Right) *Women and Children by a Lotus Pond*, Southern Song dynasty, (circa 1200–1250).

plentiful offspring.[32] *Women and Infants by a Lotus Pond* exemplifies the celebration of the affectionate bonds between mothers and children: the maternal figures are attentively engaged with and closely monitoring the young. Although certain traits, such as hairstyles, indicate that these figures are children, the faces and expressions exhibit a noticeable lack of aesthetic refinement. In many instances, they are scarcely distinguishable from adults in terms of detail and precision.

While the depictions of "children at play" in Song paintings marked the last public appearance of the physically more carefree and indulgent mode of depicting childhood before it was "taken over" and "obliterated" from the social history scene in

[32] Tingbo Zhang, "Cong Songdai bujuzi xianxiang kan liang Song yingxitu shengxing yuanyin" [Research on the reasons for the popularity of baby play pictures in Song Dynasty from the phenomenon of not raising children], *Zhuangshi* 7, no. 327 (2020): 100–103.

premodern China; the children's themes in Ming (1368–1644) paintings became relatively rare.[33] From the early Ming dynasty,

> a Neo-Confucian perspective formed a new baseline for mainstream concepts in human conduct, and, thus, also for the childhood environment during the second millennium of imperial China. . . . Infants were more carefully bundled up and at times overly protected. Pets, outdoor boisterousness, and physical games became forbidden. Tacit, timid, inactive, shy, and 'girl-like' boys were openly praised and widely adored. Neo-Confucianism posited that the ideal child should be introverted and reticent, with outdoor physical activities having little significance in their daily life.[34]

During the late Qing period, children's periodicals such as *Xiaohai yuebao* (*The Child's Paper*) (1875) and *Mengxue bao* (*The Children's Educator*) (1897) came to the fore. These changes took place amid China's "century of humiliation," which began with the First Opium War against the British Empire (1839–1842).

The Qing court's defeat in this conflict led to the imposition of a succession of unequal treaties. This pattern of defeat continued through the Second Opium War (1856–1860). The cumulative impact of these defeats and the resulting national humiliation compelled the Qing court to launch *Yangwu yundong* (the Self-Strengthening Movement) (c. 1861–1895), which aimed to modernize China's military and economy through the adoption of Western technology and industrial practices. As the first nationwide Western industrial movement in modern China, the Self-Strengthening Movement catalyzed the

[33] Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.
[34] Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 9.

introduction of a substantial amount of Western technology, scholarly works, and literature. It also facilitated the education of a generation of students abroad, significantly opening China's doors to Western learning. It was during this era of openness and reform that the Qing dynasty began to adopt a more receptive attitude toward Western learning, a context that provided fertile ground for initiatives like children's periodicals. Against this backdrop, in February 1874, the American missionary doctor John G. Kerr launched *The Child's Paper*. Due to the straightforward writing and excellent illustrations of *The Child's Paper*, and the inclusion of interactive games amidst its educational content, the periodical gained considerable popularity. Its monthly subscription reached an impressive 4,500 copies by 1890.[35] *The Child's Paper*'s influence also spread to Japan: while the Chinese version of *The Child's Paper* was influenced by its American counterpart, the Japanese periodical *Yorokobashiki otozure* sourced some of its stories directly from *The Child's Paper*.[36]

The illustrations accompanying the story "*Qiu ze de zi*" 求则得子 ("Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back") in the third volume of *The Child's Paper*, published in 1875, are exemplary of visual portrayals of children within the periodical.[37] The accompanying story is a localized version of the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament. This story is didactic in nature: set during the Taiping Rebellion, a

[35] Mei Zhang, *Wanqing wusi shiqi: ertong duwu shang de tuxiang xushi* [Pictorial Narrative in Children's Reading Materials during the Late Qing and May Fourth Period] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), 15.
[36] Mayo Kakimoto, *Jidō zasshi no tanjō* [The Birth of Children's Magazines] (Tokyo: Bungaku tsūshin, 2023), 82.
[37] All of the Chinese children's magazines discussed here were accessed through the Republican Periodical Full-Text Database. This database often includes a separate pagination system in addition to the original page numbers, and these two sets of numbers do not always align. In this article, all page references to 1920–1930s children's periodicals are based on the numbering printed in the original publication.

family from Shaoxing finds themselves victimized by the Long-Hairs (the Taiping rebels) who not only rob them of their possessions but also abduct their two teenaged sons. Helpless, the distraught parents de- vote themselves to daily prayers to Jesus Christ. Remarkably, after six or seven years, the elder son returns home on a Sunday, reinforcing the parents' piety and commitment to prayer. Subsequently, the younger son too makes his way back home, also on a Sunday.[38]

In this story's images, the depictions of children are noticeably simple, and their proportions are often inaccurately represented: for example, the two sons are depicted as being significantly smaller than would be expected for their actual ages of fifteen and seventeen, resembling children of approximately five years old in height. This misrepresentation underscores a fundamental principle of *The Child's Paper* in its portrayal of children: a shorter stature is employed simplistically to reinforce their identity as children. This indicates that the understanding of childhood in *The Child's Paper* cleaves to more traditional Confucian interpretations of childhood. The depiction of children in *The Child's Paper* more closely aligns with the definition of the "social child"

[38] Controversially, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom established by Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), was a monarchy that was inspired by missionary Christianity.

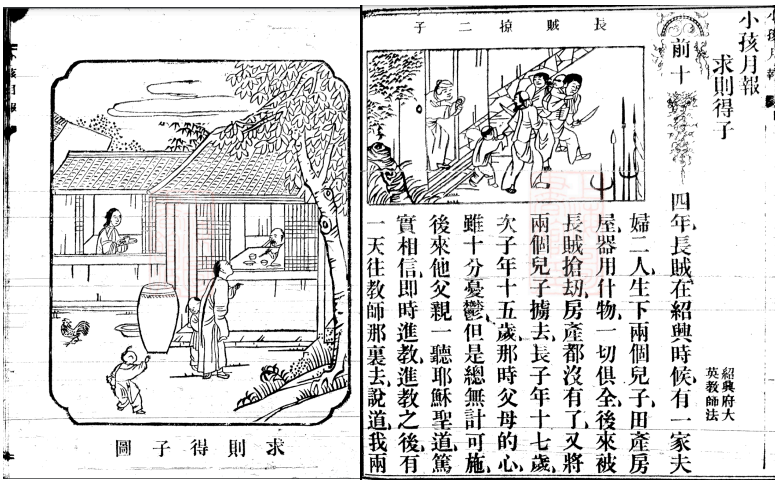


Figure 3. (Left) Title page and opening illustration of "Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back." The Child's Paper, 1875, p. 1.

Figure 4. (Right) Illustration of the sons' capture and the opening text of "Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back." The Child's Paper, 1875, p. 2.

as proposed by Ping-chen Hsiung: the "social child" is in the "junior" position vis-à-vis the "senior" in a family and is thus largely understood in terms of Confucian hierarchy;[39] the individual's actual size and physical maturity are unimportant.

Launched in 1897 in Shanghai, *The Children's Educator* was the very first wholly Chinese children's periodical; the publishers sought to cultivate "a vigorous and effective generation of future leaders capable of saving the country from foreign aggressors."[40] While *The Children's Educator* was infused with elements of Western thought, it also incorporated Confucian values. Filial piety, a core of Confucian belief, was especially emphasized in sections dedicated to personal and moral development. Figure 5 from *The Children's Educator* is an illustration from the story of Lu Ji Cradling Oranges,

[39] Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 9.
[40] Shih-Wen Sue Chen, "Children, Learning, and Play in the *Mengxue bao* (The Children's Educator, 1897–1902)," *International Research in Children's Literature* 11, no. 1 (2018): 12.

showcasing a renowned example of filial piety. Set in the Three Kingdoms era (220–280), the story follows young Lu Ji, who hides three oranges in his sleeve to bring home to his mother while visiting Yuan Shu. Impressed by his filial devotion, Yuan Shu praises him and predicts a bright future. The illustration depicts Lu Ji kneeling before Yuan Shu, expressing his wish to gift the oranges to his mother. With his back turned toward the viewer, Lu Ji's facial expression is obscured, despite his role as the protagonist. By contrast, Yuan Shu's garments are rendered in meticulous detail, and his forward-facing posture allows us a detailed view of his demeanor (See Fig. 5).

The Child's Paper distinguishes itself as a religious children's periodical, while *The Children's Educator* is primarily educational, targeting the enlightenment



Figure 5. "Chinese Moral Education: Lesson 18 Reading Lesson on Filial Conduct." The Children's Educator, 1898, p. 16.

and literacy of young readers. Despite their pioneering role among children's periodicals of the time, their visual representations of children bore a strong resemblance to the conventional representational styles. A prominent characteristic shared across these two periodicals was the conventional depiction of children as diminutive adults, outfitted in long gowns and traditional hairstyles. This reveals a minimal evolution in the portrayal of children.

Cuteness as Emergent Aesthetics in the 1920s on the Covers of *Children's World*

With its longstanding tradition of depicting children as miniature adults, Chinese art began to undergo a notable aesthetic transformation in the early twentieth century, portraying children as cute, liberated figures joyfully playing and exercising outdoors with their peers. Yet this shift was more than a mere evolution in artistic style; it was deeply intertwined with the broader political upheavals of the time and the localization of multiple strands of Western thought, both of which reshaped how childhood was conceptualized in modern China. For instance, China's New Culture Movement, launched in 1915, was a political and cultural reaction to foreign aggression and internal crises. Many radicals seized upon family reform as the key to revolutionizing the state: they "accused the traditional patriarchal family of sacrificing China's youth on the altar of filial obligation, teaching them dependency, slavishness, and insularity, and robbing them of their creative energy."[41] These radicals favored the Western conjugal family ideal (*xiao jiating* 小家庭, literally 'small family'), "an ideal that promoted free marriage choice, companionate marriage, and economic and emotional independence,"[42] over the

[41] Susan L. Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.
[42] Ibid.

Confucian ideal of extended family (*da jiazu* 大家族, literally 'large family'). New Culture intellectuals attributed the root of the superiority of the West to the conjugal family, "a form they believed fostered individual independence and enterprise."[43] The 1919 May Fourth Movement, building on the New Culture Movement's critique of tradition, placed the nation's hopes for rejuvenation in the hands of the youth. Although children had begun to gain attention in premodern China, they remained in subordinate roles within the Confucian familial and societal framework. Confronted with internal strife and external threats, intellectuals promoted modern Euro-American notions of childhood, believing in their potential to resurrect a nation in decline at the turn of the century.

Beyond debates on family structure and its role in national reform, an even more decisive influence on the reimagining of childhood came from two inter-connected intellectual threads. The first thread, tightly tied to the translation and advocacy of evolutionary theories, intricately weaves the concept of childhood into the grand narrative of national construction and identity. This process casts the child as a symbol of the nation's evolutionary trajectory and latent potential. Several decades later, this foundational understanding increased intellectuals' focus on children as pivotal in rejuvenating the country. The second thread draws on this discourse as well as the seminal works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and John Dewey (1859–1952). Their ideas emphasized a deep appreciation for childhood, advocating for respect toward children's instincts and natural tendencies—particularly their inclination toward play, physical activity, autonomy, and lively engagement with the world. By championing an

[43] Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 9.

educational approach that nurtured rather than suppressed these qualities, they contributed to a broader redefinition of childhood as an active, dynamic phase of life rather than one solely characterized by discipline and obedience. Their influence promoted a vision of childhood that valued freedom, movement, and self-expression, shaping new pedagogical ideals in early modern China. I will further explore how the influences of the second thread shaped the visual representations of children in the later section.

Yan Fu (1854–1921), a key figure in this intellectual shift, played a transformative role through his translation of the first and second parts of *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* by Thomas Henry Huxley. His work reframed evolution not merely as a biological theory but as a guiding principle for societal progress and national survival, deeply shaping Chinese intellectual discourse. Yan Fu's rendition, titled *Tianyan lun* 天演論 (*On Evolution*), was published in 1897.[44] Within *On Evolution*, Yan Fu strategically marshaled Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theories as a foil to Huxley's ideas. He vigorously championed the perspective encapsulated in the phrase "*Wujing tianze, shizhe shengcun*" 物競天擇, 適者生存 ("Creatures compete, nature selects; the suitable ones survive"). In *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*, Andrew F. Jones proves how "evolutionary thinking" became a narrative mode that exerted great influence on the discourse of nation-building as well as the way Chinese society perceived children: development represents possibility and "serve[s] as a trope for the task of reclaiming autonomy, for the possibility of making

[44] Thomas H. Huxley, *Tianyan lun* [On Evolution], trans. Yan Fu (1898; repr., Beijing: Yilin Press, 2011).

history on one's terms, rather than suffering passively as a mere plaything of history."[45] The wide-reaching impact of evolutionary theories, catalyzed by the release of *On Evolution*, established the fundamental rationale for attributing significance to the domain of children and childhood: evolutionary theories position childhood as a foundational phase in the human lifespan, imbued with significant potential and serving as a cornerstone for subsequent development. This perspective underscores the importance of early life stages in shaping individual and even national trajectories. Children thus represented hope and became an investment during the historical national salvation mission.[46] This new conceptualization of children and wider societal recognition of their developmental and cultural importance resulted in the proliferation of children's literature.

Against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement, the 1920s heralded a significant transformation in children's magazines, both in content and aesthetic approach. This era's children's magazines underwent a commercialization process, making entertainment as important as educational goals. This change not only reflected the evolving perceptions of childhood but also signaled the magazines' adaptation to the burgeoning consumer culture, where visual al- lure and entertainment value started to play a crucial role in content creation. There was a noticeable increase in the investment in visual appeal, with cuteness emerging as a defining characteristic in the depiction of

[45] Andrew F. Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 21.

[46] It is worth noting that, as explored in Andrew F. Jones's research, perspectives on evolutionary theory varied among individuals at the time. While some believed that the nation could be saved through children, emphasizing early intervention during childhood to shape better individuals and a brighter future, evolutionary theories also highlighted the concept of biological inheritability, extending beyond genetics to include social and cultural dimensions. Lu Xun embodied this contradiction: on one hand, he advocated for raising better children, yet, on the other, he felt a profound sense of hopelessness.

children. This particular aesthetic of cuteness was frequently associated with the portrayal of children's vitality, their engagement in outdoor play, and a general sense of liveliness.

In 1922, the leading intellectual Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958) launched *Children's World*, the first Chinese commercial magazine dedicated to children's literature. *Children's World*'s invitation for child readers' participation, influenced by Japanese children's magazines, exemplifies a "child-centered" perspective that emerged from the May Fourth Movement by positioning children as active contributors rather than passive recipients. These editorial efforts to engage young readers underscore the growing "visibility" of children in society, fostering a sense of ownership among readers. This participatory approach likely played a significant role in the magazine's commercial success, aligning with earlier observations about how magazines adapted to the burgeoning consumer culture of the time. In his foundational document, "*Ertong shijie*' xuanyan" 《兒童世界》宣言 ("The Manifesto of *Children's World*"), Zheng acknowledges the fairy tales of the influential Japanese children's literary magazine *Akai Tori* (*Red Bird*) (1918–1936) as an inspiration.[47][48] Shinmura Tōru elucidates this parallel further, emphasizing how *Children's World* mirrored *Red Bird* in several aspects. For example, starting in 1920, *Red Bird* began to solicit children's contributions, encompassing artworks, songs, rhymes, and fairy tales. Similarly, from its inaugural issue, *Children's World* invited its young audience to share their original works,

[47] Zhenduo Zheng, "'Ertong shijie' xuanyan" [The Manifesto on Children's World], in *Zheng Zhenduo yu ertong wenxue* [Zheng Zhenduo and Children's Literature] (Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1982), 5.

[48] In "Ertong shijie xuanyan," featured in Zheng Zhenduo yu ertong wenxue (Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chuban she, 1982), I have observed an error in the Chinese translation of Red Bird. The original Japanese term "Akai Tori" was erroneously rendered as "Chi dao" (赤島) instead of the accurate "Chi niao" (赤鳥). This linguistic oversight highlights the underestimated influence of *Akai tori* on *Children's World*.

including *ertong ziyou hua* (“paintings”), *er’ge* 兒歌 and *geyao* 歌謠 (“children’s songs and rhymes”), and *tonghua* (“fairy tales”). Recognizing and incentivizing this participation, *Children’s World* gifted books or book vouchers to contributors whose submissions made it to the printed page.[49]

Magazines such as *Children’s World* introduced a new emphasis on cuteness as an aesthetic in children’s periodicals during the 1920s. The materials under scrutiny here are two cover illustrations from *Children’s World* (see Figs. 6–8), rendered by Lin Lübin 林履彬.[50] In these images, the portrayals of children demonstrate both refined artistic skills and distinctly juvenile features. Compared with premodern Chinese depictions of children, these modern illustrations present more pronounced “infantile” traits—larger eyes, prominent foreheads, receding chins, and chubby limbs—connoting health, endearing clumsiness, and a natural appeal that elicits caregiving reactions from adults. Moreover, these publications depict both boys and girls, diverging from the traditional bias that once favored sons in earlier Chinese child portraiture and in late Qing-era children’s magazines.[51] This inclusivity aligns with the intended readership of *Children’s*

[49] Tōru Shinmura, “Akai tori to Chuukoku” [Akai tori and China], in *Akai Jiten*, ed. Akai Tori Jiten Henshū Iinkai (Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 2018), 38.
[50] Limited information exists regarding Lin Lübin, who was an illustrator at the Commercial Press and devoted his career to advancing children’s science education. Active from the 1920s to the 1930s, Lin authored several works, such as *Children’s Science Games* (*Ertong kexue youxi*) and *Children’s Handicrafts* (*Ertong shougong*). Among these, for instance, *Children’s Science Games* includes nearly forty scientific games, thoughtfully designed to engage young minds in the wonders of science, stimulate their curiosity in the subject, and deepen their understanding with valuable scientific knowledge.
[51] Although recent research has indicated that some genres and specific artworks did include depictions of girls (see Wang Gerui), the overwhelming majority of portrayals underscore the preference for boys over girls. Several factors contribute to the prevalent representation of boys in premodern China’s visual and material culture, one of which is the deep-rooted preference for male offspring. A prime example of this cultural bias can be found in the designs adorning ceramic pillows, which frequently depict baby boys as symbols of familial prosperity and continuity. Please see the example of ceramic pillows with designs of baby boys in Wicks and Avril.

World, evident in the editor's welcoming salutation to "*xiao didi, xiao meimei*" 小弟弟, 小妹妹 ("little brothers and little sisters"). Likewise, the section featuring



Figure 6. (Left) Cover, "Protection," *Children's World*, vol. 17, no. 24, 1926.

Figure 7. (Center) Cover, "Our Project," *Children's World*, vol. 17, no.8, 1926.

Figure 8. (Right) Cover, "The Gift is on Its Way," *Children's World*, vol. 20, no. 25, 1927.

children's photographs regularly showcased girls alongside boys, reinforcing a broader vision of childhood that embraced both genders.

This new aesthetic of cuteness, with its emphasis on specific morphological details, was itself made possible by the broader artistic shifts of the New Culture and May Fourth movements. Early depictions of children were often influenced by traditional Chinese painting styles, where figures were rendered in a more expressive and symbolic manner rather than with precise anatomical accuracy. These illustrations, reflecting the *xieyi* 寫意 ("expressive idealism") of traditional Chinese art, prioritized mood and atmosphere over individualized representation, often depicting children with indistinct

facial features and minimal attention to bodily details.[52] However, with the rise of the New Culture Movement, Chinese intellectuals increasingly called for a *meishu geming* 美術革命 ("revolution in art") that aligned with scientific rationality and national progress. Chen Duxiu, for instance, declared, "To embrace Mr. Science, one must reject the old arts and the old religion," advocating for *xieshi* 寫實 ("realism") as a mode of representation that corresponded to modern scientific thought.[53] As realism gained prominence, the visual portrayal of children underwent a significant transformation. Illustrations and cover images increasingly emphasized bodily structure, detailed clothing and accessories, and individualized facial features, shifting away from generic or symbolic representations. Artists depicted children with finer attention to expression and movement, reinforcing a new visuality of childhood that was grounded in observation and naturalistic representation. This transition not only enhanced the verisimilitude of children's imagery but also reinforced their presence within visual culture, transforming them from abstract symbols into distinct social subjects with individual agency.

Another major influence on the evolving visuality of children was then president of Peking University Cai Yuanpei's advocacy for *meiyu* 美育 ("aesthetic education"). Deeply influenced by Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, Cai articulated his vision for moral-aesthetic education in his 1917 essay "*Yi meiyu dai zongjiao shuo*" 以美育代宗教

[52] Xiaoling Zhang, "Wusi xin wenhua yundong yu Zhongguo meishu de xiandai zhuanxing" [The May Fourth New Culture Movement and the Modern Transformation of Chinese Art], *Tofang Knowledge Network* (2019): 9.
[53] Duxiu Chen, "Meishu geming" [Art Revolution], *Xin Qingnian* [New Youth] 6, no. 1 (1919), quoted in Xiaoling Zhang, "Wusi xin wenhua yundong yu Zhongguo meishu de xiandai zhuanxing" [The May Fourth New Culture Movement and the Modern Transformation of Chinese Art], *Tofang Knowledge Network* (2019): 11.

說 (“On Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education”). His theory of *shehui meiyu* 社會美育 (“social aesthetic education”) was fundamentally a top- down cultural transmission strategy aimed at extending progressive Western ideals, scientific knowledge, and artistic education from intellectual elites to the general public, ultimately shaping the nation’s future. Within this framework, children’s education and textbook reform played a central role.[54] The transmission model—moving from universities to elites, then to the public—positioned children as a crucial node in national modernization. Cai’s efforts to modernize textbooks, such as the publication of *Zui xin jiaokeshu* 最新教科書 (*The Latest Textbooks*) by the Commercial Press in 1905, marked the creation of China’s first modern textbook series. This reform not only reshaped classroom teaching but also laid the foundation for a new system of knowledge dissemination in which children were systematically introduced to modern science, national consciousness, and aesthetic cultivation.[55]

While Cai sought to promote progressive ideals through formal education and elite intellectual culture, children’s periodicals emerged as an equally influential platform for ideological dissemination. By using childhood as an entry point for cultural reform, these periodicals not only reflected shifting conceptions of childhood but also actively participated in their construction. They linked childhood happiness, national strength, and physical well-being, reinforcing a new discourse of childhood that emphasized health, physical fit- ness, and collective responsibility as essential to the nation’s future.

[54] Chenxi Qi, “Shehui meiyu he yishu yundong: Cai Yuanpei he Lin Fengmian de jiaoyu gaige shijian (1920–30 niandai)” [Social Aesthetic Education and the ‘Art Movement’: Cai Yuanpei and Lin Fengmian’s Educational Reforms in the 1920s–30s] (PhD diss., Zhongguo meishu xueyuan, 2017), 49–50.
[55]

To further understand the appeal of these representations, it is useful to consider Konrad Lorenz's "Child Schema" theory, which explains how certain morphological features—disproportionately large heads, prominent fore- heads, big low-lying eyes, rounded cheeks, and short chubby limbs—function as powerful triggers for adults' caregiving impulses.[56] This insight, rooted in Charles Darwin's earlier observation that infants must possess traits prompting adults to protect them, underscores how such infantile characteristics amplify perceptions of vulnerability and thus elicit a near-reflexive desire to nurture. In early twentieth-century Shanghai, some illustrations on *Children's World* capitalized on these morphological cues—plump limbs, round faces, soft contours—to evoke precisely that protective response. By presenting children in energetic, carefree poses against idyllic backdrops, these magazines appealed to readers' evolutionary predisposition to safeguard the young, thereby strengthening the emotional connection between adult readers and the images on display.

Yet, as Sianne Ngai's framework reveals, cuteness transcends mere morphological infantilism. Ngai conceptualizes cuteness not only as the aesthetic of diminutive or weak forms, but also as a "commodity aesthetic" inextricably tied to domestic pleasure, consumption, and affective response.[57] In early twentieth-century Shanghai, *Children's World* and *Little Friend* were very much embedded in this competitive print-capitalist milieu. By showcasing images of children as precious, delicate, and in need of protection, *Children's World* and *Little Friend* mobilized adult

---

[56] Konrad Lorenz, *Studies in Animals and Human Behavior*, trans. R. Martin, vol. 2 (1950; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 154; Joshua Paul Dale et al., "The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness," in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, ed. Joshua Paul Dale et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

[57] Sianne Ngai, "Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai," interview by Adam Jasper, *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 43 (Fall 2011), https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php.

sentiment to stimulate magazine purchases. Their covers and illustrations—often prominently featured—evoked parental affection and a sense of guardianship, effectively turning these sentimental responses into a market advantage. As later editor Xu Yingchang noted, "As soon as the inaugural issue was published, a large number of families and schools subscribed to it."[58] The magazine quickly became a commercial success, with each volume printing over ten thousand copies,[59] and it was widely adopted by elementary school teachers as teaching material.[60] Through the commodification of cuteness, publishers were not simply displaying darling depictions of youth; they were also cultivating a form of domestic delight and, by extension, a desire to acquire these pictorial items for the home.

Little Friend, published by the Zhonghua Book Company, was a direct competitor to the Commercial Press, which produced *Children's World*. As one of the earliest modern Chinese children's magazines, *Little Friend* was launched only a few months after *Children's World*. It serves both as a supplement and a counterexample to the emergent aesthetic of "cuteness," which was by no means uniform or universal at the time. Although *Little Friend* also featured covers rendered in a "cute" style (see Fig. 9), many of its illustrations did not follow this mode, reflecting how Chinese illustrators were still experimenting with depictions of children. In both *Children's World* and *Little Friend*, the livelier and more obviously "cute" images often drew on Western references—such as scooters, Western clothing, or European-style architecture—making it difficult to identify distinctively Chinese traits. By contrast, *Little Friend* offered more

[58] Yingchang Xu, "Ertong shijie" [Children's world], *Tongxing yuekan* 2, no. 8 (1934): 10–12.
[59] Zhang, *Wanqing wusi shiqi*, 334.
[60] Xu, "Ertong shijie," 11.

covers portraying children in Chinese attire and settings, yet these attempts frequently appeared tentative or awkward, suggesting that artists were grappling with how to represent Chinese children in this evolving idiom. Figure 10, for instance, features elongated eyes, vacant expressions, and peculiar smiles—per- haps influenced by the rarity of depicting open laughter in premodern Chinese portraiture, where Confucian rituals discouraged overt displays of emotion. This artistic struggle underscores an ongoing search for how best to visualize "cuteness" while maintaining a recognizably Chinese aesthetic.

From Natural Instincts to National Citizens: Empowered Outdoor Play in Early Republican China

In early twentieth-century China, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy gained traction among reform-minded intellectuals eager to move away from traditional, rigid instruction. Rousseau's educational treatise, *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (*Emile, or On Education*) (1762), along with other influential works such as *Du contrat social* (*On the Social Contract*), first appeared in Japan in the early twentieth century and, after several translations, eventually arrived in China,[61] where intellectuals such as Xia Mianzun 夏丏尊 (1886–1946), Feng Keshu 馮克書 (dates unknown), and Wei Zhaoji 魏兆基 (dates unknown) translated *Émile* based on Japanese or English versions and published it in various periodicals. Feng, for example, used editions by both the

[61] Notably, Yamaguchi Kotarō (1867–1917) and Shimazaki Tsunegorō (?–?) played a significant role in this intellectual exchange. They translated *Émile* by consulting the English version prepared by the American scholar William Harold Payne (1836–1907) and Hermann Denhardt's German rendition while crafting the Japanese version, *Emīru*, which was eventually published in 1920 (Sakakura 41–2). In a pioneering act of translingual adaptation, Nakashima Tanzo re-translated this Japanese version of *Émile* into classical Chinese. Subsequently, Nakashima's translation was published in *Education World* (*Jiaoyu shijie*) as an "education novel" (*jiaoyu xiaoshuo*).

American Eleanor Warshington and the British Barbara Foxley for his 1920 partial translation.[62] Feng's translation shows how these ideas were strategically introduced to highlight concepts resonating with pressing Chinese concerns, such as viewing the child as a whole person and treasuring childhood as a precious, fleeting stage of life. By choosing passages that stress love rather than stern punishment, the importance of children's play, and the need to avoid "distant fantasies" of future success, Feng underscored Rousseau's belief that present happiness and natural development are paramount:

> Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts . . . Mankind has its place in the sequence of things; childhood has its place in the sequence of human life; the man must be treated as a man and the child as a child. Give each his place, and keep him there. . . . [C]hildren should not be overly protected, nor should they be harshly punished. We should cherish the child. Encourage their courage to play, make them aware of their own weaknesses, let them rely on doing real things. Do not make them feel constrained by the teacher.[63]
>
> 此時不該過分的保護兒童，也不該苛刻責備他。我們應該愛惜兒童。鼓舞他遊戲的勇氣，使他自覺能力薄弱。使他靠著實事做去。不要使他覺得有教師的束縛。……

[62] The name "Eleanor Warshington" appears as such in Feng Keshu's 1920 partial translation. It is likely a misspelling of "Washington," but the original spelling is retained here to reflect Feng's original usage.
[63] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925).

人類有人類的地位；在生命的順序中，兒童有兒童的地位。人應該像人的樣子看待，而兒童應該像兒童的樣子看待，各有各的地位……[6465]

This selective translation—where Feng chose certain passages to emphasize while omitting others— revealed Feng's desire to reduce the teacher's authoritarian role, encourage children's physical activities, and foster a genuine sense of autonomy. In doing so, he reinforced a growing conviction that children should be treated as children and not be sacrificed for ill-defined aspirations—further demonstrating how Rousseau's writings catalyzed a broader shift toward progressive, child-centered education.

Just as Rousseau profoundly shaped China's evolving discourse on education, John Dewey also left a deep imprint on the Chinese educational scene, in many ways echoing Rousseau's emphasis on the child's nature and innate potential. Dewey's arrival in China in 1919 was arranged by his former Cornell University student Hu Shi—one of the leading figures of the May Fourth Movement—who sought to introduce Dewey's educational theories to a country in search of new approaches. Dewey stayed until 1921, delivering lectures on education that Hu then translated into Chinese. In these translated lectures, Dewey stressed the importance of children's instincts, natural dispositions, and individuality, seeing them as the wellsprings of genuine learning.[66] Some of the lectures

[64] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Ai'mi'er" [Emile], trans. Keshu Feng, *Jiaoyu congkan* 5 (1924): 1–5.
[65] Feng's translation rearranges the sequence of the English source texts and condenses or reinterprets certain phrases; all Chinese quotations cited here are drawn from Feng's 1924 Chinese version, which was based on the English translations by Eleanor Worthington and Barbara Foxley (as noted above). Notably, Feng adds phrases without equivalents in the English sources, such as "使他自覺能力薄弱，使他靠著實事做去" (make him aware of his own weakness and let him rely on doing real things), and repositions the claim about childhood's "place in the sequence of human life" to the end in this translation, disrupting the continuity of the original English text.
[66] John Dewey, "Fulu: Xiandai jiaoyu de qushi" [Appendix: The Trends of Modern Education, Dr. Dewey's Lecture in Beijing], *Fujian jiaoyu xingzheng yuekan* 1, no. 1 (1920): 1, 2, 4; John Dewey, "Xiaoxue jiaoyu

critique the traditional Chinese "rote-learning" model, warning that it turns "teaching" into little more than "the synonym of memorization," thereby smothering children's creativity and curiosity.[67] To counteract such rigidity, Dewey highlighted



Figure 9. (Left) Cover, *Little Friend*, no. 219, 1926.

Figure 10. (Right) Cover, *Little Friend*, no. 105, 1924.

the necessity of play, physical exercise, and entertainment, urging schoolteachers to bring children outdoors for games and recreation, which he believed foster both healthy bodies and active minds.[68] Dewey further contrasted what he calls "conservative" and "progressive" societies. The former, he argued, clings to old habits, values strict obedience, and discourages novelty, while the latter prizes invention, encourages personal initiative, and embraces change. The lecture pointedly framed traditional

---

de xin qushi" [The New Trends in Elementary Education: Dr. Dewey's Lecture at Jiaxing], trans. Xi Minggui, *Guangyi zazhi*, no. 33 (1922): 2.

[67] Dewey, "Xiaoxue jiaoyu de xin qushi," 2.

[68] Dewey, "Xiaoxue jiaoyu de xin qushi," 3.

Chinese education as a product of this "conservative" mindset—ill-suited to cultivating forward-thinking individuals—and thus underscored the urgent need for an educational overhaul.[69] By labeling opposing views as "conservative," Dewey's approach effectively positioned itself as the enlightened blueprint for a modern, dynamic China.

Echoing Dewey's admonitions, many covers of both *Children's World* and *Little Friend* frequently depict children playing—playing games with peers, riding kick scooters, making sandcastles, and going camping. Following the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals increasingly emphasized children's physical well-being and sports, drawing significantly from Rousseau's and Dewey's philosophy of natural development. Some commentators explicitly stressed the link between children's sports and healthy development. For instance, Wang Gen argued that "Games and sports are the very life of childhood. Without exercise, children cannot thrive. . . . After five or six years, children's physiques undergo significant changes, their bodies become stronger day by day, and their spirits grow more lively."[70] Chiang Kai-shek's government launched the New Life Movement in 1934, which continued until 1949. Through this campaign, officials promoted children's exercise and play as part of broader hygiene initiatives. *Children's World* responded immediately by publishing two special issues titled *New Life Movement Special Edition* and *Promotion of Hygiene*, spotlighting the importance of children's sports. Both issues highlighted that children should exercise and engage in play. Educators and writers also invoked Rousseau directly to underscore these ideas. In 1934, Li Botang 李伯棠 cited him in "*Ertong yundong youxi yuanze de yanjiu*" 兒童運動遊

[69] Dewey, "Fulu: Xiandai jiaoyu de qushi," 7.
[70] Geng Wang, "Ertong yu youxi yundong" [Children and the Movement of Games], *Rensheng zazhi* 7 (1924): 12.

戲原則的研究 ("A Study on the Principles of Children's Sports and Games") writing, "Rousseau once remarked, 'We should value children's freedom to play and engage in outdoor activities, allowing them to develop naturally so that their minds grow strong, their experiences and knowledge expand, their temperaments are nurtured, and their spirits achieve harmony'."[71] Meanwhile, many criticized parents and teachers who dismissed children's innate love of physical play as mere mischief. An anonymous author in 1934 lamented that "Very few families in our country pay attention to children's physical activities. . . . Some ignorant mothers even regard children's fondness for sports as nothing but naughtiness, which should be absolutely forbidden. . . . Children are naturally active; of course they crave play."[72] Li likewise observed that "[m] any schoolteachers believe children should strictly follow rules at school. So as soon as they hear any noise during class, they immediately put on a stern face and scold the children without mercy."[73] This convergence of ideas— from Wang Gen's focus on physical well-being to official New Life Movement campaigns to Li's invocation of Rousseau to ongoing critiques of overbearing adults—reflected a broader acceptance of child-centered, exercise-oriented principles in Republican-era China. By focusing on "cutifying" active, healthy children who played outside, Chinese reformers aimed to subvert the deeply rooted Confucian ideal of the quiet, studious child confined indoors. They also hoped to dispel parents' fears of the "dangerous" outside world, thus aligning

[71] Botang Li, "Ertong yundong youxi yuanze de yanjiu" [A Study on the Principles of Children's Sports and Games], *Jiangsu sheng xiaoxue jiaoshi banyuekan* 1, no. 16 (1934): 2.
[72] "Fumu zhi dao: Ertong yundong" [The Way of Parenting: Children's Sports], *Xinghua* 31, no. 21 (1934): 13.
[73] Li, "Ertong yundong youxi yuanze de yanjiu," 2.

with the core values of *Children's World*. This approach underscored children's agency and vitality while challenging traditional norms.

Children in these modern representations are not only playing or exercising—they are doing so outdoors. A quantitative analysis of cover illustrations in *Children's World* and *Little Friend* from the early to mid-1920s reveals that depictions of outdoor activities were becoming increasingly dominant. Here, "outdoor-themed" refers strictly to covers portraying children in settings beyond the household or its property, thus excluding images centered on animals or fairy tales—even if they appear outdoors—as well as scenes in private courtyards or farmland. In *Children's World*, about 38% of the covers met this criterion in volume 6 (1923), rising to around 46% by volume 13 (1925), and hovering just above 50% in volume 16 (1925) and volumes 17 and 18 (1926).[74] If farmland or courtyard scenes are also counted, the total for some volumes increases substantially—rising, for instance, to 80% in volume 18—indicating that while not all covers depict truly "public" outdoor settings, many nonetheless show children outside their immediate household environment. A similar pattern is observed in *Little Friend*, though with more fluctuation. The covers examined from 1924—selected based on availability, as some issues were not preserved—show that about half depicted outdoor scenes. In contrast, only 35% of the twenty-three examined issues from 1925 featured outdoor depictions. By 1926, in the issues surveyed between 219 and 244 (with issue 236 missing), the proportion of outdoor covers had risen to around 60%. Despite some variation, the quantitative data suggests that outdoor activities became an increasingly prominent theme in the visual representation of children's culture during this period.

[74] I excluded 1924 due to an insufficient number of extant covers.

This growing recognition of outdoor activities and play continued into the 1930s, becoming more explicitly tied to ideas of national strength and respon- sibility. By 1934, *Children's World* dedicated a special issue to Children's Day, reinforcing this emphasis on physical well-being. One of the featured poems, "*Kuaile de ertong*" 快樂的兒童 ("Happy Children"), declares,

> "Society nurtures us with the hope that each of us will have a strong and healthy body, brimming with energy like dragons and tigers. . . . We are honored as the masters of the nation; our duty is to be its vanguard. The transformation of this bright world depends on us, the children."
> 社會教養我們希望我們：個個有健全的身體，活潑得如虎如龍……我們的尊稱，是國家的主人翁。我們的責任，是國家的急先鋒。光明世界的改造，都靠著我們兒童！[75]

Immediately following this piece is an article entitled "*Zenyang shi shenti qiangjian*" 怎樣使身體強健 ("How to Strengthen the Body"), which advocated for morning exercises, martial arts training, soccer, and swimming, accompanied by corresponding illustrations (Jiang 40–41).[76] This explicit promotion of physical activity reflects a broader shift in how childhood was conceptualized—emphasizing that a strong and healthy body was not only essential for a child's happiness but also vital for the nation's future.

[75] Xiyin Fei, "Kuaile de ertong: [shi]" [Happy Children: A Poem], *Ertong Shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 30–31.
[76] Yuanqin Jiang, "Zenyang shi shenti qiangjian: Jiangyanci (futu)" [How to Strengthen the Body: Lecture (with Illustrations)], *Ertong Shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 40–41.

Euro-American theories of cuteness, as exemplified by Lorenz and Ngai, often interpret the aesthetic as a response to vulnerability that prompts a protective impulse.[77] In contrast, the deployment of this aesthetic in Republican China reveals a more nuanced and paradoxical purpose. Rather than simply stirring the desire to shield children from harm, Chinese intellectuals strategically used images of "cute" children—swimming in open water or practicing calisthenics—to convey an acceptance of potential risk, thereby fostering physical vigor, courage, and autonomy for the nation. These representations embody a central ethos of "protect but not overprotect," in which care is directed toward cultivating independence rather than confining children to passive obedience. Building on this ethos, the depiction of children at play—rendered in a visibly "cute" style—serves as a transitional space that gently mediates the transition to the emergent ideas of outdoor recreation and physical education. By framing otherwise militaristic or regimented practices—uniform clothing, coordinated movements, martial arts instruction, and even elements of military training—in a playful and disarming manner, cuteness helps ease anxieties about exposing children to risk or nationalist indoctrination. At a time when these educational models were relatively novel in China, presenting children in a cute light allowed new concepts to enter the cultural mainstream without appearing excessively harsh or threatening.

Such portrayals, which encourage children to explore beyond the limits of maternal oversight, also marked a shift away from a purely protective stance and toward the cultivation of future citizens whose physical health, intellectual vitality, and social

[77] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 24–25.

engagement were considered crucial for national progress. In this context, Chinese intellectuals strategically appropriated the emotional appeal of cuteness to garner sympathy for children while rejecting any infantilizing impulse that might undermine their autonomy and civic potential. Hence, this Chinese perspective on cuteness—one that underscores children's growth and their importance as agents of national development—stands in stark contrast to Western notions of cuteness, which largely center on fragility and provoke primarily protective impulses.

Conclusion: Liberation and Discipline in Modern Representations of Children

This chapter has traced the evolving visual language of children and childhood in China from the Song dynasty to the late Qing and into the transformative May Fourth era. In premodern China—especially from the Ming period onward, under the growing influence of Neo-Confucianism—representations typically emphasized children as miniature adults expected to be quiet, obedient learners, with play seldom depicted. However, by the early twentieth century, images began portraying children as active, curious, and "cute," reflecting the impact of transnational educational philosophies, notably those of Rousseau and Dewey.

Cuteness, I argue, served as a "softening" mechanism or transitional space, framing new forms of outdoor recreation, physical training, and even militaristic drills in a playful manner. By doing so, it helped mitigate anxieties over risk or nationalist indoctrination, allowing these practices to gain acceptance without appearing excessively threatening to parents or traditionalists. At the same time, these shifting representations of childhood exemplify how modern Chinese society localized foreign educational ideals to

serve domestic political imperatives, thereby revealing a paradox at the heart of China's reimagined childhood: while such images promoted individual freedom and play, they also placed children under new forms of regulation and control for national ends. By understanding how images both liberate and discipline, we grasp the deeper ideological stakes of childhood in a rapidly modernizing society—reminding us that depictions of children are never merely decorative, but potent tools that shape social norms and state agendas alike.



Fig. 11. (Left) An illustration of children practicing *guoshu* (national martial arts) for physical fitness. "How to Strengthen the Body." *Children's World*, 1934, p.40.

Fig. 12. (Right) Illustrations of children playing soccer and swimming, promoted as healthy outdoor activities. "How to Strengthen the Body." *Children's World*, 1934, p.41.

Works Cited

Barnhart, Richard, and Catherine Barnhart. “Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry.” In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 31–71. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002.

Chen, Shih-Wen Sue. “Children, Learning, and Play in the *Mengxue bao* (The Children’s Educator, 1897–1902).” *International Research in Children’s Literature* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–16.

Dale, Joshua Paul, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra. “The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness.” In *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, edited by Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra, 1–34. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Dewey, John. “Fulu: Xiandai jiaoyu de qushi” 附錄：現代教育的趨勢 [Appendix: The Trends of Modern Education, Dr. Dewey’s Lecture in Beijing]. *Fujian jiaoyu xingzheng yuekan* 1, no. 1 (1920): 1–9.

———. “Xiaoxue jiaoyu de xin qushi” 小學教育的新趨勢 [The New Trends in Elementary Education: Dr. Dewey’s Lecture at Jiaxing]. Translated by Xi Minggui. *Guangyi zazhi*, no. 33 (1922): 1–4.

Fei, Xiyin 費錫胤. “Kuaile de ertong: [shi]” 快樂的兒童：詩 [Happy Children: A Poem]. *Ertong Shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 27–32.

“Fumu zhi dao: Ertong yundong” 父母之道： 兒童運動 [The Way of Parenting: Children’s Sports]. *Xinghua* 31, no. 21 (1934): 13–14.

Glosser, Susan L. *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

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

Huxley, Thomas H. *Tianyan lun* 天演論 [On Evolution]. Translated by Yan Fu 嚴復. 1898. Reprint, Beijing: Yilin chubanshe, 2011.

Jiang, Yuanqin 姜元琴. "Zenyang shi shenti qiangjian: Jiangyanci (futu)" 怎樣使身體強健：講演詞（附圖） [How to Strengthen the Body: Lecture (with Illustrations)]. *Ertong Shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 33–45.

Jones, Andrew F. *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Kakimoto, Mayo. *Jidō zasshi no tanjō* [The Birth of Children's Magazines]. Tokyo: Bungaku tsūshin, 2023.

Li, Botang 李伯棠. "Ertong yundong youxi yuanze de yanjiu" 兒童運動遊戲原則的研究 [A Study on the Principles of Children's Sports and Games]. *Jiangsu sheng xiaoxue jiaoshi banyuekan* 1, no. 16 (1934): 2–4.

Lorenz, Konrad. *Studies in Animal and Human Behavior*. Translated by R. Martin. Vol. 2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971. Originally published 1950.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

———. "Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai." By Adam Jasper. *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 43 (Fall 2011). https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php.

Qi, Chenxi 戚晨曦. “Shehui meiyu he yishu yundong: Cai Yuanpei he Lin Fengmian de jiaoyu gaige shijian (1920–30 niandai)” 社會美育和藝術運動： 蔡元培和林風眠的教育改革實踐 [Social Aesthetic Education and the ‘Art Movement’: Cai Yuanpei and Lin Fengmian’s Educational Reforms in the 1920s–30s]. PhD diss., Zhongguo meishu xueyuan [China Academy of Art], 2017.

“Qiu ze de zi” 求則得子 [Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back]. *Xiaohai yuebao*, no. 3 (1875): 1–3.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “Ai’mi’er” 愛彌兒 [Emile]. Translated by Feng Keshu 馮克書. *Jiaoyu congkan* 5, no.1 (1924): 1–5.

———. *Emile, or Education*. Translated by Barbara Foxley. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925.

Sakakura, Yuji. “Nihon kara chūgoku ni watatta Emīru—Nakajima Tadashizō ni yoru kanyaku Ai’mei’er chao (1903 nen) no butaiura” [From Japan to China, the Emile That Crossed Over—The Backstage of the Chinese Translation *Ai’mei’er chao* (1903) by Nakajima Tadashizō]. *Wasedadaigaku daigakuin kyōikugaku kenkyūka kiyō* 3, no. 30 (2020): 41–53.

Shinmura, Tōru. “Akai tori to Chuukoku” [Akai tori and China]. In *Akai Tori Jiten*, edited by Akai Tori Jiten Henshū Iinkai, 36–38. Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 2018.

Songren puzao tu 宋人撲棗圖 [Song People Catching Jujubes]. Song dynasty, 960–1279. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Wang, Geng. “Ertong yu youxi yundong” 兒童與遊戲運動 [Children and the Movement of Games]. *Rensheng zazhi* 7 (1924): 12.

Wang, Gerui. “Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China.” *Journal of Chinese History* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2023.13.

Wang, Qihan 王齊翰, attr. *Heting yingxi tu* 荷亭嬰戲圖 [Women and Children by a Lotus Pond]. Formerly attributed to Wang Qihan (act. 961–975); now dated to Southern Song, first half of 13th century. Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on silk. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Wei, Zhicheng 魏志澄. “Jiangyanci: Zenyang yufang jibing” 講演詞：怎樣預防疾病 [Lecture: How to Prevent Diseases]. *Ertong shijie* 32, no. 10 (1934): 13–16.

Wicks, Ann Barrott, and Ellen B. Avril. “Introduction: Children in Chinese Art.” In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 1–30. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002.

Xia, Mianzun 夏丏尊. “Xu *Ai de jiaoyu*” 續《愛的教育》 [Continuation of Education of Love]. *Jiaoyu zazhi* 21, no. 1 (1929): 161.

Xu, Yingchang 徐應昶. “*Ertong Shijie*” 《兒童世界》 [*Children’s World*]. *Tongxing yuekan* 同行月刊 2, no. 8 (1934): 10–12.

Zhang, Jianqing 張建青, and Yaowu Wu 吳耀武. “Cong *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* dao *Ai de jiaoyu*—Yidali xiaoshuo *Cuore* Zhongguo bainian (1905–2015) Han yi jianshi” 從《兒童修身之情感》到《愛的教育》——意大利小說 Cuore 中國百年（1905–2015）漢譯簡史 [From *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* to *Ai de jiaoyu*: A Brief History of the Chinese Translation of the Italian Novel *Cuore* Over a Century (1905–2015)]. *Zhongguo fanyi* 中國翻譯, no. 3 (2015): 48–52.

Zhang, Mei 張梅. *Wanqing wusi shiqi: ertong duwu shang de tuxiang xushi* 晚清五四時期：兒童讀物上的圖像敘事 [Pictorial Narrative in Children's Reading Materials during the Late Qing and May Fourth Period]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016.

Zhang, Tingbo 張廷波. "Cong Songdai bujuzi xianxiang kan liang Song yingxitu shengxing yuanyin" 從宋代不舉子現象看兩宋嬰戲圖盛行原因 [The Reasons for the Popularity of Baby-Play Pictures in the Song Dynasty Seen through the Phenomenon of Not Raising Children]. *Zhuangshi* 裝飾, no. 327 (July 2020): 100–103.

Zhang, Xiaoling 張曉凌. "Wusi xin wenhua yundong yu Zhongguo meishu de xiandai zhuanxing" 五四新文化運動與中國美術的現代轉型 [The May Fourth New Culture Movement and the Modern Transformation of Chinese Art]. *Meishu* 美術, May 2019, 6–17.

"Zhongwen xiushen shu: Di shiba ke Xiaoxing" 中文修身書：第十八課孝行 [Chinese Moral Education: Lesson 18, Reading Lesson on Filial Conduct]. *Mengxue bao* 蒙學報 [*The Children's Educator*], no. 10 (1898): 16.

Zheng, Zhenduo 鄭振鐸. "'Ertong shijie' xuanyan" 《兒童世界》宣言 [The Manifesto on Children's World]. In *Zheng Zhenduo yu ertong wenxue* 鄭振鐸與兒童文學 [Zheng Zhenduo and Children's Literature], 3–5. Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1982.

Zur, Dafna. *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

CHAPTER III

"DOCUMENTING" THE HAPPINESS OF LABOR DURING THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD: CHILDREN'S FILM AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SOCIALIST CHILDHOOD

This chapter was previously published in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2025). I am the sole author.

The study of Chinese children's films remains significantly underdeveloped. Within broader studies of the history of Chinese cinema, children's films often receive minimal attention or are entirely overlooked, with key historical developments mentioned only briefly or left out altogether (Cheng 1980, Chen 1989, Chen 2005).[78] Although scholarship on Chinese children's films is limited, some studies, either directly or indirectly, touch on related themes. Zhen Zhang, for instance, examines the recurring figure of the orphan in Republican-era films, situating it within a transnational melodramatic mode that contributes to a global vernacular of modern experience (Zhang 2018).[79] Xu Lanjun examines how the portrayal of the iconic child figure San Mao evolved in both comics and films, from the Republican period to the PRC (Xu 2009).[80] Daisy Du explores Chinese animation, a subgenre of children's films, with a focus on its engagement with international forces during its formative years from the 1940s to the

[78] Please see Cheng Jihua, ed., *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [History of the Development of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1980), Chen Huangmei, ed., *Dangdai zhongguo dianying (Shang)* [Contemporary Chinese Film (Vol. 1)] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989), and Chen Bo, ed., *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi* [Chronicle of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenxian chubanshe, 2005).

[79] Zhen Zhang, "Transnational Melodrama, Wenyi, and the Orphan Imagination," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 83–97.

[80] Lanjun Xu, "Zhang bu da de 'San Mao': Cong zaoqi de dushi wantong dao 1949 nian qianhou de liulang'er" [The San Mao Who Never Grows Up], in *Xiandai Zhongguo·Di Ershi ji*, ed. Chen Pingyuan (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009).

1970s (Du 2019).[81] Meanwhile, Stephanie Donald specializes in children's media, with her research including Cultural Revolution posters and contemporary children's films, though not those from the Maoist era.[82] This chapter seeks to address a significant gap in the study of Maoist children's films: it focuses specifically on children's films featuring "happy children" as protagonists produced during the Great Leap Forward in the form of artistic documentaries / documentary art films.

This chapter does more than merely analyze depictions of "happy children" or the debates they generated. More critically, it interrogates how "happiness"—understood here as a concept or affect dynamically shaped by historical, social, and political forces—served as a powerful vehicle for mobilizing emotional attachments, consolidating socialist values, and positioning audiences within the broader project of national modernization.

In the Chinese language, "happiness" unfolds through two interwoven but distinct meanings: *kuaile* 快樂, a fleeting spark of delight—perhaps from winning a simple game or sharing a laugh with friends—and *xingfu* 幸福, a more enduring sense of well-being rooted in broader social support, such as strong family bonds, stable livelihoods, or reliable state protection. From the Republican era onward, representations of children—from early illustrations and popular magazines to films and literature—began coupling these two notions, forging a potent equation that tied transient childhood joy (*kuaile*) to the promise of deeper fulfillment (*xingfu*). Over time, this nexus of "happiness" took on

[81] Daisy Yan Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).
[82] Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

ever more layered historical, social, and political connotations, shifting in meaning with each changing regime and ideological landscape. Even in its earliest articulations, the image of a smiling child was charged with significance: it served not merely as a sentimental marker of innocence but also as a barometer of collective aspirations, revealing the nation's evolving hopes and anxieties in the face of modernization.

In the People's Republic of China, this notion of happiness underwent a marked politicization, particularly through cinema and related propaganda forms. Happiness is a "sticky affect," a concept proposed by Sara Ahmed to describe how emotions stick to particular bodies, objects, or signs over time, shaping our perceptions and interactions.[83] Socialist China persistently bound "happiness" to collective labor—often manifested through laughter—across various media, including children's films. Over time, agricultural work, rapid industrialization, and even self-sacrifice came to embody happiness itself. As the edited volume *Maoist Laughter* suggests, laughter in the Mao era was not merely a natural, biological reflex, but a powerful social practice vital for reproducing socialist ideology, state-building, and subject-making; it also carried the potential to express unchecked excess or even resistance.[84] Children's films were a key vehicle for visualizing this ideal. On-screen, cheerful child laborers—smiling even while engaged in strenuous tasks—became the cinematic embodiment of *xingfu*, signifying not a brief surge of pleasure but a lasting commitment to nation-building that audiences were meant to celebrate and emulate. In this sense, the pursuit of labor-based happiness

[83] Sara Ahmed, "Happy Object," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.
[84] Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, "Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era," in *Maoist Laughter*, ed. Ping Zhu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 3.

resonates with Wendy Larson's notion of "spiritual wealth," an intangible form of well-being that emphasizes "selflessness, a clear recognition of the value of work, a sense of mastery, a well-developed sense of responsibility, self-enforced discipline, and above all, optimism"— qualities the socialist state esteemed above mere material prosperity.[85]

This redefinition of childhood happiness from the Republican era to the socialist period also signaled a broader shift—from an *evolutionary* discourse that afforded children a special, *protected* status to a *revolutionary* discourse that positioned them as active builders and even *protectors* of the socialist ideals. In the earlier frame, childhood was regarded as a distinct developmental stage requiring careful nurturing and protection. During the May Fourth era, educational theories influenced by transnational Euro-American ideas—particularly the philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey—further reinforced this view by emphasizing children's innate instincts and individuality, with outdoor play deemed vital to their development and happiness (Zheng 2025).[86] With the ascendancy of revolutionary rhetoric, however, children were no longer perceived as mere recipients of adult care, but rather as model participants in labor who could invigorate the socialist cause with their fresh energy and unwavering enthusiasm. Cinematic narratives—for, instance, *The Story of Red Scarves* (*Honglingjin de gushi* 紅領巾的故事) that will be examined in subsequent sections—thus inverted traditional views of childhood play, elevating labor as the path to genuine happiness.

[85] Wendy Larson, F*rom Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 101.
[86] Leting Zheng, "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025).

From Orphans to Happy Children: Cinematic Constructions of "Modern Socialist Childhood"

The genre of children's film is inherently ambiguous, and scholars have differing opinions on whether children's films should be defined strictly as films for children.[87] In this chapter, I adopt a broader and more flexible conceptual framework, defining "children's film" as cinematic works that are either *for* children or *about* children—that is, those featuring representations of children. From the tragic orphan figures prevalent during the Republican era to the "happy children" celebrated in the socialist period, these cinematic depictions operated not merely as entertainment, but as instruments of political expression. By foregrounding the representational strategies and ideological work performed through child characters, the discussion moves beyond conventional genre boundaries to underscore how children's films continually negotiated questions of ideology, social change, and modernity.

In Republican-era cinema, children's representations frequently took the form of orphan figures. Many of these films were left-wing productions aimed at highlighting social injustices rather than appealing specifically to a young audience. During the Republican period, the profound impact of D.W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) on Shanghai's film scene, along with the popularity of Mandarin Duck and Butterflies literature—which emphasized sentimental family and romantic stories—led to the

[87] Foundational scholars, such as Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples from the field of Anglophone children's studies, and Zhang Zhilu from Chinese children's film studies (Zhang, 2012), represent a broader and more flexible approach to defining children's film. Bazalgette and Staples describe children's film as "the exhibition of films for a general audience containing some children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children" (Bazalgette and Staples 1995, 92). By contrast, scholars such as Stephanie Donald and Noel Brown. Donald and Brown advocate for a narrower definition, asserting "a children's film is a film produced for a primary audience of children and received as such" (Donald and Brown 2022, 95).

significant rise of orphan films. These films became a powerful vehicle for exploring themes of loss, familial duty, and societal transformation. *Orphan Rescues His Grandfather* achieved immense commercial success, sparking a wave of orphan films that continued until the release of *Sanmao's Wandering Life* (*San Mao liulang ji* 三毛流浪記,1949, dir. Zhao Ming 趙明 and Yan Gong 嚴恭). This trend represented a response to the Western melodrama tradition, incorporating localized elements and using children to critique societal issues in China.[88] Rather than simply telling stories about children's lives, these films used the struggles of child characters to reflect broader social and political realities, such as war, government incompetence, and societal inequalities.

In contrast, socialist China took a deliberate, state-directed approach to children's cinema, recognizing its distinct potential as a powerful vehicle for state propaganda, with all films produced exclusively through government-controlled studios during the Mao era. The Chinese government not only recognized the importance of these films in shaping young minds but also actively promoted their production. In 1950, cinemas across China were encouraged to offer free or discounted screenings of children's films during International Children's Day on June 1st, marking an early effort to promote children's cinema as part of the national agenda.[89] By 1953, Zhou Yang 周揚, then the Minister of the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, emphasized the significance of children's films at the "First National Conference on Film Script Writing." He stated, "Our red scarves, symbolic of our nation's future strength, require

[88] Zhang, "Transnational Melodrama."
[89] "Xiangying baowei ertong quanli de huyu, haozhao gedi qingzhu guoji ertongjie" [Responding to the Appeal to Protect Children's Rights, Calling on All Regions to Celebrate International Children's Day], *People's Daily*, May 4, 1950.

our educational guidance. It is essential to imbue in them the tenets of socialist virtues."[90] In the same year, the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture proposed trial screenings for children in suitable theaters to support educational goals, promoting values like patriotism and public responsibility. The Ministry also issued a directive encouraging cultural departments and film distributors to organize discounted, child-friendly screenings in collaboration with educational and youth organizations, and, in major cities, to establish dedicated children's cinemas with carefully selected films appropriate for children's development.[91] By 1956, the state's efforts to promote children's cinema was evident with the establishment of a national "Children's Film Week," which started in Beijing and spread to 28 cities, from major hubs like Shanghai and Tianjin to more remote areas such as Ürümqi.[92] China not only sought to develop its own children's cinema but also looked to the Soviet Union for guidance, actively drawing inspiration from Soviet successes in children's arts. Soviet accomplishments in integrating ideological education with entertainment were held in high regard. As early as 1952, Soviet children's literature and films were celebrated in China, and Soviet writers were praised for producing high-quality, ideologically sound content.[93] This admiration was not just theoretical—China actively incorporated Soviet influences into its own film

[90] Lin A'mian, *Zhongguo ertong dianying biannian jishi 1922–2011* [Chronicle of Chinese Children's Film 1922–2011] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012), 9–10.
[91] "Wenhua bu dianying ju daibu qicao guanyu 'tongzhi ge di wenhua zhuguan bumen zai you tiaojian de chengshi yingyuan zhong shiban ertong chang' wengao" [Ministry of Culture Film Bureau Drafts Notice on Trial Children's Screenings in Qualified City Theaters], *People's Daily*, November 14, 1953; "Wenhua bu fachu 'Guanyu jiaqiang dianying fangying he faxing gongzuo de zhishi'" [Ministry of Culture Issues 'Instructions on Strengthening Film Screening and Distribution Work'], *People's Daily*, December 12, 1953.
[92] "Shaonian ertong dianying zhou zai Beijing juxing kaimu shi" [Opening Ceremony of Children's Film Week Held in Beijing], *People's Daily*, February 19, 1956.
[93] Zhuyi ertong wenyi de chuangzuo" [Pay Attention to the Creation of Children's Literature and Art], *People's Daily*, June 1, 1952.

industry. Studios like Changchun Film Studio began translating and introducing Soviet films, adapting Soviet methods to fit Chinese cinematic productions.

Compared to the cinematic representations of orphans produced in Republican China which used children to highlight social critique, post-1949 children's films under socialism lost this critical edge. The cinematic landscape for live-action children's films was shaped by various themes, with two standing out as particularly prominent.[94] The first type of children's films, exemplified by *Chicken-Feather Letter* (*Jimao xin* 雞毛信, 1954, dir. Shi Hui 石揮), portrays child war heroes, focusing on the courageous and patriotic actions of young protagonists. It aims to reinforce nationalist sentiments, portraying the collective strength and unity of the Chinese nation in its fight against foreign enemies. The second type centers on the portrayal of "happy children," such as *Flowers of the Motherland* (*Zuguo de huaduo* 祖國的花朵, 1955, dir. Yan Gong) and *The Story of Red Scarves*. In these cinematic narratives, the focus is largely on the idealized and idyllic lives of young students. Unlike earlier films, which depict orphans and street children grappling with hardship, this new wave of children's cinema celebrates a joyful, vibrant youth, aligned with patriotic and revolutionary values. For example, as Xu Lanjun has shown, San Mao was first introduced in 1935 as a mischievous boy from a middle-class family whose innocence was used to satirize societal issues, particularly in the politically charged environment of the 1930s. By the 1940s, he had been transformed into a homeless orphan, symbolizing the social struggles

[94] Other than these two dominant types of children's films, there were also less common genres. For instance, *Elder Brother and Younger Sister* (*Gege he meimei*) (1956), directed by Su Li, focused on sibling relationships and issues of family education. Another example is *The Kite* (*Fengzheng*) (1958), a fantasy children's film co-produced by the Beijing Film Studio and the French company Galatée Films, aimed at promoting Sino-French friendship.

of the time. This evolution culminated in 1949, when San Mao was reimagined as a model child, embodying the ideals of socialist China and reflecting the broader cinematic trend toward celebrating the state's vision of happy, healthy children.[95] In addition to this shift in character portrayal, post-1949 socialist children's films began presenting children not within the context of familial bonds but as independent representatives of the Party-State and symbols of China's collective future. This shift illustrates a new vision for children—in which their significance lay not in their connection to family but in their role within the state's revolutionary project.

Expanding beyond cinema, this image of cheerful, optimistic children became a central motif in various forms of propaganda, appearing widely in posters and photographs to project the strength and prosperity of the socialist state. A notable example is the widely circulated, fabricated photograph of children supposedly standing on a rice crop dense enough to support their weight—though, in reality, they were balanced on a cleverly concealed bench.[96]

[95] Xu, "Zhang bu da de 'San Mao'."
[96] Richard King, "Romancing the Leap: Euphoria in the Moment before Disaster," in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 55.



(Figure 1 A notorious manipulated photograph depicting children purportedly standing on an unnaturally dense rice crop, capable of bearing their weight)

As with many other visual and cultural products in early socialist China, children's films of this period undeniably served propagandistic purposes. Yet, following Xiaobing Tang's perspective, it may be more productive to view state intervention not simply as a top-down instrument of control or an exploitation of culture for political ends, but rather as a purposeful response to emergent cultural imperatives.[97] In other words, while socialist New China continued the nation's broader pursuit of cultural modernity, it approached this endeavor in ways that diverged significantly from the Republican era. This shift introduced what Tang calls a "new way of seeing," wherein "it was important not only to see with a socialist eye, but also to recognize and affirm socialism in everyday life."[98]

[97] Xiaobing Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.
[98] Xiaobing Tang, *Visual Culture*, 22-23.

Within this framework, children's films became a key site for conceptualizing and cultivating a distinctly "modern socialist childhood," one that departed from both Confucian ideals and the capitalist or humanist notions of childhood prevalent during the Republican period. This reconfiguration not only reimagined the child's role but also reshaped how parents, educators, creators, and communities were expected to nurture youth under socialism. In many films, for instance, parents formed a target audience and were sometimes critiqued for not actively supporting their children's labor or embracing Great Leap Forward objectives, thereby reinforcing the expectation that all adults share responsibility for cultivating socialist childhood. Filmmakers and viewers thus engaged in a dynamic cycle: creative professionals carefully framed cinematic depictions of this "new childhood," while audiences—both young and adult—either absorbed, questioned, or selectively adapted these portrayals in their own lived experiences. Because such varied receptions prevented the creation of a single, uniform narrative, the result was not a monolithic sequence of directives but an ongoing process of cultural negotiation—one that continually redefined what childhood and modernity could (and should) encompass.

Debating Satire and Criticism: From Child-centered Approach to Politically Driven Narratives

The transformation from the portrayals of orphans to joyful, idealized children in films was not merely a matter of creative evolution but was deeply intertwined with both artistic and ideological debates of the time. Initially, many orphan films—most of which were left-wing productions—had been used to expose social injustices and reflect the darker aspects of society.

In 1949, before the founding of the PRC, the Chinese Children's Literature Writers' Association held a discussion on whether children's literature should depict the darker sides (*yin'an mian* 陰暗面) of society. These debates primarily centered on whether such themes were suitable for young audiences and on their impact on children's well-being rather than political goals, which continued the child-oriented spirit championed since the May Fourth era. However, as the political climate evolved, particularly with the onset of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, this creative freedom began to erode, since depicting society's darker aspects was seen as undermining the legitimacy of the new regime. Over time, children's literature moved toward glorifying the state's achievements and mobilizing young minds to serve collective goals.

This debate was later published in *The Chinese Educational World* (*Zhonghua jiaoyu jie, Reissue*). Xia Wei 夏畏, who initiated the debate, expressed his anxiety after his formerly well-behaved child—having first read Leonid Panteleev's "The Watch"—which became well-known after Lu Xun's 1935 translation—subsequently stole his mother's fountain pen and lied to cover it up. Xia feared that exposing children to such stories might lead them toward moral corruption.[99] "The Watch" tells the story of Petka, a homeless orphan who is driven by hunger to steal a gold watch from a drunken man. Huang Zuolin of Wenhua Film Company directed the adaptation of the story in 1949. In this version, set in Shanghai, Xiao Niu, after stealing a watch, is sent to a reformatory, where he changes his ways and goes on to live a happy and independent life.

[99] Xia Wei, "Wenti de tichu" [Raising the Question] (1949), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi* [Compendium of Chinese Children's Literature: Theory Vol. 1], ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1998), 330.

The debate that followed Xia Wei's initial concern prompted diverse responses from scholars, who were broadly divided into two opposing viewpoints. On one hand, literary and art practitioners (*wenyi gongzuo zhe* 文藝工作者) like Gong Jiong 龔炯 advocated for exposing society's darker realities. In his article "Further Discussion on 'The Dark Side Must Be Exposed'," Gong criticized the avoidance of uncomfortable truths, arguing that literature filled solely with brightness failed to address the plight of hungry and uneducated children:

> "If we are not blind, open your eyes and take a look—how many children in the country are hungry? How many children have dropped out of school? If our current children's literature has a little more brightness and a little less darkness, what difference does it make to those hungry and out-of-school children? They cannot even receive the most basic national education, they are illiterate, and their livelihoods are not secured—how could any of them appreciate children's literature? If you tell them there is a beautiful paradise in this world, would they believe it?"[100]
>
> 假使我們不是瞎子，睜開眼睛來看看，全國有多少餓肚皮的兒童？多少失學的兒童？我們現在的兒童讀物中，多一點光明，少一點黑暗，對於那些飢餓失學的兒童，有什麼相關？他們連最起碼的國民教育也不能受，字也不識，生活也不能解決，還有哪一個會欣賞兒童讀物？假使你告訴他世界上有美麗的天堂，他相信嗎？

[100] Gong Jiong, "Zaitan 'Bixu baolu yinanmian'" [Further Discussion on "The Dark Side Must Be Exposed"] (1949), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi* [Compendium of Chinese Children's Literature: Theory Vol. 1], ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988), 349.

For these scholars, revealing the darker aspects of society was essential for the literary representation of truth and cultivating empathy. In contrast, educators concerned about the psychological impact of such stories, strongly opposed the depiction of society's darker sides. Ruan Jihe 阮紀鶴, in his article "Harmful to Psychological Health," warned that exposure to stories about crime and violence could lead to emotional trauma in children or encourage them to imitate such behaviors. He argued that such narratives posed risks not only to children's psychological well-being but also to their physical health, suggesting that the stresses induced by these stories could disrupt children's normal development.[101] Chen Bochui 陳伯吹, an influential figure in children's literature theory as well as a renowned author of children's literature, provided a more measured conclusion to the debate. While acknowledging the validity of both arguments, he ultimately supported the inclusion of darker themes in children's literature, albeit with certain restrictions. Chen emphasized that such portrayals should be carefully tailored to children's age, gender, and mental health. For him, the educational value of children's literature was paramount, and while it was distinct from general literature, it should still engage with societal realities. Yet, these depictions had to be appropriate for young audiences, avoiding harm while fostering awareness.[102] In the years following the debate, it was widely accepted that children's literature could incorporate satire. Jin Jin 金近, for example, argued in September 1954 that satire was a legitimate literary form in children's tales, and in 1957, Jia Yi asserted that fables could be used to critique not only external

[101] Ruan Jihe, "Youhai shenxin jiankang" [Harmful to Physical and Mental Health] (1949), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988), 351–52.
[102] Chen Bochui, "Jiaoyu de yiyi bixu qiangdiao" [The Significance of Education Must Be Emphasized] (1949), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988), 355–63.

enemies but also internal flaws, thus helping individuals recognize their shortcomings and improve.[103]

A further significant debate in children's literature arose in 1956 with the publication of Ouyang Shan's "Discernment" (*Huiyan* 慧眼). The story follows a child who could see whether people had red hearts or black hearts and used this ability to identify a black-hearted production brigade member who lied, refused to work, and still harbored bourgeois thoughts.[104] The story sparked considerable controversy, with one of the primary criticisms leveled at its artistic quality for failing to effectively blend imagination with reality and lacking the poetic charm that was characteristic of children's literature. This debate reflected a shared recognition among intellectuals of the distinctiveness of children's literature as a specialized form of literary expression, as advocated by Chen Bochui in 1949.[105] At the time, discussions about children's literature remained relatively open, with both sides freely expressing their views.

However, starting in 1958, the rise of the anti-revisionist (*fan xiuzheng zhuyi* 反修正主義) movement abruptly curtailed these once vibrant and open debates, overturning the recognition of children's literature as a unique genre and aligning it more closely with the state's political objectives. Once children's literature was expected to serve the Party's ideological goals, it became unacceptable to depict society's darker aspects. This change not only ended the previously open discussions but also reversed many positions held by scholars. In earlier debates surrounding Ouyang Shan's "Discernment," scholars

[103] Jin Jin, "Wenxue de teshu xingshi—tonghua" [A Special Form of Literature—Fairy Tales] (1954), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988), 569–78.
[104] Ouyang Shan, "Huiyan" [Magic Eyes] (1956), in *Ouyang Shan wenji di san juan: Zhong, duanpian xiaoshuo 1954–1981* (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1988), 1065–1127.
[105] Chen Bochui, "Jiaoyu de yiyi bixu qiangdiao," 363.

had stressed that fairytales needed to have poetic and entertaining qualities to cater to young audiences.[106] However, the primary focus of children's literature now shifted to aligning with the party's political agenda, with its ideological function taking precedence. An anonymous article titled "Critique of Revisionist Literary Thought" specifically condemned Huang Qiugeng, deputy director of the *Wenyi bao* editorial board, for advocating the portrayal of societal ills, accusing revisionists of equating realism with darkness.[107] Following this shift, scholars who had previously supported such depictions reversed their positions. For instance, in 1959, Jia Yi 賈宜, who had previously supported the use of satire and the importance of literary quality and poetic elements in children's literature, reversed his stance and criticized those who still argued for the special status of children's literature. He accused them of resisting the Party's directive to align literature with socialist education, asserting that all forms of literature, including children's, must serve the political and ideological goals of the state.[108] Chen Bochui's younger brother, Chen Ruhui, further emphasized the revolutionary function of children's literature, criticizing magazines like *Little Friends* (*Xiao pengyou*) for prioritizing entertainment over political education. He argued that all literary forms, including children's literature—without exception—must serve revolutionary themes and adhere to socialist realism. While acknowledging that the characteristics (*tedian* 特點; here he avoids using

[106] Chen Bochui; Chen Shanwen, "Guanyu tonghua 'Huiyan' de yixie wenti" [On Some Problems of the Fairy Tale "Magic Eyes"] (1956), in *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, ed. Jiang Feng (Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988), 455.
[107] "Xiuzheng zhuyi wenyi sixiang de pipan" [Criticism of Revisionist Literary and Artistic Thoughts], *Dushu Yuebao*, February 15, 1958, 12.
[108] Jia Yi, "Xuyan" [Preface], in *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959), 11.

the word *teshu* 特殊) of children and children's literature are objective realities,[109] he warned that overemphasizing these could lead to mystification and exceptionalism.[110] This view stood in contrast to the perspective consistently held by his older brother. By this point, fairy tales had become a dangerous and largely avoided genre—authors were reluctant to write them, fearing political backlash. In the *1958 Anthology of Children's Literature*, Jia Yi noted that while children's literature increasingly aligned with political objectives that year, particularly in celebrating the Great Leap Forward—a development Jia Yi praised—the number of fairy tales produced had sharply declined,[111] an ironic contrast to the movement's ambitious cultural goals. Perhaps due to this shortage, Jia Yi included his own fairy tale, a story about a shoemaker's daughter cherishing her geraniums, which was completely stripped of satire and maintained a benign, though rather boring, tone.[112] The other fairy tales in the collection shared this harmonious yet unremarkable quality, carefully crafted to ensure they were politically safe and would not provoke criticism. This shift illustrated how revolutionary purpose was overtaking artistic quality as the primary concern in children's literature.

Although children's films attracted less debate and discussion than children's literature, they exhibited similar ideological trends: as children's literature gradually lost

---

[109] By describing children's literature as having "characteristics" rather than calling it "special," Chen emphasizes that, while children's literature may have unique features, it should not be considered fundamentally distinct from the universal values central to socialist literature. This choice serves to place children's literature within a unified literary framework, aligning with collectivist ideals, while avoiding any suggestion that it deserves unique treatment or stands apart from the broader socialist literary project.
[110] Ruhui Chen, "Zai ertong wenxue zhendishang shijian geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi" [Practicing Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism in the Field of Children's Literature], *Xiamen daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Xiamen University (Social Sciences Edition)] (1959): 56–67.
[111] Yi Jia, "Xuyan" [Preface], in *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959), 12.
[112] Yi Jia, "Tianzhu kui he zhixie gongren de nü'er" [The Geranium and the Shoemaker's Daughter], in *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959), 345–52.

its satirical and critical function, children's films likewise shifted from exposing societal ills to celebrating the happiness of children in New China. From the founding of the PRC, the state produced numerous films depicting joyful children and idyllic lives, establishing this as a common trope. During the Hundred Flowers Campaign, when expression was relatively freer, critics still challenged these portrayals. In 1957, Xie Liming 謝力鳴, Director of the Liaodong Provincial Bureau of Culture and Screenwriter at the Central Film Bureau, pointed out that such films monotonously embellished reality—showing parks, flowers, skyscrapers, and joyful singing—thus creating an illusion of a utopia devoid of life's complexities. Xie argued that such one-sided depictions of happiness did not reflect children's true experiences, emphasizing the need for more "truthful depictions" that, while highlighting socialism's superiority, would not ignore life's contradictions.[113] However, with the onset of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent "Planting Red Flags, Pulling Down White Flags" (*cha hongqi, ba baiqi* 插紅旗, 拔白旗) campaign, freedom of expression was significantly curtailed. Intellectuals, including film professionals, became anxious as many were labeled capitalists or revisionists, and film production was gradually reduced to propaganda extolling the supposed prosperity of New China.

From Documentary to Documentary Art Film: A New Form of Children's Film During the Great Leap Forward

One month after the "Pull Down White Flags" began, rather than directly criticizing Kang Sheng, Zhou Enlai 周恩來 sought to steer film production in a different

[113] Liming Xie, "Cong Wo He Yeye tanqi—ertong bushi guli de" [Speaking from "My Grandfather and I"], *Zhongguo dianying*, 1957, 23.

direction, distinct from Kang Sheng's extreme leftist stance. Zhou proposed a new genre—"artistic documentary" (*yishu xing jilu pian* 藝術性記錄片)— with the expectation of mediating the revolutionary spirit and the realities of the Great Leap Forward through artistic means, offering an alternative to the rigid, politically charged aesthetics of the time. Unlike typical documentaries that focused solely on real-time events or feature films defined by fictional narratives and actors, artistic documentaries, as Zhou Enlai noted, "always needed to maintain authenticity" and remain grounded in "the real." The use of actors or fictionalized elements was strictly avoided (*buyao xugou, buyao zaojia* 不要虛構, 不要造假), as these would compromise the genuine portrayal of reality. However, as "artistic" documentaries, they allowed for supplementary shooting and artistic enhancements to enrich the narrative while still preserving a sense of realism. Zhou proposed this idea in the spring of 1958, but by the end of that year, it had already been reinterpreted.[114] On December 31, 1958, Chen Huangmei 陳荒煤 published a collection under the title *On Documentary Art Films* (*Lun jilu xing yishu pian* 論記錄性藝術片). The terminology in the title shifted from Zhou's original "artistic documentary" (*yishu xing jilu pian*) to "documentary art film," (*jilu xing yishu pian* 記錄性藝術片), reflecting a subtle but significant shift in emphasis. Chen Huangmei's article in the collection, "The Beginning of the Advancement of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism" (*Xiang geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi qianjin de kaishi* 向革命的現實主義和革命的浪漫主義前進的開始), presents a distinct

[114] Jihua Cheng, ed., *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [History of the Development of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1980), 251–52.

understanding of the genre by referring to it as "documentary art film." He explicitly stated that documentary art films could include fictional elements and should be differentiated from traditional documentaries: "It features real people and real events, but but it may include fictionalization. (*keyi xugou*)." Moreover, Chen emphasized that this genre embodies both revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.[115] Over time, these two terms became interchangeable, and Zhou felt that this reinterpretation deviated significantly from his original vision, leading to misunderstanding and confusion. Since Zhou's original vision of artistic documentaries was quickly subsumed into Chen's more revolutionary interpretation of the genre, I will hereafter refer to these films by Chen's concept of documentary art films. However, whether termed "artistic documentary" or "documentary art film," the word "documentary" carried a deliberate ambiguity, intended to make audiences perceive these films as authentic and objective accounts of reality. The use of "documentary" suggested truthfulness, which was especially effective during a time when the Party-State controlled the flow of information. This ambiguity made it difficult for audiences to discern whether what they saw was real or staged, and even when they understood that certain scenes were staged, they still could not be sure if the events depicted were based on real occurrences. During the Great Leap Forward, when all media state-owned and reports often presented exaggerated or distorted depictions of reality, audiences had limited access to reliable information. The population's general lack of education and media literacy, further contributed to the effectiveness of these films as tools of state propaganda.

[115] Huangmei Chen, "Xiang geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi qianjin de kaishi" [The Beginning of Moving Towards Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism], in *Lun jiluxing yishupian*, ed. Chen Huangmei (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1958), 3, 6.

Zhou's enthusiasm for cinema in the new China was evident through his numerous guidelines. However, as he was not a professional filmmaker, his vision for an "artistic documentary" lacked solid theoretical backing and practical clarity, making it inherently controversial. This approach allowed for "artistic processing" and "supplementary shooting," even requiring the rearrangement of scenes at times, but still demanded that authenticity be preserved. In practice, this posed a significant challenge, as rearranging and reshooting scenes could easily distort the original context, compromising the objectivity that documentaries were meant to uphold. While Zhou blamed later practitioners for misunderstanding his ideas, it is possible that the reinterpretation stemmed from an awareness of the inherent contradictions within the concept itself, which may have been difficult to reconcile. This ambiguity still lingers today, as the distinction between "artistic documentary" and "documentary art film" in Chinese film studies remains unclear. For instance, records such as the *Comprehensive Anthology of Chinese Films (1949.10-1976)* (*Zhongguo yingpian dadian* 中國影片大典 *1949.10-1976*) suggest that only 35 "documentary art films" were produced in 1958, whereas *Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (*Dangdai zhongguo dianying* 當代中國電影) states that 49 such films were made that year.[116] These inconsistencies further illustrate the challenges in defining and categorizing these films, highlighting the lasting confusion surrounding Zhou's original concept and its later interpretations.

Children's films in the style of documentary art films become apparent when comparing the 1957 documentary *Play* (*Wan* 玩)*,* produced by the Central Newsreel and

[116] Zhi Qi and Di Wu, "Lun 'jilu xing yishu pian'" [On "Artistic Documentaries"], *Dangdai dianying*, 2007, 78.

Documentary Film Studio (*Zhongyang xinwen jilu dianying zhipianchang* 中央新聞紀錄電影製片廠), with *The Story of Red Scarves*, an early 1958 attempt at an artistic documentary depicting children building a "Red Scarves Steel Mill." The documentary *Play* captures the various activities that children engage in during their leisure time at school, showcasing differences based on gender—for instance, girls are shown enjoying activities like skipping rope, while boys prefer more intense (*jinzhang de* 緊張的) games. Throughout *Play*, a child's innocent and tender voiceover narrates these activities, beginning with a statement that captures the essence of childhood play: "After finishing classes and completing homework, who wouldn't want to play for a while?" The documentary then culminates with an encouraging call for wholehearted participation: "Little friends, let's play with all our might and see who can play the best!" This depiction of spontaneous, carefree play stands in stark contrast to *The Story of Red Scarves*, produced just a year later, which takes on a more structured and propagandistic tone as children are portrayed building a steel mill.





(Figures 2-3 Students' leisure activities in *Play*)

The Party-State in 1958 carefully considered how to introduce the Great Leap Forward to children in a way that was accessible and inspiring, while instilling a concrete understanding and strong enthusiasm for the goals of the movement.[117] Compared to children's literature, children's films such as *The Story of Red Scarves* were more vivid and engaging, making them an ideal medium to visualize these new concepts and knowledge. *The Story of Red Scarves* is set in a school for the children of workers (*gongren zidi xuexiao* 工人子弟學校), where students voluntarily return during the

[117] "Dali de xiang ertong jinxing zongluxian de xuanchuan jiaoyu" [Vigorously Carry Out Propaganda and Education on the General Line for Children], *Jiangsu Jiaoyu*, 1958, 9–10.

summer break to discuss building an on-campus factory. In a class discussion intended to showcase democratic participation, some students suggest building a toy factory, but the idea is dismissed as meaningless. Instead, the group ultimately agrees to establish a steel mill to support the Great Leap Forward, with the proposal embraced by the majority. The film emphasizes the intense relationship between play and labor, suggesting that fulfillment comes not from trivial play, but from meaningful work. By the end of the film, the "Red Scarves Steel Mill" becomes a success, inspiring both children and adults. The camera lovingly lingers on their faces, ensuring that every smile, borne from the satisfaction of successful toil, is highlighted.



(Figures 4-5 Children are depicted as joyfully engaging in labor in *The Story of Red Scarves*)

The Story of Red Scarves reflects the evolving expectations of children in New China and the ways in which their happiness was reimagined, with labor playing a central role in that vision. This expectation was first articulated in Soong Ching-ling's 宋慶齡 1954 article "What is Happiness?" (*Shenme shi xingfu* 什麼是幸福). Soong, who served as the vice Chairperson of the Central People's Government was also an advocate for women's rights and children's welfare. According to Soong's prescriptive definition, children's happiness was not merely personal but was linked to their unwavering loyalty

to Chairman Mao, their fervent nationalism, and their participation in socialist labor. By 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, expectations for children's loyalty to the Party and involvement in labor intensified even further. During this period, the PRC shifted from the success of the First Five-Year Plan, which focused on industrial infrastructure, to the more radical and ambitious Second Five-Year Plan. The Great Leap Forward aimed to rapidly industrialize the nation through collectivization, epitomized by initiatives like People's Communes and inflated steel production targets. In this climate, children's labor was seen as an integral part of national development. Reports from *People's Daily* on International Children's Day in 1958 praised the role of youngsters in the "Little Five-Year Plan," highlighting their contributions to industrial and agricultural tasks, such as during the previous winter's "A Basket of Manure" campaign, when children collected 1.6 billion *jin* (800 million kilograms) of manure for local agricultural collectives. According to official reports, children also helped establish "Red Scarf Reservoirs," "Red Scarf Hydropower Stations," and "Red Scarf Tractor Stations" in many provinces and cities.[118] The exaggerated nature of these reports reflects the State's investment in propaganda to address the urgent need to mobilize all available labor, including children, to address severe labor shortages during the Great Leap Forward. In this political context, *The Story of Red Scarves* stands as a cinematic representation of the intensified expectations placed on children during this time.

The Story of Red Scarves, produced in 1958, stands as an early experiment responding to Zhou Enlai's call for artistic documentaries. Created shortly after Zhou

[118] "Ai wenhua ai laodong: wei dayuejin chu yifen li" [Loving Culture, Loving Labor: Contributing to the Great Leap Forward], *People's Daily*, June 1, 1958.

proposed the concept, this film predates the conflation of the terms "documentary art film" and "artistic documentary." Unlike later films that abandoned documentary conventions in favor of more fictionalized feature films, *The Story of Red Scarves* maintains some documentary elements, as evidenced by its use of a voice-over, similar to the earlier film *Play*. While *Play* features children's voices, *The Story of Red Scarves* employs a soft, approachable female adult voice to introduce the background of the film and the student characters to the audience, beginning with: "Now let me tell you a story of the Red Scarves, which takes place during the summer vacation. Do you want to meet the young protagonists of this story?"

Although *The Story of Red Scarves* is fundamentally a propaganda film promoting socialist ideals, it still reflects a certain degree of creative space available to the director in this early phase of the documentary art film genre. The film makes efforts to present elements suitable for a children's film, such as capturing the natural spontaneity and playfulness of children. For instance, in one scene, the mischievous Wang Chunfa comically struggles with a heavy bucket, grabbing its inner handle and awkwardly attempting to lift it, nearly disappearing inside the oversized object. This moment reflects the filmmakers' attempt to balance the film's propagandistic aims with a natural portrayal of children's spirit and humor, which also aligns with the 1956 debate among intellectuals regarding the "Discernment" of children's literature as a specialized form of literary expression. Many intellectuals argued that children's literature should maintain a sense of uniqueness—one that embraced creativity and poetic qualities. In this context, *The Story of Red Scarves* reflects the director's acknowledgment of children's films as a distinct genre with its own unique attributes. However, like the evolution seen in

children's literature, this uniqueness was later compromised as revolutionary and political imperatives began to dominate.

The film also employs techniques like breaking the fourth wall to create a sense of direct engagement with the audience, further emphasizing its aim to capture the essence of a children's film. In the film's conclusion, as the students prepare to disperse after the counselor's address, the voiceover intervenes with an imperative call: "Hey, wait up! Come back, come back! We haven't said goodbye yet." This auditory intrusion rallies the students, drawing them back into the frame. Initially hesitant and shy in front of the camera, exchanging glances and bashful smiles, the group eventually finds its collective voice. Under the guidance of their leader, Liu Shuping, they turn to the audience and, smiling sweetly, say, "Dear uncles and aunts, dear little friends, goodbye!" The children's gaze intersects with the camera lens, establishing a visual dialogue with the audience and acknowledging their presence, inviting them into the narrative space.

In contrast to the increasingly formulaic and ideologically rigid approach in later children's films, *The Story of Red Scarves* retains a more spontaneous and playful spirit, allowing some aspects of children's personalities to shine through. It avoids the exaggerated, uniform aesthetics that became typical of later productions, maintaining a balance between documentary conventions and artistic expression. At the same time, the film reveals a subtle negotiation between creative aspirations and propaganda imperatives: although it upholds socialist ideals of labor and collectivism, it endeavors to preserve a degree of spontaneity and naturalness rarely found in subsequent works — reflecting the filmmakers' effort to capture childlike playfulness and everyday lives.





(Figure 6 Wang Chunfa in the bucket

Figure 7 Children gaze at the camera and happily say goodbye to the audience)

After *The Story of Red Scarves*: Louder Slogans, Less Creative Freedom

The "Pulling Down White Flags" campaign ended abruptly in November 1958. One month later, Zhou Enlai openly criticized the "Pulling Down White Flags" campaign,[119] which was followed by efforts in 1959 to rectify the excesses of leftist tendencies. Signs of internal criticism against the exaggerated style of earlier film productions began to emerge during this period. In January, Xia Yan from the Ministry of Culture openly criticized the 1958 films, pointing out the overabundance of grandiose themes, excessive praise of Mao Zedong, the General Line, the Great Leap Forward, and the People's Communes, along with the lack of lighthearted, enjoyable works. He

[119] Bo Chen, ed., *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi* [Chronicle of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 449.

highlighted a significant decline in artistic quality in film productions.[120] Chen Huangmei also noted that documentary art films had strayed from Zhou Enlai's instructions.[121] By March, the Propaganda Department held a meeting criticizing newsreel films for exaggeration, formalism, and over-glorification of life, with narration that was seen as pretentious rather than simple and elegant.[122]

Even though in 1959 the Ministry of Culture recognized the problems of over-politicization and over-glorification of society in documentary art films, these efforts to address the issues were not immediately reflected in film production. On the contrary, due to the highly radical and oppressive atmosphere of the Great Leap Forward, along with the rushed production timelines it imposed, the children's films produced that year became even more rigid and formulaic, further stifling creativity and artistic expression. The two children's films released that year, *Morning Glow* (*Zhaoxia* 朝霞) (1959) by Changchun Film Studio and *Great Ambitions in Small Hearts* (*Ren xiao zhi da*) (1959) by Zhejiang Film Studio, demonstrated the continued adherence to propaganda formulas. Both films followed a similar narrative framework to *The Story of Red Scarves*. For instance, both depict elementary school students eagerly participating in state-driven labor campaigns. In *Morning Glow*, they establish a Young Pioneers factory, while in *Great Ambitions in Small Hearts*, they cultivate experimental fields (*shiyan tian* 試驗田), engaging in regional competitions—similar to those depicted in *The Story of Red Scarves*—to see whose results were better, often culminating in recognition for the winners. A recurring theme in these films is the transformation of adult attitudes—

[120] Bo Chen, ed., *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi*, 452.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

parents and other adults, initially skeptical of the children's capabilities, eventually come to support and celebrate their successes.[123] The uniformity in themes and narratives across these films reflects the increasingly restricted creative freedom of directors.

Yan Gong's earlier direction of *Flowers of the Motherland* in 1955 showcased his artistic expertise, particularly in capturing the naturalism of children's performances. The film, which won the Second National Youth and Children's Arts Creation Award in 1980 and remains a classic today, demonstrated not only Yan Gong's skill but also his deep understanding of the unique challenges in filming children. Unlike directing adult actors, Yan Gong recognized that maintaining the spontaneity of child actors was crucial to an natural portrayal. Influenced by the renowned Soviet theater and performance theorist Konstantin Stanislavski, Yan Gong limited rehearsals to avoid overly "mature" performances, which could result in mechanical and rigid actions, instead preserving the freshness and genuine emotional development that naturally emerged during filming.[124] However, Morning Glow, produced after Yan Gong faced harsh criticism for his youth film *Footsteps of Youth* (*Qingchun de jiaobu* 青春的腳步) (1957) during the "Pulling Down White Flags" campaign,[125] took on a much more cautious, formulaic approach. The film adhered strictly to state-approved messaging, draining it of emotional depth. In

[123] This portrayal of children surpassing adults also reflects the influence of Soviet children's films on Chinese cinema, where adult figures—such as parents and teachers—are often depicted as doubting or discouraging the children's ambitions, only to be proven wrong. In Soviet children's films from the Stalinist era (1922–1953), adults function as false authorities, as seen in their attempts to limit children's abilities (Prokhorov 2007, 134). Similarly, during the Thaw period (1953–1964), teachers lost their unquestionable authority over children, with their emotional callousness and intrusiveness into students' lives becoming the source of conflict (Ibid., 142). Both periods emphasized the theme that Soviet children, seen as prototypes of the ideal communist adult, strived through their literary and cinematic role models to become more conscientious, morally staunch, intellectually superior, and even physically stronger than the adults responsible for their upbringing (Voronina 2019, 15).

[124] Gong Yan, *Xiang shi yiyang zhenshi* [As Real as Poetry] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2007), 151–52.

[125] Gong Yan, *Xiang shi yiyang zhenshi*, 167; Bo Chen, ed., *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi*, 438.

this climate, not only *Morning Glow*, but other children's films likewise abandoned the child-centered approach and the naturalism seen in earlier performances, as directors prioritized state messaging over authentic childlike experiences and genuine expressions of happiness.

One key manifestation of this shift was the heightened emphasis on "Maoist laughter,"[126] a performance central to praising the Party-state that also permeated children's propaganda films. Yet staging it in children's cinema proves particularly challenging, since genuine laughter is difficult to feign. Most child actors lacked professional training, making them far less adept at performing ideological scripts than adults. In *Great Ambitions in Small Hearts*, for example, even during the triumphant conclusion when the previously underachieving Shen Yingjiang finally qualifies to join the Young Pioneers, his smile appears forced and unnatural, while the other children behind him look blankly on. Moments later, the film cuts to a celebratory scene where everyone applauds and grins, but their body language betrays them—clapping in stiff, uncoordinated motions.

[126] Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, "Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era," in *Maoist Laughter*, ed. Ping Zhu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 1–16.





(Figure 8: Shen Yingjiang takes the oath to join the Young Pioneers

Figure 9: Children applaud in celebration)

The use of direct propaganda in these films is also evident through the prominent inclusion of political slogans. In both films, slogans like "Labor is glorious and great, we must love labor" are written on blackboards and recited by the children. Some scenes employ a question-and-answer format to educate the audience: scripted exchanges such as "What is the labor-study program?" (*qin gong jian xue* 勤工儉學) or "What is an experimental field?" are followed by equally scripted responses. This mechanical delivery of propaganda reflects the increasingly tight control over creative freedom, as the oppressive political environment forced filmmakers to prioritize state messaging over artistic expression or entertainment. In *Great Ambitions in Small Hearts*, "large-character posters" (*dazi bao* 大字報) are used to publicly condemn an elderly woman for not supporting the students' work-study efforts. This scene is significant because the elderly

woman represents the old, conservative, and revisionist segment of society—those who did not align with the revolutionary campaigns. Her public condemnation serves to emphasize that anyone opposing the collective effort was deemed an obstacle to progress and thus deserving of criticism. The film concludes with a highly exaggerated portrayal of the harvest, boasting a yield of 1,371 *jin* 斤 per *mu* 畝 —numbers that mirrored the inflated reports characteristic of the Great Leap Forward. Such portrayals reflect the film's commitment to glorifying the state's achievements, even at the cost of realism and authenticity.

Although the interventionist nature of Great Leap Forward children's films possibly made them powerful vehicles for ideological indoctrination,[127] children's reception of these films was complex, involving both genuine impressionability and unexpected forms of subversion. For children, these films could be powerful. Young viewers, being highly impressionable, often struggled to distinguish between fiction and reality. A 1937 newspaper review expressed concern that "children cannot differentiate between the real and the imagined world and naively believe that reality mirrors what is depicted in films."[128] This impressionability persisted into the Great Leap Forward era, where propaganda films had direct, tangible impacts on society. Film scholar Li Jie illustrates this influence through the example of *Tunnel Warfare* (*Didao zhan* 地道戰) (1965), which inspired students in Fujian to dig tunnels beneath their schools, emulating

[127] Ying Qian, *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 15.
[128] Zufen, "Dianying, ertong, funü: dianying yu ertong" [Cinema, Children, Women: Cinema and Children], *Lianhua Huabao* 9, no. 2 (1937): 11.

the defensive tactics shown on screen.[129] However, children's reception of these films was not uniformly compliant. Although they might not have consciously intended to resist, their developmental stage often prevented them from fully recognizing the films' propagandistic intentions or internalizing their core ideological messages. As Daisy Du points out in her concept of "childish mimicry," children in the highly politicized environment of socialist China could mock and subvert totalizing state ideology by ironically performing the roles assigned to them or misinterpreting propaganda messages.[130] During the Korean War, for instance, children sometimes clapped with excitement upon seeing American fighter aircraft, inadvertently undermining the intended anti-American message.

Because of the paucity of reception data on art documentary films and propagandistic children's films, it is difficult to assess their broader impact. Nevertheless, many Great Leap Forward children's films have fallen into obscurity, revealing their limited societal influence and ultimate failure as ideological tools. By contrast, as noted earlier, Yan Gong's *Flowers of the Motherland* in 1955, created before the Great Leap Forward, continued to garner official recognition decades later—winning the Second National Youth and Children's Arts Creation Award in 1980—and remains widely celebrated today. Its enduring popularity, accompanied by the iconic song "Let Us Row Our Oars" (*Rang wo'men dangqi shuangjiang* 讓我們蕩起雙槳), suggests that when children's cinema foregrounded natural performances and genuine emotional expression,

[129] Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist Chin*a (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 167.
[130] Daisy Yan Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 9–13.

it stood a greater chance of leaving a lasting cultural imprint. Beyond Daisy Du's observation that children's reactions can be unpredictable, the discrepancies between children's actual experiences and these carefully crafted cinematic messages underscore a deeper contradiction within socialist propaganda. While state discourse aimed to mold an idealized, labor-focused youth, the lived realities of the Great Leap Forward—marked by shortages, production failures, and political upheavals—frequently undercut the films' ability to maintain a seamless ideological narrative. Such contradictions highlight the contested nature of childhood in socialist China: on the one hand, children were championed as carriers of revolutionary potential, while on the other, they were subject to propaganda that often failed to resonate beyond its scripted slogans.

Conclusion

This chapter examines Great Leap Forward children's films produced in the form of artistic documentary / documentary art film, with a close reading of *The Story of Red Scarves*, *Morning Glow*, and *Great Ambitions in Small Hearts*. I argue that while these works served as tools of state propaganda, they also provided a space where the Party-state attempted to reshape childhood into a vision of "modern socialist childhood." What began as an extension of May Fourth–era, child-centered thinking gradually yielded to a revolutionary discourse that prioritized national development over individual needs, labor's value, and self-sacrifice for the collective good.

A key aspect of this ideological turn in children's filmmaking was the strategic deployment of happiness as a potent propaganda affect. In these Great Leap Forward films, happiness was persistently tied to collective labor and conveyed through children's laughter, which functioned not as a spontaneous biological response but as a deliberate

social practice essential for reinforcing socialist ideology. However, when directors tried to evoke "genuine" joy, they confronted various challenges—rushed production schedules, untrained child actors, and scripts laden with political messaging. This tension between forced laughter, the disconnect from children's actual experiences, and the lofty ideal of socialist exuberance ultimately contributed to the films' diminished impact and eventual marginalization.

Works Cited

"Ai wenhua ai laodong: wei dayuejin chu yifen li" 愛文化愛勞動：為大躍進出一份力 [Loving Culture, Loving Labor: Contributing to the Great Leap Forward]. *People's Daily*, June 1, 1958.

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29–51. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Bazalgette, Cary, and Terry Staples. "Unshrinking the Kids: Children's Cinema and the Family Film." In *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, edited by Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham, 92–108. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1995.

Chen, Bo 陳播, ed. *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi* 中國電影編年紀事 [Chronicle of Chinese Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo wenxian chubanshe, 2005.

Chen, Bochui 陳伯吹. "Cong 'Huiyan' tan tonghua tezheng yu chuangzuo" 從《慧眼》談童話特征與創作 [Discussing the Characteristics and Creation of Fairy Tales from "Magic Eyes"] (1956). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 469–479. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

———. "Jiaoyu de yiyi bixu qiangdiao" 教育的意義必須強調 [The Significance of Education Must Be Emphasized] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 355–363. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Chen, Huangmei 陳荒煤, ed. *Dangdai zhongguo dianying (Shang)* 當代中國電影（上）[Contemporary Chinese Film (Vol. 1)]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989.

Chen, Huangmei 陳荒煤. “Jianjue badao yinmu shang de baiqi – 1957 nian dianying yishupian zhong cuowu sixiang qingxiang de pipan” 堅決拔倒銀幕上的白旗——1957 年電影藝術片中錯誤思想傾向的批判 [Resolutely Pull Down the White Flag on the Screen: Criticism of Erroneous Ideological Trends in 1957 Feature Films]. *People’s Daily*, December 2, 1958.

———. “Xiang geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi qianjin de kaishi” 向革命的現實主義和革命的浪漫主義前進的開始 [The Beginning of Moving Towards Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism]. In *Lun jiluxing yishupian* 論紀錄性藝術片 [On Artistic Documentaries], edited by Chen Huangmei, 2–9. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1958.

Chen, Ruhui 陳汝惠. “Zai ertong wenxue zhendishang shijian geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi” 在兒童文學陣地上實踐革命的現實主義和革命的浪漫主義 [Practicing Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism in the Field of Children’s Literature]. *Xiamen daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (1959): 55–66.

Chen, Shanwen 陳善文. “Guanyu tonghua ‘Huiyan’ de yixie wenti” 關於童話《慧眼》的一些問題 [On Some Problems of the Fairy Tale “Magic Eyes”] (1956). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 451–457. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Cheng, Jihua 程季華. “Guanyu yishuxing jilupian de yici baogao” 關於藝術性紀錄片的一次報告 [A Report on Artistic Documentaries]. In *Zhou Enlai yu dianying*

[Zhou Enlai and Film], edited by Chen Huangmei and Chen Bo, 247–261. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1995.

Cheng, Jihua 程季華, ed. *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* 中國電影發展史 [History of the Development of Chinese Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1980.

"Dali de xiang ertong jinxing zongluxian de xuanchuan jiaoyu" 大力地向兒童進行總路線的宣傳教育 [Vigorously Carry Out Propaganda and Education on the General Line for Children]. *Jiangsu jiaoyu*, 1958, 9–10.

Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk. *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk, and Noel Brown. "Children's Film Culture." In *The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents, and Media*, edited by Dafna Lemish, 93–100. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Du, Daisy Yan. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

Gong, Jiong 龔炯. "Zaitan 'Bixu baolu yinanmian'" 再談「必須暴露陰暗面」 [Further Discussion on "The Dark Side Must Be Exposed"] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系理論（一）, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 347–349. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Jia, Yi 賈宜. "Bangzhu haizimen renshi shenghuo" 幫助孩子們認識生活 [Helping Children Understand Life]. *Dushu*, 1958, 12.

———. “Tianzhu kui he zhixie gongren de nü’er” 天竺葵和製鞋工人的女兒 [The Geranium and the Shoemaker’s Daughter]. In *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan*, 345–352. Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959.

———. “Xuyan” 序言 [Preface]. In *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* 1958 年兒童文學選, 3–15. Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959.

———. “Zhihui de yuyan, ruili de wuqi” 智慧的寓言，銳利的武器 [Wise Fables, Sharp Weapons] (1957). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 557–568. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Jin, Jin 金近. “Wenxue de teshu xingshi—tonghua” 文學的特殊形式——童話 [A Special Form of Literature—Fairy Tales] (1954). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 569–589. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

King, Richard. “Romancing the Leap: Euphoria in the Moment before Disaster.” In *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China’s Great Leap Forward and Famine*, edited by Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, 51–71. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011.

Larson, Wendy. *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Li, Jie. *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionist, and Audiences in Socialist China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.

Lin, A’mian 林阿棉. *Zhongguo ertong dianying biannian jishi 1922–2011* 中國兒童電影編年紀事 1922–2011 [Chronicle of Chinese Children’s Film 1922–2011]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Ouyang, Shan 歐陽山. “Huiyan” 慧眼 [Magic Eyes] (1956). In *Ouyang Shan wenji di san juan: Zhong, duanpian xiaoshuo 1954–1981* 歐陽山文集第三卷：中、短篇小說 1954–1981, 1065–1127. Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1988.

Prokhorov, Alexander. “Arresting Development: A Brief History of Soviet Cinema for Children and Adolescents.” In *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, edited by Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova, 129–152. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Qi, Zhi 啟之, and Di Wu 吳迪. “Lun ‘jilu xing yishu pian’” 論「紀錄性藝術片」 [On “Artistic Documentaries”]. *Dangdai dianying*, 2007, 73–84.

Qian, Ying. *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

Ruan, Jihe 阮紀鶴. “Youhai shenxin jiankang” 有害身心健康 [Harmful to Physical and Mental Health] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 351–352. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

“Shaonian ertong dianying zhou zai Beijing juxing kaimu shi” 少年兒童電影週在北京舉行開幕式 [Opening Ceremony of Children’s Film Week Held in Beijing]. *People’s Daily*, February 19, 1956.

Soong, Ching-ling 宋慶齡. “Shenme shi xingfu” 什麼是幸福 [What Is Happiness]. *People’s Daily*, June 1, 1954.

Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Voronina, Olga. "'The Only Universal National Text': On the Centennial of Soviet Children's Literature and Film." In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, edited by Olga Voronina, 2–46. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

"Wenhua bu dianying ju daibu qicao guanyu 'tongzhi ge di wenhua zhuguan bumen zai you tiaojian de chengshi yingyuan zhong shiban ertong chang' wengao" 文化部電影局代部起草關於「通知各地文化主管部門在有條件的城市影院中試辦兒童場」文稿 [Draft Notice on Trial Screening of Children's Sessions]. *People's Daily*, November 14, 1953.

"Wenhua bu fachu 'Guanyu jiaqiang dianying fangying he faxing gongzuo de zhishi'" 文化部發出《關於加強電影放映和發行工作的指示》[Ministry of Culture Issues "Instructions on Strengthening Film Screening and Distribution Work"]. *People's Daily*, December 12, 1953.

Xia, Wei 夏畏. "Wenti de tichu" 問題的提出 [Raising the Question] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi lilun yi*, edited by Jiang Feng, 330–331. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

"Xiangying baowei ertong quanli de huyu, haozhao gedi qingzhu guoji ertongjie" 響應保衛兒童權利的呼籲，號召各地慶祝國際兒童節 [Responding to the Appeal to Protect Children's Rights]. *People's Daily*, May 4, 1950.

Xie, Liming 謝力鳴. "Cong Wo He Yeye tanqi—ertong bushi guli de" 從《我和爺爺》談起——兒童不是孤立的 [Speaking from "My Grandfather and I"]. *Zhongguo dianying*, 1957, 19–23.

"Xiuzheng zhuyi wenyi sixiang de pipan" 修正主義文藝思想的批判 [Criticism of Revisionist Literary and Artistic Thoughts]. *Dushu Yuebao* 讀書月報, February 15, 1958, 12.

Xu, Lanjun 徐蘭君. "Zhang bu da de 'San Mao': Cong zaoqi de dushi wantong dao 1949 nian qianhou de liulang'er" 長不大的「三毛」：從早期的都市頑童到 1949 年前後的流浪兒 [The San Mao Who Never Grows Up: From Early Urban Rascal to Post-1949 Vagrant]. In *Xiandai Zhongguo, di ershi ji* 現代中國（第二十輯） [Modern China, Vol. 20], edited by Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, 188–204. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009.

Yan, Gong 嚴恭. *Xiang shi yiyang zhenshi* 像詩一樣真實 [As Real as Poetry]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2007.

Zhang, Zhen. "Transnational Melodrama, Wenyi, and the Orphan Imagination." In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 83–97. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Zhang, Zhilu 張之路. *Zhongguo shaonian ertong dianying shi* 中國少年兒童電影史 [History of Chinese Children's Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Zheng, Leting. "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025).

Zhu, Ping, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath. “Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era.” In *Maoist Laughter*, edited by Ping Zhu, 1–16. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

“Zhuyi ertong wenyi de chuangzuo” 注意兒童文藝的創作 [Pay Attention to the Creation of Children’s Literature and Art]. *People’s Daily*, June 1, 1952.

Zufen 祖汾. “Dianying, ertong, funü: dianying yu ertong” 電影、兒童、婦女：電影與兒童 [Film, Children, Women]. *Lianhua huabao* 9, no. 2 (1937): 11.

Filmography (in a chronological order)

Sanmao liulang ji 三毛流浪記 [*Sanmao’s Wandering Life*]. Directed by Zhao Ming 趙明 and Yan Gong 嚴恭. Kunlun Film Studio, 1949.

Zuguo de huaduo 祖國的花朵 [*Flowers of the Motherland*]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭 and Su Li 蘇里. Changchun Film Studio, 1955.

Qingchun de jiaobu 青春的腳步 [*Footsteps of Youth*]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭. Changchun Film Studio, 1957.

Wan 玩 [*Play*]. Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, 1957.

Hong lingjin de gushi 紅領巾的故事 [*The Story of Red Scarves*]. Directed by Wu Zhaodi 武兆堤. Changchun Film Studio, 1958.

Ren xiao zhi da 人小志大 [*Great Ambitions in Small Hearts*]. Directed by Shi Xing 史行 and Wu Xiangzhi 吳向之. Zhejiang Film Studio, 1959.

Zhaoxia 朝霞 [*Morning Glow*]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭. Changchun Film Studio, 1959.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER CHILDREN LEAVE HOME?: HAPPY CHILDREN AS "INNOCENT WEAPONS" AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE NARRATIVES IN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

This chapter explores how children were represented and how their "happiness" was imagined during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). There is extensive research on the physically more formidable and practically more influential Red Guards, yet studies of Little Red Guards remain scant. Three main reasons account for this gap: first, the historical impact of Little Red Guards on the Cultural Revolution was considerably smaller; their role was largely propagandistic. Second, the archival material on Little Red Guards is limited, and access to Cultural Revolution sources has become increasingly difficult. Third, the literary and educational materials relating to Little Red Guards, like much of the era's media, are highly formulaic and saturated with propaganda, such as fervent support for Mao Zedong, which poses additional challenges for researchers. Despite these constraints, this chapter takes on the task of examining Little Red Guards by asking: The Cultural Revolution is frequently associated with violence, so how was violence repurposed as an instrument of education and as a means of expressing children's joy? To what extent did these narratives of violence shape the experiences and identities of children in the Cultural Revolution?

The first half of this chapter's title, "What Happens After Children Leave Home," intentionally echoes Lu Xun's 1918 essay "What Happens After Nora Leaves?", which itself references Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*. Lu Xun is also a key figure frequently discussed in modern Chinese children's studies for his profound reflections on children in his time. He authored many novels and essays that scrutinized the contemporary

conditions and future possibilities for children.[131] For instance, His "Diary of a Madman" famously concludes with the forceful ending, "Save the children…"[132] Just as Nora steps beyond her domestic confines, the twentieth-century Chinese child is depicted as "stepping out" of the traditional classroom and family. This symbolic departure signifies more than a simple change in location; it represents the gradual, and later radical, subversion of traditional notions of childhood, family hierarchy, and education. In the May Fourth era, this notion of leaving the home, and by extension, playing in the outdoors, as explored in Chapter One, signaled new hopes for children as "little citizens" critical to national rejuvenation, emphasizing autonomy, independence, personal freedom, and civic responsibility over rote study or filial deference. This trend intensified during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962). State discourse further redefined childhood, deliberately distancing children from traditional family bonds; the parent-child relationship was de-emphasized in favor of a direct, unmediated loyalty to the nation and its leader. Children were portrayed as "children of the state" or, more specifically, "Chairman Mao's children," often depicted in propaganda posters surrounding him with beatific smiles. Conventional academic learning receded further in importance. The (Neo-)Confucian ideal of the morally and intellectually precocious child studying quietly in a classroom was supplanted by a new archetype: the physically robust, lively child, allegedly more capable than adults, who demonstrated their revolutionary spirit through

[131] For a comprehensive collection of Lu Xun's writings on children, see Lu Xun, *Lu Xun lun ertong wenxue*, ed. Xu Yan (Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2013). This volume compiles key essays such as "Wo'men xianzai zenmeyang zuo fuqin" [What Is Required of Us as Fathers Today], "Shanghai de shaonu" [Shanghai Girls], "Shanghai de ertong" [Shanghai Children], and "Women zenyang jiaoyu ertong de" [How Do We Educate Children].

[132] Lu Xun, "Kuangren riji" [Diary of a Madman], in *Selected Stories of Lu Xun* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000), 35.

labor, and, in some in reality, even the loss of their lives for the collective project. By the Cultural Revolution, the act of "stepping out" took a more radical turn, as children were encouraged to abandon conventional academic priorities and family hierarchies in favor of revolutionary tasks. They were imagined not merely as capable laborers as in the Great Leap Forward, but as surreal and potent agents of violence: small bodies capable of wielding weapons to identify and physically subdue adult "counter-revolutionaries."

This progression raises a series of complex questions. For instance, this study explores the central paradox of "innocence" and "violence." How did the state narrative reconcile the ideal of childish innocence with the promotion of violent class struggle as an educational and even joyful activity? How was a child's "innocence" (their perceived purity and lack of complex motive) weaponized, turning them into what this chapter calls "happy weapons"? If the May Fourth child "left home" to gain autonomy, what did the Cultural Revolution child gain by "stepping out"? Did they find genuine liberation, or was the very concept of "autonomy" itself redefined as the "freedom" to enthusiastically participate in prescribed revolutionary violence? Third, this chapter asks: how did the Cultural Revolution's state apparatus successfully adopt and radically repurpose the May Fourth era's "discovery" of children's political utility? What ideological threads connect these two seemingly opposite historical projects, the "liberal" project of child emancipation and the "autocratic" project of child mobilization?

This chapter challenges the conventional view that revolutionary violence was merely the result of passive indoctrination imposed upon a "blank slate" of childhood innocence. Instead, I argue that the state engaged in a process of ideological harnessing, exploiting the innate "wildness" of childhood as the raw material for political

mobilization. Through an analysis of visual and textual narratives, I contend that this mobilization operated through a mechanism of "joyful cruelty," a state where violence is transfigured into political happiness. This mechanism functioned via two ideological channels: making reality opaque and changing the moral color. This process enacted a violent restructuring of affect upon the children themselves, collapsing the distinction between pain and pleasure. For the child who "leaves home," the destination is therefore neither independence nor depravity, but a total integration into the Party and the State, where the surrender of the self, manifested either as a weapon against enemies or a sacrifice for the cause, is celebrated as the supreme form of political joy.

Cultural Revolution, Little Red Guards, and Violence

The Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a radical political campaign in China's modern history, spanned from 1966 to 1976. It culminated with the death of its architect, Chairman Mao Zedong, and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four, a faction pivotal in orchestrating some of the Revolution's most extreme policies. Mao initiated this campaign in a bid to reassert his authority following the catastrophic failures of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and to stave off what he perceived as the degeneration of Chinese socialism into bureaucratic and revisionist tendencies. This tumultuous decade was marked by an unprecedented level of social upheaval and political frenzy, spiraling beyond even Mao's control. The period was characterized by widespread violence, an intense cult of personality around Mao, and the aggressive promotion of class struggle, leading to profound disruptions in China's social and cultural fabric. The Cultural Revolution radically altered the landscape of Chinese society, dismantling traditional

structures, purging intellectuals, and attacking cultural heritage under the guise of combating the 'Four Olds"—old customs, culture, habits, and ideas.

Central to this movement were the grassroots mobilizations across all societal strata, notably the formation of the Red Guards and the Little Red Guards. The Red Guards, primarily comprising high school and university students, became notorious for their militant zeal in enforcing Maoist doctrines and persecuting those deemed counter-revolutionary. To understand the radical nature of the Little Red Guards organization during the Cultural Revolution, we must first situate it within the evolving history of the Chinese Communist Party's youth organizations. The Little Red Guards did not emerge in a vacuum; they were a radical restructuring of the antecedent organization: the Young Pioneers of China (*Zhongguo shaonian xianfeng dui* 中國少年先鋒隊). As Zhang Fang's research on honor culture details, the Young Pioneers was originally built on a rigid institutional hierarchy. The "Draft Constitution of the Chinese Children's and Teenagers' Brigade," promulgated in October 1949, delineates the structural intricacies of this body. It mandated the establishment of brigades across schools and villages, where committees were elected and behavior was regulated through a strict system of rewards and sanctions. In this early model, children were harnessed primarily through discipline: honors were bestowed upon those who demonstrated commendable performance in academics and daily conduct. [133] The "good child" was defined by order, obedience, and studiousness. However, this definition began to shift during the Great Leap Forward. As the state prioritized rapid industrialization, the focus of youth mobilization moved from the

[133] Zhang, Fang. "Zhongguo shaoxiandui rongyu wenhua xingcheng de kaocha (1949-1955)" [An Investigation into the Formation of the Honor Culture in China's Young Pioneers (1949-1955)], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, 2014, vol.11, 26-28.

classroom to the field and the furnace. Academic achievement, while still nominally important, began to be sidelined in favor of political fervor and physical labor, such as steel production. This period marked a transitional phase where the child's value started to be measured not just by their grades, but by their body's utility to the state. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, this trajectory reached its extreme conclusion. The emergence of the Little Red Guards signaled a fundamental rupture. Unlike the Young Pioneers, which, at least in theory, maintained a semblance of organizational order, the Little Red Guards were born out of the chaos of mass movements. In its place, a new criterion for inclusion emerged: class background and revolutionary militancy. As younger children from elementary and middle schools were mobilized into this new organization, their role shifted definitively. They were no longer merely "students" or "laborers"; they were "little warriors." In the representations on various media, they imbibed Maoist ideology not to maintain order, but to disrupt it: participating in rallies, denouncing teachers, and engaging in the very violence that the state would come to celebrate as "joyful." This historical shift, from the institutional discipline of the 1950s, through the labor mobilization of the Great Leap Forward, to the violent militancy of the Cultural Revolution, sets the stage for understanding how the "innocent" child was transformed into a political weapon. Both groups, emblematic of the Cultural Revolution's drive for ideological purity and radical change, wielded considerable influence and were instrumental in propagating the revolutionary fervor of the era. Their actions, often marred by violence and fanaticism, reflect the profound impact of Maoist thought on the younger generation and underscore the Cultural Revolution's deep and lasting imprint on Chinese society and politics.

The Cultural Revolution saw a significant decline in both the quantity and quality of children's literature. In 1977, only 192 titles were published, amounting to 26,530,000 copies for a population of 200 million literate children. This meant that, on average, there was just one book for every thirteen children, highlighting the already impoverished state of children's literature since 1955. In terms of quality, political control over children's literature tightened from 1957 to 1965. Fairy tales were dismissed as capitalist and therefore excluded from publication. Additionally, the potential for children's literature to serve as a form of societal critique through satire was prohibited. Instead, "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" was imposed as the sole guideline for writing children's literature from 1958 onwards, making the literature replete with ideological and educational values.[134] One notable publication during this period was the *Little Red Guards* magazine (hereafter *LRG*). *Little Red Guard's Paper* (*Hong Xiao Bing Bao* 紅小兵報) made its debut in Shanghai on July 20, 1967, as a weekly publication tailored for children. With the replacement of "Young Pioneers" by "Little Red Guards" as the official designation by the end of 1967, a flurry of children's magazines emerged throughout China, all adopting the revolutionary emblem "little red guard." More than half of China's provincial regions, spanning from the eastern shores of Shanghai to the western reaches of Gansu, and stretching from Heilongjiang in the far north down to Guangdong in the deep south, created their unique editions of Little Red Guards magazines. These publications differed in dimensions, publication intervals, and the diversity of their content. Tailored to the reading level of primary school students, *LRG*

[134] Mary Ann Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 271–73.

magazines typically feature a diverse array of content, including rhymes, songs, news updates, short stories with illustrations, comic strips, and children's artwork. Anecdotes suggest that some schools would subscribe to *LRG* and make it available in classrooms for supplementary reading.[135]

Joyful Cruelty: Violence in the Guise of Happiness

The May Fourth era's romanticization of childhood "innocence" (*tianzhen* 天真) seems to stand in stark, irreconcilable contrast to the politicized violence performed by children during the revolutionary period. How, then, did the "angelic" child of one era become the "revolutionary vanguard" of the next? Conventional narratives often attempt to bridge this gap using the answer of indoctrination and "brainwashing." This model suggests that revolutionary ideology was simply imposed upon a "blank slate" of childhood innocence. Such a framework, however, proves insufficient for two primary reasons. First, as this chapter will demonstrate, it relies on a flawed, romanticized definition of "innocence" as mere purity. Second, it reduces the complex mechanism of state propaganda down to a simplistic notion of indoctrination. This chapter proposes a different framework: not one of indoctrination, but of ideological harnessing, exploitation, and amplification. The central proposition is that revolutionary state propaganda did not create violence *ex nihilo*. Instead, it smartly seized upon, weaponized, and re-directed the "wildness," "aggression," and "competitiveness" that were already identified by May Fourth intellectuals as innate components of a complex, pre-socialized childhood.

[135] Chen, Minjie. 2012. "The Many Faces of Little Red Guards." Cotsen Children's Library Blog, September 20. Accessed 2/10/2024. http://blogs.princeton.edu/cotsen/2012/09/little-red-guards.

This argument is grounded in the textual evidence of the May Fourth period itself. During this time, as Chapter One has demonstrated, the notion of childhood instincts was widely accepted. Drawing on Euro-American influences, particularly Rousseau's and Dewey's educational philosophies, Chinese intellectuals began advocating for childhood as a distinct life stage—one that warranted respect for children's autonomy and natural inclinations, particularly their love of play and physical activity.[136] This discourse was simultaneously shaped by indigenous Chinese thought. Specifically, the concept of *tongxin* 童心 (child-heart), rooted in the discourse of the Ming scholar Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), provided a crucial philosophical foundation. For Li Zhi, the "child-heart" did not signify moral purity in the Western sense of being free from sin. Rather, it denoted authenticity (*zhen* 真): a primal state of being untainted by the hypocrisy of social rituals and Confucian doctrines.[137] Crucially, this authenticity was not limited to benign purity. While scholars have extensively examined the romanticization of childhood in May Fourth discourse, far fewer have recognized another dimension of this discussion: the acknowledgement that aggression and combative tendencies were also part of children's natural instincts. Zhou Zuoren, in particular, grounded this view in Western anthropology. He explicitly adopted the evolutionary framework of recapitulation, positing that the ontogeny of the child mirrors the phylogeny of the species. In his essay "Children's Literature" (*Ertong de wenxue* 兒童的文學), Zhou conceptually collapsed the distance between the child and the "primitive person"

[136] Leting Zheng, "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly 50, no. 1* (2025):
[137] Li Zhi, "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind," in *A Book to Burn and A Book to Keep (Hidden)*, ed. and trans. Rivi Handler-Spitz, Pauline C. Lee, and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 111–13.

(*yuanren* 原人), suggesting that children's inner lives are vestiges of a pre-civilized past, naturally brimming with "savage or absurd thoughts" that defy modern rationality.[138] This theoretical stance found concrete expression in his translation work. In 1914, Zhou translated Arai Dōtarō's Study on Children's Quarrel (*Xiaoer zhengdou zhi yanjiu* 小兒爭鬥之研究), where he articulates a defense of this innate wildness:

> Children are naturally inclined to quarrel, and elders often lament over this, promptly sending them to study halls to confine them, with the intention not necessarily to promote learning, but merely to restrict their behavior. Now, with the rise of schools, this responsibility is shifted onto the educational institutions. Yet, the question remains: are children's fights truly malicious acts? Or is confining them sufficient to correct their behavior? It is difficult to ascertain. Indeed, children are like little savages, regarding themselves as masters of their own small world, adept at resolving everything through their own efforts. Their conflicts resemble battles of primitive people, undertaken to defend their rights and seek victory over others, yet within these interactions, there exist their own laws and morals to govern. When elders fail to recognize this and simply impose harsh restrictions, they deeply wound their spirits, making it difficult to anticipate any positive outcomes. The Japanese Arai Dōtarō, in his work "Study on Children's Quarrel," defends children's actions and rectifies the misunderstandings of the elders.

[138] Zhou Zuoren, "Ertong de wenxue," in *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue*, ed. Liu Xuyuan (Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2012), 123.

> 小兒好鬥，長者每苦之，輒送入塾，藉以拘禁之，意不在讀書，夫亦曰關之而已。今學校興，則轉屬望於學校。然今曰問：兒童之鬥是否惡事？抑或關之固足以正其習否？不可知也。蓋兒童者小野蠻也，自居小天地中善逐其生，唯以自力解決一切。其斗也，猶野人之戰，所以自衛其權利，求勝於凡眾，而其間亦自有法律自有道德為之調御。長者不察，闌加訶禁，重傷其意，而亦難期有功。日本新井道太郎，……本兒童研究著《小兒惡戲之爭鬥》一書，自言為兒童申辯，正長者之誤解。[139]

During the 1920s, Zhou Zuoren and many other intellectuals were deeply influenced by Western anthropology, conceptualizing children as primitives devoid of civilization and enlightenment. In Zhou's introduction, children are characterized as "little savages" who operate outside the boundaries of morality and law, relying solely on the mechanisms of their miniature society, primarily violence, to resolve disputes. Despite this perspective, Zhou Zuoren aligns himself with the author Arai Dōtarō, advocating for a defense of children and a concerted effort to comprehend their violent actions as intrinsic to their nature. In the main text, Arai delineates three primary motives driving children's engagement in conflicts: 1) pursuit of personal interest; 2) adherence to principles of chivalry; and 3) preservation of the moral integrity inherent in the act of fighting. Additionally, Arai underscores the disparity in children's capacity for post-conflict reflection compared to adults. Unlike adults who engage in introspection to evaluate the moral implications of their actions, children rely on an instinctual assessment guided by

[139] Zhou Zuoren, "Xiao'er zhengdou zhi yanjiu" [Study on Children's Quarrel], in *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue*, 59.

their conscience to discern right from wrong.[140] Arai further posits from a revolutionary theoretical standpoint that children's morality represents the nascent phase in the evolutionary trajectory of moral development.[141] Besides Zhou and Arai, another Chinese scholar, Dai Weiqing 戴渭清, also mentions similar qualities of children in his article, "The Philosophical Perspective of Children's Literature" (*Ertong wenxue de zhexue guan* 兒童文學的哲學觀):

> What characterizes children's literature? Primarily, it should embody the essence of "childification." But what exactly does "childified" children's literature entail? In summary: "It encompasses the entirety of children's mindsets." Upon close examination of children's mindsets, we can discern approximately eight categories:
>
> 1. Curiosity mindset: a fascination with the supernatural and extraordinary phenomena rarely seen in the world. 2. Playful mindset: an inclination towards games and activities involving physical movement. 3. Humorous mindset: an inclination towards jokes, jests, and all forms of facial humor. 4. Competitive mindset: within group dynamics, exhibiting a proclivity for engaging in activities with the aim of competition and a strong aspiration for triumph in games. 5. Courageous mindset: facing challenges head-on with unwavering bravery and without succumbing to fear. 6. Combat mindset: having a disposition towards engaging in conflict with others and even harming or killing other animals. 7. Collectivist mindset: enjoy communal living and relish the bustling atmosphere of

[140] Zhou Zuoren, "Xiao'er zhengdou zhi yanjiu," 63.
[141] Zhou Zuoren, "Xiao'er zhengdou zhi yanjiu," 64.

thriving urban areas for leisure activities. 8. Compassionate mindset: demonstrate sympathy towards the pain of others and express empathy.

兒童文學是怎樣的呢？就是第一要「兒童化」。什麼是兒童化的兒童文學？總括一句：「是兒童所有思想的文學」。兒童所有思想考察下來，約有八種：

1. 好奇思想: 神怪離奇，世間少有的事情。 2. 遊戲思想：對於舉動上的遊戲。 3. 滑稽思想：玩笑打趣，及一切顏面上的滑稽等。4. 爭勝思想：在團體中，作事競爭，遊戲好勝。 5. 勇敢思想：遇事勇往直前，沒有什麼畏懼。 6. 爭鬥思想：喜歡與他人爭鬥並殺害其他動物 7. 愛羣思想：喜歡羣居而遊玩繁盛都市。 8. 仁慈思想：憐憫他人的痛苦而表示同情。[142]

The apparent paradox in Dai's enumeration that children possess both a "combat mindset" and a "compassionate mindset" is the crucial insight. It confirms that children are intricate beings capable of both kindness and cruelty, often concurrently. We may interpret this as an indication that their undisciplined behavior and occasional outbursts of violence stem from their inherent innocence and spontaneity. Lacking full assimilation into societal norms, they operate outside the realm of conventional "civilized" behavior, as their understanding of social rules remains rudimentary at best. This is precisely the complex definition of "innocence" that this paper employs: a primal, unsocialized state. The paradox they both observe is not a contradiction. Rather, it is the very profile of the

[142] Dai Weiqing, "Ertong wenxue de zhexue guan" [The Philosophical Perspective of Children's Literature], in Zhou Jingshen, *Tonghua pinglun* [Commentaries on Fairytales], (Xinwenhua shushe, 1928), 97-98.

"little savage," an intricate being operating in a space that is amoral (non-moral) rather than immoral.

This May Fourth understanding of "savage innocence" provides the crucial conceptual precondition that allows us to move beyond the flawed "indoctrination" model that incorrectly assumes a "blank slate" of childhood purity. With this new understanding, the process is not indoctrination, which requires a "blank slate" to impose upon. Rather, it is the act of ideological harnessing itself, a process that requires a pre-existing, innate force—the child's "wildness"—to co-opt and steer. This harnessing seizes upon the child's innate, amoral "combat mindset," weaponizes it, and re-directs it with political legitimacy. This revised framework, by moving from "indoctrination" to "harnessing," thus reveals a complex process not of "innocence lost," but of "innate wildness weaponized."

While the May Fourth era provides the concept that innocence and violence are not contradictory, the revolutionary era demonstrates its political application. This political application of violence manifests at the *surface level* as the representational performance of direct violence by children against "enemies." Underpinning this surface representation is a foundational ideological framework at play, which can be defined as cultural violence: any aspect of a culture exemplified by ideology, language, and art that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.[143] This cultural violence operates through two primary channels: 1) make reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact; it is achieved by masking the coercion with representations of "happiness," "education," and "play;" and 2) change the moral color of an act from

[143] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291.

red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow and acceptable.[144] By portraying these individuals as contemptible and morally deficient, this process reframes the child's participation in their dehumanization as a moral duty, completing the cycle of "joyful cruelty." By "joyful cruelty," I refer to a specific affective state where the performance of violence, whether inflicted upon others or endured by the self, is transfigured into a source of political ecstasy. It functions as a form of affective sublimation, where the child's innate "savage innocence"—that primal, amoral impulse—is channeled and elevated into a socially sanctioned form of revolutionary violence. In this process, the visceral reality of pain is stripped of its tragic weight and reconstituted as the ultimate proof of political virtue.

This mechanism enacts a profound, though often invisible, violence upon the children themselves. This core violence is not merely an involuntary absorption of radical Maoist ideology. More fundamentally, it is a violent restructuring of affect, a process achieved by manufacturing a visual paradox: the representation of happiness is used to conceal and legitimize the performance of violence. This restructuring involves a forcible desocialization from traditional affective bonds, such as parents-children and teachers-students relationship, and a subsequent resocialization into an ideologically driven, new cultural framework of loyalty to the state and Chairman.

From Uncontrolled Violence to Righteous Violence in Children's Illustrated Narratives

The mechanism of cultural violence, which relies on two ideological channels: making reality opaque and changing the moral color, was not an immediate creation but a

[144] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 292.

strategic approach the state learned to perfect. This section traces the crucial historical development that established the foundation for these two channels, showing how state anxiety over "uncontrolled" violence evolved into the organized promotion of "righteous" violence.

In Republican China, illustrated narratives began appearing in children's magazines, captivating young readers with their vibrant blend of text and images. During the Mao era, a time when literacy rates remained relatively low, these visually oriented stories offered a direct and effective way to spread new, often revolutionary, ideas. Illustrated narratives, such as "picture-story" (*lianhuanhua*) and various other pictorial stories, occupied a central position in children's reading materials. Amid increasingly stringent ideological oversight, these visual-textual works served as a means of revolutionary education and a conduit for promoting state-sanctioned values. While many traditional and May Fourth–inspired forms of children's literature languished under Maoist policies,[145] illustrated formats retained, and even extended, their cultural significance, largely due to their compelling blend of text and imagery that resonated powerfully with young readers. As Mary A. Farquhar observes in her wide-ranging analysis of Chinese children's literature from the May Fourth era to the post-Mao period, Marxist interventions did much to reshape the field, ensuring that certain visually appealing genres continued to thrive despite widespread library and school closures.[146] The state's intervention in this medium was not simply to promote violence, but to actively manage and sanitize it. As we will see, state organs sought to replace the "bad,"

[145] Mary Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China*, 251
[146] Mary Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China*, 244

uncontrolled, and apolitical violence found in "problematic" folk stories with a "good," righteous, and politically-sanctioned violence. Within these approved narratives, violence was both visualized and sanitized: child heroes might confront "class enemies," but graphic details such as bloodshed or the agonized faces of victims were conspicuously absent. This selective depiction legitimized violence by effacing its darker consequences, framing it as a righteous and morally justified act.

The state's complex relationship with this medium is evident in two contradictory-seeming events. First, a 1955 article in the *People's Daily* sharply critiqued students for frequenting comic stands (*xiaorenshu tan* 小人書攤) to immerse themselves in "problematic" narratives, such as fantastical sword-fighting novels, which were linked to real-world street brawls.[147] This reflects a deep societal and state anxiety over children being drawn to uncontrolled, apolitical, and "disorderly" acts of violence. In stark contrast to this anxiety, the state actively celebrated other forms of violence. Shanghai emerged as a central hub for comic artists in early 1950s, with the East China Xinhua Bookstore (later transformed into the East China People's Publishing House) attracting a cadre of professional artists, including the renowned Zhao Hongben 趙宏本 (1915-2000). His work *Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon* is among the celebrated pieces from this era. In an effort to foster creative expression, the Ministry of Culture and the China Artists Association (*Zhongguo meishu xiehui* 中國美術協會) organized the inaugural National "Picture-Book" Creation Awards in 1963, where Zhao Hongben and Qian Xiaodai 錢笑呆 (1911-1964)'s *Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon* (*Sun Wukong*

[147] "Hankou yige xiaoxue chengli ertong gongchang" 漢口一個小學成立兒童工廠, on *People's Daily*, June 1, 1955.

Sanda Baigujing 孫悟空三打白骨精) was awarded first prize.[148] This picture-story is about the plot that Tripitaka and his three disciples journeyed West to acquire the holy scriptures. Upon reaching a desolate mountain, they encountered the White Bone Demon. Craving immortality, the demon, intent on consuming Tripitaka's flesh, morphed into various human guises—a village girl, an elderly woman, and an aged man. Yet, none could dupe Sun Wukong. He uses his golden cudgel to defeat the demon. Mao Zedong held the Monkey King in high esteem, lauding him as the "wonder-worker."[149] The state's promotion of this narrative, which not only withstood the Cultural Revolution but was later exported internationally, was a clear signal: this kind of violence, aimed at a clear, deceptive, and demonic enemy, was not only acceptable but exemplary.



(Fig.1. "Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon")

This juxtaposition reveals the state's evolving strategy: not to eliminate violence from children's culture, but to monopolize and re-direct it. The "bad" violence of the

[148] Jiang Weipu 姜维朴, "Xin lianhuanhua yishu de sanshiwu nian" 新連環畫藝術的三十五年. *Meishu* 1984, no. 7: 51-2.
[149] Mary Farquhar, *Children's Literature in China*, 227.

street stalls—individualistic, anarchic, and without clear moral purpose—was to be replaced by the "good" violence embodied by Sun Wukong: state-sanctioned, righteous, and directed at a clearly defined "demon." This shift from condemning "disorderly" violence (1955) to awarding "righteous" violence (1963) is the crucial context for understanding the Cultural Revolution. The depiction of children as agents of violence in narratives like the Little Red Guards was not an abrupt aberration. Instead, it was the logical culmination of this process, where the state successfully "sanitized" violence, transforming it into a celebrated political tool and ideological duty, performed by children against the new "demons" of the era: the "class enemies."

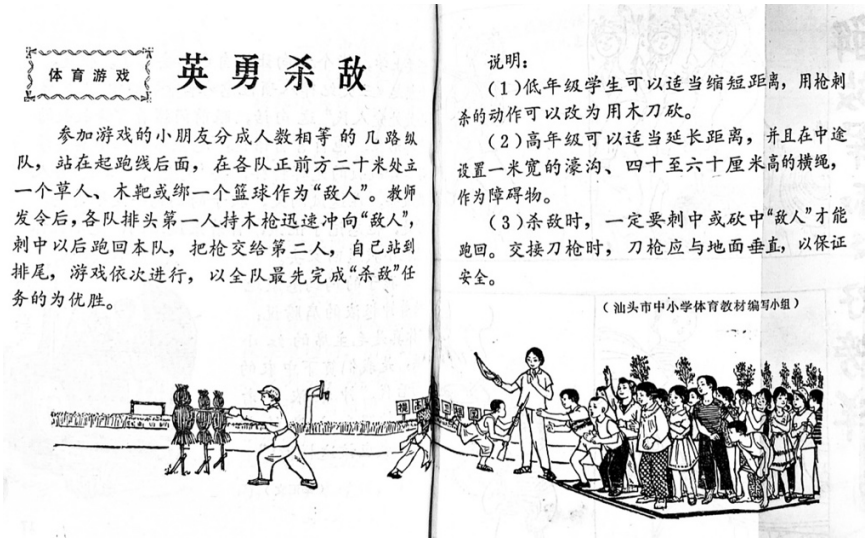
Outward Violence in *Little Red Guards*: Gamification, Sanitization, and the Overriding of Gender Norms

The State's evolving management of violence, shifting from initial anxiety to strategic endorsement, provided the ideological foundation for the Cultural Revolution. The analysis of narratives and games in *LRG* is crucial because it offers tangible proof of the two ideological channels in operation, which can be categorized by the direction of the violence: outward violence directed at enemies and inward violence directed at the self through affective restructuring. This section focuses on the outward performance of violence to demonstrate the practical function of making reality opaque and changing the moral color.

"Bravely Slaying Enemies" (*Yingyong shadi* 英勇殺敵) is a game featured in the "Sports Games" (*Tiyu youxi* 體育遊戲) column of the 1972 volume 8 of Guangdong *LRG*. It serves as a notable instance illustrating the normalization and ubiquity of violence within the magazine. It is achieved through the gamification of killing,

harnessing the cultural domains of play and education to turn the elimination of enemies into a competitive sport, thereby making reality opaque and changing the moral color.

> The children participating in the game are divided into several teams with equal numbers. They stand behind the starting line, and about twenty meters in front of each team, a straw man, wooden target, or a basketball tied up represents the "enemy." After the teacher gives the signal, the first person in each team quickly rushes towards the "enemy" with a wooden spear. After hitting the target, they run back to their team, hand the spear to the second person, and then go to the end of the line. The game continues in this manner, and the team that completes the "enemy killing" task at the frontmost position wins...[150]


体育游戏

英勇杀敌

参加游戏的小朋友分成人数相等的几路纵队，站在起跑线后面，在各队正前方二十米处立一个草人、木靶或绑一个篮球作为"敌人"。教师发令后，各队排头第一人持木枪迅速冲向"敌人"，刺中以后跑回本队，把枪交给第二人，自己站到排尾，游戏依次进行，以全队最先完成"杀敌"任务的为优胜。

说明：

（1）低年级学生可以适当缩短距离，用枪刺杀的动作可以改为用木刀砍。

（2）高年级可以适当延长距离，并且在中途设置一米宽的濠沟、四十至六十厘米高的横绳，作为障碍物。

（3）杀敌时，一定要刺中或砍中"敌人"才能跑回。交接刀枪时，刀枪应与地面垂直，以保证安全。

（汕头市中小学体育教材编写小组）

(Fig.2. "Bravely Slaying Enemies" is a game featured in the "Sports Games") column of the 1972 volume 8 of Guangdong *LRG*)

This vivid game scenario directly applies the mechanism of making reality opaque: the brutal reality of killing is actively concealed by reframing it as a competitive, rule-bound

[150] "Bravely Slaying Enemies: Sports Games" [Yingyong shadi: Tiyu youxi], *Guangdong Little Red Guards* [Guangdong xiaoxue hongxiaobing], vol. 8 (1972): 18–19.

"sports game." The deliberate misrepresentation transforms the morally ambiguous act of political violence into an innocent, joyful physical activity. Furthermore, unlike conventional portrayals of children as passive bystanders, this game empowers them, fostering engagement in aggressive acts, thereby establishing them as active agents in the ideological conflict. This phenomenon of children actively participating in enactments of violence is not unique to "Bravely Slaying Enemies" within East Asia's cultural landscape. From the 1700s to the 1900s, Japan witnessed the emergence of children's war plays, drawing the attention of prominent scholars. Figures such as Sugita Genpaku and Matsuura Seizan suggest that these activities were influenced by the dissemination of war tales.[151] Notable instances, such as those documented in Kondō Juhaku's *Rumors of Early Modern Times* (*Kinsei fūbun: Mimi no aka*), provide insight into the nature of these play scenarios. For instance, in 1855, Japanese children engaged in a war game wherein they were divided into American and Japanese factions. Tragically, an incident occurred where a bamboo rod thrust by the leader of the Japanese side fatally wounded the boy portraying the American leader. Kondō observed that such occurrences reflected the widespread anti-foreign sentiment among Japanese commoners following the arrival of Commodore Mathew C. Perry's fleet in 1853, known as the "Black Ships."[152]

This focus on active agency extends from the playground to the illustrated page. One key revolutionary violence discourse in *LRG* centers on children as aggressors inflicting harm on perceived enemies. One key revolutionary violence discourse in *LRG* centers on children as aggressors inflicting harm on perceived enemies. Within this

[151] Sabine Frühstück, *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) 19.
[152] Sabine Frühstück, *Playing War*, 21.

discourse, the first type depicts children targeting foreign adversaries, often Japanese or American soldiers, within wartime settings. These illustrated narratives construct young protagonists as active participants in armed resistance, emphasizing their ability to identify, outmaneuver, and ultimately defeat the enemy. The second type, more closely tied to the magazine's contemporary milieu, portrays Little Red Guards apprehending a suspicious individual who is later revealed to be a criminal. In both cases, youthful protagonists are repeatedly lauded as "wise and brave," reinforcing *LRG*'s unequivocal endorsement of juvenile heroism as a model for revolutionary engagement. However, particularly in the first type of discourse targeting foreign adversaries, the strategy of making reality opaque undergoes a surreal transformation. Unlike the earlier archetype of the child hero represented by Wang Erxiao, whose heroism was defined by tragic sacrifice and death, the new child scouts in *LRG* possess a surreal power to defeat formidable enemies like American soldiers without suffering physical harm. This shift marks the ultimate sanitization of violence: the removal of not just the blood, but the very possibility of martyrdom.

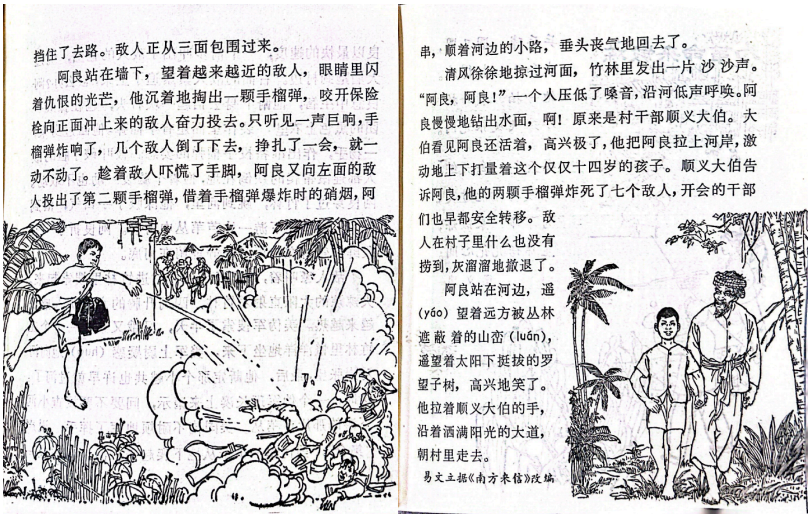
Each volume of *LRG* is prefaced with a quotation from Chairman Mao Zedong, setting a thematic tone for the magazine. On the opening page of the 1972 Volume 8 of Shandong's *LRG*, quotations from Mao Zedong is: "The peoples of the three countries of Indochina (*Yindu zhina sanguo* 印度支那三國), by fortifying their unity, mutually supporting each other, and steadfastly engaging in a protracted people's war, are destined to surmount all obstacles and secure a comprehensive victory." This is further augmented by his appeal to "Support the army and cherish the people" (*Yongjun aimin* 擁軍愛民) which serves as a prelude to the narratives that follow. Notably, the story of "A Liang" 阿

良 fits into the first category of children's violence, which emphasizes the celebration of children's bravery and resilience. One such example is the story of "A Liang" 阿良, set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Fourteen-year-old A Liang, serving as an intelligence agent (*qingbao yuan* 情報員), eludes an American-backed blockade to deliver crucial information to the Liberation Army, using his wits and a pair of grenades to neutralize several enemies and break free from their encirclement. The story ends in a lyrical language and a beautiful image: "He stood by the river, looking at the distant mountains covered by jungles and the towering camphor trees under the sun, and smiled happily. Holding Uncle Shunyi's hand, they walked towards the village along the sun-drenched avenue."[153]

The archetype of the "intelligence agent" finds its origins in the celebrated story of the child martyr, Wang Erxiao. At just thirteen years old, Wang Erxiao became an icon of bravery in the War of Resistance against Japan, immortalized through a 1942 folk song titled "Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao" ("Gechang Erxiao fangniu lang" 歌唱二小放牛郎). Created by Fang Bing 方冰 (1914-1997), a poet and Communist propaganda worker in the Jin-Cha-Ji border region, the song recounts Wang Erxiao's encounter with Japanese soldiers while herding cattle. Forced to lead them, Wang Erxiao intentionally directs the soldiers into an ambush. Though this brave act leads to his demise at the hands of the Japanese, it ultimately secures the safety of his entire village. The song lyrically honors his sacrifice: "With a smile on his face, his blood dyes the sky a deep shade of

[153] "A Liang," *Shandong Little Red Guards*, vol. 8 (1972): 1 – 7.

crimson," articulating the lasting significance of his actions.[154] Like the iconic socialist youth Lei Feng 雷鋒, the true identity of Wang Erxiao remains shrouded in mystery, with no definitive records confirming who he was. The narrative of Wang Erxiao, later has been transposed into various media formats, including "picture-story." This adaptation process not only indicates this narrative's enduring cultural resonance but also underscores the flexibility of revolutionary tales to permeate diverse facets of media. During the Cultural Revolution, the archetype of the "intelligence agent" was perpetuated and evolved, as seen in stories such as that of A Liang. It is noteworthy, however, that there was a significant shift in the portrayal of children within these narratives. Unlike earlier depictions of child martyrs, these newer narratives often ended not with their sacrifice, but with a reversal of roles. The children were now the ones who overcame and even eliminated powerful male adversaries. In the climactic resolution, they were often depicted with triumphant smiles, signifying their victory and agency.



(Fig.4. "A Liang," in 1972 Volume 8 of Shandong's *LRG*)

[154] Andrew Kauffman, "Imagining the New Socialist Child: The Cultural Afterlife of the Child Martyr Wang Erxiao," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 34 (2020): 1–23.

"Little Red Guards Capture a Villain through Cleverness" (*Hong xiaobing zhiqin huaidan* 紅小兵智擒壞蛋), a picture-story from the 1970 volume 3, demonstrates the power of the second channel: changing the moral color. In this picture-story, we see four intrepid female primary school students who, armed with a stick and heightened vigilance, embark on a patrol. They encounter a man dressed in traditional Tang Suit (*tangzhuang* 唐裝), which symbolizes the antithetical "Four Olds," acting suspiciously and communicating with another dubious character using an enigmatic language. Determined to follow him, they board a People's Bus (*renmin qiche* 人民汽車) and enlist the driver's assistance. At the end, they apprehend the suspect and deliver him to the security section, where it is revealed, he was a former criminal sentenced to labor reform (*laogai fan* 劳改犯). The narrative concludes with the girls receiving commendations, yet they humbly respond: "It is the sacred duty of little red guards to fight the enemy, and the glory goes to the great leader, Chairman Mao."[155] This statement, visually reinforced by Mao's quote "Never Forget the Class Struggle" in the background, illustrates the precise mechanism of changing the moral color. The girls' happiness—depicted here as victorious smiles—is not the chaotic joy of the "savage," but the satisfaction of fulfilling a political mandate. By reframing the violent capture of a human being as a "sacred duty," the story validates their aggression as a form of moral virtue, successfully overriding traditional gender expectations.

[155] "Little Red Guards Capture a Villain through Cleverness: Little Picture-Story" [Hong xiaobing zhiqin huaidan: Xiaoxiao lianhuanhua], *Guangdong Little Red Guards* [Guangdong xiaoxue hongxiaobing], vol. 3 (1970): 20–23.

This narrative meanwhile demonstrates the power of the ideological framework to override traditional gender norms, reflecting a trend that began in the propagandistic children's films of the Great Leap Forward period. It demonstrates the essence of changing the moral color: aggression is no longer a violation of feminine virtue or childhood innocence; it has been restructured into a "sacred duty," thereby legitimizing the children's participation in the machinery of class struggle. Furthermore, while Orna Naftali suggests that female characters in LRG narratives typically function as part of a collective, often in secondary or supportive roles,[156] this story offers a contrasting perspective.



[156] Orna Naftali, "Chinese Childhood in Conflict: Children, Gender, and Violence in China of the 'Cultural Revolution' Period (1966–1976)," *Oriens Extremus* 53 (2014): 99.



(Fig.6. "Little Red Guards Capture a Villain through Cleverness," 1970 Volume 3 of Guangdong's *LRG*)

The combination of these narratives and games demonstrates the complete success of the state's strategy in transforming childhood aggression into a potent political tool. By utilizing both mechanisms—masking violence as a game or a sanitized victory, and reframing aggression as a moral duty that transcends gender—the state successfully leveraged the child's pre-existing wildness. This systematic application of both ideological channels sets the necessary stage for the most profound form of violence: that directed inward.

Inward Violence: Children's Heroic Self-sacrifice for Others

The discourse of revolutionary violence in *LRG* is not limited to children acting as aggressors against external enemies. It reaches its ideological zenith when violence is turned inward, depicting children engaging in revolutionary martyrdom. In this narrative form, children are not engaging in self-harm in the conventional sense. Rather, out of deep

reverence for Maoist ideology and unwavering loyalty to the Party and the nation, they become self-sacrificing figures whose physical suffering is glorified, often in storylines that defy common sense. Within these narratives, Mao's famous dictum—"To die for the interests of the people is weightier than Mount Tai"—serves as the primary rhetorical device to change the moral color of self-destruction. This phrase, drawn from *The Book of Han* (*Han Shu*) and echoing Sima Qian's reflection, provides the ideological scaffolding to reframe children's physical injuries, such as losing limbs while saving others, not as personal tragedies, but as noble acts of devotion. This type of narrative constitutes a distinct form of sacrificial violence, acting as the ultimate proof of the violent restructuring of affect: it conditions children to accept, and even desire, bodily suffering as a necessary and honorable part of their revolutionary duty.

At its core, both forms of revolutionary violence discourse, whether portraying children as aggressors or children willingly injuring and even losing their own limbs, reinforce the same ideological principle: absolute devotion to the revolutionary cause. In this framework, the integrity of one's body is secondary to political loyalty, and suffering, even dismemberment, is reframed as an honorable contribution to the collective good. While revolutionary narratives featuring self-sacrifice for the Party-state are also prevalent in stories centered on adult protagonists, their presence in narratives depicting child protagonists create a profound sense of dissonance, appearing not only irrational and implausible but also deeply unsettling, even grotesque. This dissonance arises from the stark contradiction between children's physical vulnerability, mental immaturity, and the extreme demands placed upon them. Rather than being protected, as one would expect,

they are instead expected to sacrifice themselves for even younger children, reversing the natural order of care and protection.


欧阳海式的小英雄

（故事表演）

虹口区商邱路第一小学
毛泽东思想宣传小分队

甲 韶山红日呵湘江水，
合 哺育着红小兵戴碧蓉。

The play *A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai* (*Ouyang Hai shi de xiao yingxiong* 歐陽海式的小英雄) serves as an example of revolutionary martyrdom. It is part of the *Red Little Soldiers' Literary Propaganda Materials (Hong xiaobing wenyi xuanchuan cailiao* 紅小兵文藝宣傳材料*)*, a collection of revolutionary literary works published in 1970 by the editorial team in Jing'an District, Shanghai. This series consists of various forms of artistic expression, including children's songs, rhythmic storytelling (*kuaiban* 快板), drum lyrics (*luogu ci* 鑼鼓詞), recitations, theatrical storytelling, and song performances. *T*he first page of this book features a Mao Zedong quote:

> "Literature and art must become an integral part of the entire revolutionary machine, serving as a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people,

striking and eliminating the enemy, and assisting the people in their struggle against the enemy with one heart and one mind."[157]

This quotation clearly establishes that this series of literary propaganda materials was positioned as part of the revolutionary apparatus, designed to unite and educate children while fostering their opposition to class enemies.

In this story, the protagonist is a twelve-year-old girl, Dai Birong, a Little Red Guard modeled after Ouyang Hai. Ouyang Hai, originally a squad leader of the 7th Company of the former 68302 Unit of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, was posthumously honored as a national hero. On the morning of November 18, 1963, he sacrificed himself at the age of twenty-three by pushing a panicked military horse off the tracks to protect an approaching passenger train, losing his own life in the process. This narrative blueprint for the adult hero is most fully embodied in Jin Jingmai 金敬邁's 1965 novel, *The Song of Ouyang Hai* (*Ouyang Hai zhi ge* 歐陽海之歌). The novel depicts the moment of sacrifice as an intense psychological struggle "His blood boiled!... His whole heart seemed to leap from his chest!... He rushed... like a cannonball fired from a gun."[158] Crucially, this adult model is itself built on imitation: "Perhaps he was shouting... 'Dong Cunrui, my good brother, Ouyang Hai has followed in your footsteps!'" Thus, the adult sacrificial narrative establishes a logic of "spirit conquering the body", a conscious act of will overcoming fear.

---

[157] Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team of Shangqiu Road No. 1 Primary School, Hongkou District, "A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai: Story Performance" [Ouyang Hai shi de xiao yingxiong: gushi biaoyan], in Little Red Guards Literature and Art Propaganda Materials [Hong xiaobing wenyi xuanchuan ziliao], ed. Compilation Group of Shanghai Jing'an District (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1970), 44.

[158] Jin Jingmai, *Ouyang Hai zhi ge* (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1966), 438–40.

According to the script, on September 14, 1968, Dai Birong 戴碧蓉 was picking purslane near the railway yard when she noticed three young children playing in the middle of the tracks. Meanwhile, an unattended freight car was hurtling toward them at increasing speed— "their lives were in imminent danger." At that moment, Dai Birong recalled Mao's great teaching: "To die for the people is a worthy death." Without hesitation, she rushed onto the tracks and managed to carry two of the children to safety. However, the youngest, a boy named An'an, was too heavy for her to lift. Just then, she thought of "Uncle Ouyang Hai's heroic act of saving the train," and another of Mao's words came to mind: "To die for the people's interests is weightier than Mount Tai." Inspired by these revolutionary teachings, "her heart blazed like a red sun, and in that moment, her blood boiled with limitless strength." Mustering all her energy, she finally managed to push An'an off the tracks. The three children were saved, but Dai Birong's left arm and left leg were crushed and severed (*ya duan*) by the oncoming freight car.[159]

The script reveals how she bridges the gap from agony to ecstasy. In the hospital, "the pain was so intense that she saw stars and was drenched in sweat, her clothes soaked through." At this moment, "she thought: Uncle Mai Xiande... his skull was cracked open, his brain matter was spilling out, but he kept fighting. I must learn from Uncle Mai Xiande..." It is precisely through this second act of imitation that she completes her psychological transformation. At this moment, all the young actors on stage were to declare in unison: "Fearless in the face of danger, selflessly sacrificing for others. Dai Birong is truly a Little Red Guard of Chairman Mao, a true little hero in the spirit of

[159] Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team of Shangqiu Road No. 1 Primary School, Hongkou District, "A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai: Story Performance," 44–48.

Ouyang Hai!" When Dai Birong regains consciousness in the hospital, her first question is whether the three children have safely returned home. Upon hearing that they are all safe, she smiles. When the children's mother and older sister visit her in the hospital, they break down in tears, heartbroken by her condition. Yet, Dai Birong comforts them instead, saying: "Don't be sad. I still have my right hand. I can still copy Chairman Mao's quotations, study Mao Zedong Thought, and serve the people."

This final scene, where Dai Birong comforts her weeping family, reveals the definitive proof of this affective transformation. It marks a critical distinction from the adult role model: while the adult hero Ouyang Hai's sacrifice culminates in martyrdom requiring a conscious will to conquer fear, Dai Birong's culminates in a triumphant rebirth where all psychological struggle is filtered out. As Larson observes, under Maoism, "spiritual values such as selflessness, sacrifice, courage, discipline, honesty, and frugality were elevated and were especially attached to youth."[160] For the adult hero, the value of the spirit lies precisely in its ability to embody these elevated virtues through a conscious struggle against material limitations. However, when this adult blueprint is adapted for the child protagonist Dai Birong, the narrative undergoes a fundamental transformation. If the adult hero represents the spirit conquering the body through conscious will, the child hero represents the spirit eclipsing the body through ideological reflex. Here, the adult logic of "spirit conquering the body" is replaced by the more extreme logic of "spirit eclipsing the body." Her smile serves as the crucial external sign of this shift. It signals that her consciousness has successfully migrated from her shattered

[160] Wendy Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 92.

body to her triumphant revolutionary will. This migration signals a fundamental shift in human perception: she no longer perceives pain as a biological warning or a personal tragedy, but as a source of ideological ecstasy. By successfully overwriting the most primal human instinct—the aversion to physical suffering—with a political imperative, the state achieves its most thorough intrusion into the individual. The child has not merely learned to tolerate violence; she has learned to desire it. This moment, where the painful "physical self" is fully eclipsed by the joyous "ideological self," marks the total collapse of the boundary between the self and the state.

The instrumentalization of the child's body during the Cultural Revolution was not a sudden phenomenon; it was the culmination of a decades-long evolution that redefined the "ideal child" primarily in terms of physical service to the state, rather than familial piety. The shift began during the May Fourth era. During the May Fourth era, under the influence of Euro-American family ideals and educational theorists like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, the ideal child was no longer the Confucian model: filial, obedient, and quietly studying indoors, all while being morally and intellectually precocious. Instead, the new idea required children to be be energetic in outdoor play and exercise, develop robust physical health, and cultivate personal freedom and autonomy. Ironically, beneath this celebration of children's "natural instincts" lay the expectation that they would grow into strong national citizens. This trend accelerated dramatically during the Great Leap Forward, when children were urged to break from family bonds and devote themselves to collectivism. Early films of the period often depicted children scorning formal study as insufficiently revolutionary. Even after this was corrected to

"combining work and study," children's bodies were placed directly in service of state objectives, with labor becoming a primary means of contribution.

The politicization of the child's body as a tool for state service forms the crucial backdrop of the narratives of the Cultural Revolution. In Dai Birong's story, as in others, children's bodies are similarly instrumentalized. However, a crucial difference emerges: when inflicting violence on class enemies, child intelligence agents or Little Red Guards appear invincible, always achieving victory without injury, triumphant smiles lighting up their faces. By contrast, when the child's revolutionary commitment is directed inward toward protecting "the people," a far more intense level of sacrifice is demanded. Severe injury signals the highest devotion, rendering the child's dismemberment or demise a glorified testament to Maoist ideals. Once disabled, a young protagonist who continues to show loyalty, such as Dai Birong, exemplifies an even purer devotion. This dynamic appears in other "unyielding-in-spite-of-disability" (*shen can zhi jian* 身殘志堅) narratives, where physical impairment is shown to amplify, rather than diminish, one's revolutionary zeal.

From Page to Life: How Violent Propaganda Shaped Children's Experiences

Now that we have examined the content and rhetoric of these violence-laden children's stories, as well as the acts of violence they often mirrored, it is vital to ask how they actually influenced the minds of their intended young audience. Scholarship on how Little Red Guards themselves responded to or were affected by such narratives and real-life brutality remains notably limited. To address this gap, the following discussion draws on a variety of sources ranging from memoirs to historical studies to illustrate the

divergent ways in which Cultural Revolution propaganda and violence shaped children's experiences across different social, familial, and regional contexts. Children's experiences of the Cultural Revolution defy easy generalization, shaped in complex ways by factors such as family background, locality, and political status. To illustrate this complexity, this section examines two markedly different sets of sources. First, memoirs published in English for a Western readership, often by those from persecuted intellectual families, offer visceral accounts of childhood trauma and violence. Yet these works may stress the most harrowing dimensions of the Cultural Revolution, glossing over more ordinary or less dramatic realities. Second, historical studies focusing on rural populations reveal that many children in remote areas neither encountered large-scale violence nor had consistent access to propaganda materials, an experience starkly at odds with the memoirs of those immersed in urban turmoil. These perspectives together underscore the pivotal role that class, geography, and familial ties played in mediating how, and even whether, violent propaganda resonated with young minds.

Emily Wu's memoir provides a recollection of encountering death firsthand. She recounts finding the lifeless body of a familiar adult, a sight that traumatized them deeply. The stark image of Auntie Liang's discolored and violated body, described by Wu, underscores the brutality of the era: "… The color was one end of a scarf tied around the branch of a tree. The other end was knotted around the neck of a naked body…I was stunned. The body twisted slowly above me. The face was swollen. The flesh was alabaster, but the head, hands and feet were the color of a bruise…There was something eerily familiar in the features. I forced myself to look. It was Auntie Liang. A finger on her left hand where her jade ring had been chopped off. The blood from her wound had

congealed in a splatter of black ice beneath her body…I let out a deep harrowing howl. I sobbed and scratched at my eyes, trying to make everything go away."[161] Similarly, Chihua Wen reflects on the normalization of violence in daily life. The frequency of deaths witnessed by children, initially shocking, gradually became mundane, discussed as casually as one would converse about a meal: "As a child, I saw young people die in the streets. When I first saw someone die from gunfire in the streets, I was terrified. When I saw second, third, or fourth death, I got used to it. Talking with my friends about the street fighting and death became like talking about food. While bread is a necessary part of like, violent death in the streets should not be. During the Cultural Revolution, death was a part of nearly every child's life."[162] Wen also recalls how a boy, merely fourteen, assumed a role of violent authority. Clutching a metal rod, he forced prisoners to proffer their hands, which he then struck, decrying their smoothness as evidence of a bourgeois life. [163]

Jonathan Unger's study of Canton, a major urban center, offers a more nuanced view of children's experiences during the Cultural Revolution, spanning the patriotic materials they encountered and the institutional structures shaping their education. In these comparatively well-resourced urban settings, school administrators introduced a range of revolutionary reading materials, frequently linking contemporary class struggles to earlier victories over Japanese forces or the Nationalist regime, an approach that parallels many of the children's stories analyzed in this chapter. Unger's findings,

---

[161] Emily Wu and Larry Engelmann, *Feather in the Storm: A Childhood Lost in Chaos*, reprint ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 133.
[162] Chihua Wen, *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 1.
[163] Chihua Wen, *The Red Mirror*, 15.

however, do not show a significant impact of these texts in and of themselves. Students were frequently more perceptive than one might assume, able to detect the formulaic quality of state propaganda. This skepticism is illustrated by "remembering bitterness, contemplate the sweet" assemblies that, over time, devolved into rote performances—many children recognized these events as staged rather than genuinely transformative.[164] Instead, more potent, real-world factors overshadowed any direct effect such publications might have had, ultimately explaining why young people became embroiled in political conflict or chose to engage in violent acts. Schools, in line with Party directives, worried that placing too much emphasis on academic performance would foster "careerism," so they did not encourage students to devote themselves exclusively to grades, effectively closing off academic achievement as an avenue of advancement for those without favorable class backgrounds.[165] Instead, they prioritized political loyalty, often through group-based activities such as "good deeds" campaigns.[166] Yet this collective model readily transformed into a contest over who could most visibly demonstrate allegiance, intensifying rivalries among students from different family backgrounds. This propels many students to participate passionately in class struggles, even resorting to violence, once the Cultural Revolution was fully underway.[167]

While Jonathan Unger's findings illuminate how urban schools in a major center like Canton channeled revolutionary fervor, rural settings often presented a distinctly different picture. In what follows, I draw on research on Raoyang 饒陽 County in Hebei

[164] Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton, 1960-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 98.
[165] Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao*, 71-72.
[166] Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao*, 98
[167] Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao*, 100.

Province, as well as an interview with my father, an elementary school student during the Cultural Revolution in Humen Town, Dongguan City—then a relatively impoverished locale. These examples underscore how the political atmosphere and the role of propaganda varied markedly between urban and rural contexts. In Raoyang County, Hebei Province, an economically less developed region, research indicates that "beating teachers," though common in some city schools, rarely occurred in rural elementary classrooms. According to one interviewee, classes there were briefly suspended for the Cultural Revolution, but factional clashes or "linking up" among students never took root. Instead, young pupils simply rehearsed cultural programs to praise revolutionary leaders. They generally welcomed the suspension of classes, relieved they could forgo exams, and their engagement in political activities leaned more toward red propaganda and music-and-dance routines than militant conflict.[168] Meanwhile, in rural areas like the southeastern coastal town of Humen in Dongguan, my father's account closely echoes the Raoyang scenario. He recalls that, despite certain families being labeled "landlords," no teacher was ever attacked, and teachers themselves took a genuine interest in students' academic progress. Children memorized Mao's quotations, but they did not actively engage in revolutionary struggles, nor did they undergo military training (though they did "learn from the peasants" by planting sweet potatoes, sometimes bringing the harvest home). Given the scarcity of resources and the relative poverty of many rural districts, children in the rural areas might have had limited access to, or familiarity with, officially sanctioned "revolutionary" literature, further constraining the influence of violent

[168] Xuefeng Feng, "'Wenge' shiqi de xiaoxue jiaoyu yanjiu" [Research on Primary Education during the "Cultural Revolution"] (Master's thesis, Party School of the Central Committee of C.P.C, 2016), 36–37, 40.

propaganda. These findings altogether demonstrate the complexity and unevenness of children's experiences with Cultural Revolution narratives: some readily embraced or even performed revolutionary fervor, others viewed it as mere theater, and still others had only marginal exposure to the propagandistic materials in question.

Conclusion

Returning to this chapter's title—"What Happens After Children Leave?"—we can trace how this concept evolved. From the May Fourth era onward, new conceptions of childhood imagined children departing from the traditional family. No longer merely obedient sons or daughters, they were to become the nation's "little citizens." During the Great Leap Forward, this vision advanced further as children actively employed their bodies in socialist construction. By the Cultural Revolution, however, this process of "leaving" grew radical. The state did not simply indoctrinate a blank slate; it harnessed the pre-existing "wildness" of childhood identified decades earlier. Parent–child bonds were undermined, and academic achievement was devalued. In its place came an unending commitment to class struggle. This ideological shift demonstrates both an inheritance of and a break from the earlier period: the state adopted the May Fourth discovery of children's agency but radically repurposed it, transforming "savage innocence" from a biological stage into a political weapon.

This weaponization was achieved through the mechanism of "joyful cruelty." As the narratives of Little Red Guards reveal, the state reconciled innocence and violence by operating through two distinct channels. First, it made reality opaque, masking the coercion of violence with representations of games, sports, and sanitized victories, effectively gamifying the act of killing. Second, it changed the moral color of aggression,

reframing violence against enemies and even violence against one's own body as a sacred, joyful duty. Examining these narratives reminds us that children's happiness under a revolutionary banner was a deeply orchestrated affair. The answer to the question of what the child gained by "stepping out" is thus revealed to be a tragic paradox. They did not find the autonomy of the individual envisioned by May Fourth intellectuals. Instead, they found a total integration into the state apparatus. By collapsing the distinction between pain and pleasure, the Cultural Revolution successfully restructured the child's affect. Children finally became 'innocent weapons' wielded by the state, fulfilling a destiny where leaving home meant neither independence nor depravity, but a state of being where the surrender of the self was celebrated as the supreme form of political joy.

Work Cited:

"A Liang" 阿良. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Shandong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 8 (1972): 1–7.

"Bravely Slaying Enemies: Sports Games" 英勇殺敵：體育遊戲 [Yingyong shadi: Tiyu youxi]. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Guangdong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 8 (1972): 18–19.

Chen, Minjie. "The Many Faces of Little Red Guards." Cotsen Children's Library Blog, Princeton University, September 20, 2012. https://blogs.princeton.edu/cotsen/2012/09/little-red-guards.

Dai, Weiqing 戴渭清. "Ertong wenxue de zhexue guan" 兒童文學的哲學觀 [The Philosophical Perspective of Children's Literature]. In *Tonghua pinglun* 童話評論 [Commentaries on Fairytales], edited by Zhou Jingshen 周鏡深, 92–101. Shanghai: Xinwenhua shushe, 1928.

Farquhar, Mary A. *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Feng, Xuefeng. "'Wenge' shiqi de xiaoxue jiaoyu yanjiu" 「文革」時期的小學教育研究 [Research on Primary Education during the "Cultural Revolution"]. Master's thesis, Party School of the Central Committee of C.P.C., 2016.

Frühstück, Sabine. *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

Galtung, Johan. "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291–305.

Gao, Hongbao. “Wei shaonian ertong tigong gengduo genghao de jingshen shiliang” 為少年兒童提供更多更好的精神食糧 [Provide More and Better Spiritual Food for Children]. *Wenyibao* 文藝報, no. 10 (1981): 3.

“Hankou yige xiaoxue chengli ertong gongchang” 漢口一個小學成立兒童工廠 [A Primary School in Hankou Establishes a Children’s Factory]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], June 1, 1955.

“Hong xiaobing zhiqin huaidan: Xiaoxiao lianhuanhua” 紅小兵智擒壞蛋：小小連環畫 [Little Red Guards Capture a Villain through Cleverness: Little Picture-Story]. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Guangdong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 3 (1970): 20–23.

Hongkou qu Shangqiu lu di yi xiaoxue Mao Zedong sixiang xuanchuan dui 虹口區商丘路第一小學毛澤東思想宣傳隊 [Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team of Shangqiu Road No. 1 Primary School, Hongkou District]. “Ouyang Hai shi de xiao yingxiong: Gushi biaoyan” 歐陽海式的小英雄：故事表演 [A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai: Story Performance]. In *Hong xiaobing wenyi xuanchuan ziliao* 紅小兵文藝宣傳資料 [Little Red Guards Literature and Art Propaganda Materials], edited by Compilation Group of Shanghai Jing’an District 上海靜安區編寫組, 44–48. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1970.

Jiang, Weipu 姜維樸. “Xin lianhuanhua yishu de sanshiwu nian” 新連環畫藝術的三十五年 [Thirty-Five Years of New Lianhuanhua Art]. *Meishu* 美術, no. 7 (1984): 51–56.

Jin, Jingmai 金敬邁. *Ouyang Hai zhi ge* 歐陽海之歌 [The Song of Ouyang Hai]. Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1966.

Kauffman, Andrew. "Imagining the New Socialist Child: The Cultural Afterlife of the Child Martyr Wang Erxiao." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 34 (2020): 1–23.

Larson, Wendy. *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Li, Zhi 李贄. "Tongxin shuo" 童心說 [Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind]. In *A Book to Burn and A Book to Keep (Hidden)*, edited and translated by Rivi Handler-Spitz, Pauline C. Lee, and Haun Saussy, 111–113. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Lu, Xun 魯迅. "Kuangren riji" 狂人日記 [Diary of a Madman]. In *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, 2–35. Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2000.

———. *Lu Xun lun ertong wenxue* 魯迅論兒童文學 [Lu Xun on Children's Literature]. Edited by Xu Yan. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2013.

———. "Nala chuzou yihou" 娜拉出走以後 [What Happens After Nora Leaves]. In *Fen* 墳 [The Grave]. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980.

Naftali, Orna. "Chinese Childhood in Conflict: Children, Gender, and Violence in China of the 'Cultural Revolution' Period (1966–1976)." *Oriens Extremus* 53 (2014): 85–110.

Unger, Jonathan. *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton, 1960–1980*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Wan, Laiming 萬籟鳴, dir. *Danao tiangong* 大鬧天宮 [The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven]. Shanghai: Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1961–1964.

Wen, Chihua. *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.

Wu, Emily. *Feather in the Storm: A Childhood Lost in Chaos*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2008.

Xia, Mianzun 夏丏尊. "Xu" 序 [Preface]. In *Ai de jiaoyu* 愛的教育 [Education of Love], by Edmondo De Amicis, translated by Xia Mianzun, 1–2. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004.

Xu, Xu. "'Chairman Mao's Child': *Sparkling Red Star* and the Construction of Children in the Chinese Cultural Revolution." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 381–409.

Zhang, Fang 張放. "Zhongguo shaoxiandui rongyu wenhua xingcheng de kaocha (1949–1955)" 中國少先隊榮譽文化形成的考察（1949–1955） [An Investigation into the Formation of the Honor Culture in China's Young Pioneers (1949–1955)]. *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 中共黨史研究, no. 11 (2014): 24–34.

Zhang, Jianqing 張建青, and Yaowu Wu 吳耀武. "Cong *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* dao *Ai de jiaoyu*—Yidali xiaoshuo *Cuore* Zhongguo bainian (1905–2015) Han yi jianshi" 從《兒童修身之情感》到《愛的教育》——意大利小說 *Cuore* 中國百年（1905–2015）漢譯簡史 [From *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* to *Ai de jiaoyu*: A Brief History of the Chinese Translation of the Italian Novel *Cuore* Over a Century (1905–2015)]. *Zhongguo fanyi* 中國翻譯, no. 3 (2015): 48–52.

Zhao, Hongben 趙宏本, and Qian Xiaodai 錢笑呆. *Sun Wukong sanda baigujing* 孫悟空三打白骨精 [Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon]. Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014.

Zheng, Leting. "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025): 39–61.

Zhou, Zuoren 周作人. "Ertong de wenxue" 兒童的文學 [Children's Literature]. In *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue* 周作人論兒童文學 [Zhou Zuoren's Discourse on Children's Literature], edited by Liu Xuyuan 劉緒源, 122–130. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2012.

———. "Xiaoer zhengdou zhi yanjiu" 小兒爭鬥之研究 [Study on Children's Quarrel]. In *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue* 周作人論兒童文學 [Zhou Zuoren's Discourse on Children's Literature], edited by Liu Xuyuan, 59–68. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2012.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The strategic mobilization of the "happy child" for political ends is a widespread global phenomenon, visible across regimes, from capitalist to state-socialist systems. This practice appears to be a hallmark not of the modern nation-state in the abstract, but more specifically of its most intense projects: nation-building, ideological competition, and the consolidation of state power. During modern times, the "happy child," endlessly reproduced in state media, becomes a potent visual argument for a regime's legitimacy, vitality, and guaranteed future.

The Cold War period offers a stark example of this dynamic. The two superpowers, representing dueling ideologies, both weaponized the figure of the child by fabricating images of their own children's happiness to prove the superiority of their ideologies, while attacking their opponents' ideologies through their children's images. As Margaret Peacock argues in *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*, on the American side, the ubiquitous image of the happy American child assumed Cold War significance. Joyful American kids were everywhere in the 1950s. Life magazine, which carried an average of fourteen images of children in each of its issues from 1949 until 1963, offered regular feature articles on American children that reported predominantly on the happiness and carefree innocence of the young. Feature stories offered snapshots of the happy lives being led by children in places like "Rocket City," California, where youngsters could play while their fathers carried on weapons research. "The bomb leaves rocket-like clouds of dust," one such caption from 1948 read, showing boys joyously dragging an old practice bomb along an

automobile rut. Such visions testified to the harmless joy of children under the protective umbrella of a powerful nation. While a far more diverse group of television producers, publishers, advertisers, and politicians manufactured these visions in the 1950s, the image of the child that they produced nonetheless bore striking resemblances to those being constructed on the other side of the Iron Curtain.[169]

The state-socialist model, conversely, often linked children's happiness directly to the figure of the leader. In the Soviet Union, state media meticulously portrayed children enjoying a "happy abundance" in Pioneer camps—complete with "three good meals, clean sheets, and wholesome fun"—to "legitimize the planned economy" and project an image of material success. Crucially, this happiness was framed as a gift bestowed by the state and its patriarch. In the years after the war, Stalin and the Communist Party marshaled the population again to rally behind the socialist project and the figure of the vozhd', the great leader. As Peacock details, the performance of happiness was a public duty. When Svetlana, with her braids tied in bows and her Pioneer tie carefully knotted, took the stage to talk about the country's future and the next generation's ability to defend it, much was at stake. After shuffling her papers and clearing her throat, she declared in a high, well-trained voice that "Soviet children are the happiest children in the world.[170] Today, here, in the Kremlin, we give warm thanks for our happy childhood, for the real and ever-more beautiful future that the Bolshevik Party has offered us, and for our dear and loving Joseph Visarionovich Stalin." This logic of state-bestowed happiness is visible in an even more pervasive form in North Korea. As Barbara Demick's *Nothing*

[169] Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 22.
[170] Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, 17.

to Envy describes, the entire state apparatus is geared toward producing this singular narrative. The visual landscape is dominated by propaganda posters depicting Kim Il-sung as "the sun," smiling "benevolently at a group of brightly dressed children crowding around him." This visual regime is reinforced by omnipresent, red-lettered slogans that "leap out of the gray landscape," declaring, "We have nothing to envy in the world." In this context, "happiness" is not just a projection of abundance; it is a mandatory performance of gratitude to the leader, a decree that seeks to replace reality itself.[171]

Like these 20th-century regimes, 20th-century China also extensively mobilized the figure of the child for its political projects. These comparative cases, when viewed alongside the Chinese trajectory detailed in this dissertation, powerfully confirm this project's central theoretical argument: childhood is best understood not as a passive stage of human development or a mere social construct, but as an intangible contested space—a dynamic battlefield where adult anxieties, ideologies, and fantasies converge and clash. In this framework, children function as empty signifiers, endlessly appropriated as metaphors for societal aspirations and fears, allowing diverse forces—from state apparatuses and educators to families—to project visions of the future onto them.

This dissertation has traced the mechanisms of this contestation across three distinct, yet interconnected, moments in modern Chinese history. Chapter One, "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines," analyzed the profound "pictorial turn" in children's representations. It demonstrated how, during the May Fourth era, the premodern depiction of children as miniature adults or symbols of prosperity was radically replaced

[171] Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea* (London: Granta Books, 2010), 12.

by new images of "cute," autonomous individuals. This transformation was shown to be far more than an aesthetic shift; it was a fundamental reconfiguration of childhood itself, driven by transnational Euro-American philosophies. The chapter revealed the core paradox of this era: the celebration of the child's "natural" freedom was harnessed to serve a deeply nationalistic agenda. Chapter Two, "'Documenting' the Happiness of Labor During the Great Leap Forward: Children's Film and the Making of Modern Socialist Childhood," examined how the very definition of happiness was re-engineered for socialist construction. It challenged monolithic views of propaganda by revealing a period of artistic debate and experimentation in early PRC children's film. The analysis demonstrated how these films systematically displaced the May Fourth-era's child-centered, play-focused ideals, replacing them with a new revolutionary discourse where happiness was achieved through collective labor. Finally, Chapter Three, "What Happens After Children Leave Home?: Happy Children as 'Innocent Weapons' and Revolutionary Violence Narratives in the Cultural Revolution," investigated the apex of this political-affective mobilization.

While this dissertation is inspired by the comparative insights of scholars like Margaret Peacock, its primary contribution lies in its distinct context, methodology, and theoretical framework. Methodologically, it is not a study confined to a single discipline, such as history, literature, or media studies. Instead, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach, synthesizing archival research with the analysis of diverse materials, including literature, film, and graphic arts. This is combined with a transnational perspective that traces how Euro-American and Japanese theories of childhood were disseminated, localized, and ultimately reinvented within the modern Chinese context. Theoretically,

the dissertation's primary intervention is its use of an affect theory framework to explore happiness. It moves beyond treating happiness as a simple emotion, instead conceptualizing it as a political-affective resource, and examines how this affect was produced, circulated, and mobilized to serve state-building projects.

This field of global children's studies, while vibrant, remains heavily dominated by Anglophone and Eurocentric perspectives. Scholarly work on Asian childhoods is notably limited, with studies focusing on 20th-century China being even scarcer. This dissertation seeks to fill this critical gap, bringing the unique trajectory of modern Chinese childhood—with its distinct political, cultural, and material mechanisms—into the center of the scholarly conversation. In doing so, this project serves as a necessary corrective, providing an opportunity for the field to reflect on its theoretical assumptions. It challenges the presumed universality of Western-derived frameworks and demonstrates their profound limitations when applied to non-Western contexts, urging a more nuanced and globally representative approach to the study of childhood.

Beyond its intervention in global children's studies, this dissertation also makes several critical contributions to the field of modern Chinese studies itself. While studies of modern Chinese childhood have emerged since the 2000s, the field remains relatively niche, leaving significant and compelling gaps for further inquiry. A primary contribution of this project is its longitudinal scope, which bridges the conventional divide between the Republican era and the People's Republic of China. By tracing the concept of "happiness" from its articulation in commercial magazines to its radical redefinition in state-led socialist propaganda, this dissertation reveals the precise mechanisms of ideological change and media transformation across a pivotal historical threshold.

Furthermore, this project is not only a work of children's studies but also a contribution to modern Chinese studies more broadly, using the child as a unique and powerful analytical lens. In doing so, it fills specific evidentiary gaps in several adjacent subfields. For instance, the canon of socialist-era children's films constitutes a unique cinematic category that has been almost entirely overlooked by film historians. This project recovers this archive, offering a more complete understanding of filmmaking practices during the "Seventeen Years" period. Similarly, the focus on the Little Red Guards provides a new perspective on the Cultural Revolution, shifting attention away from the heavily studied Red Guards to a more marginalized, yet equally revealing, subject group. Through this lens, this dissertation offers a fresh perspective for re-examining the history and politics of modern China.

From Dissertation to Book: A Concrete Plan for Revision

For my monograph, I will revise the title of the project to "Futuring the Nation: Happiness, Affective Economies, and Contested Childhoods in Modern China." In the twentieth century, across divergent ideological landscapes—from the United States to the Soviet Union and East Asia—the child emerged as the universal symbol of the future. I conceptualize the modern history of Chinese childhood as a history of "futuring"—an active, engineered process where the state mobilizes the child's body and emotions to materialize its temporal aspirations.

The theoretical core of this book engages with Sarah Ahmed's concept of "affective economies." Ahmed posits that emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation. In this model, value is generated via a logic of accumulation through

circulation. However, my work complicates this theory by demonstrating that the mechanisms of affect are not limited to the logic of free market circulation. This book reveals that the modern Chinese experience was defined by a dynamic tripartite evolution. It began with the open circulations of the Republican era, which then gave way to the establishment of a "state-planned economy of affect" under socialism. Unlike the capitalist model described by Ahmed—where affect accumulates value through open circulation—the socialist state functioned as a planning authority, strictly regulating the production, allocation, and consumption of emotional energy. Instead of facilitating a free market of feelings, the state engaged in the strategic valorization of specific emotions to power the machinery of national legitimacy. This trajectory concludes with the transition to a neoliberal order in the post-socialist era, characterized by the state's retreat.

Chapter Breakdown

- **Chapter One: Economies of Affect: From Open Circulations to State Planning (New Chapter).** This new theoretical chapter represents a critical intervention in transforming the dissertation into a cohesive monograph, providing the conceptual architecture that binds the project's historical arc. It articulates the book's core framework by examining how the Republican era initially follows Ahmed's market-based model in her concept of "affective economies," wherein emotions accrue value through open, liberated circulation between subjects. During this period, diverse actors, from commercial forces to intellectuals, competed to shape the ideal child, producing a heterogeneous landscape in which "cuteness" circulated as just one among many affective currents. The chapter then demonstrates how the socialist transition complicates

this model. The state intervened to monopolize this circulation, replacing the open flow of the market with a centralized plan that narrowed the parameters of an ideal childhood to a singular definition: the happy, self-sacrificing subject of revolutionary collective life. Finally, the narrative concludes by tracing the transition to a post-socialist neoliberal order, at which time the state's retreat gave rise to a market-driven anxiety that reconfigures the logic of futuring.

- **Chapter Two: Cuteness as Political Capital (Revised from Dissertation).** This chapter explores the open circulation of the Republican era through the lens of a major "pictorial turn." I trace in the May Fourth era (1920s) how representations of children shifted from premodern depictions of "miniature adults" confined to domestic gardens to the "cute" (*ke'ai*), autonomous individuals of the May Fourth era engaged in outdoor play. Validating the circulatory logic of Ahmed's theory, I show how "cuteness" functioned as a freely circulating currency in a competitive marketplace of ideas. While this new imagery—influenced by transnational theories of Rousseau and Dewey—framed childhood as a time of natural freedom, I argue that this "cutification" was paradoxically tethered to a nationalistic agenda. Beneath the celebration of the child's natural instincts lay the expectation that they would grow into strong national citizens. This tension between the natural and the national reveals that the rhetoric of liberation, in practice, aligned with the demands of the state.
- **Chapter Three: Happiness as State-Building (Revised from Dissertation).** Moving into the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) during the socialist period, this chapter mines the underexplored archive of children's films to analyze how Great

Leap Forward "documentary art films" served as a dynamic space for constructing a "modern socialist childhood." I demonstrate that the cultural production of Socialist children during the early years of the PRC did not begin as a rigid political paradigm. Instead, it passed through a vibrant phase of debates and artistic experiments before devolving into repetitive, low-quality vehicles of political messaging under intensifying ideological pressures. By focusing on happiness as a central affect in these films, I reveal a fundamental departure from the May Fourth–era evolutionary logic and its reliance on soft, domestic affects like cuteness. In its place, the state leveraged the immersive power of cinematic construction—marking an escalation in its engineering capabilities—to valorize a revolutionary discourse in which happiness was rooted not in familial bonds, but in the collective labor essential for socialist construction.

The chapter demonstrates how the socialist transition complicates the market model. The state intervened to monopolize this circulation, replacing the open flow of the market with a centralized plan that narrowed the ideal childhood to a singular definition: the happy, self-sacrificing subject of revolutionary collective life. I theorize this shift through two key mechanisms. First, a strategic displacement of affective currencies: the state recognized that "cuteness"—rooted in domesticity and soft caregiving instincts—was insufficient for large-scale political mobilization. In its place, the state valorized a new currency of "revolutionary happiness" derived from collective labor. Second, an escalation in engineering technologies: while commercial cinema existed in the Republican era (often depicting tragic orphans), the socialist state leveraged the immersive power

of cinematic construction to strengthen sensory control. By engineering the "socialist smile," the state transformed the screen into a vehicle for state building, marking the consolidation of the planned economy.

- **Chapter Four: The Void of the Playground (New Chapter).** This new chapter introduces a material and spatial dimension to the book's analysis of affective engineering. It connects the preceding Chapters Two and Three by interrogating the concept of "play" itself, revealing how its function in the Chinese context—across Republican and Socialist eras, differed fundamentally from Euro-American models. It interrogates the epistemological instability of the "playground" in twentieth-century China. Unlike the Western model, where the playground emerged as a distinct enclosure to protect "play for play's sake," the Chinese equivalent functioned as a linguistic and conceptual void. I trace this ambiguity to a deeper pedagogical absence: the lack of "unstructured play" as a recognized goal in the Chinese imagination. Without a teleological belief in play as an essential right, there was no need for a sacred enclosure dedicated solely to it. This conceptual vacuum provided the perfect plasticity for state intervention. Because the space was anchored not by the sanctity of play but by movable objects, it became a fluid site readily appropriated by shifting political agendas. Drawing on the trajectory from the 1920s to the 1950s, I demonstrate how this plasticity facilitated the space's repurposing. In the 1920s, educators like Chen Heqin used imported slides and swings to carve out an educational space. However, as the national crisis intensified in the 1930s, these props were swapped for stages for the performance of "salvation plays." Finally, during the Great Leap

Forward, the boundaries of the playground collapsed entirely: schoolyards were repurposed into sites of industrial production where students built "backyard furnaces." Here, the "playground" became a microcosm of the factory, transforming the child from a "player" into a "laborer" whose physical energy was harnessed for the state.

- **Chapter Five: The Affective Discipline of Anger (Revised from Dissertation).** This chapter examines the representational violence of children across different media during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). For this book manuscript, I will pivot the analysis away from the spectacle of violence that is central into my dissertation to the specific "affective pedagogy" that engineered it: the cultivation of anger. Within this state-planned economy of affect, anger was valorized as a productive and essential emotion. The state systematically taught children not only how to hate but whom and when to hate—specifically when confronting class enemies. This chapters demonstrates how the state transformed the child's destructive impulses into essential affective labor, where the capacity to perform correct anger became the ultimate measure of revolutionary loyalty.
- **Epilogue: The Afterlife of the Socialist Affective Economy — "Son-Phobia" on Social Media Platforms (New Chapter).** Serving as the book's conclusion, this newly added chapter traces the afterlife of the state-planned economy—functioning both as an economic system and as a regime of affect—in the contemporary era. Drawing on a digital ethnography of China's leading social media lifestyle platform, RedBook, this epilogue analyzes the emergence of a new digital phenomenon: the wave of "son-phobia." In a counter-intuitive inversion of

traditional patriarchal norms, pregnant women increasingly create posts and comments expressing intense anxiety upon giving birth to boys, or engage in online rituals of "digitally receiving" luck to manifest daughters (*jie nübao*).

I analyze this sentiment through a dual lens. On one level, these expressions often function as a performative shield, adopted to preempt feminist backlash against traditional "son-preference." However, beneath this discursive strategy lies a genuine, utilitarian dread driven by China's transition to a neo-liberal reality. Here, anxiety emerges not merely as a private emotion, but as a dominant affect produced by relentless market pressures that circulates through digital networks. Unlike the Maoist era when the state monopolized emotional allocation, affect has returned to circulation, yet it is now governed by the imperatives of the market. The dismantling of the socialist "Iron Rice Bowl," characterized by the state's retreat from the provision of social welfare, specifically housing, healthcare, and elder care, has forced families to view reproduction through a ruthless cost-benefit lens. Consequently, the desirability of producing a male heir has been re-evaluated: no longer the ultimate asset of an agrarian past, sons are now perceived as a source of financial dread in a hyper-competitive capitalist housing market. This epilogue reveals how the logic of "futuring" persists: even though the state no longer monopolizes emotional allocation, the "engineering of the child" continues, now dictated by the market's imperative to manage risk in an era of precarious social welfare.

Works Cited

Peacock, Margaret. *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Demick, Barbara. *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea*. London: Granta Books, 2010.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. “Happy Objects.” In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

“Ai wenhua ai laodong: Wei dayuejin chu yifen li” 愛文化愛勞動：為大躍進出一份力 [Loving Culture, Loving Labor: Contributing to the Great Leap Forward]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], June 1, 1958.

“A Liang” 阿良. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Shandong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 8 (1972): 1–7.

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage Books, 1962.

Barnhart, Richard, and Catherine Barnhart. “Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry.” In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 31–71. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002.

Bartholomew, Terese Tse. “One Hundred Children: From Boys at Play to Icons of Good Fortune.” In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 57–83. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002.

Bazalgette, Cary, and Terry Staples. “Unshrinking the Kids: Children’s Cinema and the Family Film.” In *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, edited by Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham, 92–108. London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1995.

"Bravely Slaying Enemies: Sports Games" 英勇殺敵：體育遊戲 [Yingyong shadi: Tiyu youxi]. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Guangdong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 8 (1972): 18–19.

Chen, Bo 陳播, ed. *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi* 中國電影編年紀事 [Chronicle of Chinese Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo wenxian chubanshe, 2005.

Chen, Bochui 陳伯吹. "Cong 'Huiyan' tan tonghua tezheng yu chuangzuo" 從《慧眼》談童話特徵與創作 [Discussing the Characteristics and Creation of Fairy Tales from "Magic Eyes"] (1956). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 469–479. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

———. "Jiaoyu de yiyi bixu qiangdiao" 教育的意義必須強調 [The Significance of Education Must Be Emphasized] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 355–363. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Chen, Huangmei 陳荒煤. "Jianjue badao yinmu shang de baiqi: 1957 nian dianying yishupian zhong cuowu sixiang qingxiang de pipan" 堅決拔倒銀幕上的白旗——1957 年電影藝術片中錯誤思想傾向的批判 [Resolutely Pull Down the White Flag on the Screen: Criticism of Erroneous Ideological Trends in 1957 Feature Films]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People's Daily], December 2, 1958.

———. "Xiang geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi qianjin de kaishi" 向革命的現實主義和革命的浪漫主義前進的開始 [The Beginning of Moving

Towards Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism]. In *Lun jiluxing yishupian* 論紀錄性藝術片 [On Artistic Documentaries], edited by Chen Huangmei 陳荒煤, 2–9. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1958.

Chen, Huangmei 陳荒煤, ed. *Dangdai Zhongguo dianying (shang)* 當代中國電影（上）[Contemporary Chinese Film, Vol. 1]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989.

Chen, Minjie. "The Many Faces of Little Red Guards." Cotsen Children's Library Blog, Princeton University, September 20, 2012. https://blogs.princeton.edu/cotsen/2012/09/little-red-guards.

Chen, Ruhui 陳汝惠. "Zai ertong wenxue zhendishang shijian geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi" 在兒童文學陣地上實践革命的現實主義和革命的浪漫主義 [Practicing Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism in the Field of Children's Literature]. *Xiamen daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 廈門大學學報（社會科學版）(1959): 55–66.

Chen, Shanwen 陳善文. "Guanyu tonghua 'Huiyan' de yixie wenti" 關於童話《慧眼》的一些問題 [On Some Problems of the Fairy Tale "Magic Eyes"] (1956). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 451–457. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Chen, Shih-Wen Sue. "Children, Learning, and Play in the *Mengxue bao* (*The Children's Educator*, 1897–1902)." *International Research in Children's Literature* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–16.

Cheng, Jihua 程季華. “Guanyu yishuxing jilupian de yici baogao” 關於藝術性紀錄片的一次報告 [A Report on Artistic Documentaries]. In *Zhou Enlai yu dianying* 周恩來與電影 [Zhou Enlai and Film], edited by Chen Huangmei 陳荒煤 and Chen Bo 陳播, 247–261. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1995.

Cheng, Jihua 程季華, ed. *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* 中國電影發展史 [History of the Development of Chinese Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1980.

Dai, Weiqing 戴渭清. “Ertong wenxue de zhexue guan” 兒童文學的哲學觀 [The Philosophical Perspective of Children’s Literature]. In *Tonghua pinglun* 童話評論 [Commentaries on Fairytales], edited by Zhou Jingshen 周鏡深, 92–101. Shanghai: Xinwenhua shushe, 1928.

Dale, Joshua Paul, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra. “The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness.” In *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, edited by Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra, 1–34. New York: Routledge, 2017.

“Dali de xiang ertong jinxing zongluxian de xuanchuan jiaoyu” 大力地向兒童進行總路線的宣傳教育 [Vigorously Carry Out Propaganda and Education on the General Line for Children]. *Jiangsu jiaoyu* 江蘇教育 (1958): 9–10.

Demick, Barbara. *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea*. London: Granta Books, 2010.

Dewey, John. “Fulu: Xiandai jiaoyu de qushi” 附錄：現代教育的趨勢 [Appendix: The Trends of Modern Education, Dr. Dewey’s Lecture in Beijing]. *Fujian jiaoyu xingzheng yuekan* 1, no. 1 (1920): 1–9.

———. “Xiaoxue jiaoyu de xin qushi” 小學教育的新趨勢 [The New Trends in Elementary Education: Dr. Dewey’s Lecture at Jiaxing]. Translated by Xi Minggui. *Guangyi zazhi*, no. 33 (1922): 1–4.

Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk. *Little Friends: Children’s Film and Media Culture in China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk, and Noel Brown. “Children’s Film Culture.” In *The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents, and Media*, edited by Dafna Lemish, 93–100. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Du, Daisy Yan. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019.

Farquhar, Mary Ann. *Children’s Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

Fei, Xiyin 費錫胤. “Kuaile de ertong: [Shi]” 快樂的兒童：詩 [Happy Children: A Poem]. *Ertong shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 27–32.

Feng, Xuefeng. “‘Wenge’ shiqi de xiaoxue jiaoyu yanjiu” 「文革」時期的小學教育研究 [Research on Primary Education during the “Cultural Revolution”]. Master’s thesis, Party School of the Central Committee of C.P.C., 2016.

Frühstück, Sabine. *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

“Fumu zhi dao: Ertong yundong” 父母之道：兒童運動 [The Way of Parenting: Children’s Sports]. *Xinghua* 31, no. 21 (1934): 13–14.

Galtung, Johan. “Cultural Violence.” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291–305.

Gao, Hongbao 高洪波. “Wei shaonian ertong tigong gengduo genghao de jingshen shiliang” 為少年兒童提供更多更好的精神食糧 [Provide More and Better Spiritual Food for Children]. *Wenyibao* 文藝報, no. 10 (1981): 3.

Glosser, Susan L. *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Gong, Jiong 龔炯. “Zaitan ‘Bixu baolu yinanmian’” 再談「必須暴露陰暗面」 [Further Discussion on “The Dark Side Must Be Exposed”] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 347–349. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

“Hankou yige xiaoxue chengli ertong gongchang” 漢口一個小學成立兒童工廠 [A Primary School in Hankou Establishes a Children’s Factory]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], June 1, 1955.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism.” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 10–22.

“Hong xiaobing zhiqin huaidan: Xiaoxiao lianhuanhua” 紅小兵智擒壞蛋：小小連環畫 [Little Red Guards Capture a Villain through Cleverness: Little Picture-Story]. *Hongxiaobing* 紅小兵 (Guangdong ed.) [Little Red Guards], no. 3 (1970): 20–23.

Hongkou qu Shangqiu lu di yi xiaoxue Mao Zedong sixiang xuanchuan dui 虹口區商丘路第一小學毛澤東思想宣傳隊 [Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team of

Shangqiu Road No. 1 Primary School, Hongkou District]. “Ouyang Hai shi de xiao yingxiong: Gushi biaoyan” 歐陽海式的小英雄：故事表演 [A Little Hero in the Spirit of Ouyang Hai: Story Performance]. In *Hong xiaobing wenyi xuanchuan ziliao* 紅小兵文藝宣傳資料 [Little Red Guards Literature and Art Propaganda Materials], edited by Compilation Group of Shanghai Jing’an District 上海靜安區編寫組, 44–48. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1970.

Hsiung, Ping-chen 熊秉真. *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.

———. *Youyi yu youmeng: Jinshi Zhongguo shehui de mianyan zhi dao* 幼醫與幼蒙：近世中國社會的緜延之道 [Pediatrics and Early Education: A History of Reproductive Strategies of Chinese Society]. Xinbei: Lianjing chuban gongsi, 2018.

Huxley, Thomas H. *Tianyan lun* 天演論 [On Evolution]. Translated by Yan Fu 嚴復. 1898. Reprint, Beijing: Yilin chubanshe, 2011.

Jia, Yi 賈宜. “Bangzhu haizimen renshi shenghuo” 幫助孩子們認識生活 [Helping Children Understand Life]. *Dushu yuebao* 讀書月報 (1958): 12.

———. “Tianzhu kui he zhixie gongren de nü’er” 天竺葵和製鞋工人的女兒 [The Geranium and the Shoemaker’s Daughter]. In *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* 1958 年兒童文學選, 345–352. Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959.

———. “Xuyan” 序言 [Preface]. In *1958 nian ertong wenxue xuan* 1958 年兒童文學選, 3–15. Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1959.

———. “Zhihui de yuyan, ruili de wuqi” 智慧的寓言，銳利的武器 [Wise Fables, Sharp Weapons] (1957). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 557–568. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Jiang, Weipu 姜維樸. “Xin lianhuanhua yishu de sanshiwu nian” 新連環畫藝術的三十五年 [Thirty-Five Years of New Lianhuanhua Art]. *Meishu* 美術, no. 7 (1984): 51–56.

Jiang, Yuanqin 姜元琴. “Zenyang shi shenti qiangjian: Jiangyanci (futu)” 怎樣使身體強健：講演詞（附圖）[How to Strengthen the Body: Lecture (with Illustrations)]. *Ertong shijie* 32, no. 7 (1934): 33–45.

Jin, Jin 金近. “Wenxue de teshu xingshi—tonghua” 文學的特殊形式——童話 [A Special Form of Literature—Fairy Tales] (1954). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 569–589. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Jin, Jingmai 金敬邁. *Ouyang Hai zhi ge* 歐陽海之歌 [The Song of Ouyang Hai]. Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1966.

Jones, Andrew F. *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Kakimoto, Mayo. *Jidō zasshi no tanjō* [The Birth of Children’s Magazines]. Tokyo: Bungaku tsūshin, 2023.

Kauffman, Andrew. “Imagining the New Socialist Child: The Cultural Afterlife of the Child Martyr Wang Erxiao.” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 34 (2020): 1–23.

King, Richard. “Romancing the Leap: Euphoria in the Moment before Disaster.” In *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China’s Great Leap Forward and Famine*, edited by Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, 51–71. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011.

Kinney, Anne Behnke. *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Larson, Wendy. *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Li, Botang 李伯棠. “Ertong yundong youxi yuanze de yanjiu” 兒童運動遊戲原則的研究 [A Study on the Principles of Children’s Sports and Games]. *Jiangsu sheng xiaoxue jiaoshi banyuekan* 1, no. 16 (1934): 2–4.

Li, Jie. *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.

Li, Zhi 李贄. “Tongxin shuo” 童心說 [Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind]. In *A Book to Burn and A Book to Keep (Hidden)*, edited and translated by Rivi Handler-Spitz, Pauline C. Lee, and Haun Saussy, 111–113. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Liang, Qichao 梁啟超. “Cong quwei chufa” 從趣味出發 [Starting from Interest]. In *Liang Qichao lun jiaoyu* 梁啟超論教育 [Liang Qichao on Education], edited by

Dong Fangkui 董方奎 and Chen Fuyi 陳夫義, 275–277. Haikou: Sanhuan chubanshe, 2007. Originally delivered as a speech titled “Quwei jiaoyu yu jiaoyu quwei” 趣味教育與教育趣味 [Education of Interest and Educational Interest] on April 10, 1922.

Lin, A’mian 林阿棉. *Zhongguo ertong dianying biannian jishi 1922–2011* 中國兒童電影編年紀事 1922–2011 [Chronicle of Chinese Children’s Films 1922–2011]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Lorenz, Konrad. *Studies in Animal and Human Behaviour*. Vol. 2. Translated by R. Martin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971. Originally published 1950.

Lu, Xun 魯迅. “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記 [Diary of a Madman]. In *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, 2–35. Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2000.

———. *Lu Xun lun ertong wenxue* 魯迅論兒童文學 [Lu Xun on Children’s Literature]. Edited by Xu Yan 徐妍. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2013.

———. “Nala chuzou yihou” 娜拉出走以後 [What Happens After Nora Leaves]. In *Fen* 墳 [The Grave]. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1980.

Naftali, Orna. “Chinese Childhood in Conflict: Children, Gender, and Violence in China of the ‘Cultural Revolution’ Period (1966–1976).” *Oriens Extremus* 53 (2014): 85–110.

Ngai, Sianne. “Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai.” By Adam Jasper. *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 43 (Fall 2011). https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php.

———. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Ouyang, Shan 歐陽山. “Huiyan” 慧眼 [Magic Eyes] (1956). In *Ouyang Shan wenji di san juan: Zhong, duanpian xiaoshuo 1954–1981* 歐陽山文集第三卷：中、短篇小說 1954–1981, 1065–1127. Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1988.

Peacock, Margaret. *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Prokhorov, Alexander. “Arresting Development: A Brief History of Soviet Cinema for Children and Adolescents.” In *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, edited by Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova, 129–152. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Qi, Chenxi 戚晨曦. “Shehui meiyu he yishu yundong: Cai Yuanpei he Lin Fengmian de jiaoyu gaige shijian (1920–30 niandai)” 社會美育和藝術運動：蔡元培和林風眠的教育改革實践 [Social Aesthetic Education and the “Art Movement”: Cai Yuanpei and Lin Fengmian’s Educational Reforms in the 1920s–30s]. PhD diss., Zhongguo meishu xueyuan 中國美術學院 [China Academy of Art], 2017.

Qi, Zhi 啟之, and Di Wu 吳迪. “Lun ‘jilu xing yishu pian’” 論「紀錄性藝術片」 [On “Artistic Documentaries”]. *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影 (2007): 73–84.

Qian, Ying. *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

“Qiu ze de zi” 求則得子 [Pray and You Will Have Your Children Back]. *Xiaohai yuebao*, no. 3 (1875): 1–3.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “Ai’mi’er” 愛彌兒 [Emile]. Translated by Feng Keshu 馮克書. *Jiaoyu congkan* 教育叢刊 5, no. 1 (1924): 1–5.

———. *Emile, or Education*. Translated by Barbara Foxley. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925.

Ruan, Jihe 阮紀鶴. “Youhai shenxin jiankang” 有害身心健康 [Harmful to Physical and Mental Health] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 351–352. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

Sakakura, Yuji. “Nihon kara Chūgoku ni watatta Emīru—Nakajima Tadashizō ni yoru kanyaku *Ai’mei’er chao* (1903 nen) no butaiura” [From Japan to China, the Emile That Crossed Over—The Backstage of the Chinese Translation *Ai’mei’er chao* (1903) by Nakajima Tadashizō]. *Wasedadaigaku daigakuin kyōikugaku kenkyūka kiyō* 3, no. 30 (2020): 41–53.

“Shaonian ertong dianying zhou zai Beijing juxing kaimu shi” 少年兒童電影週在北京舉行開幕式 [Opening Ceremony of Children’s Film Week Held in Beijing]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], February 19, 1956.

Shinmura, Tōru. “Akai tori to Chūgoku” [*Akai tori* and China]. In *Akai Tori jiten*, edited by Akai Tori Jiten Henshū Iinkai, 36–38. Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 2018.

Songren puzao tu 宋人撲棗圖 [Song People Catching Jujubes]. Song dynasty, 960–1279. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Soong, Ching-ling 宋慶齡. “Shenme shi xingfu” 什麼是幸福 [What Is Happiness]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], June 1, 1954.

Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Tillman, Margaret. *Raising China's Revolutionaries: Modernizing Childhood for Cosmopolitan Nationalists and Liberated Comrades, 1920s–1950s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Unger, Jonathan. *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton, 1960–1980*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Voronina, Olga. "'The Only Universal National Text': On the Centennial of Soviet Children's Literature and Film." In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, edited by Olga Voronina, 2–46. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Wang, Geng. "Ertong yu youxi yundong" 兒童與遊戲運動 [Children and the Movement of Games]. *Rensheng zazhi* 7 (1924): 12.

Wang, Gerui. "Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China." *Journal of Chinese History* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–33. https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2023.13.

Wang, Qihan 王齊翰, attr. *Heting yingxi tu* 荷亭嬰戲圖 [Women and Children by a Lotus Pond]. Formerly attributed to Wang Qihan (act. 961–975); now dated to Southern Song, first half of 13th century. Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on silk. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Wang, Shouren 王守仁. "Xunmeng dayi shi jiaodu Liu Bosong deng" 訓蒙大意示教讀劉伯颂等 [The General Aims of Elementary Education: Shown to Teacher Liu Bosong and Others]. In *Wang Wencheng gong quanshu* 王文成公全書 [Complete

Works of Wang Wencheng], vol. 1, annotated by Wang Xiaoxin 王曉昕 and Zhao Pinglue 趙平略, 108–110. Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2015.

Wei, Zhicheng 魏志澄. "Jiangyanci: Zenyang yufang jibing" 講演詞：怎樣預防疾病 [Lecture: How to Prevent Diseases]. *Ertong shijie* 32, no. 10 (1934): 13–16.

Wen, Chihua. *The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.

"Wenhua bu dianying ju daibu qicao guanyu 'tongzhi ge di wenhua zhuguan bumen zai you tiaojian de chengshi yingyuan zhong shiban ertong chang' wengao" 文化部電影局代部起草關於「通知各地文化主管部門在有條件的城市影院中試辦兒童場」文稿 [Draft Notice on Trial Screening of Children's Sessions]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People's Daily], November 14, 1953.

"Wenhua bu fachu 'Guanyu jiaqiang dianying fangying he faxing gongzuo de zhishi'" 文化部發出《關於加強電影放映和發行工作的指示》[Ministry of Culture Issues "Instructions on Strengthening Film Screening and Distribution Work"]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People's Daily], December 12, 1953.

Wicks, Ann Barrott, and Ellen B. Avril. "Introduction: Children in Chinese Art." In *Children in Chinese Art*, edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, 1–30. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

Wu, Emily. *Feather in the Storm: A Childhood Lost in Chaos*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2008.

Xia, Mianzun 夏乏尊. “Xu” 序 [Preface]. In *Ai de jiaoyu* 愛的教育 [Education of Love], by Edmondo De Amicis, translated by Xia Mianzun, 1–2. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004.

———. “Xu *Ai de jiaoyu*” 續《愛的教育》 [Continuation of *Education of Love*]. *Jiaoyu zazhi* 教育雜誌 21, no. 1 (1929): 161.

Xia, Wei 夏畏. “Wenti de tichu” 問題的提出 [Raising the Question] (1949). In *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi: Lilun yi* 中國兒童文學大系：理論一, edited by Jiang Feng 蔣風, 330–331. Taiyuan: Xiwang chubanshe, 1988.

“Xiangying baowei ertong quanli de huyu, haozhao gedi qingzhu guoji ertongjie” 響應保衛兒童權利的呼籲，號召各地慶祝國際兒童節 [Responding to the Appeal to Protect Children’s Rights]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], May 4, 1950.

Xie, Liming 謝力鳴. “Cong *Wo he yeye* tanqi: Ertong bushi guli de” 從《我和爺爺》談起——兒童不是孤立的 [Speaking from *My Grandfather and I*: Children Are Not Isolated]. *Zhongguo dianying* 中國電影 (1957): 19–23.

“Xiuzheng zhuyi wenyi sixiang de pipan” 修正主義文藝思想的批判 [Criticism of Revisionist Literary and Artistic Thoughts]. *Dushu yuebao* 讀書月報, February 15, 1958, 12.

Xu, Lanjun 徐蘭君. *Ertong yu zhanzheng: Guozu, jiaoyu, yu dazhong wenhua* 兒童與戰爭：國族、教育、與大眾文化 [Children and War: Nation, Education, and Popular Culture]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015.

———. “Zhang bu da de ‘San Mao’: Cong zaoqi de dushi wantong dao 1949 nian qianhou de liulang’er” 長不大的「三毛」：從早期的都市頑童到 1949 年前後的流浪兒 [The San Mao Who Never Grows Up: From Early Urban Rascal to Post-1949 Vagrant]. In *Xiandai Zhongguo, di ershi ji* 現代中國（第二十輯） [Modern China, Vol. 20], edited by Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, 188–204. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009.

Xu, Xu. “‘Chairman Mao’s Child’: *Sparkling Red Star* and the Construction of Children in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 381–409.

Xu, Yingchang 徐應昉. “*Ertong shijie*” 《兒童世界》 [*Children’s World*]. *Tongxing yuekan* 同行月刊 2, no. 8 (1934): 10–12.

Yan, Gong 嚴恭. *Xiang shi yiyang zhenshi* 像詩一樣真實 [As Real as Poetry]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2007.

Zhang, Fang 張放. “Zhongguo shaoxiandui rongyu wenhua xingcheng de kaocha (1949–1955)” 中國少先隊榮譽文化形成的考察（1949–1955）[An Investigation into the Formation of the Honor Culture in China’s Young Pioneers (1949–1955)]. *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 中共黨史研究, no. 11 (2014): 24–34.

Zhang, Jianqing 張建青, and Yaowu Wu 吳耀武. “Cong *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* dao *Ai de jiaoyu*: Yidali xiaoshuo *Cuore* Zhongguo bainian (1905–2015) Han yi jianshi” 從《兒童修身之情感》到《愛的教育》——意大利小說 Cuore 中國百年（1905–2015）漢譯簡史 [From *Ertong xiushen zhi qinggan* to *Ai de jiaoyu*:

A Brief History of the Chinese Translation of the Italian Novel *Cuore* Over a Century (1905–2015)]. *Zhongguo fanyi* 中國翻譯, no. 3 (2015): 48–52.

Zhang, Mei 張梅. *Wanqing wusi shiqi: Ertong duwu shang de tuxiang xushi* 晚清五四時期：兒童讀物上的圖像敘事 [Pictorial Narrative in Children's Reading Materials during the Late Qing and May Fourth Period]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016.

Zhang, Tingbo 張廷波. "Cong Songdai bujuzi xianxiang kan liang Song yingxitu shengxing yuanyin" 從宋代不舉子現象看兩宋嬰戲圖盛行原因 [The Reasons for the Popularity of Baby-Play Pictures in the Song Dynasty Seen through the Phenomenon of Not Raising Children]. *Zhuangshi* 裝飾, no. 327 (July 2020): 100–103.

Zhang, Xiaoling 張曉凌. "Wusi xin wenhua yundong yu Zhongguo meishu de xiandai zhuanxing" 五四新文化運動與中國美術的現代轉型 [The May Fourth New Culture Movement and the Modern Transformation of Chinese Art]. *Meishu* 美術, May 2019, 6–17.

Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

———. "Transnational Melodrama, Wenyi, and the Orphan Imagination." In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 83–97. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Zhang, Zhilu 張之路. *Zhongguo shaonian ertong dianying shi* 中國少年兒童電影史 [History of Chinese Children's Film]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2012.

Zhao, Hongben 趙宏本, and Qian Xiaodai 錢笑呆. *Sun Wukong sanda baigujing* 孫悟空三打白骨精 [Monkey Subdues the White-bone Demon]. Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014.

Zheng, Leting. "The Visibility and Visuality of Children in Modern China: Cuteness, Play, and Outdoor Activities in Children's Magazines." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2025): 39–61.

Zheng, Zhenduo 鄭振鐸. "'Ertong shijie' xuanyan" 《兒童世界》宣言 [The Manifesto of *Children's World*]. In *Zheng Zhenduo yu ertong wenxue* 鄭振鐸與兒童文學 [Zheng Zhenduo and Children's Literature], 3–5. Shanghai: Shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1982.

"Zhongwen xiushen shu: Di shiba ke xiaoxing" 中文修身書：第十八課孝行 [Chinese Moral Education: Lesson 18, Reading Lesson on Filial Conduct]. *Mengxue bao* 蒙學報 [The Children's Educator], no. 10 (1898): 16.

Zhou, Zuoren 周作人. "Ertong de wenxue" 兒童的文學 [Children's Literature]. In *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue* 周作人論兒童文學 [Zhou Zuoren's Discourse on Children's Literature], edited by Liu Xuyuan 劉緒源, 122–130. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2012.

———. "Xiaoer zhengdou zhi yanjiu" 小兒爭鬥之研究 [Study on Children's Quarrel]. In *Zhou Zuoren lun ertong wenxue* 周作人論兒童文學 [Zhou Zuoren's Discourse

on Children's Literature], edited by Liu Xuyuan 劉緒源, 59–68. Beijing: Haitun chubanshe, 2012.

Zhu, Ping, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath. "Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era." In *Maoist Laughter*, edited by Ping Zhu, 1–16. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

"Zhuyi ertong wenyi de chuangzuo" 注意兒童文藝的創作 [Pay Attention to the Creation of Children's Literature and Art]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People's Daily], June 1, 1952.

Zufen 祖汾. "Dianying, ertong, funu: Dianying yu ertong" 電影、兒童、婦女：電影與兒童 [Film, Children, Women: Film and Children]. *Lianhua huabao* 聯華畫報 9, no. 2 (1937): 11.

Zur, Dafna. *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Filmography (in chronological order)

Sanmao liulang ji 三毛流浪記 [Sanmao's Wandering Life]. Directed by Zhao Ming 趙明 and Yan Gong 嚴恭. Kunlun Film Studio, 1949.

Zuguo de huaduo 祖國的花朵 [Flowers of the Motherland]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭 and Su Li 蘇里. Changchun Film Studio, 1955.

Qingchun de jiaobu 青春的腳步 [Footsteps of Youth]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭. Changchun Film Studio, 1957.

Wan 玩 [Play]. Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, 1957.

Hong lingjin de gushi 紅領巾的故事 [The Story of Red Scarves]. Directed by Wu Zhaodi 武兆堤. Changchun Film Studio, 1958.

Ren xiao zhi da 人小志大 [Great Ambitions in Small Hearts]. Directed by Shi Xing 史行 and Wu Xiangzhi 吳向之. Zhejiang Film Studio, 1959.

Zhaoxia 朝霞 [Morning Glow]. Directed by Yan Gong 嚴恭. Changchun Film Studio, 1959.

Danao tiangong 大鬧天宮 [The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven]. Directed by Wan Laiming 萬籟鳴. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1961–1964.