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Ping-chen Hsiung. *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005. xvi + 351 pp. $73.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4164-4.

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Bringing Bygone Children into Focus: The Quality and Choice of Lenses

A tender voyage. The term comes from a Buddhist metaphor describing human existence within the "bitter sea" of life. The journalist Fox Butterfield used this metaphor as title for his 1982 book *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* to suggest the hardships of ordinary life in China under socialism and Maoism, which was hardly a tender voyage. Ping-chen Hsiung is adopting an earlier usage from the Late Imperial Era (Ming-Ch'ing dynasties, 1368-1912) that had come to be applied to the lives of infants and young children (up to seven or eight years of age). The lives of these children were tinged with innocence and fragility, in this view; they were on a poignant voyage, outcome uncertain. Hsiung seems drawn to that tenderness and to the quality of an open-ended voyage, both in life and in historiography.

Ping-chen Hsiung is a college dean and research fellow at the Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica on Taiwan. She did graduate work at Brown University, and has been publishing actively on the history of children and childhoods for the last fifteen years; the works cited for this study include three of her own books (in Chinese), twenty articles, and eight presentations. The resources of the Republic of China on Taiwan are evident in this book, from the support of the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation to the National Palace Museum art and archival collections, not to mention her admiration for the scholar and diplomat Hu Shih and her preference for Wade-Giles over Pinyin (I have adopted her usage for this review).

The metaphorical title she has chosen for this first book in English is revealing. Hsiung is deeply suspicious of modern psychological and sociological theories being applied to the Chinese past (although she has no problem using the language and concepts of postmodernism to frame her own analysis). She prefers a rich and evocative metaphor from the Chinese past to a more academic title. That past, she feels, is a rich reservoir of human experience that deserves to be understood on its own terms first; only then can scholars negotiate more substantial transcultural bridges of theory among the varieties of humanity. The history of children and childhoods for her is a particularly rich case study of what is wrong with modern historical studies: Historians have overlooked too many less powerful participants in history, from women and misfits to children, and have prematurely fit the narrative into a supposedly objective scientific frame. She intends in this book to sketch in the proper way to study children and childhoods and to expose the inadequacies of modern scholarship. Does she succeed in this ambitious undertaking?

Hsiung is at times her own best critic. In the preface she calls the book a collection of essays, not a monograph; says it is more like a stack of short stories than a novel; imagines her book as a field report on a future joint project that she hopes will enlist many more scholars in diverse disciplines. She can envision her book as a long introduction to a multivolume study of children and childhood in China, and seems already to be working on a table of contents. This book is, in short, "preliminary," with "sweeping views and concerns" (p. xiv).[1] The author mixes confident judgments and claims with humble self-effacement, not unlike a hostess at a Chinese banquet who apologizes to her guests that there is "nothing to eat." But like the actual banquet, this book contains a feast for the reader.

The book is organized in three parts, with a preface, introduction, and afterword. Part 1 has three chapters under the heading "Physical Conditions," a somewhat misleading subtitle as the chapters are about the medical understanding and treatment of newborns, infants, and young children. This part draws heavily on medical records and advice literature created by incipient pediatric specialists from the Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1279) on. Part 2 is called "Social Life," with three chapters addressing modes of upbringing, the mother-son domestic bond, and the emotional world of children.

The primary sources for this part are also distinctive: 800 chronological biographies (*nien-p'u*) from the Ming-Ch'ing period. The final part 3 is called "Multiplicity," with one chapter addressing the least-studied half of Chinese children (girls and girlhood), and another chapter exploring the interaction between concepts and realities in the study of children and childhood. The book reads like a progressively richer stew of materials and perspectives, with the most difficult and controversial (and therefore most satisfying) parts coming towards the end.

Part 1 is an intriguing look into a previously unexploited body of records, in which Chinese doctors help mothers and children with birthing, breaking the umbilical cord, cleaning the newborn, initiating breastfeeding, weaning, and dealing with common and uncommon childhood illnesses and conditions. Hsiung claims this literature cumulatively documents the creation of a pediatric profession in China centuries before anything similar in Europe. Much of the advice was sensible and modern, flowing out of a clinical attitude of listening and observing, she notes. My concerns with this argument are two-fold: how "scientific" this medical understanding actually was, and how effective it was in reducing the pre-modern curse of infant mortality. Scientific thought grows up in tandem with other thoughts, mainly religious and magical, about what causes things to happen in the world. Children were caught up in many hypotheses about the causes and prevention of disease, from auspicious numerology to spirit possession; many existed concurrently in the heads of family members as well as doctors. Hsiung acknowledges this mix: "Elements of folklore mingled liberally with the ideas and practices of medicine" (p. 81). But these pseudo-scientific understandings come through on the margins of the medical records in Hsiung's presentation; were they marginalized by her, or were they really marginal? What was more determinative in practice? Secondly, a demographic linkage would really help establish Hsiung's argument that this pediatric health care was widespread and effective in Ming-Ch'ing China. Was China's exceptional premodern population growth partially influenced by better child care, and can that be demonstrated?

Part 2 builds on the insight that the survival of children (hence the pediatric attentiveness) was a "key enduring value" in Chinese culture. This survival was much more than a bio-physical interest; more central were the hoped-for cultural transmission and social reproduction (what others might call acculturation and socialization) across many generations. What were the established social and cultural meanings and patterns for children born into this culture? Three chapters within part 2 attempt to construct an answer for the Late Imperial period: "Modes of Upbringing" (chapter 4), "Domestic Bond" (chapter 5), and "The Emotional World" (chapter 6). The source material for this section is the aforementioned 800 chronological biographies surviving from the Ming-Ch'ing era. More precisely, most are from the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912), and only 300 to 400 deal seriously with the childhood years. Many contain personal materials, such as letters and autobiographical writings, along with the biographer's narrative. Most subjects are males from the gentry class, many of whom distinguished themselves by their later scholarly and official careers.

Is this a big sample from which to draw patterns and meanings? It is probably big enough to make some claims, although it is still a thin body of evidence, which is unfortunately true of all evidence pertinent to the history of children and childhoods. My own study, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing Up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890-1920*, used about 80 life histories (30 of them extended oral interviews) to focus on a thirty-year period. Four hundred biographies spread over 500 years is a much thinner sample. Scholars must employ a "saturation technique," whereby individual cases merge into common patterns confirmed by repetition in cases and confirmation from other types of sources. If the sample is too small, the patterns may simply be unrepresentative. Does it take 10, 20, or 50 examples to be able to say "few," "many," "most"? Hsiung is aware of this problem, and also of the need to direct scrutiny at each individual source and each type of source material. But uncertainty is built in. As she rightly says, there is "no unambiguous reading or straightforward interpretation" (pp. 123, 126-127).

The patterns Hsiung has discovered through the *nien-p'u* are encapsulated into subheadings and may be grouped into two categories: distinctive Chinese practices and generic or universal boxes. The former are much more useful, such as these examples: "the 'motherly' assembly" (paternal aunts, various wives, elders sisters, wet nurses), "the power of death" (citing a life expectancy of late 30s or early 40s, and the fact that one-third of children in the 800 *nien-p'u* had lost a parent by age eight), "the suffering mother and the obligated son" (common messages of guilt and debt transmitted to sons by mothers), "learning to take command" (the historical trend for ever-earlier learning pressures from the mid-sixteenth century on), or "bookish boys against the rest of the world" (the Neo-Confucian model boys and pupils as a minority of Chinese youngsters). The universal boxes are less useful. "Sadness and fear" or "The joys and pains of growing up," for example, document universal emo-

tions without much that is distinctively Chinese. This is unfortunate because there were vulnerabilities and pains for boys (and girls) in Chinese childhoods that were very distinctively Chinese, such as the gap for boys between early indulgence and harsh learning that complicated the sense of autonomy for many.[2]

In part 2 Hsiung begins to clarify her stance on the tension between normative conceptions and expectations and the actual behavior of parents and children in the past. A normative Chinese model goes back to early classical literature; subsequently, differing viewpoints of human nature and education became part of the Confucian tradition with its optimistic and pessimistic wings (how perfectible or flawed were children?). The normative debate was framed in the Late Imperial period by the more pessimistic Neo Confucians, who emphasized early control, strict learning, and harsh punishments and the Wang Yang-ming school of gentle awakening through education and self-study. In my own study I was more impressed in the late nineteenth century with the continuing sway of Neo-Confucian assumptions among parents, perhaps in a distorted and lifeless form. Hsiung detects, already in the mid-sixteenth century, a strong countercurrent among elite families, especially in the southeastern coastal areas. Fathers and mothers were cooperatively raising children in more casual, informal ways at home. This "preschooling" lasted until age seven or nine, before more structured education with outside teachers began. The subsequent period of boys as pupils is of less interest to her; she does not see it as forming a crisis or break in socialization for children that complicated their struggles with autonomy and authority thereafter. She seems disinterested in this kind of theoretical issue, perhaps as part of her distaste for any modern sociological and psychological theories. Yet she confidently identifies patterns from individual *nien-p'u* that orient the reader to children and childhood. These patterns bring her to the cusp of deeper theoretical questions; however, she declines to pursue them (perhaps deliberately). It is one of the silent omissions in her book.

The final "Multiplicity" part of the book takes us first into girlhood, and secondly into "Concepts and Realities" where the richest methodological discussion occurs, without resolving the omission cited above. "Girlhood" (chapter 7) is the most thorough and insightful discourse on its subject anywhere, with one revealing exception. Hsiung probes the gentle treatment extended to girls, the non-preferred sex (who ironically in this sense were more privileged than their brothers). They had more "breathing space" as children than boys, perhaps, she suggests, because of parental awareness that they would soon be stuck in marriage and womanhood. She traces at considerable length the new research on women's education during the Ming-Ch'ing, an era which produced 3500 published female authors. It was an education nipped in the bud, but it did reflect the increasing desirability of cultivated daughters, erudite wives, and learned mothers. While reading this chapter I kept wondering whether footbinding would be mentioned at all. It finally is, in one paragraph that largely discounts the importance of this distinctively Chinese practice (pp. 216-217). One hundred days of pain? A fad among extremist conservative families? Falls "outside the domain of this study" because it started at age eight or nine? The historian John K. Fairbank remarked over twenty years ago how significant footbinding was for centuries as a physical sign of male power over women, with ramifications from erotic practices to physical mobility. It began often at age five or six, hobbled young girls for years in excruciating and daily pain, and demanded footcare for the rest of a woman's life to maintain these misshapen "golden lilies."[3]

This slighting of female pain by a female scholar is puzzling and I do not claim to understand it. Footbinding, of course, was often the only thing that most Westerners knew about Chinese women, and the portrait of female lives needs to be much broader and deeper. It was also a symbol of sexual discrimination for revolutionaries of all stripes who finally ended the practice in the twentieth century. Hsiung appears over-sensitive to these emancipatory currents of thought, and views scholarship with suspicion when it appears to be an accomplice to such ends. The history of children and childhoods for her is not a narrative of linear progress towards an enshrined and final "modern" understanding that posits a separate, autonomous world for liberated children. China, and Taiwan, may or may not be heading that way as cultures and societies, but the Chinese past is seen by her as an alternative world that questions and complicates our sense of children and childhoods. The value of this subfield is that it opens up new windows on our humanity, nothing less. She is not bothered if her work is not seen as a "balanced appraisal" because it is a rejoinder to the "ineptness" and "oversights" of modern scholars. She is saddened that Philippe Aries had to rescue "childhood" from its customary oblivion, and that to this day so little has been written about it.

Some of these new windows that she has opened up are enlightening indeed. Her distinction between the child as biophysically immature and sociologically a junior in status is important, for the status of "child" in China was lifelong for sons and daughters. Her insight

into children as givers of joy, by rejuvenating and completing lives for adult women, men, and masters, linking them all in the chain of human generations, is uplifting (p. 251). Her call to listen to the silences and see the void is worth heeding, although from my own efforts and experience I am skeptical about how far we can recover the viewpoint of the child in our scholarly work (writing novels may be a better medium for this). Her sketching in an agenda for future research is admirable. But I think Ping-chen Hsiung is also looking through some cracked window panes of her own making, and I would hope that she can replace them. One is the frequent repetitions in chapter 8 about the impoverishment of modern psychological assumptions and social theories that see children only as passive recipients. She reiterates how active, mischievous, non-conformist and independent Chinese children were; they were not "docile recipients of conventions and adult motivations," but had "a willful mindset of their own" (p. 248). This is a miscast and superseded argument; there are modern theories that are far from impoverished in this way, with assumptions that can move us forward. The truth is that we experience both passive and active dimensions in growing up; we are embedded in a world that is not of our own making, and over time we embody that world into ourselves, changing it, recreating it, making it our own.[4]

Notes

[1]. Hsiung's self-criticism, which is specific, is quite different from her criticism of others, which is typically non-specific. Although she finds much inadequate in modern historical studies and in the approach to the history of children and childhoods, she seems reluctant to target particular shortcomings by particular authors in particular books. This places an unnecessary burden on reviewers in ascertaining the validity of her criticisms.

[2]. See Jon L. Saari, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing Up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 78-86.

[3]. John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 68-73.

[4]. See *Legacies of Childhood*, preface, prologue, and chapter 3 on "Mischievous Sons."

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