

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald. *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. xiv + 134 pp. \$77.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2540-5; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2541-2.

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## Making "Friends" Across Past and Present

Since the post-Maoist reform era began over twenty-five years ago, Chinese culture has struggled with the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in trying to balance China's communist past with its present participation in global market economies through the development of its accession to the World Trade Organization. How have these shifts and struggles influenced children's media culture? How are media "competencies" taught in Chinese classrooms, and how do such competencies contribute to Chinese children's understanding of themselves as "agents" in local and global contexts? These are the questions broached and most generally pursued throughout *Little Friends*, which offers ample material relevant to historians of modern childhood.

Donald, a Communications scholar specializing in Chinese youth and media, states in her opening chapters a desire to bridge disciplines in the social sciences, arguing for her book's relevance to scholars of psychology, education, cultural anthropology et al. She does not, however, consider readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese history, and thus her accounts of the vicissitudes in children's media over time assume the reader already knows the chronology of China's politics during the twentieth century (for others, a timeline might have been even more useful than the glossary of Chinese terms provided at book's end). Donald situates her work in a global conversation about studies of youth and media, arguing both for differences and continuities between Eastern and Western contexts.

One important difference she notes is that children's media in China foreground "educational" intentions far more than their American counterparts, which often fo-

cus solely on entertainment. The topics to be taught in this educational concern include a sense of Chinese nationalism—how to teach a pride in "Chinese-ness" while also acknowledging the popularity, among children, of the narrative and visual styles of Japanese and American animation, both of which are eyed with uneasy concern by some Chinese parents and educators.

Another intriguing issue Donald illuminates is a desire for continuity between past and present generations in children's film, which she reads as symbolic of a hope that socialism (the old) and market-consciousness (the new) can coexist as harmoniously as do the intergenerational relatives in a handful of children's films that she analyzes. She likens the warmth of family feeling in these films with the Chinese concept of *ganqing*, a word meaning a shared sense of class identity. Donald convincingly demonstrates that the "Film Course," a governmental initiative to bring media-literacy training to schoolchildren, is more accessible in the urban districts of China's eastern seaboard than in the more impoverished, rural areas of the west. Although class divisions manifest even today in the sphere of children's media, she shows how *ganqing* can represent a solidarity of Chinese identity as a national construct, one that links contemporary Chinese children with the parents and grandparents who came to political consciousnesses in the communist decades of the recent past.

Perhaps because of its disciplinary distance from the humanities (this reviewer's area of training), this book lacks the narrative cohesion one more typically finds in History, English, or Film Studies books. Donald's text ranges across a variety of loosely interconnected topics: she addresses film content most consistently, but inter-

sperses these analyses with some (less developed) observations about television and new media, and the book is divided between historical/cultural discussions of children's film and summaries of reception studies done with Chinese schoolchildren about their interactions with media both at home and in the classroom. The variety of topics and methodologies make for interesting reading, even if threads of continuity are sometimes hard to follow.

The book's governing argument appears most lucidly throughout the final two chapters, where Donald suggests that children's media are poised to make a significant intervention in children's identities as citizens and consumers in a country that is, in the reform era, neither fully socialist nor capitalist. In this historical moment, according to Donald, children's media are vital in teaching a valuable lesson in the potential hybridity of local and global sensibilities: namely, that "national style should be cultivated even in transnational marketing logic" (p. 98), and that children can also, simultaneously, learn a cosmopolitan world-view by their passionate interaction with popular, foreign-produced children's media. As Donald states in her final paragraph, "It

is foolish to assume that global media-regulated, marketised, profit-driven, and ideological-will lead any charge for political change in China or elsewhere. What they may facilitate is a facility of mind and feeling in young people, which could in turn allow a little creative hospitality towards the beauty of strangers and the adventures of the enemy" (p. 112).

I wish this persuasive argument had appeared at the beginning rather than the end of the book, for it would help the reader navigate Donald's examples and analyses more easily. Unfortunately, there were some significant failures of copyediting, along with numerous blurry pages, which marred the reading of an otherwise compelling volume. However, these impediments to the fluidity of the reading experience do not impair the value of the book's information. Taken as a whole, *Little Friends* offers an intriguing and informative survey useful to anyone wanting to learn more about the intersections of Chinese national identity, the development of media industries, and the education of children in a transitional historical moment.

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