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## Childhood in Premodern China

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# CHILDHOOD IN PREMODERN CHINA

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*John Dardess*

The history of childhood in China is a subject wholly untouched until recently. The potential body of source materials for such a study—or indeed series of studies—is large to the point of unmanageability, and scattered over a variety of written genres, both native and foreign.

I shall open up the topic by introducing some of the principal kinds of written works that deal with childhood in whole or in part. I have in mind the reader who may not be familiar with Chinese history and society, but who may have a vague sense that a Chinese childhood will have been lived in obedience to some unfamiliar order of rules and expectations. Western-language sources are considered first, followed by a review of the topic from within the resources that Chinese civilization has itself produced over the past millennium or so.

Among the most accessible of sources are those that detail childhood as lived inner experience. There exist a number of reminiscences written or dictated by Chinese for the Western reading public. One of the earliest of these is Yan Phou Lee's *When I Was a Boy in China* (Boston, 1887). Many of these autobiographies are memorable, even searing. Katherine Wei and Terry Quinn, *Second Daughter. Growing Up in China, 1930–1949* (New York, 1984), contains, among other things, an exceptionally frank and vivid account of a girlhood visit to a traditional-style, upper-class extended household in rural south central China in the early 1940s. Chiang Yee, *A Chinese Childhood* (1940, reprinted New York, 1953), gives a bittersweet collection of vignettes of upper-class life on the mid-Yangtze early in this century. Martin C. Yang, *A Chinese Village. Taitou, Shantung Province* (New York, 1945), relates at absorbing length his childhood experiences as a member of a north China peasant family. One also may mention Ida

Pruitt's *A China Childhood* (San Francisco, 1978), an extraordinary story of her life as a child growing up quasi-Chinese in the same province of Shantung, also around the turn of the century. These citations are meant as examples only, as they by no means exhaust the genre.

There also is childhood as collective social manifestation as observed by outsiders, in the early days Christian missionaries, whose intended readership appears primarily to have been the churchgoing youth of their own home countries. Most books of this sort are profusely illustrated. Examples include Mary Isabella Bryson's *Child Life in Chinese Homes* (London, 1885), later republished in altered format as *Childhood in China* (London, 1900). Mrs. Bryson, an English missionary, was for many years posted in Wuchang on the mid-Yangtze, about 150 miles west of Chiang Yee's home city of Kiukiang, and her carefully executed account gives special attention to differences between the rich and the poor in the way they handled their children, as well as to the separate treatment accorded boys and girls, especially in the wealthier families. Also useful are the several works of Isaac Taylor Headland (1859–1942), an American Methodist missionary and teacher with some close connections in the Manchu court in Peking in the early 1900s. He is sunnier and more ebullient about his subject than Bryson, who tends to stress the unpleasant. His *The Chinese Boy and Girl* (New York, 1901) is, in a way, an attempt to describe a distinct Chinese children's culture, with its own special games and amusements. Headland's *The Young China Hunters* (West Medford, Mass., 1912) is a peculiar work, or so it appears now, in that it consists in an imaginary visit to Peking by a delegation of American children, who speak either among themselves or to the American teachers who accompany them and explain authoritatively every strange sight they encounter. Nowhere do the American children directly engage their Chinese counterparts, nor is any Chinese child given a participatory role. At the end Headland offers his own verse translations of two primers used in the households of the Peking elite, the *Ti-tzu kuei* ("Rules for Sons and Younger Brothers") and the *Nü-erh ching* ("Classic for Girls"). The point of all this, one gathers, was to interest American children in supporting foreign missions, or perhaps in the possibility of future careers as China missionaries.

Seventy or so years later it was in a very different spirit and with a very different readership in mind that the attention of outsiders was once again directed to the question of childhood in China. For one thing, the recent emergence of "childhood" as a singular and compelling focus of inquiry in its own right, as between the covers of this and many other Western books, has in no small degree been the outcome of a sense of crisis occasioned by an erosion of religious values, an apparent weakening of family competence and solidarity, and the rise of learned professional specialties such as child psychology, early childhood education, social work, and the like, all of which aim, often in conjunction with state authority, to ease the disastrous results of family incapacity or mismanagement in the rearing of its children. It is social scientists or professional practitioners who have been the most recent commentators on childhood in China.

Unlike the missionaries earlier, the latest writers have not brought to China an unproblematical sense of the superiority of Western culture, or even unbounded faith in the ability of their own techniques to improve much the general quality of childhood in their home societies. A prime example is William Kessen's *Childhood in China* (New Haven, Conn., 1975), a thoughtfully edited collection of reports by the American Delegation on Early Childhood Development in the People's Republic of China, which made its visit in 1973, late in the Mao era. The visitors saw in childhood in that immeasurably older society visually striking, intellectually puzzling counter-examples to all the disorder and anomie that seemed to infect the lives of children in America. Neither the visitors nor their hosts could explain how the children of the families, nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools they saw all managed to become so "emotionally expressive, socially gracious, and adept," so controlled and well ordered even in the apparent absence of any conscious, deliberate guidance or programming. Evidently the place and purpose of childhood in the larger picture of human and social development were perfectly, if tacitly, understood and accepted, such that "the ideology of expectations often becomes the fact of child behavior."<sup>1</sup>

Kessen suggests that the extraordinary "concentration, orderliness, and competence" of the children must stem in some way from "the older stabilities of Chinese culture," rather than from Marxism-Leninism, or the Maoist doctrines of the moment. Indeed, that may be true. Yet it is by no means clear *how* it may be true because when one considers the "older stabilities," one is immediately confronted with the problem that the institutional matrix of childhood in the later dynastic era was so very different from the vast array of state-run nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools of the 1970s. The upbringing and early education of children were family matters into which the Confucian state seldom, if ever, intruded directly.

Even though the big question, how one arrives here from there, currently is unanswerable, the whole matter of child raising in China's past is well worth a look in its own right, in part because so much in it is at variance with Western tradition and practice. Unlike the case in the early West, there never seems to have been much doubt, at least in a legal and ritual sense, about what a child was. A person's age normally was carefully reckoned in *sui*: an infant was one *sui* at birth, and turned two on the first day of the next lunar new year. Criminal liability began at seven *sui*, and became, by degrees, heavier until finally legal adulthood and full culpability was reached at sixteen *sui*.<sup>2</sup> China's self-contained "Confucian civilization" indeed placed certain definite expectations on children. Even though China's historical experience was never such as to raise childhood out of its familial and educational nexus to anything like the same degree of singularity we find about us in America nowadays, it is nevertheless possible to discern signs of broad historical change in the matter, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when efforts were made to ease some of the harsher standards of earlier times.

Before I introduce some of the relevant literature, let me sketch in some

general context. Given the immense size of China, its huge population, and the sheer length of its recorded history, any topical inquiry such as “childhood” must sooner or later founder on the jagged edges of regional, temporal, and social variation. A sense of the realities demands that one proceed circumspectly. Let “later imperial China” take in the Sung (960–1279), Yüan or Mongol (1279–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Ch’ing or Manchu (1644–1911) dynasties. The early boundary (tenth and eleventh centuries) is marked by a doubling of the population to the hundred million range; a surge of economic development and enrichment; the spread of cheap printed texts; and the revival and reworking of the Confucian doctrinal heritage, a broad movement known as neo-Confucianism.

As for social context, it is convenient (and also culturally relevant) to focus one’s attention on the upper class. The label “upper class” poses grave problems of definition, but by it I mean the social element known in Chinese as *shih* or *shih-ta-fu*, variously rendered in English as literati, scholar-gentry, or scholar-officials—anyone, in short, with something approaching a classical Confucian education and often, but not necessarily, at an upper or middle level of income usually, but not always, derived from landholding. *Shih-ta-fu* were expected to assume leadership roles of some sort: as imperial officials, as teachers, as local elders, or as managing heads of lineages or extended families. Any of these roles might be assumed by the same man at different stages in his life, and one or more of them might involve him in questions of child management.

The orthodox, extended, upper-class Chinese household (or family) was, in theory and often enough in fact, an autonomous socioeconomic unit. Depending on one’s direction of vision, it was either the original model or a microcosm of the imperial political system. “It is within the family,” as Benjamin Schwartz has put it, “that we find the root of *public* virtue.”<sup>3</sup> A positive view of the equivalency of state and family as ordered systems was early on advanced by Lü Pen-chung (1048–1145) in a tract called “Instructions for Children” (*T’ung-meng hsun*):

Serving the ruler is like serving one’s parents. Serving one’s official superiors is like serving one’s older brothers. Associating with official colleagues is like associating with all the members of one’s family. You treat the clerical underlings just like you treat [domestic] slaves and servants. You cherish the common people the same as you cherish your wife and children. You manage state affairs just like you manage family affairs. If you can do things like this, then you can say you have taken your mind to its limits. If you fall short in the slightest, then you have not yet done all you can.<sup>4</sup>

Lü, as most writers of instructions for families or children, was a purveyor of Confucian doctrine. Sometimes it is appropriate to think of the Confucianists as constituting a kind of national superprofession: a knowledge elite trained in an abstract and generalized body of principles, in their case ethical, applicable to all aspects of collective existence, and demanding to be put to disinterested use to remedy any and all collective ills. Confucian writers wrote with an au-

thority that consciously transcended the ad hoc and the merely customary, and as such it may not be going too far to understand them as distant cousins to the professional social theorists and practitioners of our own time and place. The Confucian writers certainly shared some of the same anxiety over their efficacy as any of the members of Kessen's delegation. The Confucians themselves did not regard Confucian civilization as in any way an achieved condition. It was, rather, a distant goal that demanded a difficult, unrelenting uphill struggle against the forces of social disorder and chaos, a battle in which the successes were few and the failures many. Childhood was certainly one crucial battlefield in this struggle, and the Confucian texts—advice books, medical books, family instructions, primers, and the like—that deal at all with children should be read in this light. What one will discover in the literature is the fashioning by Confucian writers of a number of strategies and techniques aimed at fostering in children as quickly and efficiently as possible the adult Confucian virtues of self-restraint, altruism, and sober and discriminating moral judgment.

In theory, such instruction might start while the child was yet in the womb. Ancient ritual detailed a regimen called "placental instruction" (*t'ai-chiao*), in which the pregnant mother sought to shape the character of the coming child by restricting her activities, avoiding bitter or spicy foods, and listening to refined music and elevated moral discourse. I am not at all sure how widespread this procedure was in later imperial times; I found it prescribed but once, in a book of family instructions by Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing (1479–1557).<sup>5</sup> One may note, however (and this is part of a configuration of new developments in child handling), in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the rise of nearly a dozen Confucian medical writers who were, among other things, eager to intrude into the previously neglected territory of infancy and earliest childhood. Although it was clear to them (as it also was clear to Mrs. Bryson) that the health of the children of the lower classes often was more robust because they were free to run and play outdoors, the medical writers nevertheless strongly prescribed the strict confinement of upper-class children for the sake of their moral development. They also looked to emotional and behavioral lapses in the nursing mother as the principal sources of the diseases of infancy and early childhood.<sup>6</sup> In an important study Charlotte Furth has shown in detail the close subordination of gynecology and pediatrics in late imperial times, not so much to the pursuit of health for its own sake as to the overriding need to sustain and strengthen the patriarchal Confucian family system.<sup>7</sup>

One way to gauge the place of children in that system is to consider the fairly small number of family instructions or household management guides that were originally intended for the use of specific families, but were published and widely circulated, and thus served as inspirational models nationwide. Of these guides the one that gives the most attention to children, young boys almost exclusively, is the *Family Instructions* of Huo T'ao (1487–1540), an imperial official and Confucian moralist from the countryside near Canton.<sup>8</sup> I have reproduced elsewhere the ground plan of this walled, carefully guarded extended-family com-

pound, together with an explanatory key.<sup>9</sup> Huo T'ao's elaborate layout is intended to provide architectural reinforcement for the Confucian sociomoral order, and as such it resembles nothing so much as a well-designed prison camp.

Inside the Huo compound sexes and age cohorts are strictly segregated. Sixteen two-room apartments have been reserved for nuclear families of childbearing age, and one notes how the wives' rooms open into "females' streets," which are at every point walled off from the streets used by the males. Each sex has been assigned separate dining areas, separate latrines, separate assembly halls, and separate routes to access to the quarters of the husbands' parents. Huo T'ao has assumed that by age fifty parents have become grandparents, and accordingly he moves them to special quarters toward the front of the compound. The moral imperative of filial piety (*hsiao*) comes into its fullest play here, between these older and younger married adults, and not within the nuclear families as such. The babies and young children are clearly expected to live with their parents, although at some point boys are expected to "follow" their fathers, and girls, their mothers. No age is specified for this, but the Chiang family rules, for example, compel the sex segregation of siblings at age ten.<sup>10</sup>

Huo T'ao has no interest in infants. For him, Confucian sociomoral instruction begins with toddlers. As soon as the child can "walk and talk," Huo T'ao demands that its parents begin teaching it the rudiments of filial piety by taking it along on their required morning and evening visits to the husband's parents' quarters, so that it may learn by observing and itself practice asking after its grandparents' warmth and comfort, just as its parents do.

From earliest childhood, moreover, the little one should be taught to identify his elders, and to yield to them his seat, his place at table, and his position in a group. "Whenever he sees his elders in the morning," wrote Huo, "he must bow solemnly. He must respond [to orders] with assent. He must be taught to be factual, deliberative, reverential, and conscientious. If he practises these things from childhood, they will come naturally to him." The tot also learns how to identify teachers, or dignified figures who resemble teachers, and is shown on such occasions how to "come forth, bow, and stand for a while at left or right." Further, little boys should be taken by their elders twice monthly to the ancestral temple, so that they can watch the elders as they perform the obeisances, and gradually learn to participate themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Huo T'ao had no tolerance for play. Instead, children must practice treating one another as adults. Here is what he mandates:

Revering friends: As for families with children, as soon as a child is able to walk and talk, it must be taught not to play with other children. When [children] see each other in the morning, they must be taught to bow solemnly to each other. When they enter primary school, they must be taught to order themselves by age-rank. When they see each other do good, they must increase their respect for each other. They must not gang together to make jokes, laugh, or cavort. They must learn good from each other, and

warn each other against evil. They must not slander each other, or compete with each other.

The ancients benefited from their friends, whereas nowadays people are harmed by them. If these things are taught from childhood, then [the boys] will nourish and preserve an upright nature. This is the basis for suppressing human desires and extending Heaven's principles. This is why I write "revering friends," not "closeness with friends."<sup>12</sup>

Thus the little Huo boys were to be deliberately and persistently molded into the orthodox Confucian morality and behavior from their earliest conscious moments. It is apparent here that by itself, the nuclear family nest is quite inadequate to this task, and that the "public" character of Confucian familial values requires a larger and wider social context for their realization. Similarly, all punishments were to be inflicted by the extended family as a whole or its representatives, never by the child's own parents. "Whenever sons and nephews are guilty of transgressions," wrote Huo, "their crimes may be punished only in the ancestral temple. Private families may not beat or curse them, as to do so would damage the atmosphere of harmony."

Huo T'ao was by no means alone in his determination to implant Confucian styles of deportment into children so early, and to do it within the context not of the nuclear, but of the large and extended family. At the same time, however, there persisted a powerful folk custom (noted as early as the twelfth century by that acute observer of attitudinal tendencies within families, Yuan Ts'ai, and still much in evidence at the present day<sup>13</sup>) that set aside a certain liminal space in the earliest life of a child, and mandated its thorough, almost abject spoiling, such that its every whim was satisfied, and its every tantrum yielded to. "[A]lmost every Chinese child," noted Isaac Taylor Headland, "is a little tyrant."<sup>14</sup> Yan Phou Lee (b. 1861, and, like Huo T'ao, from the Canton region) stated that "babyhood is the most enjoyable stage in the life of an Oriental. It is the only period when his wishes are regarded and when demonstrations of affection are shown him. The family regulations are such that so soon as a child begins to understand, he is not only taught to obey, but also loses his freedom of action."<sup>15</sup>

The aim of rule book writers like Huo T'ao was, if not to eliminate spoiling altogether, to put an end to it as early as possible. Thus P'ang Shang-p'eng (ca. 1524–ca. 1581, also from the Canton region) laid it down that boys from the age of five will no longer be permitted to act as they please, and will memorize and daily chant the P'ang family's own trimetrical jinglet (called "Song for the Instruction of Boys"), with its strident ethical propaganda.<sup>16</sup> Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing (1479–1557, from the Chekiang coast east of Hangchow) advised that:

as soon as a child can walk and talk and eat, he will begin to show traces of good conscience (*liang-chih*). This is the right time to ensure that he does not become willful and unrestrained. Confucius said that the road to sagehood begins with the nourishing of uprightness in childhood. This means that the child must constantly be taught not to engage in silly behavior, that he must eat after his elders, that he should always yield



the nicer and accept the poorer, and that, as for clothes, he should always be taught to take the plain and spurn the fancy.<sup>17</sup>

Establishing disciplined procedures for handling infants lay in the province of the medical writers, or of the writers of Confucian advice books for brides. Thus Ch'en Ch'ueh (1604–1677, a native of the same place as Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing) counseled brides not to coddle infants or overdress them, and to feed them on strict schedule, not on demand.<sup>18</sup> Writers of family management guides never ventured that far, and babyhood seems on the whole to have preserved its freedoms pretty much intact.

Elementary education for boys constituted, in late imperial times, a Confucian subspecialty in its own right, with its own large literature of scholarly methodology, syllabi, primers, and so on. There were traditionally recognized two stages in formal education: elementary (*hsiao-hsueh*, literally small studies, lesser learning) and advanced (*ta-hsueh*). The orthodox neo-Confucian belief, as stated by its principal exponent, Chu Hsi (1130–1200), was that in the golden age of antiquity there had existed a national system of elementary schools that every male child in the realm from the ages (*sui*) of eight to fifteen was required to attend. These schools gave instruction “in the chores of cleaning and sweeping, in the formalities of polite conversation and good manners, and in the refinements [of the Six Arts] of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics.”<sup>19</sup>

As with most of the rest of the antique inheritance, this elementary education had been neglected for millennia, and the neo-Confucian revivers of the heritage found themselves only with bits and fragments of the original curriculum and its texts to work with. Thus part of the literature on elementary education is purely scholarly, in the sense that it simply tried to research and recapture the ancient system, for example Chu Hsi's *Hsiao hsueh*, actually done by Liu Ch'ing-chih (1130–1195) under Chu Hsi's direction, and a small cottage industry of later scholars laboring to improve on Chu Hsi.

This work was important. It had the effect of establishing in principle the idea that elementary education was an essential component of a fully civilized society. It provided guidelines for practical efforts at reform. And it sanctified the idea that although elementary study should be open to all boys, there must follow at about the age of fifteen a rigorous winnowing, so that only boys of privileged status “together with the gifted from among the populace” might undertake advanced instruction.<sup>20</sup>

Hand in hand with the scholarly effort to repossess the antique program of primary instruction there also was set in motion a long series of concrete attempts to set up elementary schools in the here and now. These reforms did not, as a rule, try to reimpose the antique system literally. The idea was, rather, to adapt its more practicable elements to the much changed social conditions of later imperial times. Practical guides to elementary schooling, which are legion, drop most of the “Six Arts,” for example. And as elementary education was not state-controlled or regulated in late imperial times, it pretty much has to be established on a case-by-case basis whether and when a young child was tutored

by his elder kinsmen or a hired tutor (classes usually were held in the family's ancestral hall), or attended classes in a privately endowed community school (*she-hsueh* or *i-hsueh*), as Huo T'ao arranged for his kin. In addition, as Alexander Woodside has pointed out, the elementary curriculum was never wholly standardized.<sup>21</sup> Thus there existed flexibility, and a choice of methodologies that earlier tended to reflect the mainly "adult" proclivities of the neo-Confucian scholars, but later, from around the sixteenth century, came to embody a growing concern for children's special needs.

Thus the approach of Chu Hsi, or at least of the *T'ung-meng hsu-chih* ("What Children Must Know") ascribed to him, was alternately prohibitory and hortatory in tone. It aimed at implanting adult standards in children as early as possible, without making much in the way of particular concessions to child mentalities. There is a good deal of later literature in this same vein. For example, Chen Te-hsiu's (1178–1235) often-reprinted *Chiao-tzu-chai kuei* ("Regulations for the Studio Where I Teach My Sons"), among other things, gives detailed instructions on sitting, walking, standing, speaking, bowing, reciting, and writing. The little ones are exhorted always "to walk slowly with the arms held within the sleeves, with no waving of the arms or jumping," and to recite "with the undivided mind upon the words, enunciating the phrases slowly, so that each word is distinct and clear; don't look about you or play with things with your hands."<sup>22</sup>

Some family rules (not all of them) contain variations or extensions of these themes of deportment: the fourteenth-century Cheng rules enjoin a comely gravity on all male children (no leaping, arguing, joking, slouching, or using vulgar language); and Huo T'ao's rules list no less than *fifteen* stipulations governing the child's control of his facial expressions, his bodily postures, and his speech.<sup>23</sup>

That this pressure toward instilling solemnity and self-control early on in children may have had some effect is evidenced in Lee Yan Phou's reminiscence, in which he discusses the early disciplines imposed on him and others of his class, with the result that, as he writes, "the Chinese boy at sixteen is as grave and staid as an American grandfather."<sup>24</sup> And Mrs. Bryson noted in the 1880s that "all violent exercise is discouraged, and a boy is taught that the more dignified and grave his deportment, the greater approbation he will receive from his elders."<sup>25</sup>

Yet these were the fruits of a pedagogy that often enough came into being at the price of deep-seated resentments among the children who experienced it. Lee asserted that the too-early repression of children "does foster a sullenness and a spirit of rebellion that fear alone keeps under. But the Chinese deem this method absolutely necessary for the preservation of authority."<sup>26</sup>

Lee was not, apparently, aware that the method had been called into question long before his own time. In fact, a more "liberal" approach to early childhood education goes back at least to the early sixteenth century and Wang Yang-ming, the philosopher and statesman whose thesis was that education was not something imposed as strictures from without so much as it was the result of ethical self-discovery and self-realization unfolding from within, the gradual or sudden awakening of the "good conscience" (*liang-chih*) of each individual. Wang was

one early exponent of the view that early childhood learning posed special problems, principally that the purely physical energies of children had to be provided some outlet, which he insisted should take the form of singing, dancing, and ritual. Children who were repressed, he observed, develop smouldering hatreds that they inevitably vent in sly and underhanded ways.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that elementary education should be better adapted to children's natures also found expression in the discovery that children liked rhymed jingles and learned them easily. Confucian writers of repute, including especially Lü Te-sheng (d. 1568) and his son, Lü K'un (1536–1618), worked a number of elevated moral injunctions and bits of practical wisdom into popular jingle form. These often were reprinted.<sup>28</sup> The "Trimetrical Classic" (*San-tzu ching*) was composed by someone now unknown perhaps as early as the thirteenth century, but it appears to have achieved true popularity as a primer only from around the seventeenth century onward. This little text, which Lü K'un liked and used, delivers fundamental neo-Confucian doctrine to primary pupils in the form of short and easy rhymes.<sup>29</sup>

Children also loved stories and pictures, and some observant pedagogues, seizing on this fact, put together some morally uplifting illustrated texts for them. An example of this (which seems to have had a regional rather than a national vogue) is the *Jih-chi ku-shih* ("Stories for Daily Memorization") of 1542, by Hsiung Ta-mu, himself a primary teacher by profession. The stories are biographies, arranged in sixty-one categories, and presented as true history, with names and dates and specific settings. Its sober moral lessons may or may not have impressed young minds, but most of the accounts are actually quite interesting, and perhaps Hsiung had some success holding the attention of his pupils with this primer.<sup>30</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, in all the general guides to elementary education I found, the storytelling approach is conspicuous for its absence. At least for some writers, the reason seems to have been that storytelling bordered too closely on common culture, the vulgar world of opera and professional narration, and was, accordingly, more an enticement to dissipation than an effective vehicle of instruction. Lu Shih-i (1611–1672, from the Yangtze Delta region of Kiangsu province) stated as much:

Chu Hsi, in his remark on the hexagram *meng* ("childhood"), wrote: "Take away external temptations, so as to preserve intact true purity." These are eight marvelous words. As a child, one is most susceptible to outside temptations, things like playing gambling games, watching operas, or listening to story-tellers. These very easily lead people into permanent dissipation. The good teacher of children won't allow this, nor will he even let them get close to such outside enticements.<sup>31</sup>

There was no place for stories in Lu's own program of education, which he divided into three phases, each lasting ten years. The primary phase was for children from five to fifteen *sui*, that is, as early as four by Western reckoning.

Lu argued that one must begin as early as that nowadays because children are much more sophisticated (“attracted to knowledge and transformed by material things”) than they were in ancient times, when primary instruction began at eight or nine.<sup>32</sup> Still, Lu assailed Chu Hsi for having made the idea of “seriousness” (*ching*) central to his revival of elementary education. “Seriousness” was all well and good for older students; it was not something to impose on the little ones. Lu Shih-i was no follower of Wang Yang-ming, but he, too, thought, as Wang had, that the youngest pupils had to be handled leniently and lured into learning through appropriate methods, which in the case of formal subjects (the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* of Confucianism, plus astronomy, geography, history, and computation) meant the memorization and recitation of rhymed songs. The psychological theory of education that underlay this methodology, as stated by Lu Shih-i and echoed by others, was that children up to the age of about fifteen have an innate capacity for memorization (*chi-hsing*) that educators should certainly exploit. After the age of about fifteen that capacity fades and is supplanted by a new capacity for understanding (*wu-hsing*). At that point pedagogical technique must shift to new ground. “When [the pupils] grow older,” wrote Lu, “their calculating intelligence grows, at which time enticements will just make them uncontrollable. Then you must be strict with them. Otherwise, they become unruly. Each method works for a specific age.”<sup>33</sup>

At the end of elementary education it was the responsibility of the upper-class extended families themselves to conduct evaluations of each boy’s aptitude, and place him in some appropriate career (*yeh*). It seems to have been the expectation that only a few boys in any family would show true diligence or talent for book-learning or meditative study. The rest will not. Slight, but interesting differences among families arise in connection with the question of what to do about the young washouts.

Huo T’ao’s solution was, as far as I know, unusual in its enthusiasm for physical labor. Primary school was mandatory for all boys at age seven, but at age ten they also were made to do farmwork, either fulltime in spring and summer or halftime through the year. “Most of the sons and nephews,” he wrote,

dislike farmwork and are unaware that if they do it in youth, they will learn its hardships, and will not develop a mind for luxuries. If one practices farming when young, one’s habits will become solid and honest, and one will have no mind for depravities. By undergoing physical toil, one develops a mind for goodness, and will not do the kinds of things that entail censure. So the sons and nephews must work at farming.<sup>34</sup>

So far, so good. But at age fifteen farmwork changed from a meritorious exercise to a kind of penalty for the academically inept. Boys who, on reaching the age of fifteen, began study for the imperial civil service examinations were excused from all farm labor. But if at age twenty-five they had no success at that, then they were forced to become farmers for life, a pursuit that counted for little in the Huo family’s merit rating system, and rendered them ineligible for posthumous commemoration in the family’s ancestral temple.

Almost all the family rules contained provisions that were designed in one way or another to facilitate the early discovery of academic talent, and to foster it by various kinds of preferential treatment. For Huo T'ao it was either advanced study or farming, decided at age fifteen. The fourteenth-century Cheng rules established a cutoff point at age twenty-one, whereat the "dull" ones left school and were placed in one or another management position in family government. No one was expected to farm.<sup>35</sup> Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing offered failing youth several choices: farming, crafts, commerce, painting and calligraphy, medicine, or fortune-telling and geomancy—all respectable, if second-rate, income-producing careers.<sup>36</sup> A few rule books single out, at the opposite end of the spectrum, unusually gifted youth as a cause, not for pride, but for trepidation, owing to the likelihood that such boys would easily escape all discipline, turn frivolous and arrogant, and in the end bring themselves and their families to ruin.<sup>37</sup>

Model households of the upper class usually had in their rules provisions for the ancient "capping" ceremony, a formal coming-of-age ritual for boys. Details for conducting the rite were available in a text such as Chu Hsi's *Chia li* ("Family Rituals"). Capping was by no means automatic. Huo T'ao's rules clearly restricted it to boys of twenty who passed tests on the *Four Books* and the *Huo Family Instructions*, and whose record of behavior was considered acceptable. The Cheng rules put capping between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, whenever the boy had "memorized the *Four Books* and one of the [*Five*] *Classics* in orthodox text, and can explain the general meaning." He could be uncapped later if he became remiss in his studies.<sup>38</sup>

And what of girls? Chinese girlhood has a history very different from that of boys, although to be sure there are points of parallel development. There seems no doubt that a separate, subordinate female culture, with its own folkways and uncanonical rituals, was a standard component of upper-class family life through the whole late imperial period. Family instructions, written by and for men, typically have little to say about or to women, beyond laying down sex segregation as a primal principle of family organization. The Confucian classic called the *Book of Rites* sanctioned this arrangement, prohibiting all contact, direct or indirect, between any male and female except the very young, the very old, and husband and wife. All sharing of objects and giving of gifts, even passing objects from hand to hand, was forbidden. This is why, for example, the ground plan of the Huo family compound featured a set of rotating food buckets installed in such a way that the women and girls in the kitchen and the male servants in the men's dining rooms could pass things back and forth without so much as even eye contact being made. The Cheng rules (in an early version at least) also featured just such a device.

The rigid sequestration of women was certainly conducive to and perhaps even guaranteed the formation of a separate female culture. There were repellent and even shocking aspects to that culture, as it was within female circles, and not in any Confucian rule books, that such things as female infanticide, foot-binding, mother-in-law tyranny, and the cruel treatment of family servants (often

children) were common practice. By their reticence in these matters the Confucian rule books chose in effect to leave that female culture to itself, intact and unchallenged.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the writers of family instructions positively denied to women access to the higher civilization of the men, including in particular such things as painting, calligraphy, or belles lettres. For example, Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing ordered that girls from the age of seven were to be confined henceforth to the women's quarters. Next, at the age of eight, they were to be taught to read the "female teachings," a generic term that probably has in mind such texts as the *Lieh-nü chuan* ("Biographies of Women," by Liu Hsiang, B.C. 77–6) and the *Nü chieh* ("Commandments for Women," by Pan Chao, herself a woman, d. 116 A.D.). This was so that the girls will know "the right way of being a woman." However, added Hsu, "do not let [the girls] become adept at writing, or study lyrical composition."<sup>40</sup> Madame Wen, nee Lu (seventeenth century), in a little book of homespun advice recorded by her son, is quoted as having said: "Women should just learn to recognize a few characters, like those for fuel, rice, fish, meat, and the like; to learn more is of no benefit, and may even be harmful." Chiang I (1631–1687, from the Yangtze Delta region of Kiangsu), in his book of family instructions, ruled that girls "are to be allowed only to recognize written characters, and are to be taught filial behavior and ritual restraint. They needn't read a lot of books." Yao Shun-mu (1548–1627, from northern Chekiang province), however, insisted that the daughters be taught cooking, weaving, embroidery, plainness, and reticence, and said nothing of literacy.<sup>41</sup>

The fourteenth-century Cheng rules also made no provision for female literacy, but did subject the women to regularly scheduled Confucian preaching. Presumably daughters sat by their mothers during the twice-monthly lectures, when male students read and explained to them the *Lieh-nü chuan*, and at the daily morning assemblies, when a young, uncapped male repeated aloud the Cheng family's "instructions for women" (*nü-hsun*). A hair-pinning ritual, wholly a female ceremony, was mandated for daughters as they came of age.<sup>42</sup> The rules have no more to say about the upbringing of daughters.

These strictures, designed to maintain a clear boundary between the women's world and that of the men, did not necessarily forbid women direct access to the Confucian texts studied by the men, but there was in this connection a definite expectation that women would not progress far in their studies. Lü K'un quotes with approval Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086) on this point:

When the girl is six, she should start practicing easy women's work. At 7, she should recite the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the *Analects*. At 9, she should learn the meaning [of those texts] plus the *Commandments for Women* and texts of that sort. She should have some general idea of the larger meaning. Nowadays some people teach their daughters songs and poetry and vulgar music, and that is not appropriate.<sup>43</sup>

Nuances aside, the prescriptive literature of Confucian household management is consistently resolute in its determination not only to segregate the female

membership, but also to exclude it from the higher culture and intellectual life of the nation (learned or cultured women were, typically, not of the upper class, but courtesans whose status was servile). Participation by upper-class women in China's higher civilization would have required close, sustained, and collegial or personal relations with men, and that would have imperiled the very foundations of social order. Normative social order (*li*, "ritual," "propriety") was based in a series of discriminatory distinctions—youth and age, scholar and peasant, master and servant, Chinese and barbarian, male and female, and so on—whose necessary points of contact required strict limitations and controls.

And "human inclinations" (*jen-yü*) always challenged these distinctions. In 1360 K'ung Ch'i finished a book he called the "Straight Remarks" (*Chih chi*). This was not the usual guide to family management, but rather a collection of raw materials (e.g., anecdotes and observations) whose purpose was in part to show why strict segregation within the upper-class family was absolutely necessary. K'ung Ch'i's own family, by his own testimony in utter disarray, owing to the negligence of his father and the rise of one of his concubines, often was used by him as a source of negative examples. From him one can see how much the Confucian sociomoral order depended on a vigilant policing of people and of the environment they lived in. Thus he strongly urged that anything conducing to sexual arousal be removed from the family compound, including domestic animals of mixed gender, whose shameless and unsightly copulations were especially unwholesome for young children and young servants to look at.<sup>44</sup> He would forbid young daughters from crossing status lines and playing with the children of wet nurses: "This is sure to cause family disorder," he warned. "It is up to some knowledgeable male in the family to put a stop to this right away, and see to it that the wives do not injure [the principle] of great righteousness with their permissiveness."<sup>45</sup> If young daughters play with the servants' children, they will become contaminated by "the light-minded attitudes of the marketplace, and by the time those daughters have grown up, they will have become habituated to intimacy and casualness in their relationships, and surely then some unwelcome things may take place."<sup>46</sup>

K'ung Ch'i feared the lower, servant class as a source of moral pollution; he held exactly the same view of Turks and other foreigners common in China in his day—as people who were otherwise acceptable, but who did not practice sex segregation, and who, therefore, should never be met socially because of the fatal attraction their lax customs had for women and other weak-willed elements in the Chinese upper classes.

Among the members of the upper-class household itself there were dangers too. K'ung relates a story about a wealthy family in which lived a son with his daughter, and his sister with her son. Brother and sister teased the two little cousins about their someday becoming husband and wife. Now, marriage between paternal cousins was absolutely immoral and illegal; but what was meant only as a joke ended in the two children becoming strongly attracted to each

other, and the story ends in tragedy.<sup>47</sup> No wonder that the common rule was that daughters, on marriage, must leave the paternal home for good.

Unmarried, nubile daughters also raised problems. K'ung Ch'i related an official case that he had heard from his father, which had to do with an unmarried girl of pinning age (around fifteen) who became pregnant, even though careful investigation determined that she had never had a lover. What had happened was that the girl had overheard the noises of desire her parents had made while engaged in intercourse. Her emotions were moved. Shortly after, the mother urinated in a basin, and the daughter followed and urinated in the same basin. The "lingering air" penetrated her and so caused a fetus to form. To us this explanation looks like an elaborate cover-up for incest; to K'ung Ch'i it showed that "the ancients had a reason for establishing the rule that inner and outer must not share baths and latrines."<sup>48</sup> More important, it showed that whatever the circumstances, unmarried daughters must leave their parents' quarters and live strictly by themselves:

As for unmarried daughters, their housing must be especially secluded and quiet. They must not visit the rooms of their parents, or those of their brothers' wives, for fear they'll witness common or intimate goings-on, which would be most inappropriate. This is an example of what the ancients meant by "stopping trouble before it starts."<sup>49</sup>

In view of the likely shortage of such secluded housing in extended-family compounds, the most convenient remedy for the problem was to marry off the daughters about as soon as they came of age physically. Although child brides may have been disapproved (although only Hsu Hsiang-ch'ing's rules explicitly forbid them), daughters were commonly married off in their mid to late teens. Hanley and Wolf estimate, in Western-style years, "a premodern mean age at marriage of approximately 17.0."<sup>50</sup>

Upper-class marriages in late imperial China were matters of negotiation between senior heads of families. In view of the sequestration of daughters, there was no way even the boy's elders could get to know the prospective bride ahead of time. The girl was rather a blank quantity until she actually arrived as a bride at her husband's gate. Therefore, the family management guidebooks could do no more than offer rules of thumb in arranging the marriages of sons. It was urged by most guides that rich or powerful families be avoided, despite the generous dowries and other advantages they might offer. Hu Yuan (993–1059, a neo-Confucian father quoted approvingly by Lü K'un) advised that one marry one's daughters into families better than one's own, and select brides from families not as good, in the expectation that this class asymmetry would help to ensure that the new bride would render diligent and careful service to her parents-in-law.<sup>51</sup> Chiang I's rules stated that one should select girls whose parents are known to be virtuous, and that the bride should be a girl of virtue, not of "talent and allure."<sup>52</sup>



It is known that upper-class families were expected to evaluate the aptitudes of their sons and nephews and direct them into one or another appropriate career. It would be surprising if, given their sequestration, the senior womenfolk did not do the same for their daughters and nieces. The matter requires further research, but it is likely that the daughters will have varied greatly: some stolid and ugly, some shy and yielding, some frivolous and pretty, some formidable young dragon-ladies. Of these, some may well have been especially prepared for conventional upper-class marriage, and others for roles as concubines, courtesans, nuns, or tradeswomen. The prescriptive literature is silent, but the social demography of upper-class families—the extreme lopsidedness of their reported son-daughter ratios, with many more unaccounted-for daughters than female infanticide alone can explain—seems to point in that direction.<sup>53</sup>

It is symptomatic of a larger process of social change under way in China that from about the late sixteenth century, something of a “women’s problem” came more and more to the attention of Confucian writers. Recent research has begun to point this up. Joanna F. Handlin has demonstrated Lü K’un’s pioneering role in trying to convey Confucian ethics more effectively to girls and women by composing songs and tracts addressed specifically to them in an interesting and affective literary style.<sup>54</sup> Mary Backus Rankin has further pointed out how, down to the early nineteenth century, and well before the onslaught of Western ideas, Confucian writers came increasingly to challenge the old orthodoxies and oppressions—“such evils as bound feet, seclusion, curtailed education, and a rigid one-sided morality, epitomized in the cults of chastity and virginity.”<sup>55</sup>

The publication of Lü K’un’s illustrated *Kuei fan* (“Models for the Women’s Quarters”) in the late sixteenth century was one of the earliest significant Confucian inroads into the autonomy of women’s culture. This, as well as the later efforts of others in the same direction, was not a guidebook for use within any particular family, but a tract directed at the sequestered society of women in general, with nothing less than the aim of effecting its moral and spiritual reformation along Confucian lines.

Lü’s observation was that the moral education of upper-class women had fallen much too far below the ancient standards. Women had become vain, arrogant, self-indulgent, flippant, and even violent, to the point that family order was everywhere in jeopardy. To reimpose that order, Confucian intervention into the upbringing of daughters by their mothers was essential. What Lü thought lacking was reading materials that girls might enjoy as well as learn from. The traditional texts of female instruction (most of them, incidentally, composed by women<sup>56</sup>) he found to be “too long, too difficult, too miscellaneous, or too flavorless to win the reader’s respect.” His new *Kuei fan* presented lively, well-executed stories of model females (arranged by social role: daughters, mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, stepmothers, wet nurses, maids, and so on) with the idea that these should have a suasive impact, and so elevate women’s attitudes and behavior. Lü’s father contributed to the overall project of women’s uplift by composing easy rhymes for girls to learn and recite.<sup>57</sup>

In a recent and pathbreaking study Mark Elvin has reproduced woodcut illustrations from a Ming edition of the *Kuei fan*, and has further shown that the educational efforts of people like Lü K'un had some definite social effect. More and more, the imperial state officially canonized women for leading virtuous private lives, often at great and sometimes at extreme personal sacrifice. Female Confucian virtues were most meritorious when expressed in defiance of the inappropriate demands of men. An explosion of official honors occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as women of the lower classes came to gain recognition as well.<sup>58</sup> It is historically significant that the moral uplift of girlhood and womanhood by way of an improved and appealing pedagogy paralleled in time the development of comparable techniques directed at the youngest male pupils, as noted earlier.

In case the daughters and brides missed this new education, or were unmoved by it, then one notes a deepening concern by Confucian writers, especially in the seventeenth century, for placing controls on female misbehavior, in particular the savage cruelties often inflicted by upper-class wives and daughters on young serving maids.

That the wives and daughters, themselves a suppressed and culturally deprived class in the context of the extended family, were especially prone to abuse female servants, who ranked at the bottom of the family social hierarchy, was noted as early as the twelfth century by Yuan Ts'ai.<sup>59</sup> In the seventeenth century (late Ming) Wang Yen-ch'ou described at length, with convincing psychological realism, the "living hell" that some brutal women continued to inflict on young family maids.<sup>60</sup> The sanctions Wang and others recommended for this problem ran from the bride's early breaking in to the family rules ("teach the bride when she first comes" was the often-repeated adage), to expulsion from the family, to legal action before the local magistrate. Advice books for brides, such as the *Hsin-fu p'u* by Lu Ch'i (b. 1614), devoted much space to normalizing women's management of family maids.<sup>61</sup>

Surely a childhood spent as a servant, male or female, was not enviable. There seems to have been no place allotted in it for education, for play, or even for leisure.<sup>62</sup> Confucian moral doctrine, that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came to be presented in a more and more positive way to the regular womenfolk, seems never to have descended any further down the family social hierarchy. Confucian doctrine should, in theory, have been fairly easy to simplify for servants; Confucian ethics always emphasizes the acceptance of status, high or low, and the devoted performance of duties that status requires. Yet not even a morally inspiring jingle seems ever to have been written for serving children. Was it perhaps enough to persuade the women to go easier with their punishments? Or was the moral emancipation of servants on some future Confucian agenda, never fulfilled?

In sum, the upper-class extended household of late imperial China was something more than simply an enterprise dedicated to the maintenance and perpetuation of a patrilineal kinship group. Its internal structure and mode of operation

were strongly shaped by a need to uphold and make manifest Confucian sociomoral values as expressed through the principles of *li*, which set senior apart from junior, male from female, and people of ability and stature from people without it.

Children and youth were, because of the imperative of *li*, divided among themselves within a single extended family. It did not matter so much that one was a child. What mattered was that one was a son or daughter, older or younger than the next child, and a regular family member or a child of the servant class. Each child had its proper *place*.

Children were discouraged from banding together simply as children. Free play was frowned on, as was the mixing of children across sex and status lines. The rules of social hierarchy and discrimination were among the earliest lessons children were taught. Yet there did exist something of a children's culture: nursery rhymes and tales, games, puppet shows, kites, toys, and so on.

The Confucian distinctions were, by all indications, maintained within the family only by dint of constant effort, constant vigilance, and what K'ung Ch'i liked to call "steel guts" (*kang ch'ang*) on the part of those in positions of family authority. Human desires and passions often ran in one direction, whereas the body of Confucian principle cut in quite another.

The upper-class family probably maintained an outward display of rank and order without great difficulty. In part this was possible because social rank and order were embodied in the architecture and layout of the extended-family compound. But the actual state of affairs must always have fallen short of the ideal in some way or another. Human passion and desire thwarted the ideal system not by way of any frontal challenge to its basic principles and outer form, but by subterfuge and concealed subversion. That, too, was a lesson learned and practiced from childhood. Perhaps the eerie absence of American-style confrontation and overt disruption in the primary schools of Mao's China, the childish orderliness that so impressed Kesson's group, was in some way a continuation of that tradition.

## NOTES

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### A NOTE ON FURTHER READING IN WESTERN LANGUAGES

As a topic for scholarly inquiry, the history of childhood in China has a shallow past, but surely a promising future. The larger social structures that encompass childhood have recently been the subject of some major gains: note especially Patricia Buckley Ebrey and James L. Watson, eds., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China 1000–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and Charlotte Furth, “The Patriarch's Legacy: Household Instructions and the Transmission of Orthodox Values,” to appear in *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, ed. K. C. Liu (forthcoming). Also in process is a major undertaking, Patricia Ebrey's annotated translation of Chu Hsi's *Chu-tzu chia li*, under the title *The Family Rituals of Master Chu*.

On childhood in Mao's China, one also may consult Iris Bubenik-Bauer, *Kollektive Kleinkinderziehung. Aspekte der Erziehung in der Volksrepublik China* (Veröffentlichen aus dem Übersee-Museum Bremen, Reihe D Band 3, Bremen, 1977), and Ruth Sidel, *Women and Child Care in China* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972). For Taiwan there is a large anthropological literature; one important example, which deals with the upbringing of girls, is Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972). Richard W. Wilson has written two books on the political socialization of children in Taiwan; note in particular his later one, *The Moral State. A Study of the Political Socialization of Chinese and American Children* (New York: Free Press, 1974).

Missionary accounts, diligently researched, would surely turn out to contain a great deal more about childhood in China than I have cited in this chapter. One place to start is Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility. American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-century China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984).

Literature and the visual arts also are rich sources. The famous eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been translated in whole or in part several times, most recently by David Hawkes as *The Story of the Stone* (5 vols., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979). The novel deals centrally with the interactions of early adolescents in a declining upper-class household. Those who enjoyed the film *The Last Emperor* might be inspired to consider the more prosaic boyhood of an imperial ancestor, the Ch'ien-lung emperor (1711–1799); see Harold Kahn, “The Education of a Prince: The Emperor Learns His Roles,” in *Approaches to Modern Chinese History*, ed. Albert Feuerwerker et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 15–44.

Children also were represented with some frequency in traditional Chinese painting; the whole question of *how* they were depicted, by whom, when, and for what purpose awaits study and analysis. As one example only, the thirteenth-century artist Li Sung seems to look at children quite outside the bounds of Confucian orthodoxy in his "The Knick-Knack Peddler," in which a bunch of little rich children accompanied by a wet nurse eagerly surround a well-stocked itinerant toy merchant. See Ellen Laing, "Li Sung and Some Aspects of Southern Sung Figure Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 37 (1975):5–38, and figures no. 3–11, 14, 15.

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