

## Introduction



In 1929, decades before Philippe Ariès wrote his pioneering study of the history of children, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, Dr. Hu Shi, a leading figure in China's May Fourth Movement, stated that, to understand the degree to which a particular culture is civilized, we must appraise three factors: how it treats its women, how it spends its leisure hours, and how it handles its children.<sup>1</sup> Hu Shi understood that people reveal much about themselves when they interact with those who are less privileged and less powerful, and thus less able to demand fair treatment or question abuse. One of Hu Shi's goals was to stand the concept of a naturally ordered social hierarchy on its head and inquire how, in traditionally conceived relationships of subordination such as son and father or wife and husband, inferior members fared at the hands of their privileged superiors. Similarly, one goal of this book is to inquire into the costs and benefits for children in such a system.

As will be seen throughout this study, an inquiry of this sort often places "an emphasis not so much on conscious thoughts or elaborated theories as on unspoken or unconscious assumptions."<sup>2</sup> The social justification for widespread practices like infanticide, for example, receives little direct discussion in early texts. The student of early China is, as Ann Waltner has said of her study of infanticide in Ming and Qing China, "placed in the complex (and sometimes unenviable) position of pushing our sources to tell us what it is we want to know, rather than what it is they want to tell us."<sup>3</sup> But even when sources present information in a straightforward manner, we will never know for certain the extent to which theory translated into actual practice. Many of the primary sources I have used, such as ritual texts and legal codes, are prescriptive rather than descriptive. As such they tell us about how things ought to be but not necessarily about actual conditions. Another difficulty stems from the nature of traditional Chinese historiography. The *Shiji* (*Records of*

*the Grand Historian*), for example, relates historical events by means of fictional dialogues and frequently interweaves realistic, factual accounts with elements of myth, dream, and legend. But for all its imperfections as a mirror of ages past, it still renders important insights into the various ways that people thought about and discussed childhood. I therefore use many of these sources not as accurate pictures of the social reality for children, but as indicators of the “presuppositions, expectations, questions, arguments, and justifications” surrounding discourse on the child in early China.<sup>4</sup>

It is also difficult to judge the extent to which people shared various beliefs. Even among contemporaries, views on children and childhood must have diverged greatly according to a person’s specific geographical, educational, and social background. But though the ideas discussed in this book may only represent the views that one person shared with several others at one particular point in Chinese history, the survival of these texts has made their voices the ones that were heard (and in some cases, the ones that were heeded) for the next two millennia.

My study encompasses the stages of human development that begin with the embryo and extend to include the late adolescent. At times, however, I also take account of children in the broadest sense of the word, that is, offspring of any age. In classical Chinese, as in English, the terms used to designate the stages of human development depend upon context. Medical, legal, and literary texts, for instance, all define the stages of human development differently. For the purpose of taxation in early China, for example, a fifteen-year-old might qualify as an adult, whereas in Confucian ritual, male adult status was conferred in the capping ceremony at age nineteen. In contrast, young girls in early China who married at age eleven or twelve may have achieved one form of adult status, but in fact even some of their contemporaries would have shared our modern sense that these young wives were still mere children. Generally speaking, for this study I have used nineteen as the uppermost age for “youth.” Nevertheless, I have on several occasions also used the term youth to designate what some of us now think of as “late adolescence,” specifically, the final phase in the prolonged childhood of the unmarried, highly educated, and unestablished youths in our own culture, who range in age from twenty up to twenty-nine years or more.

Probably more than in any other culture, one’s status as a child in traditional Chinese society was retained and reinforced throughout the entirety of one’s life. Chinese law, for example, determined various forms of legal standing based on whether a man was acting in his role as a father or as a son. In a few of the legal cases I shall discuss, particularly in Chapter Three, the “child” in question refers to adult offspring. But I

have tried to limit my discussion of adult children to cases that help elucidate the status of children who were truly minors. In antiquity, just as in our own times, the threshold that separated the child from the youth or the youth from the adult was not fixed but changed according to a specific milestone (for example, a child might achieve reproductive maturity at age thirteen but adult legal status much later). I here urge the reader to seek explanations of the various schemes of child development in the more specific contexts discussed in this book.

Rather suddenly, in Han times (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), we begin to find fairly detailed references to children and to the childhoods of famous figures. My study attempts to identify the cultural conditions that placed children and childhood near the center of intellectual debate for the first time in Chinese history. These conditions were in large measure related to the establishment of a centralized empire. Other influential factors include the consolidation of theories of cosmogony and related notions of embryology within intellectual discourse; the growing influence of Han Confucianism, which stressed early education and pressed for the establishment of a public school system; and the frequency with which immature children came to the throne to rule “all under Heaven.”

Chapter One, “The Discovery of Childhood,” discusses the cultural conditions that made childhood an important topic of intellectual inquiry in Han times. In particular, I examine the increasingly accepted view that a child comes into the world with incomplete moral faculties, that these faculties require development through lengthy programs of instruction, and that this instruction should begin when the child is a mere fetus. Confucians stressed the child’s unformed state and its need for instruction, not as a simple statement of obvious fact, but as part of a larger argument based on the conviction that education is the foundation of a humane society. Daoists, on the other hand, who took a dim view of culture and learning, criticized the Confucian perspective by championing the natural purity of the infant, who, they averred, was untainted by the false distinctions and trivial distractions of the world. Though the Confucian perspective places little value on childhood in and of itself, this low estimation also represents a more general objection to basing a man’s social status on birth rather than merit.

Chapter Two, “The Precocious Child,” takes into account a separate and superficially contrasting image of the child that was also present in early Chinese representations of childhood: the child who is born wise and who acquires wisdom without instruction. The theme of the juvenile prodigy in early Chinese literature tends to be linked to legends concerned with the necessity of overlooking a humble social background in

cases of true worth. Most often, the child's extraordinary abilities betoken its conformity to a Heavenly plan that operates outside of the usual hierarchical constraints—such as noble birth—that determine social status. This chapter shows how the diametrically opposed child exemplars prevailing in Han times—the child who requires lengthy instruction and the child born wise—both serve as cultural icons that challenge aristocratic privilege.

Chapter Three, “The Aristocratic Child,” provides a third perspective on childhood in early China. Privileged children are often characterized in Han texts as spoiled, bored, and unruly. Born into positions of wealth and power, aristocratic boys already possessed and were therefore often unmoved by the material and social benefits that encouraged low-ranking boys to educate themselves. Moreover, through their aristocratic privileges, young nobles were often able to evade the law—even in cases as serious as murder—and at times wielded sufficient political power to punish tutors who nagged too much. The sheltered lives of these high-ranking boys created formidable obstacles to any serious educational effort. Descriptions of youth at court thus stand in sharp contrast to portraits of the preternaturally wise, dutiful, and solemn children discussed in Chapter Two. Biographical entries in the Han histories emphasizing the bad behavior of these youths can be read as meritocratic arguments against the corrupting influence of too much wealth and too much power, premised on the idea that indulgence and privilege result in intellectual and moral atrophy. Nonetheless, at the same time that they deride various pampered aristocrats, the Han histories reveal the great dangers that persistently haunted the lives of aristocratic and other court children. Ultimately, the aristocratic child emerges most frequently as a pathetic victim of court politics. This chapter discusses the hazards for children of high status, taking into account how succession, factionalism, and traditional views concerning patriarchal and parental authority contributed to their vulnerability.

Chapter Four, “Infant Abandonment,” explores early Chinese accounts of infanticide and infant exposure and examines the reasons why such practices were generally tolerated. In descriptions of burial and mourning rites recorded during the Han, infants are virtually absent, suggesting not only the infant's liminal position in the family but also its marginal standing as a human being. A newborn child was viewed not as an individual with its own right to existence but as one element that might contribute to or imperil the ancestral line. The needs of the enduring family unit were therefore generally given precedence over those of the child. Though infanticide was illegal, it was punished not by death, as was the case for murder, but by forced labor and tattooing. Nevertheless,

most early accounts of infanticide demonstrate that offenders were rarely brought to justice. This toleration may have been due in part to the enduring sense that the head of the Chinese family wielded the power of life and death over offspring, despite a legal code that suggested otherwise. Infanticide, moreover, was most often practiced by commoners struggling for economic survival. In the view of some early Confucian philosophers, all people were entitled to an adequate food supply. Thus, they tended to assign blame for the crimes perpetrated by the poverty-stricken (such as infanticide) not to the offenders, but to the ruler, who was held responsible for the livelihood of his subjects. Chapter Four also illustrates how a child's gender figured in a family's decision to raise or abandon it and introduces a number of larger issues connected with female offspring.

Chapter Five, "Girls," examines the issue of female education, a new concern in Han times generated by the increasingly diverse mix of social classes that began to inhabit the imperial women's quarters and influence politics at the highest level. Han intellectuals sought to redress the situation by using a variety of approaches ranging from promoting strict separation of the sexes and subservient roles for women to stressing literacy for girls as preparation for their future vocations as advisers to husbands and teachers to children.

In general, intensive literary education appears to have remained a privilege restricted to a small number of upper-class girls and girls who served in the imperial palace. Though the occasional low-born girl might receive a courtesan's training in music and dance, most girls looked forward to lives centered on their roles as wives, mothers and textile producers. Nevertheless, by all accounts, it was in the Han dynasty that, for the first time in Chinese history, girls from all sectors of society became the focus of Confucian educational efforts. This endeavor included the dissemination of texts, displays of public artwork, and the bestowal of governmental benefits on village women in reward for their moral behavior or for their contributions to the state in cloth or silk production.

By stressing the moral and economic capacities of the female population, Confucian officials may well have been drawing on two of Qin's policies. First was the effort of the Qin state to impose on the populace standardized modes of behavior between the sexes. Second was the Qin tendency to view the entire population as a workforce it could rightfully tap in its construction and expansion of China's first united empire. From this perspective, a wise and efficient ruler could not afford to overlook girls as potential contributors to his domain. When we come to the Han, because of the increasing importance of yin-yang thought in official Confucian ideology, a number of thinkers viewed the yin, or female, sphere as an essential component in their efforts to achieve and maintain cosmic

balance. Finally, government attempts to encourage certain normative behaviors on the part of its female populace were also the result of idealistic Confucian views that education would usher in the era of *taiping*—Great Peace. Most significantly, any ordinary girl could now view herself as an active contributor to the improvement of family, state, and cosmic harmony, though she often paid for her involvement by being asked to assume increasingly subservient positions to her father, brother, or husband.

Chapters One, Two, and Five concentrate on the rationalist and often text-centered approach to educating and morally forming both girls and boys. As we shall see, traditionally transmitted sources occasionally mention mantic practices such as physiognomy and calendrics in connection with child care. But in general received texts leave us with the impression that beginning in the late Warring States period, and especially from the mid-Former Han onward (ca. 87 B.C.), Chinese child-rearing proceeded along lines not especially foreign to the modern Western reader. We can therefore single out the emulation of positive role models and the acquisition of text-based learning as the two practices that received the greatest stress. But in the last several decades, Chinese archaeologists have uncovered a host of materials that document what is only hinted at in the traditional texts: the widespread use of occult practices in the care and upbringing of children. It is these practices, and particularly the ones concerned with the developing fetus, that are the main concern of Chapter Six, “The Magical Manipulation of Childhood.” In that chapter, I look into a number of theories seeking to explain why correlative cosmology and occult speculation came to new prominence in the third and second centuries B.C., and show how this new current of thought transformed the way people understood and cared for their children.

One thesis of the chapter is that there was a clear connection between the new preoccupation with fetal life in scholarly discourse and the growing need of the emerging centralized state—with its increasing reliance on a nonhereditary bureaucracy—to reorient human life in a past that transcended family ties.

Finally, let me explain the conventions I have followed in this book. Scholars have become increasingly reluctant to use traditional terms such as “Confucian” and “Daoist” to describe the philosophies or the proponents who embraced the various currents of thought in early China. This reluctance represents a healthy suspicion of terms that obfuscate rather than clarify our understanding of the individuals or beliefs they seek to explain. As is well known, the English term Confucian is a rather poor translation of the Chinese term *Ru*. As Michael Nylan has observed, “*Ru*,

conventionally translated as ‘Confucian,’ means ‘classicist,’ though dedicated Ru were said to regard Confucius as their ‘ancestral teacher’ because of his monumental efforts to preserve the ancient traditions.”<sup>5</sup> But as she later points out, the term Ru, “quite confusingly, was also used in ancient texts more narrowly to describe the committed followers of Confucius, who adhere in their conduct to the specific ethical Way of antiquity supposedly prescribed by the Master.”<sup>6</sup> We are thus faced with the dilemma, in the apt words of Keith Knapp, of “to *Ru* or not to *Ru*.”<sup>7</sup> I have taken a middle position, sometimes using “Ru” and “Ruist,” and sometimes using the more traditional “Confucian” not to indicate a substantive distinction but rather as a stylistic alternative. I have also adopted Michael Loewe’s terms “modernist” and “reformist” in cases where it is important to distinguish between the two major modes of thought and imperial policy that held sway during the Former Han.<sup>8</sup>

The transliteration of Chinese was another matter to be decided. Many of the English authors I quote and most of the ones from whom I have drawn my translations wrote their books at a time when the Wade-Giles system was conventionally used. In the end, I decided that it would be best, to avoid confusion, to convert all these quoted materials to pinyin without comment. Chinese terms are generally italicized only at their first occurrence. Finally, a word about the treatment of people’s ages. Traditionally, Chinese children were regarded as being one *sui* (year) old at birth. Ages cited in old texts are therefore generally equivalent to modern Western ages minus one. In this study, the ages given are in Western years unless specifically designated as *sui*.