

Limin Bai, *Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China*.

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The last few years have seen growing interest in the history of childhood in China.¹ Limin Bai's [白莉民] study of school primers speaks both to the evolution of China's educational system and to Chinese views of childhood. Focusing on the school books used in the late imperial periods, it also highlights the broader intellectual shifts that affected elementary education.² Although various schools of thought had much to say about children and childhood, Bai concentrates on "Confucian education." She takes the concept of Confucianism broadly enough to encompass Daoist and Buddhist influences, among others, but educational institutions basically reflected official culture, which was generally Confucian.

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¹ Anne Behnke Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Keith N. Knapp, *Selfless Offspring: Filial Children and Social Order in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Earlier work includes Thomas H. C. Lee, "The Discovery of Childhood: Children's Education in Sung China (960-1279)," in Sigrid Paul, ed., *Kultur, Begriff und Wort in China und Japan* (Berlin: Dieter Reimer, 1984), pp. 159-198; and Anne Kinney, ed., *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

² Bai does not define "late imperial" and in fact begins her discussion with the ancient philosophers, but the book's emphasis is on the period from the Song, which saw Neo-Confucians paying renewed attention to the education of children, through the Qing.

Broadly, Bai argues that Chinese elites consistently saw the primary function of the education of children in terms of the need to shape their moral character. At the same time, at least from the Tang dynasty, elites wanted their own children to succeed in the examination system. In this sense, elementary education was simultaneously divorced—to a degree—from the concerns of daily life, and also what we might almost call “pre-professional” in today’s terminology (if we define examination success as a loosely professional). Formal education, at least, was long a matter only for the elites, but by the Ming, schooling seems to have spread more widely. Ming elites took a new interest in the socialization of the masses. More child-friendly primers reflected the perceived need to imbue commoners with a sense of practical morality that would shore up the social order. Bai argues that this added a third dimension—along with the more essentialized morality of Neo-Confucianism and materials suitable for preparation for the exams—to the texts given to children. Schools avoided vocational subjects to concentrate on basic literacy and memorization of the Classics, according to Bai, though it seems to me we could also regard the civil service as a kind of vocation.

The Ming was also a turning point, according to Bai, for taking into account the distinct stages of children’s cognitive and social development. Yet like the earlier Song Neo-Confucians, but Ming educators remained devoted to the rapid formation of virtuous adults. The distinctive Song contribution to education had been an emphasis not only on basic literacy but also on ritualizing the body, an emphasis which survived into the twentieth century. Children were seen, if not as little adults, then as adults-in-training (p. xx). It may be that in emphasizing the pivotal roles of the Song and the Ming, Bai somewhat understates the role of Confucianism and moral thinking generally in pre-Song primers. Nonetheless, Bai convincingly argues that school books give us a representation of the “ideal child” that was the hope of his (since the ideal was a boy) family. In the Chinese view, children were innocent and unformed,

but amenable to the proper shaping; providing them with the right environment was key.

Bai's study is limited to school books and educational writings—we get no sense of how texts were used in classrooms or what students thought of them. This seems unfortunate, especially since she covers much of the background that produced the texts. Even snippets of how they were taught and read would have added texture to the book. Based on her dissertation, the published monograph also neglects more recent work relevant to the subject.³ Yet Bai's study will long stand as the best introduction to the subject—essentially a survey of a very broad subject, each chapter a potential monograph in itself. Bai shows how new ideas about moral character and especially about the best ways to shape children most effectively periodically led to new primers.

This book is organized partly by theme and partly by chronology. In the first chapter, Bai traces primers to Han dynasty wordbooks. There seem to have been wordbooks in previous periods, but they did not survive the Qin, and Han educators had to start over. By the Song, as family schools began to spread, elementary education texts (蒙書) included history, literature, classics, and ritual texts. And in the Ming the famous *Sanzijing* (三字經), *Baijiaxing* (百家姓), and the *Qianziwen* (千字文)—collectively known as the “Sanbaiqian” (三百千)—began to be used. The “Sanbaiqian” had roots in popular village books and were rejected by elites until the Ming. (The *Qianziwen* was evidently authored in the 6th century, spreading rapidly enough so that 32 different editions were discovered in the Dunhuang caves, including a bilingual Chinese-Tibetan version).

Chapter two focuses on the development of Song Neo-Confucianism as a

³ Recent studies making use of textbooks include Thomas H. C. Lee, *Education in Traditional China: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Xu Zi 徐梓, *Mengxue duxu de lishi toushi* 蒙學讀物的歷史透視 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996).

watershed moment in the history of Chinese education. Bai is not the first to stress the Song. For Bai, however, the Song neither represented a Chinese discovery of childhood, which she claims had long been understood as a distinct stage of the life cycle, nor were Song innovations entirely beneficial. Certainly, the Song thinkers displayed a new concern with education as the numbers of elites grew and the examination system was opened up. Yet primers such as Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) *Elementary Learning* (小學) treated children as adults. The Song curriculum thus emphasized abstract ideas on the one hand and behavioral patterns and daily practice—in essence the ritualization of the body (particularly through the literal revival of classical deportment 灑掃應對)—on the other. Correct body training was seen as a key ingredient to self-cultivation. Bai suggests that a certain tension marked competing demands of moral idealism and practical preparation for the exams but does not show if this was played out in primers. Be that as it may, it is clear that Bai thinks a more important watershed came with what we today might call the more “child-centered” approach of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529), the subject of her third chapter. Bai seems to link Wang's philosophical commitment to the potential sagehood of all persons to his new acknowledgement of the naturalness of play. Thus where Zhu Xi's ritualization of the body implied the repression of children's playful instincts, Wang encouraged the classroom use of singing, for example.

One can question whether the links between philosophy and pedagogy are as necessary as Bai seems to suggest, and she neglects socio-economic, even political factors. If an expansion (or redefinition of elites) led Song educators to emphasize the bodily discipline and moral self-cultivation, why did the Ming expansion of education lead to a kind of relaxation of classroom behavior? Actually, as Bai shows, Wang Yangming's goals were the same as Zhu Xi's: both men wanted to instill a sense of morality that would in turn support stable social norms. They

differed only in their means. One wonders if early Ming emperors' encouragement of popular education along with expanding commercial opportunities did not play a role in the rise of more popular educational texts such as, broadly speaking, morality books (善書) and story books (故事), the latter of which Bai discusses at some length.

Bai returns to the ritualization of the body in chapter four, tracing the use of ritual (禮) in the classroom through the Qing. She points out that in the Ming, while Lǚ Kun 呂坤 (1536-1618) can be seen as radically liberalizing pedagogy in a number of respects, he still emphasized school rules and the ritualization of body. Similar codes, all revolving around filiality, marked the growing number of family instructions (家訓) as well. Nonetheless, proper deportment remained only one of several basic techniques to socialize and educate children. In chapter five, Bai turns to the use of models, whose exemplary behavior was supposed to inspire children to imitate, or at least learn what the ideal was. Interestingly, most models were of adults. Again, this may reflect a sense that children were "little adults" who could be held to the highest standards—at least from about the age of seven, when formal schooling was generally considered appropriate. But not all models were of adults, and Bai concentrates on stories of exemplary children. The use of stories about fantastic prodigies (memorizing the classics in infancy and so on) had largely died out in late imperial times, and primers tended to tell of more historically-based models that real children might learn from. There were innumerable stories like those about Sima Guang 司馬光—not so much a young genius as a dedicated pupil who persisted in studying regardless of hunger or cold. And even more stories of filial children who refused to eat until food was offered to their parents, and so on and so forth. Numerous editions of the "Twenty-four Cases of Filial Piety" (二十四孝), many influenced by Buddhism and Daoism, found their way into the common culture.

Finally, in addition to ritual and morality, schools did deal with the nitty-gritty of teaching basic literacy. Bai examines late imperial wordbooks in chapter six. By

the Qing, systematized introduction to set number of characters was deemed necessary before children should start reading the classics. In essence, this is what the “Sanbaiqian” did. However, Wang Yun’s 王筠 (1784-1854) *Explanation of Characters for Children* 文字蒙求, for example, went further to not only introduce morality stories in the process of teaching characters but also classify them as pictographs, ideographs, compound ideographs formed from two or more pictographs, and phonetic. Bai suggests that Wang’s classification scheme did *not* reflect contemporary *kaozheng* (考證) scholarship on the evolution of characters so much as the older belief that characters were a reflection of nature of reality (unfortunately, Bai does not explain this notion). Wang taught key Confucian elements through his analysis of characters: e.g., how the original form of “ruler” (君) shows a seated prince while “subject” 臣 shows a kneeling man, thus obedience; “filial” (孝) shows that the son is the product of the father, thus filiality; “(married) woman” (婦) shows a woman with a broom, and so forth.

Bai makes a brave effort to discuss peasant children’s education in chapter seven; however, as noted above, the real evidence is of elite attitudes toward village culture. She argues that officials such as Lü Kun and Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀(1696-1771) were certainly concerned with maintenance of the social order. But she disagrees with scholars such as Alexander Woodside on the significance of this social bias, arguing that village schools were not intended to divorce peasants from the civil service examination system.⁴ Rather, Bai thinks village schools essentially fit into a division between elementary and advanced education of long standing. They took the agricultural cycle into account, unlike elite schools, closing during busy seasons. For Bai, the fundamental problem of village schools was not that they dumbed down

⁴ See Alexander Woodside, “Some Mid-Qing Theorists of Popular Schools: Their Innovations, Inhibitions, and Attitudes toward the Poor,” *Modern China* 9:1 (1983), pp. 3-35. Bai would, however, probably agree that in fact few peasant children were able to pursue higher education.

the elite curriculum, but that, precisely in emphasizing the usual Neo-Confucian approaches, they ignored peasants' real educational needs.

In her final chapter eight, Bai examines the late Qing's response to the national crisis, especially after the 1890s. Later famous as a translator, Lin Shu 林紓 (1852-1924) wrote *Songs for Educating Children* 訓蒙歌訣 in about 1895; it was adapted as a primer in 1898. Lin wanted to teach children about the threats from Western and Japanese imperialism while also conveying Western knowledge. Like the other reformers of his generation, Lin was highly critical of the examination system and blamed the classical curriculum for producing worthless literati. Bai suggests this view also reflected the influence of seventeenth century interest in practical studies and the question what children actually need to know. However, in my view, while criticisms of the examination system were of course ancient themselves, educational reformism in the 1890s is best seen as part of a thorough-going rethinking of all traditional institutions that was provoked by the national crisis. The key figure in late Qing educational reformist discourse, as in so many other areas, was Liang Qichao 梁啟超. In the 1890s he took Britain as his model for educational reform, while after his exile at the turn of the century in Japan, he turned more to that country (as Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 had long advocated). In either case, Liang saw compulsory education as the basis of the modern state; China's primitive educational system was holding the Chinese back. As Bai notes, a social Darwinist view of national competition informed Liang's views on education as on other matters. He urged less memorization and more materials suitable for the various stages of childhood development. Women's education was important to enable future mothers to properly raise future citizens, beginning at the foetal stage, an ancient notion in many respects.⁵ Less convincing to my mind is Bai's contention

⁵ Bai correctly notes that for all the scholarship on Liang, little deals with his educational views; however, for Liang's views on women's education, Bai would have done well to consult Joan Judge, "Citizens or

that Liang was able to produce a new educational synthesis of “old” and “new” learning (a terminology disguising the “Chinese”-“Western” split). That Liang sought such a synthesis, I agree; that advocating Confucianism along with Western languages and geography in the schools and using a 10-day week indicates a successful synthesis, I doubt. Bai is on firmer ground showing the influence of Protestant mission schools and the New Policy educational reforms after 1902. Modern primers began to spread in the 1890s, and the Qing school regulations of 1904, authored by Zhang Zhidong, dramatically increased their numbers and their use.

The new school system that the Qing officially put into place as it abolished the old exam system (in 1905) marked the beginning of a new era, and Bai ends here, on the eve of educational modernity as it were. Specialists will feel Bai has neglected their particular turfs—whether the dictionaries of the Han, the literary training of the Tang, the new primers of the 1880s and '90s, or indeed various elementary school subjects beyond basic literacy and the classics (Bai comments briefly on training in numeracy but says virtually nothing about history or geography). Such is the nature of a survey: its inevitable omissions should not obscure the achievements of this book, which not only analyses particular primers in some depth but also shows how changing ideas about the nature of children—ideas which were in turn rooted in philosophical concepts—shaped pedagogy and the texts used to educate children.

Bai emphasizes continuities as well as change. From the Han through the Qing (at least), Chinese educators agreed that “the purpose of education was to transform the biological child into the social child” (p. 209). If, ideally, adulthood was defined not by age but by moral qualities, childhood naturally became a time of rigorous moral training. But as Bai says, parents did not send their children to schools only for

Mothers of Citizens? Gender and the Meaning of Modern Chinese Citizenship,” in Merle Goldman, and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 23-43.

moral training. They wanted their children to be equipped for life's practical problems. Above all, elites wanted their children prepared for the civil service exams. I wish Bai had said more about how the tensions between the pedagogy of moral training and the rigors of exam preparation were worked out.

Bai also fails to consider a key question raised by the new educational system that was foreshadowed by Lin Shu and Liang Qichao. That is, given her picture of the degree to which traditional educational institutions were already what we might call "child-centered," was the deliberate rejection of this tradition a mistake?⁶ In other words, would it have been better to build on the existing schools rather than start over with an entirely new system, as proposed in the Qing's new educational regulations? This question is but one case of the larger debate over "tradition" that has existed in of China since the nineteenth century. The point here is that it would have been useful to have Bai's take on the question. My own view is that while the new system certainly represented a break with the past institutionally, in terms of curriculum, and perhaps even pedagogically, nonetheless the break was in fact gradual and partial. Naturally, the new school system took some time to get off the ground, and a good deal of local autonomy was in practice retained. The new curriculum, while including plenty of science and other "foreign" subjects, also maintained an emphasis on ethics and even ritual that would have been familiar to imperial-era educators.

In any case, the twentieth century takes us beyond the scope of this excellent book, and these quibbles do not detract from its contributions. Bai writes fluently and convincingly, and she brings much new material to our attention. This book is an important contribution to the history of Chinese children and education.

⁶ See Ruth Hayhoe's "Forward" to Bai's book, p. ix; also Thomas D. Curran, *Educational Reform in Republican China: The Failure of Educators to Create a Modern Nation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).