

Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage:
Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China.*

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In this collection of eight essays, Professor Hsiung explores fresh material to address topics related to children and early childhood in late imperial China. The author structures these essays within her clear definition of the subject of this study, the “child”, defined firstly as a social status relative to his/her elders, then as a phase in a person’s life span, and finally as specific qualities in human nature from philosophical and aesthetical perspectives. This creates a definitive framework within which the first three chapters focus on the physical condition of children, followed by three chapters on their social life; and the third part of this volume contains an important study on the treatment and education of girls, and also a chapter with a discussion of various issues relating to children and childhood in concepts and reality. Although this volume is not a full treatment of the subject, these essays investigate various aspects of the lives of infants and young children in the late imperial period.

A major success of this volume lies in its unprecedented exploration of an extensive range of resources. Apart from using the usual prescriptive and didactic

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works, such as *The Book of Rites*, Neo-Confucian writings, family rituals and instructions, and philosophical treaties, the author painstakingly researches paediatric texts and biographical accounts to reconstruct a multi-faceted environment against which the material and physical experience of Chinese children, and their social and emotional lives, are narrated and analysed.

Firstly, by examining paediatric texts from the seventh century and throughout the late imperial period, the study constructs “China’s evolving material conditions and biological environment” (p. 29) as they affected children. Specific details of newborn care and issues relating to nursing and infant feeding are documented to demonstrate that Chinese paediatrics developed earlier than in other civilizations. The use of these paediatric texts to depict a beneficial environment (which was created by the efforts of the government, the educated elite and medical professionals) for the survival and protection of the child during this period, is groundbreaking.

Secondly, the information generated from more than eight hundred chronological biographies from the Ming-Ch’ing period is used to examine the social aspects of children’s lives, with detailed discussions on modes of upbringing, domestic bonds, and the emotional world of the child. The use of such materials to construct children’s past is not new, as the author noted that “the necrological literature (poems and burial inscriptions)” (pp. 6-7) is used by Pei-yi Wu in his study of the parent-child bond in *Chinese Views of Childhood* (edited by Anne Behnke Kinney, University of Hawaii Press, 1995). What has been achieved in this volume, however, is the extensive use of biographical accounts and other sources, such as diaries, collections of random notes, novels, dramas and stories, contemporary accounts of local customs and rituals, folklore and artistic depictions, some legal cases and clinical reports. Combined, they provide a wealth of information regarding children’s social environment in late imperial China. It reveals that in a traditional Chinese family, it was not unusual for grandparents, aunts and maids, as well as the children’s own

parents, to all be involved in raising the child. Especially in the gentry families and in the setting of polygamous marriage, children not only had their own biological mother but also a “social mother”, a term which refers to their fathers’ formal wives. This kind of collective effort in child rearing, on the positive side, might have provided children with a warm and secure environment where they could learn all sorts of social skills and develop their emotional world. However, the reality was often much more harsh, and many children actually suffered from the loss of one or both parents, and had to endure hardship or unfair treatment from their unkind relatives or clansmen.

Of course, the narrations of children’s emotional lives are reconstructed by adults as they came from the adults’ recollection of their childhood. This seems to be one of the inevitable limitations of using such material to construct children’s lives in the past. Nevertheless, the information revealed in them still adds value to our understanding of Chinese children and childhood in the past.

The same point applies to the discussion of the bond between mothers and sons in this volume. Chronological biographies and personal letters, memorial essays and autobiographical accounts are employed to portray the bond between Chinese mothers and sons. It discloses that in traditional Chinese society a woman had to realise her personal ambition and public recognition through her son. Through the detailed portrayal of various types of mothers, such as model mothers, widow mothers, the suffering mother, and through the eyes of sons and the voices of the mother, the author argues that the Chinese mother was devoted to the son; meanwhile, the son was constantly reminded of his mother’s sacrifice and suffering for him, and was required to reward and honour his mother by attaining success in civil service examinations. This aspect of Chinese mother-son ties has been described in Jon L. Saari’s *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis* through the accounts of adult sons [(Cambridge and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University,

1990), pp. 108-109, 151-156]. However, Saari's study focuses mainly on a particular elite group of Chinese schoolboys growing up during social and political upheaval at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the Republican era, and the anecdotes of the mother-son ties are used only to illustrate the problems in "growing up Chinese". Because of this, the narration of mother-son ties in Saari's book does not attract Professor Hsiung's attention, although she regards his work as "a valuable groundbreaker" (p. 6). Her own detailed discussion of the role of Chinese mothers in this book elaborates the characteristics of the Chinese mother – son bond and its social effects in a much broader context.

An important argument presented in this book is that fresh approaches to children emerged in the late imperial period, which challenged the classical model outlined in *The Book of Rites* and the normative views of the time.

In the first place, children in this period were encouraged to commence their academic development early, and this general obsession with the early pursuit of intellectual talent had surpassed the Sung–Neo-Confucian emphasis on moral inculcation, even though the educated elite never acknowledged their decreasing interest in moral cultivation in child-rearing. The normative views, the author maintains, only presented the prescribed adult vision about how children should act and behave. Most Confucian writings on the moral development of children represented Confucian views of childhood rather than the children's own history. While it is difficult to establish history from the child's perspective, the empirical evidence in this study, such as scenes showing children at play in paintings, their reading of non-Confucian books (such as novels, plays and stories), at least reveals some aspects of their lives as recorded in adult accounts, including the children's understanding of themselves, their feelings and attitudes to others and their voices. Furthermore, such material demonstrates the emergence of "the cult of the child" in Ming-Ch'ing China where Confucian doctrines appeared to be defied, and most

children were “ordinarily ‘coarse’” and “preferred playing and acting out their boisterous nature” (p. 121). Such accounts were apparently in sharp contrast to the Neo-Confucian images of the ideal child, where physical activities and outdoor play were discouraged. However, further research may be required to determine to what extent such rebellious attitudes to Neo-Confucian doctrine on child-rearing and the education of children were prevalent in the whole of society. The work of Professor Hsiung, as documented in this volume, is pioneering, and will surely stimulate further study in this area.

The second aspect of this new approach to children is exhibited in the treatment and education of girls. The study unveils some important findings. Firstly, in early childhood “the moral character and the real identity of an ideal child defined along gender lines appeared very much blurred” (p. 191). Secondly, young girls were not treated differently from young boys, in terms of food, clothing and affection from parents under normal circumstances. Thirdly and most importantly, “late imperial Chinese parents tended to be warmer and more lenient in their treatment and training of young girls” (p. 199). This challenges a stereotypical assumption that in a patriarchal society like that in traditional China, parents favoured sons and therefore invested more, both materially and emotionally, in boys. The author attributes this “tenderness” to parents’ “compensatory” attitude towards their daughters: the parents’ acknowledgement of their daughters’ undertaking household chores at a very early age, their sympathy with their daughters who would face difficult womanhood later, and their private opposition to public and social prejudice against women. Also, the parents’ lack of high expectation for girls, ironically, helped spare young girls from corporal punishment and allowed them to enjoy childhood more than their male counterparts. The author points out that this seemingly “discriminatory” treatment of young girls contributed to the development of “a ‘daughter loving’ culture in this society of son-preference” (p. 203).

This “daughter loving culture” was part of the rise of “softer sociocultural trends” in the upper level of society by the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Such trends challenged the classical model of child rearing and rigid attitudes to children. In Chapter Four, in the narration of Kuei Yukuang, who used to “carry his first daughter to approach her mother’s breasts for the daily nursing” (p. 115), and then of T’ang Chen’s frustration over the lack of study, the author argues that in this period much appreciation of and respect for a more softer, warmer and more domestic and sociable father, husband and man emerged to challenge the classical model where the roles of parents were clearly divided into the inner and outer spheres.

The “softer sociocultural trends” can also be seen in the education of young girls in Ming-Ch’ing times. Chapter Seven shows that girls before the age of ten received a similar preliminary education to boys. There were three types of female education in late imperial China: the first type was the same as boys where the child was educated by their relations, including their learned male kin; the second was the family schools particularly set up for girls, and special tutors were hired to teach them; and the third was “unofficial channels”, such as girls who secretly listened to the lessons taught to male students. Because of a lack of detailed information, it is difficult to determine the prevalence of these three types of education for girls, but the evidence presented in this study shows that for these girls from the families belonging to the “sophisticated circles of Chinese society”, book learning and intellectual pursuits acquired in early childhood provided them with the “only means of temporary escape or respite” (p. 218).

Chapter Six emphasises this new tendency in the domestic realm from the sixteenth century onward (p. 163), arguing that at that time educated elite families in cities and big towns began to lead a more softened, flexible and relaxed family life which signified a newly emerged tendency to re-structure domestic arrangements,

gender relations and moral codes. The elite and lower-middle classes in small towns and rural areas, on the other hand, continued their edifying campaign for the realization of Neo-Confucian ideals. However, additional documented evidence is needed to make this argument more convincing. For instance, from the evidence presented in this volume it is not clear how the members of the “sophisticated circles of Chinese society” were defined. The current study reveals that they were well educated big city dwellers. But, except for their educational backgrounds and urban settings, what other criteria can be used to identify this elite group? Using only these two, we cannot help wondering whether Ming-Ch’ing scholars who endeavoured to spread Confucianism into the lower echelons of society all came from the elite and lower-middle classes in small towns or rural areas. If this is the case, a comparative study of the deeds and ideas of those who represented a new socioeconomic trend, and those who held firmly to Confucian ideals, might provide further insights into the practices of child rearing, the issues related to the domestic realm and the treatment of girls in this period.

Overall, this book makes a remarkable contribution to the study of children and childhood in Chinese history. It enables readers to view the subject from various perspectives and to recognise its multifaceted nature and complexity. This study can be seen as an abridged version of Professor Hsiung’s many publications in Chinese. As a result, some fascinating arguments presented in this book may require readers to consult her books in Chinese for further evidence and more detailed discussion. The author states that in her Chinese publications she gave “the topic a more structured treatment” (p. xv) and some footnotes actually direct readers to these books. Other points, such as the “sophisticated circles of Chinese society” and the rise of “softer sociocultural trends” in Ming-Ch’ing China, demand closer examination, which may inspire further research interests in this area among China scholars.