


Shall Children Play? Evidence from Arts in Late Imperial China

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Abstract

This article examines various positions on whether children should be allowed to play in late imperial China. Demonstrating distinctly different views from Neo-Confucian thinkers, professional genre painters of “Children at Play” (*yingxi tu* 嬰戲圖), and the emerging pediatric specialists, the article maintains that clearly multi-vocal forces coexisted during the Song Dynasty, including a persuasive child-favoring stance that remains unique in global humanities on this issue.

Keywords

Children, Play

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“Toys are angels to children, playing the most important work to a youngster.”

Chen Heqin 陳鶴琴 (1892–1982)

The issue

Whether children should be allowed or encouraged to play is a perennial question that looms large during the pandemic. Song China offers us a multifaceted representation for further reflection. While Neo-Confucian moralists stressed the importance of keeping youngsters respectful, quiet, and staying away from “useless” activities, contemporary artists produced paintings of children at play showing that girls and boys played in all four seasons. Social debates quickly resulted in divisions within philosophical camps that pleaded to set children free. Emergent pediatricians, on the other hand, joined from the sidelines, advocating the importance of physical well-being and regular exercise. Reviewing the under-studied evidence not only recalls Philippe Ariès’ thesis that the concept of children is but a modern invention, it also brings to the fore traditional Chinese sources significant to the understanding of children’s inclination or right to play as advocated and debated today (see Ariès, 1962).

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Neo-Confucian philosophers in Song China (960–1279) were known for their stoic attitude demanding strict discipline regarding the daily conduct of young children. Cheng Yi's 程頤 (1033–1107) idea that children should best be treated like dogs, beat over their heads every time they approached the family hall—lest their animal instinct pass for the rule of good conduct—was an infamous reminder of what the world used to be like when moralists ruled (Hsiung, 2005). Similarly, a century later, in *Essential Knowledge for School Children* (*Tongmeng xuzhi* 童蒙須知), Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130–1200) admonished that children should never be left to their own choices: fighting over melon and fruits, flying kites, kicking balls, keeping birds and pets, and succumbing to “any such useless affairs” (*wuyi zhishi* 無益之事, see Hsiung, 2005: 230).

To play or not to play? Debates continue time and again among parents and teachers from near and far. At the center of the quest are not merely questions about the nature of children, nor even about the centrality of the human need to play, that *homo sapiens* are but *homo ludens*, according to Huizinga (1955).

Moralists and functionalists like to see the young devoting time to productive activities, acquiring knowledge and learning useful skills leading to profitable lives. By the late imperial period, what these endeavors meant for people in different walks of life can be instructive: children from the scholar-literati families (*shi* 士) should be studying the classics and preparing to pass civil service examinations to enter officialdom; those of peasants (*nong* 農) should be acquiring the skills to tend water buffalo and till the land; those of artisans (*gong* 工) should be apprenticing for the crafts in their respective trade; and those of businessmen (*shang* 商) should be learning to run the shops. Youngsters among the latter three categories needed to acquire 200 to 600 Chinese characters by their early teens. In contrast, children of the educated elite were expected to learn up to 2000 characters by heart through tutoring or in village schools and memorize the *Four Books*, the *Five Classics*, and the like, before practicing eight-legged essays for the civil service examination (Elman, 2013; Rawski, 1979).

Small wonder that Neo-Confucianists from the literati class pressed to steer children's energy away from fighting for snacks, playing with pets, kicking balls, flying kites, etc. The civil service examination was becoming the single ladder of success for the boys. For girls, their ladder of success remained marriage and home-making (Mann, 1997).

Thus, by the 11th century, for children from all walks of life, mercantile activities and urban life in Song China made it plain that there were growing profits to be made for the enterprising and hard-working. Everyone had an eye on opportunities and a mind for competition, so much so that descriptive statistics from tens of hundreds of biographical and family data over centuries produce a startling conclusion. These statistics show that with each passing century, in the aggregate, children on average were made to acquire the same literary or mathematical skills as children who were one year older in the preceding century (Hsiung, 2005). In other words, what leading households like Sima Guang's (司馬光 1019–1086) expected boys to learn at the age of nine, 100 years later, educated parents and teachers would be making children learn at age eight, and so forth, up the centuries. What child would be left with even a moment to catch a breath, much less play? By the 19th century, cameras caught Chinese boys acquiring skills as “genius toddlers” at the age of two or three. Tiger dads and tiger moms had been long in the making, with tiger tutors pacing by, rulers in hand.

Little surprise that during this same period, physicians felt hard-pressed with apprehensions about the overly indulged toddlers, who hardly had the opportunity to touch the ground or see the sunlight; they were so excessively protected and nervously groomed that they were losing their appetite and were unable to weather any common disease.



Figure 1. Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), *The Virgin and Child*.

In arts

Yet exactly during this same period, girls and boys were shown by professional painters as playing in the courtyards in four seasons and picking dates in each other's boisterous company, as evident in the works of Southern Song painters. Were these wistful portraits or in part realistic depictions? Seen as a "genre" in the arts, depictions of young merrymaking children exploded, especially during the 12th–13th centuries, appearing "striking" yet ironically "natural" at the same time. These portraits appeared natural because merrymaking seems ordinary and instinctive, especially for the young, although one may ask to what extent retrospective appreciation was compounded by a modernist taste, mingling with that of the Song. Sociocultural elements from the Song period strike such a sympathetic chord to modern scholars that Japanese Sinologists have argued that modern China, or the early modern period, began from the Song, as demonstrated by impressive developments in education, economy, and urban growth. The portraits also struck a chord because *Children at Play* (called *Xiyingtu* 戲嬰圖 or *Yingxitu* 嬰戲圖) depicted youngsters as just having fun together, an exception in world arts. Since Medieval European portraiture of the young could hardly date back to the Song era, historians such as Philippe Ariès gained an impression that led them to novel conclusions. Baby Jesus with Madonna were shown as a holy family, not as an ordinary child in his mother's arms. Discursively, this European image was exaggerated many times over and made famous by Ariès' renowned thesis that people (European or French, actually) had no idea of childhood until the dawn of modernity, as evidenced in the arts. Famed pre-17th-century European oil paintings depicted princesses and princes who appeared like "miniature adults," with the dresses, hairdos, body gestures, facial expressions, physical proportion, and activities (motionless, stiff) of adults. None approached the likeness of a real child, as Ariès and his followers argued, until the Dutch social painters produced examples in portraits of bourgeoisie domesticity (Figures 1 and 2).

Ariès' thesis doesn't apply to the Song paintings that depicted children at play in four seasons. The two full-sized *Children at Play* by Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 (ca. 1094–1172) in the winter and in



Figure 2. Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Las Meninas*, 1656–1657.



Figure 3. Su Hanchen (ca. 1094–1172), *Children Playing in the Winter* 冬日嬰戲圖 (196.2 cm x 107.1 cm).

fall that now are kept in the National Palace Museum in Taipei show in fine details a young girl and a young boy at leisure (Figures 3 and 4). Whether carrying a toy flag or a lure made of peacock feather used to tease a furry kitten under the weather, or playing the balancing game called “pushing the date-nut” on one of the two archaic stools set next to the Lake Tai rock in the autumn courtyard, the fact remains that people would be hard-pressed to identify these portraits depicting “miniature adults,” per Ariès’ thesis. Their hairdos are of the styles belonging to toddlers at three or four; their outfits, though refined, appear to be of the cut and design one would adorn only on small children. The physical proportions of their body, their eyebrows and eyes are typical for those of children, not to mention that the children Su drew consisted usually of a pair, a young girl and a young boy, with no adults around. To professional painters at this time, theirs was a respected



Figure 4. Su Hanchen, *Children at Play in the Autumn Courtyard* 秋庭戲嬰圖 (19 7.5 cm x 108.7 cm).



Figure 5. Su Zhuo (fl. Ca 1120–1170), *Children Playing in the Dragon Boat Festival* 端陽戲嬰圖 (88.9 x 51.3 cm).

specialty that was handed down in the family, with an art market carved out for them. Su Hanchen and his son, Su Zhuo 蘇焯 (fl. c. 1120–1170), made a name for themselves as artists, leaving behind a legacy in concept, methods, and genre, with varying degrees of success.



Figure 6. Fig Su Hanchen, *Children Picking Dates* 撲棗圖.



Figure 7. Li Song (fl. 1190–1230), *The Village Peddler* 貨郎圖.

Similar to Su, other art professionals flourished in the same period, employing meticulous brushwork and closely depicting the leisurely activities of young children. In a full-sized portrait attributed to Su Zhuo, (fl. ca. 1120–1170) entitled *Children Playing in the Dragon Boat Festival* (*duanyang xiying tu* 端陽戲嬰圖), for instance, a toddler is seen with a pomegranate in one hand and a toad in the other, teasing and scaring two other little ones (Figure 5). The infantile appearance and their open-cut slacks leave little doubt as to the age group of the figures. Other examples show kids squatting on the ground and staring at bugs caught in urns, reminding the viewer of verses from contemporary poets, such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) and Yang Wanli 楊萬里 (1127–1206),



Figure 8. Su Hanchen, *One Hundred Children*.



Figure 9. Su Hanchen, *One Hundred Children* (part).

on bug keeping and cricket fighting (Hsiung 2011). The main import of such portraits is to convey the amusements of carefree youngsters during festivities and leisure hours outside the house. Pre-school-age youngsters were shown picking dates, crouching over knick-knack peddlers, mostly by themselves (Figure 6). Attending adults sometimes included a nursing mother, or a peddler with carrying pole, as in *The Village Peddler* (*Huolang tu* 貨郎圖) by Li Song 李嵩 (fl. 1190–1230) (Figure 7).

More studies need to be done on “children at play” in Chinese art history, obviously an indelible imprint, although the paintings leave behind that playing freely is the late imperial Chinese idea of the beginning of an auspicious life, wistfully imagined, artfully executed. In this regard, a theme called *One Hundred Children* (*Changchun baizi* 長春百子) also emerged (Figures 8 and 9). In long scrolls, numerous boys engage in myriad activities, including kicking balls, playing faces, and dressing up with masks. Some may aspire to enter the world of letters and officialdom, but none entertains immediate concerns of productive labor or of functional obligations in life.



Figure 10. *Children Playing amidst Autumn* 秋景戲嬰 (Yuan Dynasty) (127 x 67 cm).

Were there social debates built into these cultural representations? Perhaps, though not explicitly or directly. A large painting titled *Children Playing amidst Autumn* 秋景戲嬰 dated from the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) may serve as an intriguing example (Figure 10). At the forefront of this full-sized portrait, six boys and girls are shown cracking a watermelon next to a plateful of grapes, peaches, and other fruits. A girl is petting a black rabbit crawling by two white rabbits. Children standing behind are reaching out to branches, some carrying off a bunch of flowers.

These childish amusements are ordinary enough, except for those who might be under the influence of Master Zhu Xi's previously mentioned instruction on the must-dos and must-nots in children's learning, titled *Essential Knowledge for School Children* (*Tongmeng xuzhi* 童蒙須知). Zhu Xi disapproves of such favorite childish pastimes as fighting over melon, fruits, and snacks; keeping birds and pets; flying kites; kicking balls; and any such "useless things," and he believes they should have been suppressed, although decades later they remain perfectly painted. At the time, Zhu Xi's philosophy did not win official patronage immediately, as his advice on early education was first released during the Southern Song. However, his annotated classics later became standard texts for the civil service examination during the Yuan in 1312,¹ lending him authority on child training for centuries since. There can be no denial of the mainstream influence of the Cheng-Zhu School of Song Neo-Confucianism in forming social norms since the 14th century, including in early education, especially for its discouragement of physical activities and free play, favoring quiet sitting (*jing* 靜) and respectful self-discipline (*jing* 敬) instead. Viewed cross-culturally, late imperial Chinese art uncovered in *Children at Play* and related representations from the Southern Song an imaginative sensibility that was at once vivid and even innocently indulgent, although hidden debates may have been taking place behind people's back as Neo-Confucianists were establishing their authority.

Indeed, in its long history, Chinese art was not known for portrait paintings. Painters from the Tang and Northern Song were mentioned as beginning to draw women and children,² though none of these works is existent today. In depicting children at play, Southern Song and early Yuan specialists display unusual achievements. Their positive, meticulous observation of



Figure 11. Zhou Chen (ca. 1486–1535), *Kids Catching the Willow Flowers* 閒看兒童捉柳花.

children’s everyday life and their expert execution in conveying these observations through refined brushwork are careful and persuasive depictions of the very young. Unfortunately, as a genre, “children at play” has never attracted the scholarly attention it merits, but together with related portraiture such as *The Village Peddler* and *One Hundred Children* (*Changchun baizi tu*), the painters of this genre present a compelling celebration of the merrymaking of girls and boys, with extraordinary technical accomplishments and undeniable passion for the subject. Their point-by-point characterization of young children deep in the happiness of patting pets, enjoying fruits, and kicking balls gave people a world in contrast to Zhu Xi’s opposition to such activities as “wasteful.” Viewed together with the advice from the emerging Southern Song pediatrician’s cautioning against over-protection and under-exercises of elite offspring, the paintings set off an argument in the Sinic world that has continued ever since. From the collectors’ stamps from celebrities and emperors added on these scrolls over eight centuries, it is also clear that for the admirers, these paintings exhibited not merely blissful scenes of healthy, plump children, but the added attraction that they were playing. The mixture of the two created an unmistakable chemistry for an auspicious life that appeals to all.

After the Ming (1368–1644) and during the Qing (1644–911), “children at play” as an artistic form declined. From the Ming, there is one long scroll by Zhou Chen 周臣 (1460–1535) depicting young children in the yard catching willow flowers, with specific reference to a Tang verse alluding to kids playing with the willow furry blossoming outside a scholarly studio (Figure 11). The Song-Yuan painters’ stylistic passion for showing the details of children playing, the aesthetics in representing a particular joy, was no longer visible. In the Qing, children continued to be painted during festivities, with boisterous kidding and adults hiding out the door, looking askance (Figures 12 and 13). From then on, down to the modern era, “children at play” survived as a generic theme in Chinese art, well-wishing, with stereo-typical sketches, preserved as reminiscence, like the plump youngsters ceremonially adorning the New Year’s paper prints (e.g. the Yang Liuqing or Taohuawu workshop New Year’s prints, for which the original charm and surprising delight from Song high arts served as a baseline (Figure 14)).



Figure 12. Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1498–1552), *A Village School* 村塾圖.



Figure 13. Jin Tingbiao 金廷標 (?–1767), *Children Playing at School* 鬧學圖.

In thought

In contrast, Chinese philosophy includes a built-in hypothesis regarding children and childhood as something approaching the core of humanity, thereby children perhaps being closer to the very origin of human existence. Hence, the Daoist ideal that all should best return to the state of infancy referred not merely to the physical child.³ The practical-minded Confucianists and Legalists in the first millennium of imperial China emphasized training and learning as opposed to the laissez-faire and naturalistic approach propagated by Buddhism and Daoism. By the Northern (960–1127) and Southern Song (1127–1279), Neo-Confucianism was in command, though it was not the only allurements wearing the label of “New (Neo).” The market economy, boosted by short and long-distance trade that connected demands and supplies within and beyond the border, generated in towns and cities opportunities for social mobility that were both alluring and anxiety-provoking. Old morals began to loosen, and ethics became fluid. Confucian elites were out to refashion the



Figure 14. New Year's Painting, from the workshop of Yang Liuqing 楊柳青 Qing Dynasty.

social order, maintaining influence by re-defining behavioral codes, as the rest of society rushed to gainful employments. With boundless energy and stirred up ambitions, people were finding ways to compete, to cash in. Amidst all the commotion, the merrymaking of innocent children carried a special charm, though not without contention.

Neo-Confucianists, admittedly, were by no means child specialists. Like the Legalists, Daoists, or Buddhists, thinkers in the Song, such as the Cheng brothers (Cheng Yi 程頤 1033–1107 and Cheng Hao 程顥 1032–1085) or Zhu Xi, found themselves speaking out on issues of early education, even though they were not focused on the actual task of child rearing. Unlike Su Hanchen and his fellow specialist painters, drawn to the observation and depiction of the young by vocation, or Qian Yi 錢乙 (1032–1113) and his fellow pediatric practitioners who focused on the physical condition of young children, Confucian scholars in their studies looked at childhood as a state of humanity in the making, not as a physical condition to be attended to, or as a cultural icon to be teased in play. For the artists seeking to capture the childlike state as an aesthetic, existential quality, playing children appeared literally larger than life and frozen in time. These artists were like the pediatricians on the other end of the vocational spectrum who had little choice but to struggle to master as much knowledge of real infant's physiology as they try to meet the needs of the young in the everyday (Hsiung 1995, 1999, 2005). In terms of cultural discourse, the philosopher, the artist, and the pediatrician operated in exactly the same temporal space, yet each within their own professional boundaries so as to be in command of how the very young should act or be groomed. Accordingly, their professional views crisscrossed, although they themselves might not need to confront each other directly.

The daily playing of children seen from the perspective of the interplay of these forces need not be at the center of contemporary concerns. Philosophers wanted to discipline the young, painters wanted to celebrate adorable girls and boys, and pediatricians wanted to apply their skills in umbilical cord-cutting, feeding and nursing, controlling feverish disease, helping girls and boys to survive, all the while apprehensive over babies being carried in arms for too long. Quibbles over the daily play of children might mingle in the larger tug of war of bio-social reproduction.

Seen from an analytical distance, Zhu Xi's instruction on the ideal mode of behavior for elite boys (he never specified but was probably not worrying about girls), which involved minding their manners, keeping their clothes, caps, and shoes tidy, their language and steps respectful, and their desks and surroundings well managed, might not be unreasonable. His admonishment against snacking, pet-keeping and outdoorsy sports indeed left a stern imprint, but the strong preference for "disciplined inaction" of the body and the performance of daily duties of the young should not

be a surprise. The pressure was on the artists and physicians to respond, as it turned out, over the long run.

Within Neo-Confucianism itself, the inhibitive force of the Cheng-Zhu school soon produced direct dissent from the left, the best known of which came from Wang Yangming 王陽明(1472–1528) in a letter written to a friend who asked for his advice on early education. In a prose of less than 500 words, known as *The Principles in Child Education* (*xunmeng dayi* 訓蒙大意), the childless Wang issued his famous plea to turn children loose to play, free to follow their own instinct. For him, “the true character of a child (*tongzi zhiqing* 童子之情) delights in playing, while fearful of any constraint.” Children are like a plant while sprouting, said Wang. A plant tends to stretch out freely and cannot but wither when obstructed by any external force (Wang, 1962: 219–220).

Past readings of Wang’s rebuttal recognized his strong preference for seeing humanity as a force of nature, likening the teaching of children to allowing grasses and trees to rejoice in the rain and breeze of the spring. The goal of education, then, is to nurture the life force that youngsters celebrate by virtue of their innate inclination. Their progress becomes “unstoppable,” not unlike plants that are helped by water and air in order to generate seedlings. In both cases, “their daily progress and monthly change is but part of Nature.” In contrast, if education were to come down like frosting or ice storms, little wonder that life would but shrivel, dry out, and die (Hsiung, 2000: ch. 3; Hsiung, 2005: 225–226, Wang, 1962: 220). Surely, no one wanted to see pupils locked up as inmates, schools turned into prisons, and teachers become jailors, Wang countered.

Re-reading these passages from the early 16th century, one perceives Wang’s strong indignation at the emotional and physical harm of the young. In his promotion of children’s action, over inaction, Wang was driven not simply by his philosophical preference for nature over culture, but by his inclination to make room for children’s pleasure, beyond allowing their innate forces to fall into place in the Daoist sense, as demonstrated in many contemporary naturalist paintings. He repeatedly pointed out that if only people were to entice children with the delights of rhythms in lyrics and poetry, they could not but openly express their feelings, jumping up and down, overjoyed in singing and dancing. Wang thought the education of children, just as in rites and rituals, should never be solely about the solemn dignity the authorities prescribed but also about permitting the young to exercise their blood veins, their bones and sinews mobilized, as they learn to bow and make rounds. Elements of physiology and psychology, of what people later understood as child development, saw an early formulation here, beyond moral philosophy.

Afterthought

From the Southern Song to the early Ming, views on the issue of “children playing” came from three different corners. Specialist painters depicted the merrymaking of young girls and boys as a representation of an auspicious life. Neo-Confucian moralists such as Zhu Xi dismissed child play as “useless,” while the left-wing naturalist Wang Yangming advocated play as indispensable for children’s sanity. Then came the concerned voices of emergent pediatricians who promoted daily physical activities as necessary to a child’s health. The three forces coexisted, although they never engaged each other directly.

Developments of a so-called “child-centered” liberationist kind from the Enlightenment to the early modern and modernist views of the West then influenced East Asia and China, eventually turning the issue of play into a “rights” issue. The question “whether” children shall play from late imperial Chinese platform became an insistence of “must” with legal implications (as exemplified in the UN Declaration of Children’s Right).

With the recent pandemic, related concerns resurfaced, offering an occasion for the late imperial Chinese articulation to provide substantive input from the past that could be read as historical resources for future reflections.

Further considerations may examine how the Wang Yangming school turned Neo-Confucianism left, or how Western Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) took a sympathetic stance on the liberty of children and their play. The tug-of-war continues, given that the sources of global inspiration, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, now cast under the shadow of the pandemic, cannot stop people from asking “Shall children play”? This question occurs despite the fact that many see they do.

Notes

1. In 1312, the Yuan Emperor Renzong (元仁宗) ordered the use Zhu Xi’s commentary of the *Four Books* as the text book for the imperial civil service examination. This was followed by the Ming and Qing dynasties.
2. For example, in the Tang Dynasty there was Zhang Xuan 張萱 (fl. first half of 8th c.), and in the Northern Song there were Liu Zongdao 劉宗道 (early 12th c.) and Du Haier 杜孩兒 (early 12th c.) who were known for their paintings of children. See Deng, 1963: 78–79 and *Yingxitu*, 1990: 2–3.
3. *Laozi*, chapter 10: “When one gives undivided attention to the (vital) breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a (tender) babe” (*zhuan qi zhi rou, neng ying'er hu* 專氣致柔，能嬰兒乎”).

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