

## Anthropology of Chinese Childhood and Children

Gladys CHICHARRO \*

**Résumé :** Cet article cherche à présenter les différents travaux anthropologiques sur l'enfance et/ou les enfants en Chine, indépendamment de l'origine géographique des chercheurs qui en sont les auteurs. En partant des premières recherches s'attachant plutôt aux représentations sociales et symboliques de l'enfance jusqu'aux plus récentes mettant en avant le rôle d'acteurs des enfants, il s'agit également de s'interroger sur un élément apparaissant de manière récurrente dans nombres de publications : le rôle de l'institution scolaire et la place qu'elle semble prendre dans la vie des enfants.

**Mots-clés :** Chine, anthropologie, enfance, enfants, éducation, socialisation, état de l'art

**Abstract:** This paper reviews the different anthropological works on childhood and/or children in China, written by researchers of various geographical origins. It begins with early research emphasizing the social and symbolic representations of childhood and continues up to more recent work claiming to consider children as agents. The paper's purpose is also to question a specific and recurrent aspect of this literature: the role of the school institution and its impact on children's lives.

**Keywords:** China, anthropology, childhood, children, education, socialization, state of the art

### Introduction

If we put aside Marcel Granet's studies on symbolic construction of the life cycle and rites of passage in ancient China, we can say that the anthropology of Chinese childhood and children appears only recently in academic fields, even later if we look for studies from mainland Chinese scholars. In this paper, I will try to sketch an overview of what can be called the anthropology of Chinese childhood and children.

However, I would also like to point out a specificity of the Chinese context in comparison to most other societies where the first anthropological works on childhood and children emerged and continue to prosper (especially, for French anthropology, African societies). In China, the school institution has a very long history: it has played a central role for centuries. Today most children attend schools, at least for a few years. According to UNICEF statistics, in 2009 the rate of primary school enrolment in the People's Republic of China was approaching almost 100 percent. This percentage should certainly be questioned because there are many "grey children", unofficial and undeclared children, or migrant children who can not attend to school so easily, but the rate is still quite high for a "mid-developed country" as Chinese used to qualify their country.

I would like to question this specificity because it seems that many works of anthropologists about children in the Chinese world pay significant attention to the children's school life and their relation with the school institution. My own fieldwork conducted in the new city of Langfang (Hebei province) since 2001, made me think about how children evolve, learn and

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\* Paris 8 University, EXPERICE (Centre de Recherche Interuniversitaire Expérience Ressources culturelles Education), LESC (Laboratoire d'Ethnologie et de Sociologie Comparative), gladys.chicharro-saito@univ-paris8.fr

create cultures in the different spaces they live in: families, streets, leisure, entertainment, consumption or religious places, and of course schools, where they every year spend a longer time.

I will try to present the different phases, currents and themes that I have noticed in what can be called an anthropology of Chinese childhood and children, regardless of the origin of the scholars producing these studies. In fact, there has been a tradition of cooperation linking scholars from Taiwan and Hong Kong with their Western counterparts, especially North American. Many of them have studied or stayed abroad for their research and publish together, either in Chinese or in English. So, my goal here is to discuss some of the research on the social and symbolic construction of childhood by those who claim to consider the child as an actor: by doing so, I will of course make simplifications and I do not claim to be exhaustive.

## **Social and symbolic constructions of childhood and children**

### ***Marcel Granet: Life cycles and rituals***

Marcel Granet was one of the first to analyze Chinese traditional conceptions of life cycle and rituals ([1953]1990). He showed how physical development and transformations (such as teething, puberty, female and male menopause...) and social events (such as: naming, social sexual separation, engagement, wedding, retirement) were interpreted according to symbolic numbers and in relation with the cosmos. For instance, as both *yin* and *yang* evolve under the influence of the other, male development is seen to be regulated by a feminine and even *yin* number (8) and female development by a masculine and odd number (7). This is why the first teeth are supposed to emerge at 7 or 8 months, the second teething comes at 7 or 8 years according to the sex. Women become fertile at 14 years old (2x7) and men at 16 (2x8); their wisdom teeth respectively come in at 21 (3x7) and 24 (3x8) years of age. Female and male bodies respectively reach completeness at 28 (4x7) and 32 (4x8) years old, then they become weaker according to seven - or eight - year cycles until the ages of 49 (7x7) and 64 (8x8) when women and men respectively lose their fertility. The appropriate age of engagement, wedding, beginning and ending of social sexual separation for instance were also justified by these types of symbolic calculation where the numbers 3, 7 and 10 (3+7) played a fundamental role.

Marcel Granet also described and analyzed different rites of passage (birth, naming, end of reclusion, passage into adulthood), according to ancient texts. But after that, we almost have to wait until the eighties and nineties to get more information about children and childhood in China.

### ***History and the birth of childhood studies?***

The publication of Philippe Ariès' book *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960), which was translated in English as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), had considerable repercussions among historians of China, especially in the USA, Hong Kong and Taiwan. But only twenty years later, some works in childhood history appeared from Chinese studies. Some scholars started to verify the validity of Ariès' thesis in the Chinese world and tried to

establish when the first discovery of childhood could have occurred there. Some would say this occurred during the Song dynasty (Thomas HC Lee, 2000), others say that a first discovery of childhood already took place during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-221 A.D.) (Anne Behne Kinney 2004).

Today, the study of the history of childhood in China is becoming a recognized field with a few founding publications, like the two books edited by Anne Behnke Kinney: *Chinese Views of Childhood* (1995) and *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (2004). *Children in Chinese Art* (2002), edited by Ann Barrott Wicks, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (2005) by Hsiung Ping-chen, or Jon L. Saris *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890–1920* (1990) should be also mentioned. Others scholars coming from fields of demographic history, family, gender, medicine, and education also added their contributions to the field, such as Wu Pei-Yi, and Bai Limin (education), Charlotte Furth (medicine, gender), Ann Waltner (infanticide and child mortality, adoption), Thomas H. C. Lee (education), and Angela K. Leung (medicine), among others. A final element in Chinese traditions concerning childhood that historians point out was the early introduction of state-sponsored Confucian education for a small number of elites, with occasional openings for some talented peasant children. It made the education theme a far more developed field than childhood and children per se.

Nevertheless most of these studies rely on different types of written texts (ritual, paediatric, family records, schoolbooks...) and visual representations for source material. They make a great contribution to the history of childhood as a social and cultural construction, they document adult perceptions of children, but it is still quite difficult to have an idea about the actual lives of ordinary children through them.

### ***What about Anthropology?***

Mainland China was not a very easy place to do fieldwork during most of the twentieth century, hence the pioneering research on childhood and children was conducted in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Two Western pioneers were Marjorie Topley and Margery Wolf. Margery Wolf did fieldwork in rural Taiwan. In her studies of the Chinese family (1968, 1970), she paid attention to child training, a theme that would become quite important in the future, especially among Taiwan and Hong Kong scholars. She analyzed the gendered role of mother/father with their son/daughter, pointing out the changes of parental behaviors when the child reaches the age of six or seven years old. She also examined the high influence of the paternal grandmother in keeping traditional ways of education. Marjorie Topley who lived in Singapore and Hong Kong for a long time, was interested in the kinship system and women, which also led her to study the representations of children and childhood. Her article about the conception of a cosmic antagonism between the new-born baby and his mother (1974) is still relevant today. In this article she investigates everyday practices and cosmological explanations that Cantonese mothers invoked when they encountered difficulties in child-rearing during the period of postnatal adjustment.

In the eighties and nineties, the themes of the representations of childhood, adoption and the circulation of children, and rites of passage (which had emerged quite earlier among anthropologists of other continents), started to be developed among anthropologists of China, and the fact that these themes were simultaneously investigated by historians of China, led to fruitful exchanges. I would like to mention here my mentor Brigitte Baptandier (1986, 1987, 1988, 1996, and 2008) who studied the cult of a goddess associated with childbirth and

childhood and its therapeutic rituals for children. Françoise Lauwaert worked on adoption in the history of the Chinese family but from an anthropological perspective (1991, 1993, 1994). All these anthropologists did their first fieldwork in Taiwan or Hong Kong, and most of them took the opportunity to continue in Fujian and Cantonese provinces when the mainland opened (as Fujian is culturally and linguistically closer to Taiwan, while Hong Kong is in the Cantonese region).

### **Child training, Policy and social change**

In the nineties, studies on socialization and child training in schools and families continued, but simultaneously a new generation of scholars emerged. Westerners directly conducted their fieldwork on the mainland, covering many other provinces and investigating new subjects. With the revival of social science in the People's Republic of China, some anthropologists also began looking at children and childhood themes with interest.

### ***Socialization and learning***

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, many scholars continue to question the specificity of a “Chinese” socialization, comparing with “Western patterns”. Anthropologists used to cooperate with psychologists in order to analyze the effects of family and school training. Many of them were trying to find the key of the high academic achievement of Chinese children which has always intrigued Western scholars – and which still seems to be a debate today in the USA<sup>1</sup>. But they give a much more nuanced picture of children's lives. David (Yan He) Wu, now retired from the Department of Anthropology of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, was one of the first to study child-rearing practices, preschool education, and food socialization in this context. His first article about this subject untitled “*Cong renleixue guandian kan muqian Zhongguo ertong yangyu*” [An anthropological perspective on Chinese children rearing] was published in 1966 in Taiwan. After that, he continued to publish regularly on this topic in English (1985, 1991, 1992, and 1997), but he is probably mostly known in Western countries by his contribution to Joseph J. Tobin's book *Preschool in Three Cultures* (1991).

In Taiwan, Heidi Fung follows these cultural and psychological perspectives by studying moral socialization, and child-rearing concepts like shame, autonomy and authority (1999, 2010), sometimes in cooperation with other scholars like Eva Chen (2001) or B. Smith (2009).

A good image of this tendency can be read in the book edited in Hong Kong by Sing Lau, *Growing Up the Chinese Way: Chinese Child and Adolescent Development* (1997), in which some contributions from mainland scholars, especially educational sociologists like Feng Xiaotians, were also published.

This research could also lead to questioning the concept of learning. From a slightly different perspective, in his monograph of a Taiwanese fishing village entitled *The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang* (1996), Charles Stafford examined the relationship between nationalist schooling, child-rearing practices and popular religion. His

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the debates following the publication of Yale professor Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), where she argues that Chinese parents (especially mothers) are better at raising children than Western ones.

research continues to focus on child development, schooling and learning (2003).

***Population control and the quality (suzhi) education movement: How the policy produces the child***

Since the end of the nineties and especially in last ten years, children and childhood became a more common theme among a new generation of Western anthropologists of China. Many studies started to analyze the effects of population control, the one-child policy or more recently the “quality education movement”, but also the country’s overture to globalization. Susan Greenhalgh, for instance, focuses on the causes and the implementation of population policy, in “Science, Modernity, and the Making of China’s One-Child Policy” (2003) and her last book *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China* (2008).

The doctoral dissertations of Susan Champagne, *Producing the Intelligent Child: Intelligence and the Child Rearing Discourse in the People’s Republic of China* (1992), Terry Woronov, *Transforming the Future: “Quality” Children and the Chinese Nation* (2003) and Teresa Kuan, *Adjusting the Bonds of Love: Parenting, Expertise and Social Change in Urban China* (2008) give other perspectives on the political discourses on child-rearing or education and actual parenting practices.

Vanessa Fong studied the long-term effects of the one-child policy on children’s lives. She started doing fieldwork in Dalian in the nineties and published many articles (2002, 2004, 2007), and a book, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China One-Child Policy* (2004), in which she stresses the parents’ investments on schooling and the expectations of children raised with first-world aspirations in a country where they hardly can be realized.

My own research, published in some articles (2001, 2008, 2011) and in *Le fardeau des petits empereurs. Une génération d’enfants uniques en Chine* (2010) [The Burden of Little Emperors. A Generation of Only Children in China] can be seen as a continuity of Vanessa Fong’s work. It is based on fieldwork conducted from 2001 in the new city of Langfang (Hebei), an exemplary site of Chinese utopian modernism. I tried to understand how the so-called “little emperors” living in a “communist country” with a liberal economy are educated in schools, families and other places (e.g. religious, consumption or leisure spaces). I also studied the reaction of these children to their own situation, and how they can escape from the government and family projects by appropriating and transforming what they receive and by creating new cultures.

Most of us did ethnography in schools and families, sometimes assuming the role of a teacher or a tutor (Vanessa Fong, Teresa Kuan), to analyze parenting and schooling changes. One fact we all have noticed is the great importance of formal education regarding parental investments and children’s life (in term of time).

Andrew Kipnis specifically examined this issue in his most recent book *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, politics and schooling in China* (2011), in which he tries to understand why going to university seems to be the actual goal for everyone.

In China, the effects of the one-child policy were not taken into consideration only by anthropologists, but by educational sociologists. Until recently, anthropology was understood as “ethnic minority’s studies”. Today, the recognized “specialist” of only children is Feng Xiaotian 风笑天, head of the Sociology Department of the University of Nanjing. He wrote many articles and a book in Chinese: *Zhongguo dushengziniu : cong ‘xiaohuangdi’ dao*

‘*xingongmin*’ 中国独生子女:从“小皇帝”到“新公民” [Chinese only children: from “little emperors” to new “citizens”] (2004), and concludes that the specificity of this generation of children is not really linked to their condition of being only children, but to the fast changes that they have experienced, and to the generational gap.

### ***Poverty and migration, vulnerable children, and children’s rights***

Do mainland anthropologists care about children and childhood? It seems that some new perspectives are just emerging now. In 2009 the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences<sup>2</sup> took place in Kunming, China. Since 2005 this organization (IUAES) has had a specific commission called Anthropology of Children, Youth and Childhood (*ertong, qingshaonian renleixue* 儿童、青少年与童年人类学) where, among others, Professor Deepak Kumar Behera, head of the Department of Anthropology of Sambalpur University, Orissa (India) is very active. And it is very interesting to note that many of Behera’s publications on vulnerable children have been translated into Chinese. Before the 2009 congress, he started to establish fruitful relations with mainland sociologists and anthropologists interested in the same theme. Liu Zhijun 刘志军, from the Department of Sociology of Zhejiang University, is one of them. He works on “children left behind” (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) - in rural villages because of parents’ migration (2009) and “migrant children” (*liudong ertong* 流动儿童) (2011).

Yang Chunyu 杨春宇 (Institute of Ethnological and Anthropological Study of Chinese Academy of Social Science, China) recently started working on children’s rights.

Despite many differences, India and China actually have to face some similar problems. Both countries try to control the rapid growth of their populations, and have to deal with poverty and internal rural-urban migration. The productive exchange between Western and Chinese scholars seems to open some spaces to new exchanges and comparisons among countries sharing similar difficulties. Mainland anthropologists appreciate cooperation with other Asian researchers, who consider that their studies are giving voices to vulnerable children, and by doing so, they should influence either governments or NGO actions and practices to improve the lives of these children in difficult circumstances.

### ***The anthropological perspective***

Even more recently the theme of children’s culture seems to emerge. In June 2005, “The Institute of Childhood Culture Studies” (*ertong wenhua yanjiuyuan* 儿童文化研究院) was set

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<sup>2</sup> The IUAES is the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the largest world forum of anthropologists and ethnologists, with members from more than fifty countries. Every five years, in different parts of the world, the IUAES sponsors an International Congress (ICAES), gathering researchers from all of the various subfields and branches of anthropology. The IUAES was founded under the auspices of UNESCO in 1948. The International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (ICAES) had been separately founded in London in 1934. The two organizations united in 1964, becoming one organization four years later. The main objective of the IUAES is the internationalization of anthropology, and the cross-cultural honing and public dissemination of anthropological research perspectives.

up in Zhejiang Normal University (Jinhua)<sup>3</sup>. This university has a long tradition in children's literature studies, and most of the researchers are not anthropologists. Nevertheless, some young researchers are trying to develop new perspectives, like studying games and plays. Here I want to mention Zheng Suhua 郑素华, who wrote an article in Chinese entitled "To understand childhood we need the anthropological perspective" (*lijie tongnian xuyao renleixue shiye* 理解童年需要人类学视野) (2010) and another entitled "In 'childhood studies' we must integrate children's voices" (" 'tongnian yanjiu' xuyao yinru ertong shengyi" 童年研究 需要引入儿童声音).

## Conclusion

The anthropology of Chinese children and childhood emerged quite recently relative to other contexts. In the People's Republic of China, social sciences suffered for a long time from repression or prohibition (especially during the Cultural Revolution), and the country was almost closed to outside researchers until the late eighties. So, the pioneer research, in the seventies, was all based on fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong and Taiwan by both local and Western scholars who shared their perspectives on the representations of childhood, child-rearing discourses and practices. Their followers in the eighties and nineties continued to develop these themes, which were simultaneously investigated by historians of China, leading to fruitful connections.

In the nineties, studies on socialization and child training continued, but a new generation of scholars emerged. Westerners directly did their fieldwork in the mainland and started to study the effects of population control and how the policy produces children. The great importance of formal education and the school institution, which had always been observed in the Chinese world, seemed to take new significance in this context. Children's points of view and reactions appeared also progressively in the publications.

With the revival of social science in the People's Republic of China, the consequences of the one-child policy and urban childhood started to be studied by some sociologists, as anthropologists preferred to turn their attention to vulnerable children (caused by poverty and rural-urban migration), and children's rights. Therefore, they started to cooperate with other Asian researchers, especially from India. The two countries are facing some similar difficulties, and many mainland anthropologists share the idea with their Indian counterparts that their researches should have political applications. A final emerging theme in the People's Republic of China should also be mentioned: the study of children's culture, but it is still very minor.

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<sup>3</sup> Zhejiang province seems to be very active and creative in the generation of new perspectives for a Chinese anthropology of childhood.

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